
Talking Tall: Rem Koolhaas & David Gianotten: The New Context of Tall

Author(s): Rem Koolhaas and David Gianotten

Source: *CTBUH Journal*, 2014, No. 1 (2014), pp. 48-51

Published by: Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24192781>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

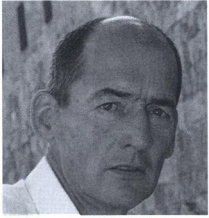
Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *CTBUH Journal*

JSTOR

The New Context of Tall



Rem Koolhaas



David Gianotten

On the occasion of receiving the overall Best Tall Building Worldwide award at the 12th Annual CTBUH Awards ceremony for Beijing's CCTV Headquarters, Rem Koolhaas, founding partner, Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), sat for an interview with Daniel Safarik, CTBUH Editor. Koolhaas was joined by David Gianotten, partner, OMA, who is intimately involved in the firm's Asian projects.

Interviewees

Rem Koolhaas, Founding Partner
Office for Metropolitan Architecture
Heer Bokelweg 149
3032 AD Rotterdam
The Netherlands
t: +31 10 243 82 00
f: +31 10 243 82 02
e: office@oma.com
www.oma.eu

David Gianotten, Partner
Office for Metropolitan Architecture Hong Kong
14/F On Hing Building
1 On Hing Terrace
Central, Hong Kong
China
t: +852 3691 8941
f: +852 3691 8948
e: hongkong@oma.com
www.oma.eu

Rem Koolhaas
Rem Koolhaas founded OMA in 1975 together with Elia and Zoe Zenghelis and Madelon Vriesendorp. He graduated from the Architectural Association in London and in 1978 published *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. In 1995, his book *S,M,L,XL* summarized the work of OMA in "a novel about architecture." He heads the work of both OMA and AMO, the research branch of OMA, operating in areas beyond the realm of architecture such as media, politics, renewable energy, and fashion. Koolhaas has won several international awards including the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2000 and the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 2010 Venice Biennale. Koolhaas is a professor at Harvard University where he conducts the Project on the City.

David Gianotten
David Gianotten joined OMA in 2008, launched OMA's Hong Kong office in 2009, and became partner in charge of OMA Asia in 2010. Gianotten oversees OMA Hong Kong and OMA Beijing and leads OMA's development in China and Asia. Projects currently under his supervision include the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, the Taipei Performing Arts Centre, the Chu Hai College of Higher Education in Hong Kong, and the end stages of the construction of the CCTV headquarters in Beijing. In 2010 he delivered the OMA conceptual masterplan for the West Kowloon Cultural District, the biggest cultural project in Hong Kong to date, and the Edouard Malingue Gallery, a contemporary art gallery in Hong Kong. Born in 1974 in the Netherlands, he studied Architecture and Construction Technology at the Eindhoven University of Technology. Before joining OMA, he was the Managing Director – Architect of SeARCH.

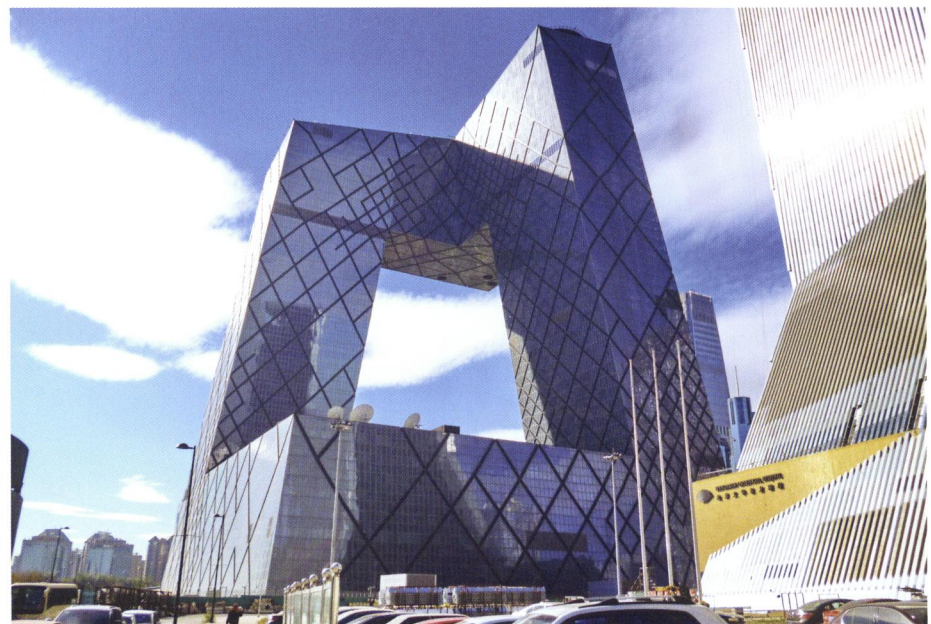
You recently completed the Shenzhen Stock Exchange – it's obviously a very different building from CCTV, in a different city. In the course of the decade or so since CCTV was proposed the Shenzhen Stock Exchange was completed. What has changed about working in China?

