

# ARCHITECTURE

## Post-Delirium

*In MOMA's traveling show, Rem Koolhaas—once a champion of urban sociability—emerges as one of the master planners of Europe's new corporate gigantism.*

BY RICHARD VINE

*Yes, Europe is now, almost everywhere, ridiculously beautiful for those who can forget—for a fleeting moment—the arbitrary delusions of order, taste and integrity.*

—Rem Koolhaas

Officially, the 50-year-old Rem Koolhaas is head of a 20-person architectural firm, the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), headquartered in Rotterdam, with branches in London and Athens. Unofficially, he is the profession's latest media darling: a popular teacher who has done stints at Columbia, UCLA, London's Architectural Association, the Technical University in Delft, and Harvard; author of the 1978 urbanology cult-classic *Delirious New York* and of a soon-to-be-released, 1,376-page compendium of fiction, history and theory titled *S, M, L, XL*; a tireless participant in international symposia and competitions; director of a gargantuan building project in Lille, France (considered, with the impending completion of the super-fast train system, the "virtual center" of the new European transportation network); and lately the subject of many admiring publications ranging from a book-sized Princeton Architectural Press monograph to articles in *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

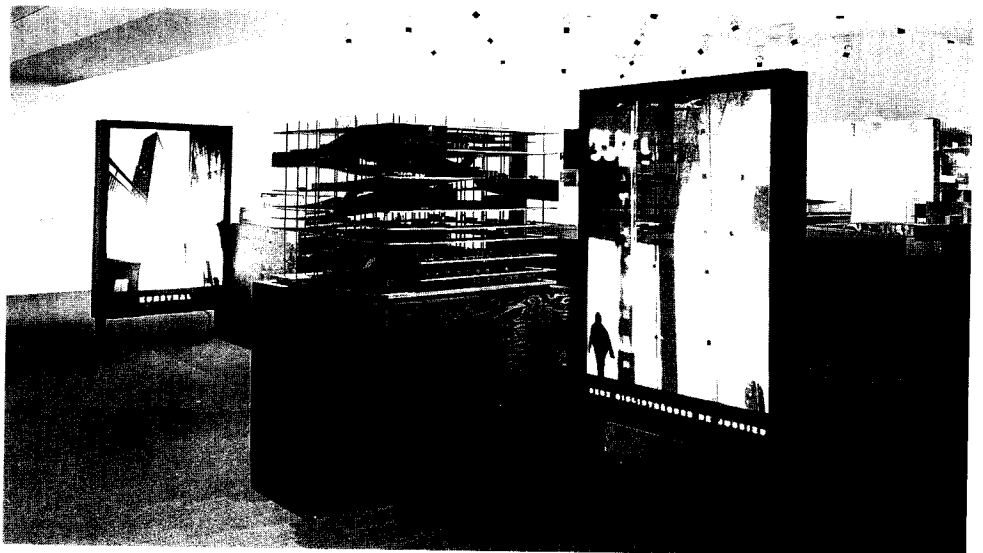
The traveling exhibition "OMA at MOMA: Rem Koolhaas and the Place of Public Architecture" was organized by Terence Riley as part of the Museum of Modern Art's "Thresholds" series on contemporary architecture and design. (This was not Koolhaas's first appearance at MOMA. In 1988, he was included in the Tomorrowland-ish "Deconstructivist Architecture" survey curated by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley [see *A.I.A.*, Jan. '89]. OMA was the subject of a show at the Guggenheim in 1978.) The ensemble consists of models, drawings, photographs, a video and extensive wall texts documenting Koolhaas's proposals—some realized, some not—for three urban plans, five public buildings and three houses. Installed in a top-floor gallery, this material presented New York viewers, inhabitants of one of the world's great pedestrian cities, a glimpse at the kind of post-humanist fantasia now prevailing in the urban environments that Koolhaas takes as his touchstones: Singapore, Tokyo and the newly de-centered Atlanta.

Supplementing the modest in-house display at MOMA were installations at half a dozen nearby locales. Escalator walls of the subway station across from the museum, for example, were hung with photographs—usually out-of-focus close-ups—showing OMA projects and models, interspersed with koanlike phrases such as "Historical Amnesia," "Redundant Identity" and "Temporary Program." A telephone kiosk on 53rd Street sported an aerial image of the city and an excerpt from *Delirious New York*. The fence of a construction site bore a strip text titled "Elegy to a Vacant Lot." Several shop windows in the area held copies of Koolhaas essays printed on vellum, or light boxes containing, by turns, pictures and texts.



Alternating texts and photographs of Rem Koolhaas projects on an escalator wall at the subway station across from MOMA.

