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Source: *Perspecta*, Vol. 37, Famous (2005), pp. 98-105

Published by: [The MIT Press](#) on behalf of *Perspecta*.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40482244>

Accessed: 28/06/2014 07:29

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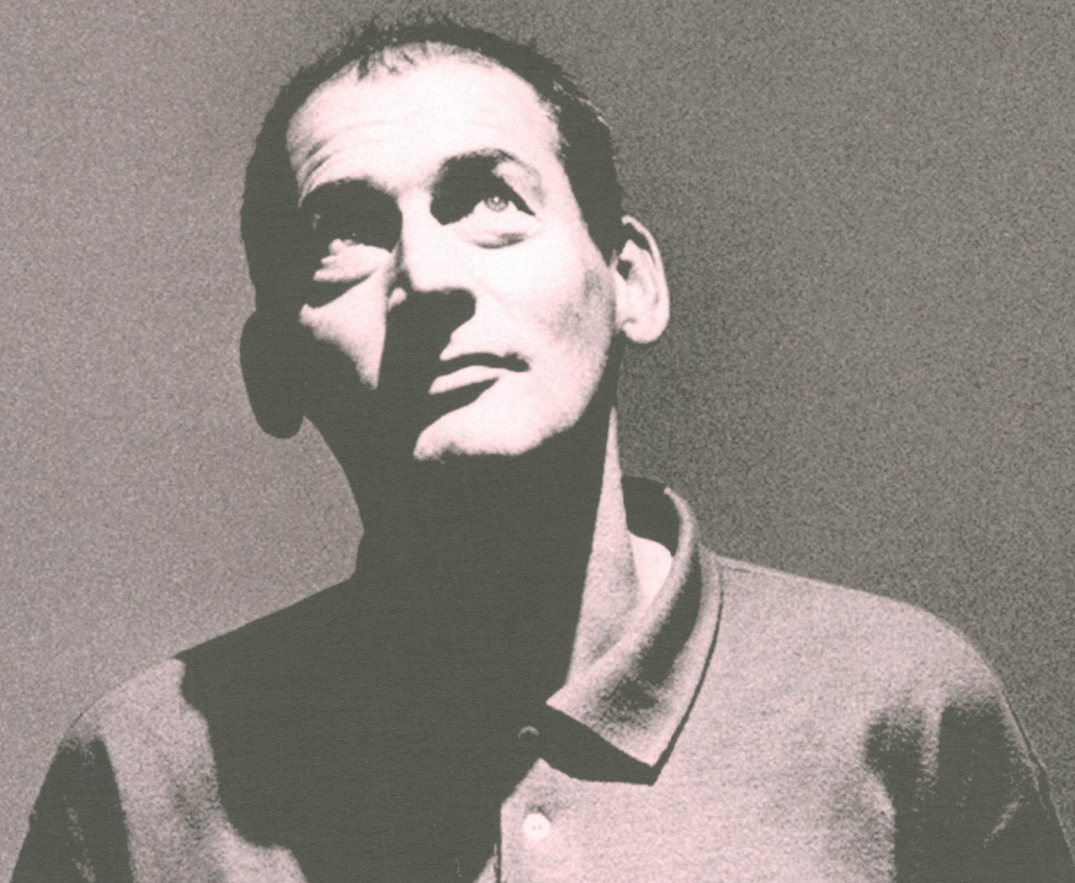


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Rem Koolhaas

The Carlyle Hotel
New York City / January 8, 2005





PERSPECTA 37 YOU HAVE BEEN A VERY INFLUENTIAL FIGURE TO A WHOLE GENERATION OF ARCHITECTURAL PRACTITIONERS AND STUDENTS. HOW HAS BEING IN THAT POSITION AFFECTED YOUR OWN WORK?

