

Anyone

Wrong about Rem

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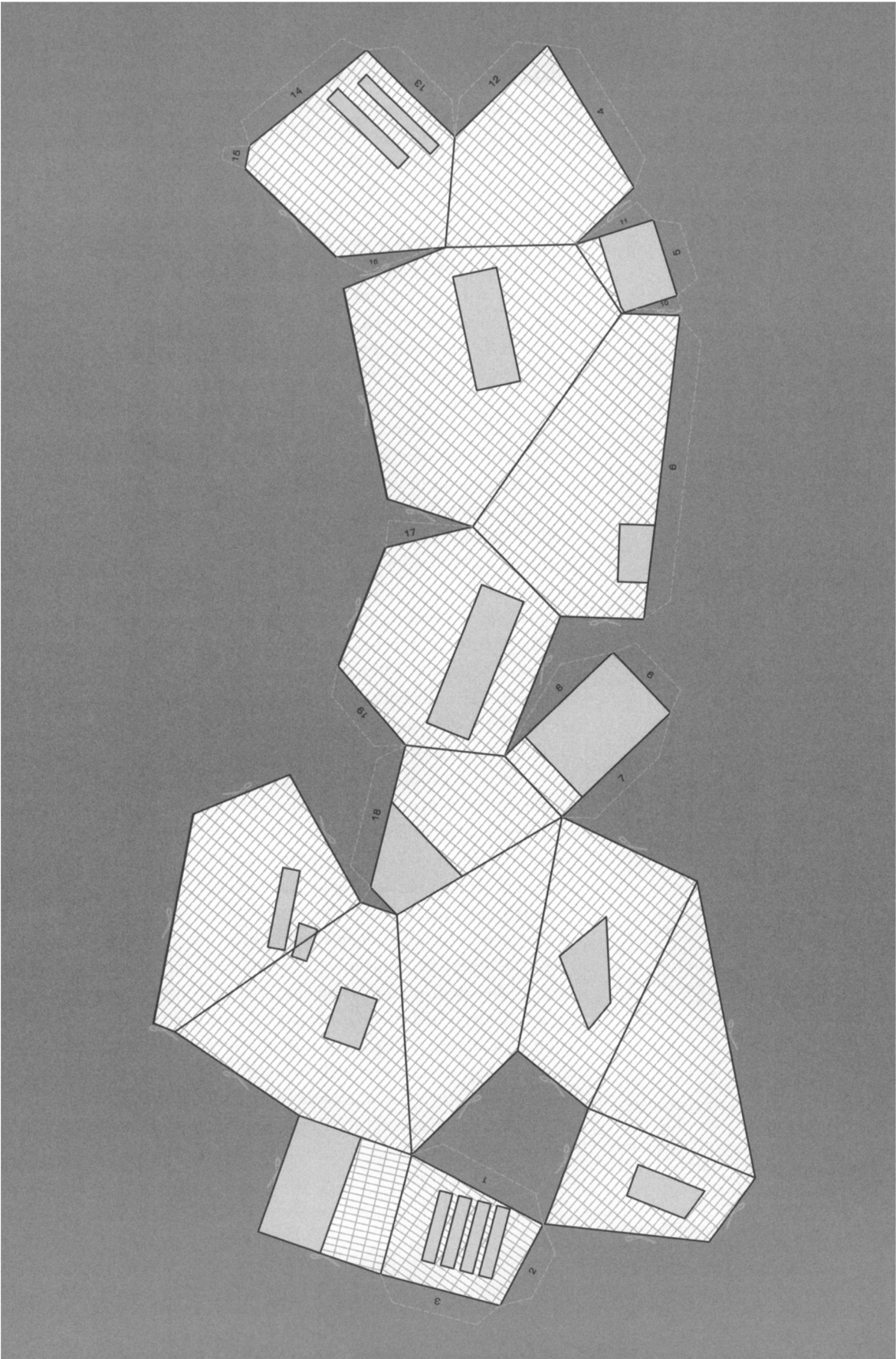
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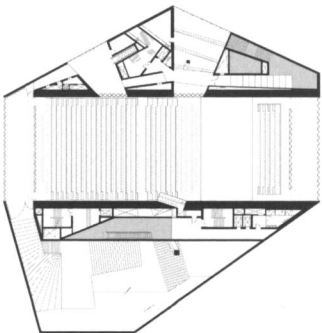
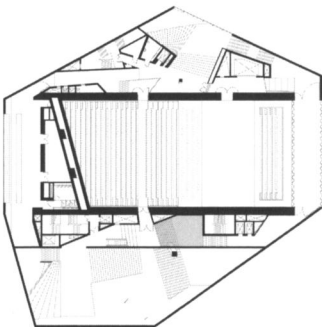


