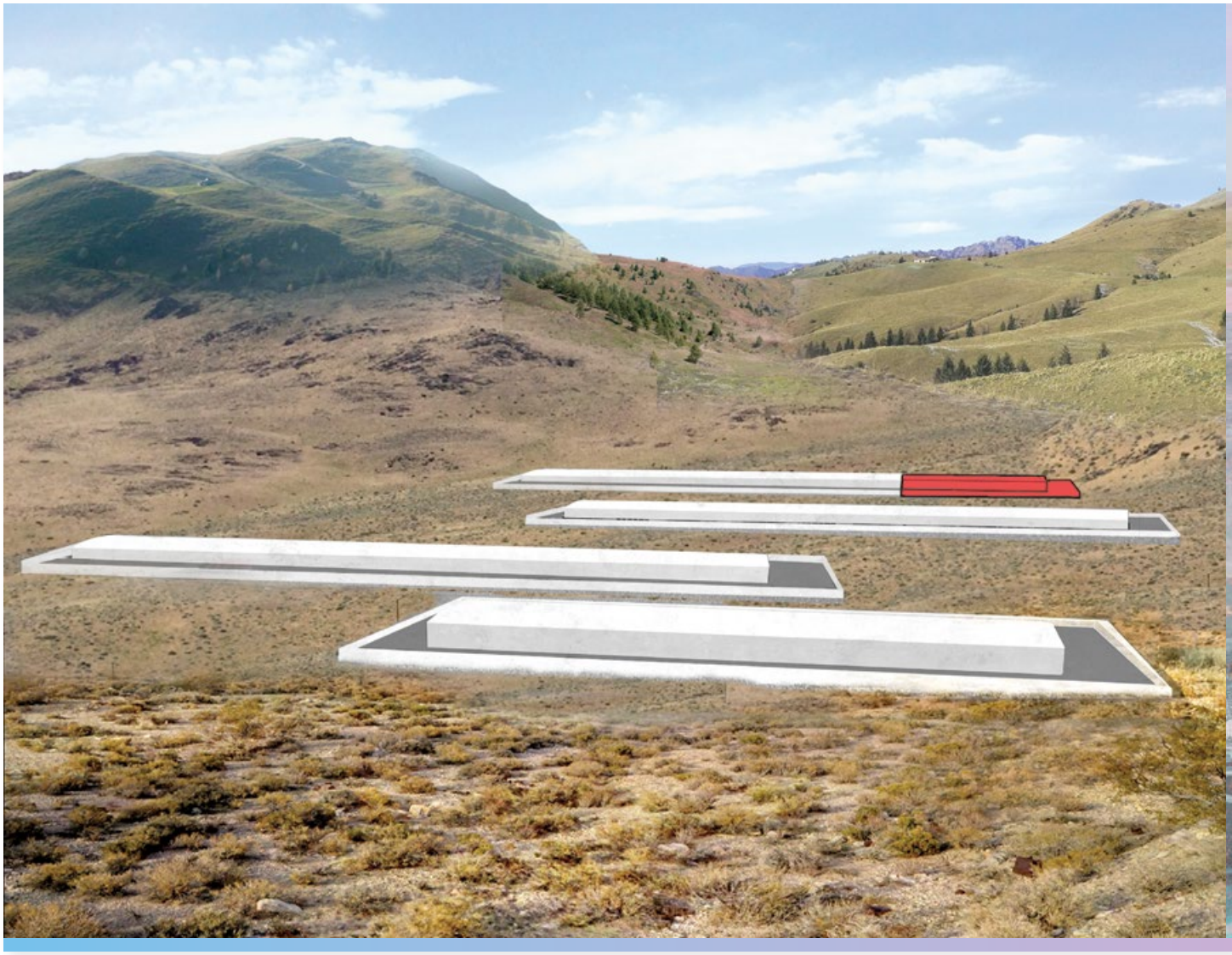
# Rem Koolhaas, OMA


OMA,
Museum in the Countryside,
2018

At a moment when our collective history is digital, the data centre is becoming one of our most significant cultural typologies. In this context the spaces of museum storage and experience are afforded new relevance in what would have once been an unexpected alliance.


IN THE
SIDE
DATA CENTRE

As part of OMA's forthcoming exhibition 'Countryside: Future of the World', which opens at the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum in New York this autumn, the office is cataloguing the emergence of a new kind of architecture, the data centre. These vast, monolithic facilities are not designed to be inhabited by humans, but through their unimaginable scale and radical starkness they illicit the sensibilities of a new technological sublime. OMA founder **Rem Koolhaas** explores the ways through which architects might be able to engage this condition through cultural programmes and make it accessible to the people it would otherwise exclude.