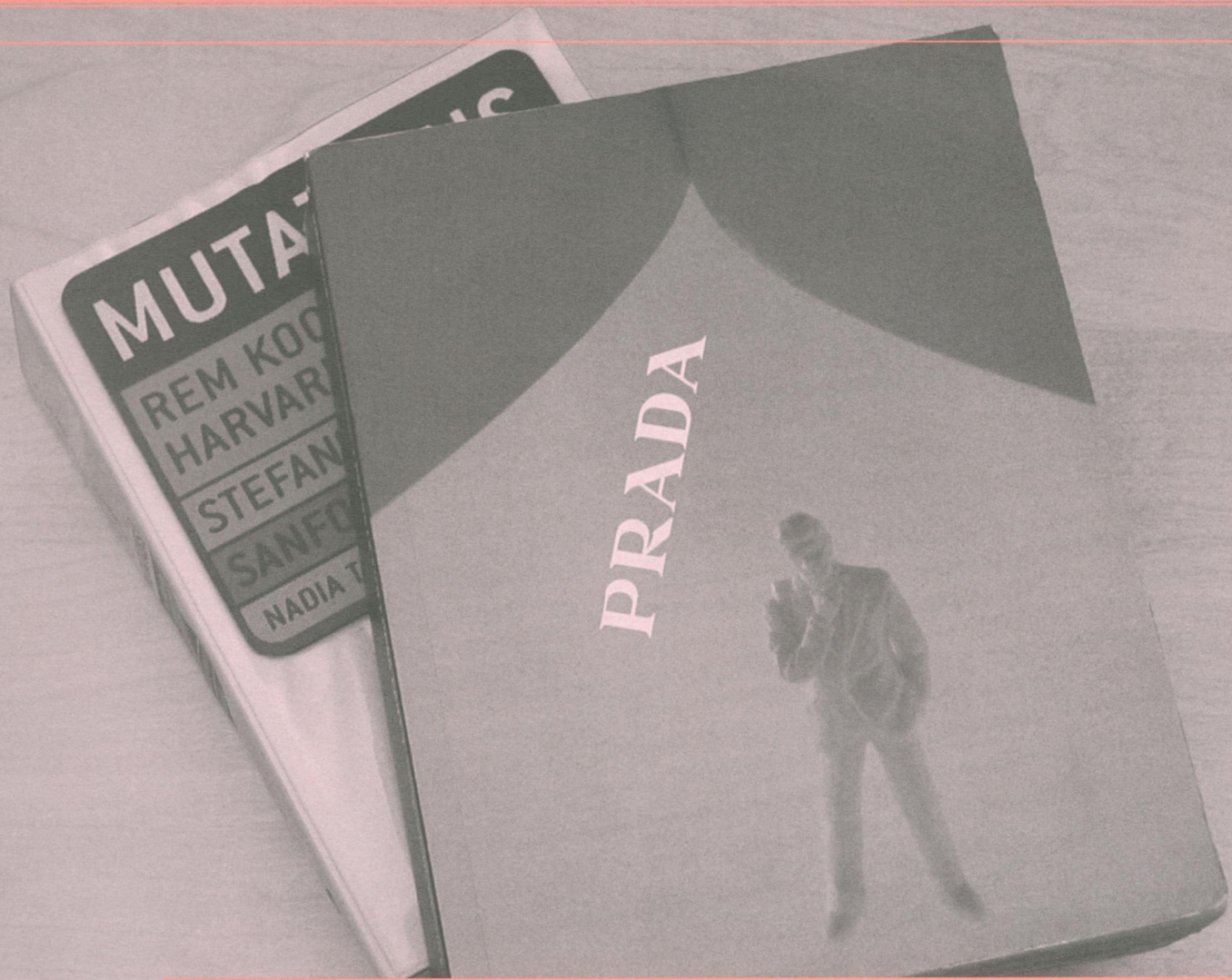
Rem Koolhaas It is really important to distinguish a number of aspects of this. To be so influential and know that your ideas have such an impact is a really huge and mostly unwelcome burden. In a culture that is so accelerated there is often very little distinction between the first and the second waves in the development of an idea. That has forced us for a long time to be incredibly strategic about how we proceed, and there are basically two ways that you can approach this. On the one hand, being confronted so rapidly with an idea's degeneration has often motivated us to do things more quickly. In a way, it is sad that there is almost no difference any more between a fresh iteration and a debased iteration. But it can also be inspiring in terms of forcing us to go forward in different

ways and to continuously reevaluate our trajectory. On the other hand, you can choose to ignore the situation or accept it as a given, because at some point it really makes no difference whether you are part of the first or the second wave of development. To be overly concerned about it would simply be a huge waste of time.