CASA DA MUSICA IN PORTO AND (OPPOSITE PAGE) IN A BUILD-YOUR-OWN TABBED DIAGRAM. IMAGES COURTESY OMA.

Halfway up the precipitous cascade of razor-sharp aluminum steps that forms a spectacular and slightly alarming approach to the main auditorium of Porto's new concert hall, the Casa da Musica, is a curious pair of armchairs upholstered in crushed red velvet. They seem to belong to another time and place, translated through a wormhole in the space-time continuum direct from the disco era to soften Rem Koolhaas's soaring concrete structure. They were designed by an obscure Portuguese architect back in the 1970s. Koolhaas chose to have them made especially for use in his building because, as he put it, "It liberated us from the need to imagine more than was necessary." It's a typical piece of Koolhaas rhetoric, simultaneously an acute observation that asks us to look at things from a new and uncomfortable point of view, and an elbow in the ribs for those of his peers still unliberated enough to want to design their own sofas. I paused on my journey up those precipitous steps, which rumor has it, have already drawn copious quantities of blood from one insufficiently cautious concertgoer who misjudged a step. It was time to acknowledge that I had gotten a couple of things wrong about Rem Koolhaas.

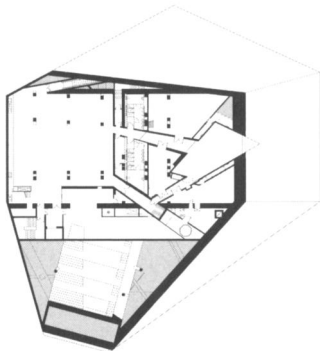
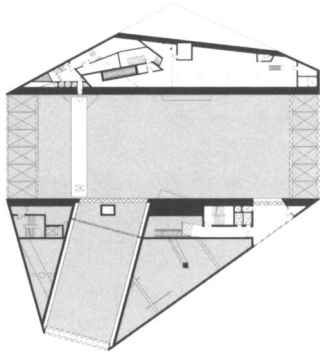
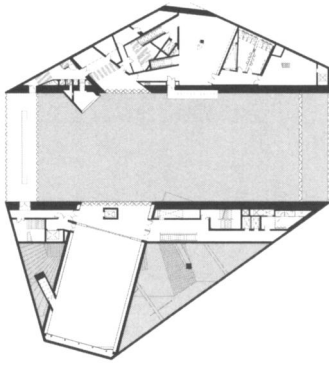
First, that he is capable of building a much better building than I had previously expected. From some of Koolhaas's pronouncements about architecture, I had assumed that he had adopted at least some of the views of his former teaching colleague at the Architectural Association, Leon Krier. Krier, it will be remembered, once took the view that it was the duty of all serious architects not to build, because to do so in any form, no matter how enlightened, would merely be to become an accomplice in the crime of the millennium, the destruction of the European city. Koolhaas's pronouncements are usually couched in more nuanced terms, but they, too, can be seen as a fundamental onslaught on the profession of architecture. Koolhaas seemed bent on trashing architecture and leaving it a smoldering ruin as he stepped aside on the way to something more substantial – devising a teenage shopping magazine for Condé Nast, perhaps.