*opposite:* Set among the rectilinear slabs of the countryside data centre, the bays of the museum extend the formal arrangement of the server stacks and seamlessly connect to the existing building services infrastructure.

*below:* Seen from the air, the data centre museum reads as stark, unadorned figures in the landscape.

As architects, we have been involved in thinking about museums at OMA since the late 1980s. One of the issues that preoccupies us is how – in the age of massive artworks and enormous visitor numbers – to maintain the authenticity of the encounter between the artwork and the visitor. How can certain techniques, technologies, radical new combinations and new contexts benefit and stimulate our experience of the museum?

In 1997, in a competition for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, we proposed for the first time a view-on-demand system for artworks. Individual visitors, with individual desires, could see the museum potentially more as an archive of things than a place where the voice of curator is paramount. The idea was not only about generating unique personal experiences of particular artworks; it was about merging storage and display in one integrated system. When you see some of the works in any museum's storage facilities, it is a crying shame that they are not accessible to the public. For many institutions, the idea of leaving so many works in storage has been an incentive, especially in the last 20 years, to constantly expand their museums. Funding and philanthropy becomes focused on architectural expansion at the expense of less tangible functions. Tate Modern at Bankside in London now has a new wing, which is basically bigger; the argument is we can show bigger works from mediums that require more space. The Pompidou in Paris has an outpost, but again the argument is that it is bigger.

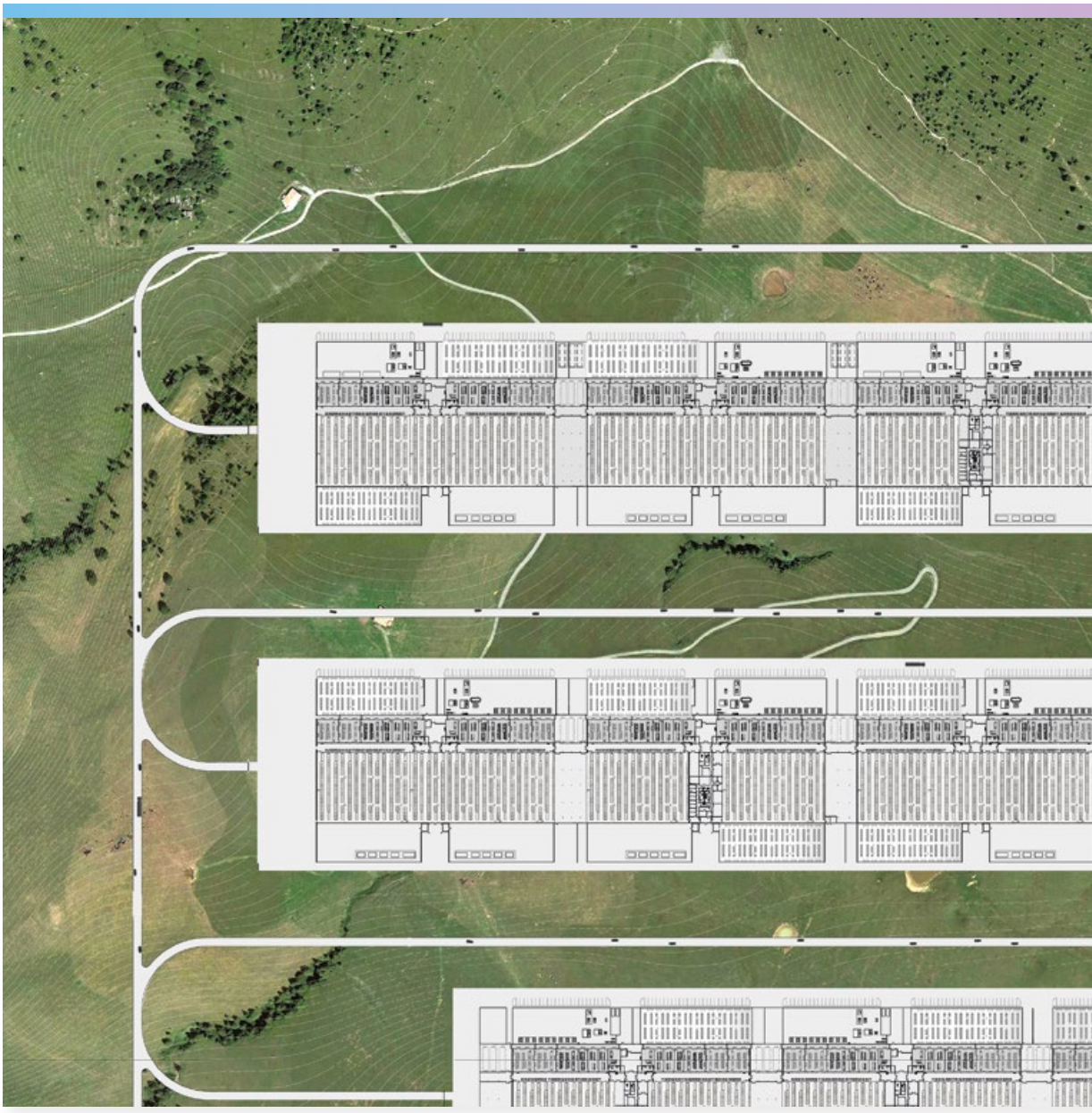
As architects we are constantly wondering where architecture is going and how relevant it is. Museums are under similar pressure, yet constantly repeat the same formula. Why is there not more adjustment and more creativity on every level, from physical conception to programming? If you look at the typology of museums, there is stagnation.