WHEN YOU WERE A STUDENT AND A YOUNG ARCHITECT, WERE THERE FIGURES WHOM YOU MODELED YOURSELF AFTER OR AGAINST?

That's a very interesting question. One of the perverse consequences of being in the spotlight of fame is that if you write about someone, it is often perceived as a statement that you model yourself after that person. For the longest time, for instance, people confused my interest in Wallace Harrison for a desire to be like Wallace Harrison.

But there have certainly been other architects I've



admired less overtly. Sometimes it's because of their work, but it's more often because of the ways in which they managed to open up certain new possibilities for architecture. Ironically, these were usually trajectories away from architecture. From the very beginning, I found architecture to be a very claustrophobic world, and I had a lot of respect for people who were able to step out of the limitations of the field by introducing new models. And I would say that my tendency has always been to admire people who keep themselves from becoming caricatures and who maintain a certain distance from fame even as they possess the clearly identifiable characteristics of it.

AFTER YOU GRADUATED FROM ARCHITECTURE SCHOOL, DID YOU HAVE A CLEAR SENSE OF WHERE YOU WANTED TO GO?

No, not at all. But it's important to note that I'm from the '68 generation, which was really both a curse and a blessing. It was a curse because the cultural notions of the so-called revolutionary machine were very uncritical, self-indulgent, and self-important. On the other hand, it had one enormous virtue, which was that the situation allowed me to defer satisfaction. So after I finished school, without the slightest hesitation, I added six more years to that in order to do a book. And I think that right now, any of you would be really frightened to waste so much time. Today, there is the feeling that you need to work fast, and you have to

conform to certain models. But the extra time I took was extremely productive for me.

AND IT WAS THE PUBLICATION OF THAT BOOK, *DELIRIOUS NEW YORK*, AND NOT THE DESIGN OF A BUILDING, THAT INITIALLY MADE YOUR REPUTATION. HOW DID THAT EXPERIENCE AFFECT THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUR PRACTICE IN THE EARLY DAYS?

Well, unlike most architects, I had a profession before I was an architect. I think that being a journalist had an important effect. Journalism is ironically one of the few professions that is almost completely immune to fame. There are almost no famous journalists. The journalist is driven by an insatiable curiosity coupled with the ability to find and condense information quickly. That experience, coupled with the fact that I started relatively late in architecture—I was twenty-five before I even started studying architecture—made it relatively easy for me not to feel intimidated by the architecture world at that stage.

The great benefit of writing a book before practicing as an architect was that it helped me get work. But it was bad because it meant that my subsequent work had to meet an unusually heavy burden of proof. I think that my experience exposed me to a number of unspoken prejudices that still operate in the current cultural moment. There's a strange prejudice that says you cannot both think and do architecture at the same time.



IT SEEMS THAT OVER THE COURSE OF YOUR CAREER, YOUR BOOKS HAVE SERVED TO ARTICULATE NEW DEVELOPMENTS AND DIRECTIONS IN YOUR THINKING. IN A WAY, YOU HAVE CONTINUALLY RESHAPED YOUR IMAGE THROUGH PUBLICATIONS BY STAKING CLAIMS IN NEW AREAS OF EXPLORATION.

Well, you can invent a new identity much more easily with a book than with architecture. I think that publishing books is actually a great luxury for us, because it's a relatively quick way of redefining ourselves by exploring a series of new practices and interests. In a way, each book is an experiment, but also a kind of ironic approximation of a certain typology. *S,M,L,XL* was about the work as a book, whereas *Content* is much more polemical. With *Content*, we wanted do something very quickly without becoming superficial, while at the same time aligning ourselves away from the design world toward other disciplines.