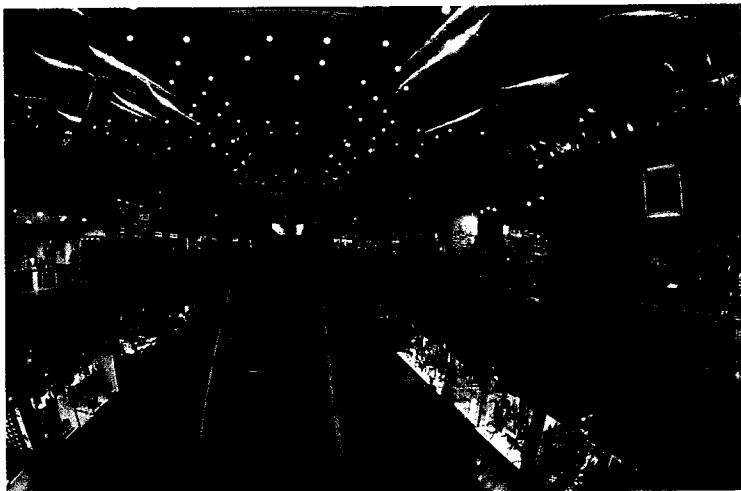
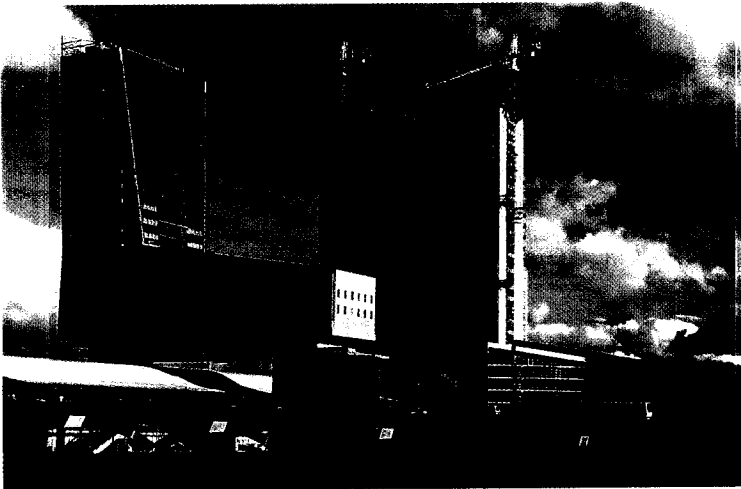
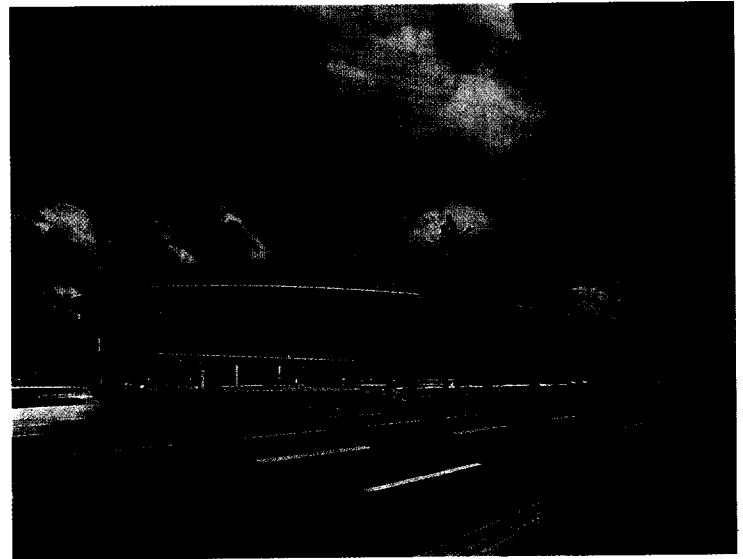
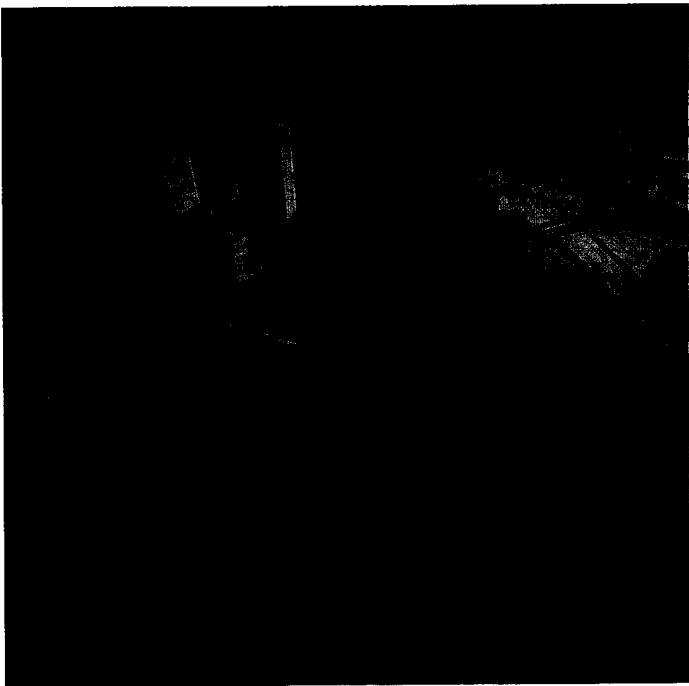
Installation view of "OMA at MOMA" with a 1992 model of the proposed library for the Jussieu campus of the University of Paris (foreground).