When I went to the Seattle Public Library, I found a work of architecture from Koolhaas that, as he would put it,



other architects might actually like, a sign of failure in his eyes, of course. Koolhaas is still Koolhaas, and leading tours during the opening in Porto, he was quick to remind us that he is not like other architects. “The ideal acoustic form for a concert hall is a shoebox. And we have seen a lot of architects trying to make shoeboxes interesting, or to design interesting shoeboxes. We got rid of the shoebox.” He could be talking about Norman Foster’s recently opened Sage Centre in Gateshead in England, a complex of halls with ambitions for an accessible mix of music genres that is very similar to Porto’s. Sage tries to camouflage its shoeboxes under a shell roof spreading expansively across the banks of the Tyne. And it handed over the architecture of the auditoria to the priesthood of acousticians. The Casa da Musica is a remarkably compact, angular, white concrete mushroom that explodes every preconception of what a concert hall should be and how one should look. It faces a big civic space, surrounded on three sides by a mix of buildings ranging from the banal to the ramshackle and the stately. For once in his career, Koolhaas has responded to context. The white concrete is a deliberate allusion to the shades of cloud that Alvaro Siza uses for his buildings in the city. And unlike the Sage, the acoustician’s job was to make the architecture of the auditorium work as well as he could rather than to build a music-making machine.

Koolhaas may like to claim that he does not want to invent more than he has to, but the Casa da Musica is nevertheless a ruthlessly inventive building. It is the only concert hall in the world with two walls made entirely of glass. As a result, its 1,300-seat auditorium is suffused with daylight. It comes pouring in from behind the podium on which the orchestra will sit, and streaming down from the wall behind the audience. Porto’s soft, white Atlantic light makes it a beautiful and comfortable place to sit, but as an idea it terrifies acousticians trying to replicate Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw or any of the handful of models that all concert halls aspire to emulate. Glass walls are a hopeless way of trying to achieve the conditions needed to hear music properly. They scatter sound in random and unpredictable directions, and of course they risk letting in the noise of passing traffic. Koolhaas claims to have solved the first problem by making the glass ripple in tightly curved folds, and setting two glass skins a meter apart is said to insulate the interior from noise in a manner that is both ingenious and beautiful to look at. Alfred Brendel and Lou Reed put it to the ultimate test the week after I was there.

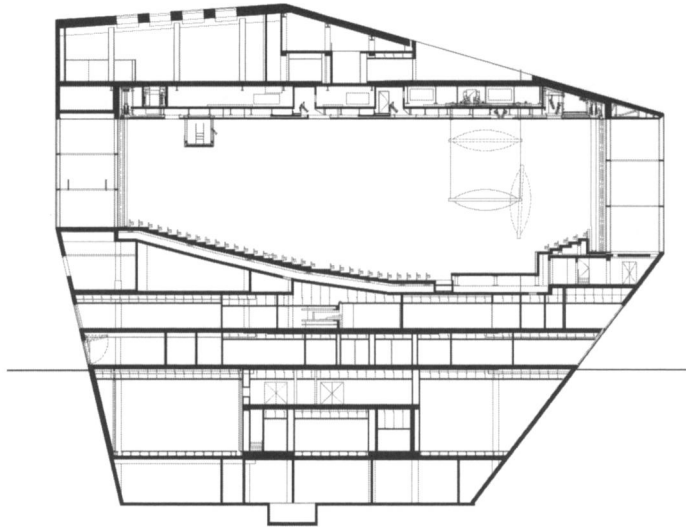


PLANS OF CASA DA MUSICA, PORTO. FACING PAGE FROM TOP: LEVELS 0, 1, 3, 4. ABOVE: LEVELS 5, 6, 8. DRAWINGS COURTESY OMA.