IN A LECTURE YOU GAVE, YOU MENTIONED THAT IN THE INITIAL PHASE OF DEVELOPMENT ON THE Y2K HOUSE PROJECT, OMA PRODUCED A VERSION THAT IT DID NOT HAVE THE FREEDOM TO PURSUE, BECAUSE OTHER PRACTITIONERS HAD ALREADY CLAIMED THAT PART OF THE ARCHITECTURAL SPECTRUM. HOW DO YOU POSITION YOUR WORK IN THAT SPECTRUM, AND HOW DOES THAT AFFECT YOUR WORKING PROCESS?

To be precise, the reason we didn't build the Y2K House was not because it was too similar to other architects' work, but because we couldn't come to an agreement with the client. But earlier on, we had been experimenting with something that looked Gehry-like. And in a certain way, the easily caricatured inventory of current positions can be very useful for the design process. Because you can imagine, for instance, a Gehry version, an Eisenman version, a Zaha version, and it sometimes helps accelerate your own thinking.



SO DO YOU VIEW YOURSELF AS A CELEBRITY?

I see a very important distinction between fame, which I feel is related to work, and celebrity, which is related to the person. Celebrity is really an American condition; it simply does not exist in the same way anywhere else in the world. I would say that in the case of the Whitney Museum project, for instance, the reasons why we were chosen were probably more related to celebrity than to the work itself. And that also made it easier for them to reject the project ultimately, because they could spin it and use the pre-existing typology of the celebrity—a person who won't listen, who refuses to compromise. So that was a very negative experience of celebrity culture.

I guess I'm speaking from a position of almost artificial innocence, but, in the end, I consider myself to be a producer of ideas. I am more interested in launching ideas and finding reactions to them.

IN A WAY, THIS CELEBRITY CULTURE COMES OUT OF THE POPULAR MEDIA'S PROPENSITY TO TRY TO BRAND ITS SUBJECTS AS ONE THING OR ANOTHER, AS WITH THE CARICATURES YOU MENTIONED EARLIER. WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH THIS? HOW DO YOU RESIST OR CHALLENGE THIS TENDENCY?

For me, a very effective form of resistance has been simply to live and work in Rotterdam. The European media really don't have the pervasive presence of the American media. And if you work in Russia or China, it's even more limited. The intensive media spectacle is mostly an American phenomenon, and you can wonder if there is a direct correlation between celebrity and the relative poverty of American architecture. If more substance were produced, perhaps the cult of celebrity might not be as prominent.

On the other hand, if you are a producer of ideas, it is clearly useful to have access to the *Charlie Rose Show*, for instance. Perhaps, in that sense, the media

Whitney Museum of American Art expansion (project), New York, 2003



attention has been very beneficial for me. Although it was never intended as such, it has enabled me to move beyond the world of architecture, which was what I wanted in any case.

TRADITIONALLY, ARCHITECTS HAVE ATTEMPTED TO EXPAND THEIR ROLES BY DESIGNING PRODUCTS AND FURNITURE. WHILE YOU CANNOT BUY A KOOLHAAS TEA KETTLE OR EVEN A KOOLHAAS CHAIR, IT SEEMS THAT AMO'S WORK FOR CLIENTS SUCH AS PRADA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION REPRESENTS THE SAME SORT OF EXPANSION OF THE ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT.