This is where OMA's interest in museums potentially intersects with another preoccupation – the countryside. At some point we became aware that typically urban conditions are being used to declare what architecture is becoming. But we had an instinct that it was more interesting to look at the countryside, the non-urban condition, where more urgent transformations are taking place.

The urban surface of the world is only 2 per cent, yet there is very little thought among architects about the other 98 per cent. It is strange that so much territory can be outside our vision. Countryside is now completely different from our nostalgic notions, impacted and conditioned by connectivity of all kinds. Digital surveillance covers almost every square inch of the world and creates a vast increase in knowledge of things we never see. This is clearly a paradox: we do not go to the countryside any more, but theoretically we know more about it than ever before. The digital is perhaps used more to affect the non-urban condition than the urban one.

And the countryside is where this digital power emanates and is stored. Looking at the countryside today, there is an emergence of a new kind of architecture, the aesthetic of the data centre. You could be upset that huge facilities are appearing across such beautiful landscapes, unimaginably massive, inert boxes seemingly lacking 'architectural' qualities. These spaces are not intended to be inhabited; they are hardly even meant to be used or experienced by

The conditions for the archiving and experience of art are efficiently aligned with the cooling requirements and stable air necessary for the optimal functioning of server stacks.



The spaces of the data centre are almost entirely devoid of people. As human occupants are retreating from the countryside, the museum programme would reoccupy the landscape with a new form of public activity.

human beings. Nevertheless, or maybe because of that, they are outrageously beautiful and new, almost the definition of the sublime – as something producing an overwhelming sense of awe or other high emotion through being vast, grand. Once you look at these facilities with a Land Art sensibility, their physical dimensions and the activities within are surprisingly artistic as well as utilitarian. As architects, we are asking: can you modify or add something to that situation, to make it explicit, coherent and accessible to the people it otherwise excludes?

The proposition is to use the architectural configuration of the data centre for a museum, almost without any change. We do not know whether this is impossible. Data centre architecture operates on the purest form of a grid; you maintain the same grid and use it as a place where storage and exhibition can coexist (data and art are both forms of storage).

Such a museum would automatically benefit from a deep analogy between industrial work and artistic realisation. It could introduce multiple activities that may never have been combined before: the conservation not only of works held by the museum, but also for the work of collectors, private institutions and corporations; viewing on demand; auctions, events, exhibitions; even the testing of exhibitions in different configurations or with different curatorial parameters – a facility that no major museum currently has at its disposal.

By moving the museum to the countryside, a completely new and unexpected situation is immediately created, in a context where there is a global curiosity but little knowledge. The museum would become an articulation of public activity where only data storage is proliferating, a function by necessity devoid of people.

What is really exciting is that this is an architecture where the ego of the architect is completely absent. It is based on a reading of the future for any cultural institution, but also on the emerging coexistence between technologies and human beings, articulated in the context of art. The purity of intention, undistorted by architectural vision, is what is particularly attractive about this possibility. ⌀

The rigid bays of the data centre typology house both the regimented rows of 19-inch server stacks and the climate-controlled spaces of museum archiving and visitor experience.