Koolhaas: I think a lot has changed, but there is another issue, which is maybe even more important, i.e., where a building or project is located. In other words, the culture in Beijing is very different from Shenzhen, which is a lot more comparable to Hong Kong or general Asian conditions. Also, the expectations of a building and discourse about a building is less unique in Shenzhen than it is in Beijing, and that has a number of advantages. The technical expertise is more distributed and common in Shenzhen. You cannot say absolutely that the quality is better in Shenzhen than in Beijing, but good quality is more common in Shenzhen, and more present.

One of the main things you also encounter is the difference in how the procedures work and the support the planning bureaus get. The planning bureaus can just be testing and approval bodies, but they can also really try to help a client and make it more professional. The support of the planning bureau is very different for each city. It is much more formal in Beijing, and much more design-oriented and hands-on in Shenzhen.

Gianotten: So, during the process, the client goes through a learning curve. In Shenzhen, that was really a two-sided effort. OMA and the planning bureau really worked together and supported the client in its ambitions.

In Beijing, the planning bureau supported the effort, but more from a technical perspective. From the client's perspective, it was at a greater distance. That made a very big difference in the process with the client, and also with the contractors. In the case of Shenzhen, the client was looking for different



CCTV, Beijing. © Butyrskii Igor

things, and was much more educated. They were really going for quality and had the financial means, and time built into the schedule. In the CCTV building it was a little bit more traditional, in that the client was mostly invested in the schedule and the financial aspects, leaving the architect to advocate for design quality. That is a very interesting difference, which also meant the speed of the two buildings was different.

Koolhaas: In Shenzhen, they have created a city of about 20 million now, in about 20 years. In Beijing, it is an ancient city that is modernizing now. So the perspective is also different. But what is interesting is that both had the same contractor. It wasn't the same people working on the two buildings, but what was very clear was that they had done many more international projects in between doing CCTV and the Shenzhen Stock Exchange. Doing SSE was more routine for them than when they were doing CCTV. In the past seven years, the level of architectural design, the skill of contractors, and the sophistication of clients has leapt considerably.

So, the quality is beginning to catch up with the speed?

Koolhaas: Yes, I would say so. You really see that when there is this good collaboration between government, client, architect, and contractor, that the quality can be achieved, and it is similar to many places we know in Europe.

I have some questions around the word "context," with which you have dealt harshly in the past. Looking at three of your tall buildings in three places – Beijing, Shenzhen, and the Rothschild Bank Headquarters in London, these are all quite different. Do you think there is a threshold of "bigness" beyond which buildings make their own context, and is that universal? Can or should they draw from their surroundings?

Koolhaas: It is really kind of childish to say so, but I think the quote "f--- context" has really been taken out of context. In every situation

“In the case of CCTV, you could say it is a very contextual building, but the context is not yet visible. It is a building that will be surrounded by 300 taller buildings, so therefore, we realized from the beginning it was a losing proposition to try to be taller. Therefore, we decided to be different, which is a very contextual approach...”

you have to judge the context. Sometimes there is a context that actually deserves recognition and acknowledgement. Sometimes you have no choice. In the case of Rothschild, we had no choice, because it is an incredibly medieval, delicate part of the city. Therefore you would not want to offend it or create a contrast, necessarily. So you develop ways that generate sort of analogies, and you expose elements of the context that have never been visible before.