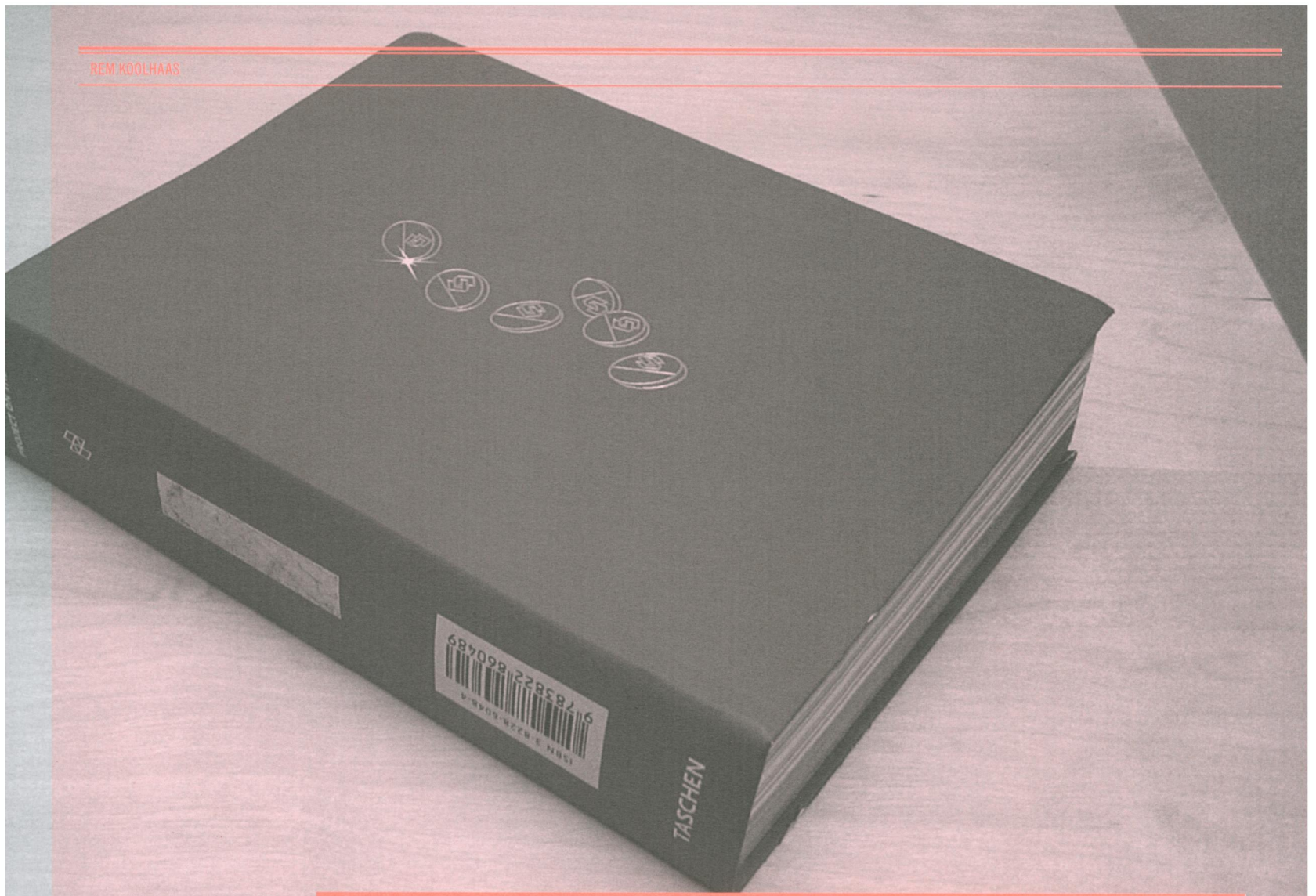
Maybe that's the best characterization of what fame and celebrity has enabled us to do. We have been able to enter territories where architects have not been invited. Through AMO, we have been able to pursue more of our own agenda and in certain cases initiate our own projects. It would be disingenuous to say that it would have been possible without the attention

brought by fame. So in that sense, celebrity has been relatively evenhanded.

It's a position of exceptional luxury. We have been able to pursue our interest in Africa. We are hoping to become even more involved with the European Union and play a larger role in being responsible for representing their intentions.

MUCH OF YOUR WORK HAS BEEN FOR WHAT COULD BE CALLED A HIGH-CULTURE CLIENTELE. WITH *CONTENT*, YOU SEEM TO BE MOVING TOWARD A DIFFERENT DIRECTION, BY MORE CONSCIOUSLY EVOKING TABLOID CULTURE.