The Casa da Musica is engaging and intelligent in its architecture, constantly inventive and energetic as a building. In places, it is intimate and comfortable; in others, grand and formal. A spiral of smaller performance rooms is wrapped around both sides of the main auditorium, overlooking it through giant internal windows. It sits comfortably on its site, neither overly humble nor embarrassingly attention-grabbing. It is the intelligence of the design that impresses, not bombast. On the outside it is made up of two distinct components. What you see first is a quiet object, finely made, angular, crystalline, and precise. This superstructure protrudes from rounded, travertine-faced foothills that contain the Casa da Musica's rehearsal spaces and offices. On the inside, it is not afraid to work with the still-robust Portuguese craft traditions that give it its strongest, most distinctive flavors. The auditorium is lined with timber, embellished with pixelated gold leaf to create the effect of a giant wood grain pattern. A baroque organ has been pinned like an exotic specimen to the wall, and the VIP room is decorated with hand-painted traditional blue tiles.

The hall could only have been built in a country like Portugal, which takes the results of architectural competitions seriously. Anywhere else it would have been watered down or abandoned. The project has survived a protracted construction process – it was originally meant to open in time for Porto's year as European Capital of Culture in 2001. It has weathered changes of government and litigious contractors, and no fewer than five committees charged with running the project have come and gone. But Koolhaas will not thank you if you describe Porto's Casa da Musica as "his" building. For Koolhaas, the notion of the architect as lone genius is another myth that is badly in need of dismantling. "Tragically, in the contemporary idolatry of architectural stars, all teamwork is drained from discussion," he says. "The more ambitious we are, the more we depend on team effort." It's perfectly true that without Cecil Balmond, the gifted Arup engineer who has worked on every major Koolhaas project since Lille, the building would not stand up. Without the furniture designer Martin van Severen, who died a tragically premature death six weeks before the hall opened, there would not be any seductive plush velvet seats with soft rubber armrests. Without Petra Blaisse, who is responsible for the curtains and the patterns, it would be a far less rich interior. Without Hans Luxembourg, the acoustic engineer, the concert hall would have been an even more risky proposition than it already is. And without the

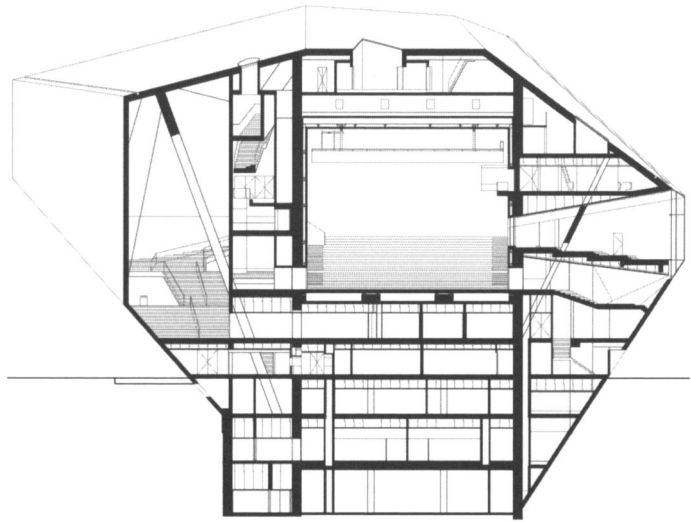
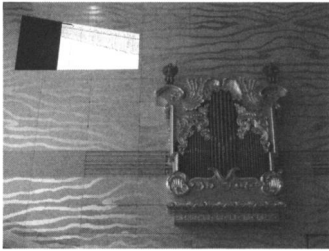
OMA, CASA DA MUSICA, EAST-WEST SECTION. FACING PAGE: NORTH-SOUTH SECTION; LOBBY, AND ORGAN IN LARGE AUDITORIUM. PHOTOS: CHARLIE KOOLHAAS.



help of his former employee Fernando Romero, Koolhaas might never have had the flash of intuition that an abandoned design for a house in Holland, which was kicking around the OMA studio at the time of the competition, would, if inflated tenfold, work better as a concert hall.