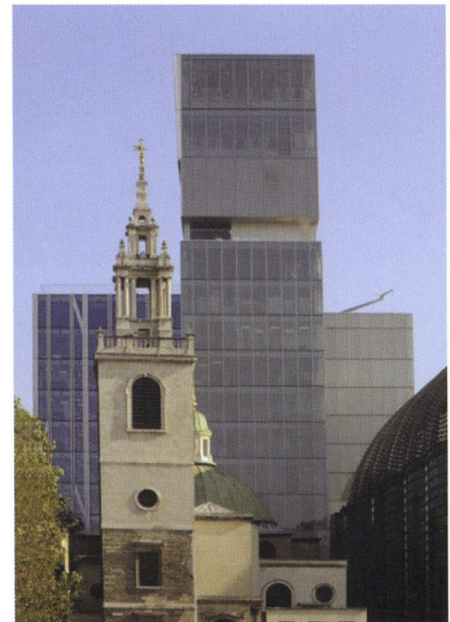
I think in the case of CCTV, you could say it is a very contextual building, but the context is

not yet visible. It is a building that will be surrounded by 300 taller buildings, so therefore, we realized from the beginning it was a losing proposition to try to be taller. Therefore, we decided to be different, which is a very contextual approach, I would say.

In Shenzhen it is also quite contextual, in the sense that the lifted podium actually works quite well in capturing the environment and making it play within an urban composition, and within, a kind of public space. So, I think it is always possible to work with the context, and I think we are getting quite refined and



Shenzhen Stock Exchange. © OMA/Philippe Ruault



Rothschild Bank Headquarters, London. © OMA

“The greatest virtue of CCTV is that it does offer a whole series of multiple identities, in a culture that actually insists on stability. People think of it as a homogeneous place but it is far from it.”

good at it, but in Europe, “context” is often used as a pretext for an incredibly conservative situation, to eliminate a whole repertoire of possibility.

Also, what is really important is not trying to invent and or respond to all elements of the context, but to use elements of the context for the good and benefit of the building and its surroundings.

At the same time, one puts a clear contrast between the building and its context. You create a situation in which the building is recognized and does not disappear. So it is a

delicate thing. It all depends on how you describe “context.” Many people define “contextual” as “similar to its surroundings.” Then the role of the architect becomes less important, because every owner or client wants to be different and stand out.

Gianotten: At the same time, you of course have a responsibility to the neighbors and the public that use the space. It’s a subtle balance between trying to find a context you can use for the benefit of your building, and at the same time, find a way to detach the building from the context so that it is unique.

Koolhaas: We are not contextualists in the sense of feeling obliged to be similar, but we are contextualists in the sense that every one of our buildings is a comment on its context. Sometimes a comment is critical; sometimes it is supportive in enlisting that context into a greater whole.

When it comes to commentary – CCTV is a state-run organization, and China is not a democracy. Some have interpreted the twisting form of CCTV as a symbol of conflict of how China represents itself internally and externally – is there anything to that?

Koolhaas: No, at least not consciously. I don’t think there is anything to it, on the other hand, for me in retrospect, the greatest virtue of the building is that it does offer a whole series of multiple identities, in a culture that

actually insists on stability. People think of it as a homogeneous place but it is far from it.

Gianotten: Even within Beijing, identities are very different. If you see how the CCTV building responds to the process of TV-making, and at the same time tries to find almost a public place that is related to state television, it creates a combination of aspects that were never there before under previous leaders. What you see now is that everything becomes more public and visible. The process gets revealed, and I think the building contributes in its architecture to that development. It’s not that we want to take that development on the shoulders of the building, but it definitely helps how people perceive CCTV. It’s in a much more dynamic way than it was before, and it’s more recognizable, because it’s much more “there.”

It’s certainly a complicated building that reflects that complexity. My impression was that it was all done for one client.