Well, that's a key characteristic of journalism... it has a very leveling gaze. We've always been skeptical of high culture, but at the same time deeply aware and even committed to some of its forms. But the tabloid nature of *Content* is meant as an articulation of a particular moment. Whether it's due to consumerism or whatever else you might call it, I would say that we



are living in a world with an extremely short attention span, which is increasingly ruled by sound bites. It was important for us to represent the vulgarity of the whole thing. And if you look at our work, I think that vulgarity has always been in the background.

HIGH-PROFILE ARCHITECTS ARE OFTEN HIRED BY CLIENTS WHO WANT A BUILDING WITH A RECOGNIZABLE SIGNATURE. WHILE YOUR WORK IS NOT SO STRONGLY IDENTIFIED BY A STYLISTIC SIGNATURE, DO YOU FIND THAT CLIENTS EXPECT CERTAIN THINGS FROM YOU AS WELL?

Currently in Europe, almost all of the new work comes through competitions. As a result, you are almost never confronted with a client's expectations. That is one of the almost frightening aspects of the current architectural situation, because it's kind of a lottery. And what you end up with is a situation that is profoundly dismissive and destructive of a number of much more intimate and productive connections that architecture could have. We've tried to resist this system, but it hasn't really worked.

So I'd really have to go back in time quite a bit to find an instance when a client came to us specifically because it was us and specifically because they expected something from us. That happened in the case of the Villa Dall'Ava, outside Paris, where the clients really knew exactly what they were doing.

AND DID YOU FIND IT DIFFICULT TO WORK WITH THEM BECAUSE OF THAT?

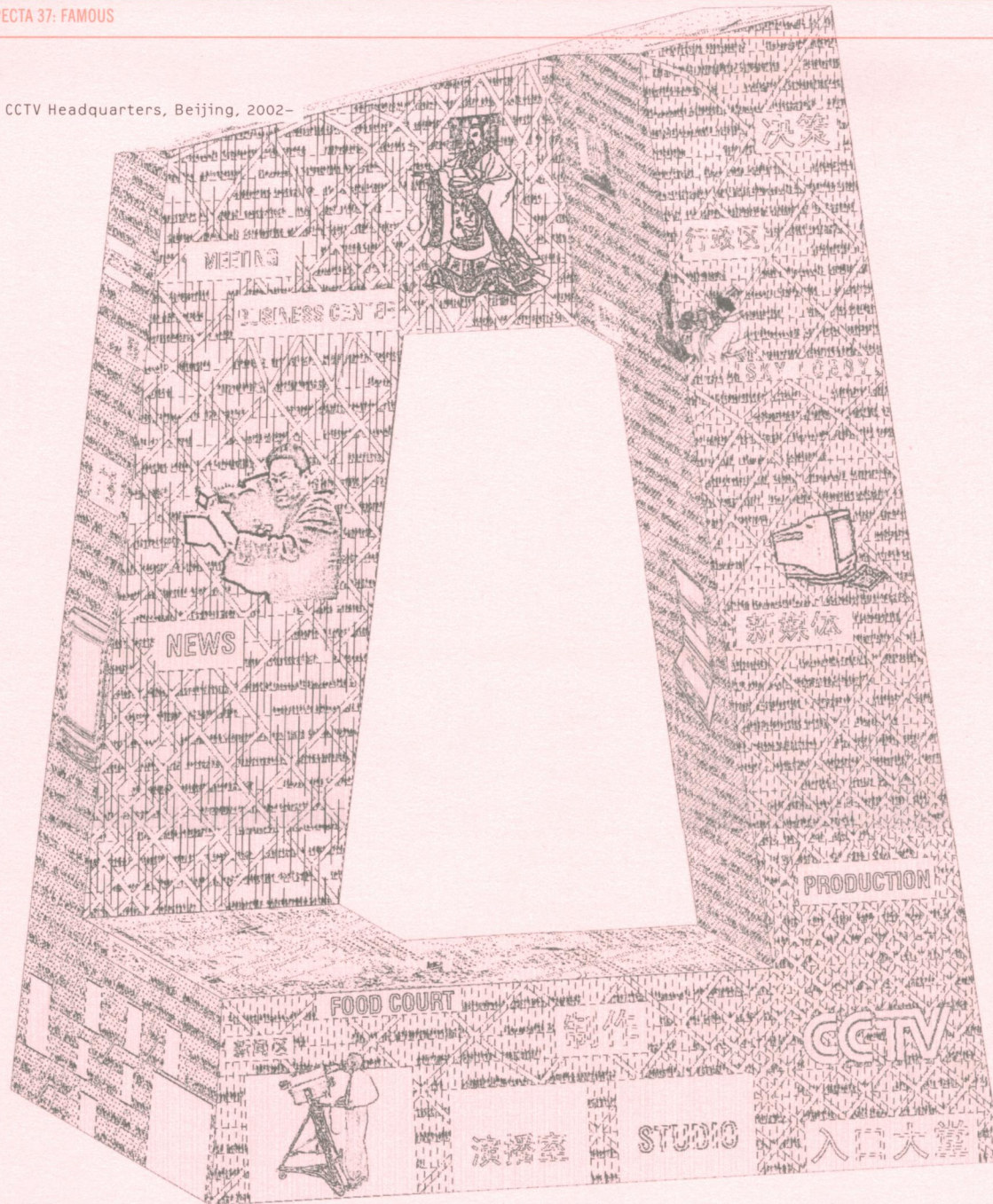
No, that is one of the beauties of how architecture works. The stakes are so high that you move almost immediately beyond politeness and almost immediately confront issues about money and intimacy. One has no choice except to become genuine.