The other thing that Porto told me I had gotten wrong about Koolhaas is that he is not, as I had always suspected, modeling himself after Le Corbusier. To some degree, Koolhaas's career can be seen as a process of deadpan acting out in the blank Warholian manner. At various points he has modeled himself after Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and at others, after Mies van der Rohe. When Koolhaas, Madelon Vriesendorp, and Elia and Zoë Zenghelis established an architectural practice in London, they called it the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, an ironical attempt to pitch themselves at the midpoint between North American technocracy and Stalinist centralism, even as they worked from a kitchen table and struggled to pay their photocopying bills. When they parted company, leaving Koolhaas in command of the OMA name, he went to Rotterdam and created a parody of a big corporate American architectural practice. It was housed in an appropriately bland office slab rather than the usual converted warehouse, but with a bargain basement rent and a workforce that appeared to consist entirely of ex-students rather than crew-cut types wearing bow ties.

Koolhaas did subsequently mirror Le Corbusier at every stage of his career, in his own person. He has Le Corbusier's self-flagellating belief that the world is against him, even as it presses new commissions on him. He also has Le Corbusier's prodigious appetite for words: No architect has



published so many pages as Koolhaas. He has even, after an initial love affair with Manhattan, acquired something of Le Corbusier's contempt for America. And since he has been working in China, he appears to have caught up with Le Corbusier's authoritarian phase. Le Corbusier was associated with right-wing French politics in the 1920s and courted Mussolini in the 1930s, as well as Marshal Pétain and Vichy France in the 1940s. Koolhaas has apparently embraced the cult of the strong ruler in his enthusiasm for submitting to political discipline and his search for a father figure. "What attracts me about China is that there is still a state. There is something that can take initiative on a scale and of a nature that almost no other body that we know of today could ever afford or contemplate," he told an interviewer for the *Financial Times*. "Everywhere else, and particularly in architecture, money is everything now. So that is blatantly not a good situation as it leads to compromises of quality. Money is a less fundamental tenet of their ideology."¹ Koolhaas has not always been so dismissive of the power of money. "I think it's very important to say that we live without complaint, fear or trust under the following regime that you see here: the major currencies of the world, the Yen, the Euro, and the Dollar," he wrote in the *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*. "They describe a regime that sets our parameters, and those parameters are fairly immutable. But on the other hand, it is also a regime that gives us an almost unbelievable amount of freedom to establish our own trajectories within it."² Of course, that was when he was attempting to find a way to demonstrate that it was possible to maintain a critical detachment when working for Prada and a Las Vegas casino,

1 Rem Koolhaas interviewed by Mark Leonard, "Architecture: Power Housing," *Financial Times*, March 6, 2004, W6-W7. Available online at <http://fpc.org.uk/articles/243>.

2 Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong, eds., *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (Cologne; Cambridge, Mass: Taschen, 2002).

THE DANGEROUS STAIR. PHOTO COURTESY OMA.



rather than the Chinese Communist Party. Now he is doing both at the same time: searching the streets of Shanghai for a suitable place to build an outlet for Prada, and monumentalizing the new China.

Koolhaas has become increasingly impatient with criticism of this work:

Participation in China's modernization does not have a guaranteed outcome. The future of China is the most compelling conundrum. Its outcome affects all of us. A position of resistance seems somehow ornamental. On our own, we can at most have good intentions. But we cannot represent the public good, without the larger entity, such as the state. To make matters worse, the more radical, innovative, and brotherly our sentiments, the more we architects need a strong sponsor.³

3. Rem Koolhaas, wall text in the OMA exhibition "Content" at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 2003.

Whatever Koolhaas's views about strong states, to walk around the overlapping volumes of Porto's Casa da Musica and the dandyish elegance of its velvet and gold finishes is to forcibly remind one that it is Adolf Loos, rather than Le Corbusier, whom Koolhaas most closely resembles. When Loos flayed his contemporaries, from Josef Hoffman to Henry van de Velde, in his Vienna newspaper columns, he was establishing a pattern that Koolhaas has followed. And when Loos formulated the idea of the *Raumplan*, with its interlocking cross-level spaces, he was setting a spatial precedent that Koolhaas has followed in Porto a century later.

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