Koolhaas: Yes, but that client is already kind of changing, and has been changing over the past ten years. There is now a quite considerable presence of other companies inside the company. Making of media is fragmenting, so I think you can see that in the building too. There are 60 or 70 different parts of the building that have really different identities, groups of people dealing with very different subject matter, and you really recognize that. Of course it is the CCTV building, but right next to it is a Mandarin Oriental Hotel, broadcast studios, and plug-in locations for outside TV vehicles. It gives a very different environment an identity. I think you can say CCTV is one institution, but it has 76 different stations within it.

Gianotten: Everything at CCTV is related to media. Also, with the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, only about 40% of the building is occupied by the stock exchange itself. They rent the rest of space to companies that are related to that business.

Do you worry about the ability of instant, iconic skyscrapers to homogenize cities, in the sense of creating a piece of sculptural



De Rotterdam in context. © OMA/Ossip van Duivenbode

iconography that could be dropped anywhere?

Koolhaas: I think CCTV could not happen anywhere else. I think that is one of the most interesting things to see today, in that it is not completely orthogonal. It really has an ability to associate itself to everything else. It's not a sort of singular, isolated statement, but on the contrary, it's a kind of radiating octopus that almost has tentacles.

In the vertical dimension, the race for height is very often related to a context that is completely irrelevant to the rest of the city. You could envision these needles anywhere. That is also one of the criticisms OMA has about the race for height. It has nothing to do with the rest of the city. It's only related to your little corner of the world that needs 2,000 square meter floor plates at height, and the rest of the city doesn't matter. What CCTV and many of the OMA projects do is try to keep the connection with the city, and build a real piece of the city, not something that totally liberates itself from the city.

So if you talk about the highest building, it is often something that detaches itself from the city and could be anywhere, although I would be very careful about saying that in each continent. The race for height is, in every different continent, a very different race, and based on very different background ideas of clients.

The more experience I have, the harder I find it to generalize. The Burj Khalifa, which should be the wrong kind of building that is only interested in height, has actually established its own context in a really wonderful way. If you are there, it is not only amazingly strong as an individual building, but also for the kind of effect it has had on the city of Dubai as a whole and on its immediate environment. It's created a center. Therefore, I wouldn't want to be seen as a kind of "anti-height" type, because in certain conditions it is a really wonderful device. It's ambitious, and that makes the difference.

You wrote *Delirious New York* in 1978. In the New York of today, we are seeing many skinny skyscrapers that place billionaires more than 1,000 feet above the ground. Do you think the city has entered a period of delirium that is different from the one you diagnosed in the middle 1970s? How does the city look different in the early decades of the 21st Century as opposed to the terminal decades of the 20th?

Koolhaas: Basically, I wrote two things about New York. One was *Delirious New York*, and the other was a piece for *Wired* called "Delirious No More," to kind of talk about the effort to launder the city, to clean up, and kind of remove some of its urban unpredictability. That was obviously, for me, not a great period. I think it is too early to tell now, but these billionaire needles have the possibility to

collectively lift the level of imagination, or they are really the last and most extreme effort to scrape every little bit of advantage from the existing situation.

Gianotten: The question is asked whether the "billionaire needle" in New York is trying to go too far. If you look what the circumstances are in Hong Kong, the thin and tall towers have been there since the 1970s. The center of Hong Kong really began developing in the late 1970s when the MTR (metro) came into the city. It became a typology of its own that supports a very big part of the city. I am not sure if the things that are happening in New York will not have a surprising outcome. Perhaps in 20 years it will be creating a totally different environment at different levels of the city. Maybe New York is capable of accepting the typology and not making it only exclusive, and the buildings can deliver something that makes the place more three-dimensional, and makes it therefore, much more interesting. From the perspective of Hong Kong, that's how we see it.

Koolhaas: A lot of the high-rise needles in Hong Kong are public housing. The chance that you would get a new kind of Peter Stuyvesant Village going now in New York is, I would estimate, about zero percent. But eventually it could happen. Even when bridges exist between buildings at 8 or 13 stories, let alone 50 or 90, that brings along a vibrancy that you almost cannot imagine. ■



Hong Kong skyline. © Terri Meyer Boake



New York skyline. Source: imgur.com