DO YOU FIND THAT EXPECTATIONS ARE DIFFERENT WHEN YOU ARE WORKING IN CHINA, FOR INSTANCE, AS OPPOSED TO THE U.S. OR EUROPE?

Yes, it couldn't be more different. Right now, we are working in America, Europe, Russia, and China. It's hard to generalize, but I would have to say that what is most different is the nature of the client and our relationship with the client. For instance, at the Whitney, the average age of the trustees was perhaps sixty or seventy. They were a highly risk-averse group who were there less for the art than for their individual egos.

Meanwhile, in China, we are working with clients and decision-makers who are on average thirty-five years old, so it is totally different in terms of risk-taking and also in terms of the energy they put into the process. And in Europe right now, everything is usually very political, but with a kind of impersonal aspect to the process as well. As you can see, having these opportunities to work globally has exposed us to a big anthropological spectacle.

CCTV Headquarters, Beijing, 2002—



SO THESE DAYS YOU HAVE BUILDING PROJECTS ALL OVER THE WORLD, YOU'RE DOING WORK FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION, AND YOU'RE DIRECTING ACADEMIC RESEARCH AT HARVARD. IT SEEMS THAT OMA / AMO IS MODELED AFTER THE OPERATIONAL TYPOLOGY OF THE COLLABORATIVE CONSULTANCY, DEVELOPING IDEAS AND EXPERTISE. HOW DO YOU MANAGE TO KEEP EVERYTHING GOING AND NOT GET CAUGHT UP WITH THE POTENTIALLY LIMITING FACTORS OF BEING A CELEBRITY?

We are privileged to be able to work with many people who are really smart. In the office, we have a judgment system that is ruthless and efficient and not dictated by politeness or rank, because one thing that we try to maintain is the idea that anyone can make a discovery, that every discovery can be valid. For us, efficiency is really our secret. Of course, it can often be perceived as coldness or brutality.

We have had the luxury of being able to work with people outside of architecture, so that we don't get

too stuck in our own world. Once we have loosened our definition of what architecture is, we can simply engage in a mutual interaction of potential intelligence. On my part, I think it's simply about having an instinct as to what the relevant issues are.

Many of our clients are also very smart. Every project becomes a learning condition, which sounds like a stupid cliché, but it's really true. Celebrity culture breeds a particularly obnoxious perception that there are all of these figures who hog the stage and who continually recycle the same things. But the reality is that many people have doubts and feel the need to continually experiment with different things. I hate to use the word *modesty*, but we do try to maintain some modesty vis-à-vis the phenomena that are around us. I have a dedication to learning new things.