For the nonspecialist, OMA's materials are not particularly engaging at first sight. The drawings, though architecturally audacious and often spiced up with color, seem clinical and severe. The city-plan models are so stylized, so lacking in the fine and quirky details conducive to verisimilitude (and to human enjoyment), that they remain conceptual exercises, communicating little sense of the ground-level life which gives functioning cities their magic. The photographs in the exhibition proper are either reportorial

or melodramatic: uninflected studies of the built projects at various stages of completion, alternating with artily conceived "beauty shots." Only the video interview with Koolhaas, along with the building models and the somewhat oracular wall texts (drawn from OMA project presentations and from Koolhaas's extracurricular writings) provide immediate access to the architect's compelling mental universe.

Koolhaas is, by his own account, a celebrant of free-style urbanism—of new technologies and largely



*The Euralille project (clockwise from top left): model of overall complex; Koolhaas's Grand Palais (Congrexpo) convention center (photo Hans Werlemann); interior view of the same building showing the Salle Zénith (photo Daniel Rapaich); Congrexpo facade detail; Jean Nouvel's commercial center (photo Daniel Rapaich); and Christian de Portzamparc's L-shaped tower for Crédit Lyonnais (photo Daniel Rapaich).*

**A 15-year, \$1-billion project that will cover 300 acres with retail, office, hotel, exhibition and residential buildings, Euralille is designed to serve as the “virtual center” of a new high-speed transport system.**



*Aerial view of the Euralille project under construction, September 1994. Photo Daniel Rapaich.*

unregulated development, of freaky juxtapositions and serendipitous interactions (both architectural and social), of building-use “programs” that maximize density and activity, congestion and instability—and an opponent of “architecture,” by which he means any structure which limits possibilities. However, there is a striking discrepancy between the vivacity of Koolhaas’s doctrines and the coldness of his actual designs. This split, so evident throughout the show, points beyond an undeniable ambivalence in Koolhaas’s own thinking to a dilemma that must, of formal necessity, beset anyone who attempts to foster public conviviality with the vocabulary of corporate neo-modernism.

**B**orn in a Rotterdam undergoing extensive reconstruction after the bombings of World War II (the city also contained surviving modernist works by Brinkman & van der Lugt, W.M. Dudok, J.J.P. Oud and Gerrit Rietveld), Koolhaas spent four years of his boyhood (ages 8 through 12) in an economically awakening Indonesia. He began study at the Architectural Association in London at the age of 24, after spending several years as a journalist and screenwriter. In the former role, he witnessed both May ‘68 in Paris and the Soviet invasion of Prague. Thereafter a struggle to balance the extremes of “control and de-control” was soon evident in his creative work. He characterizes *The White Slave*, his independent film made with a friend in Amsterdam, as an allegorical treatment of “the European condition.” In Hollywood, he wrote an unused script for Russ Meyer.

At 26, Koolhaas produced a study deliberately designed to unsettle his “flower power” teachers at the Association. “The Berlin Wall as Architecture” comments that infamous structure as a vital embodiment of history, a continuous architectural event that generated new—and unquestionably authentic—meanings at every intersection. Two years later, in 1972, he joined his future OMA partners (Elia Zenghelis, Zoe Zenghelis and wife-to-be Madelon Vriesendorp) in publishing “Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture,” a proposal for surrounding selected portions of London with walls and allowing—or effectively forcing—residents to decide whether they wished to live inside or outside these gratuitous confines.

A Harkness Fellowship then enabled Koolhaas to come to New York, where he joined Steven Holl, Bernard Tschumi and others at Peter Eisenman’s Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies. While in the U.S., he also developed friendships with Kenneth Frampton, Frank Gehry and Philip Johnson. In 1974, the year OMA (“grandmother” in Dutch) opened its first office in London, he was asked by a student admirer, Laurinda Spear, to help design a house for her parents in Miami. Though the house was never built, the plan won a *Progressive Architecture* award.

In 1977, Spear went on to cofound (with her husband Bernardo Fort-Brescia) the Miami-based Arquitectonica [see *A.L.A.*, Sept. ‘88], a firm sometimes said to have put Koolhaas’s principles into practice before he himself could do so.

OMA’s influence was, in fact, mostly theoretical—albeit widely publicized through competition entries, treatises and unbuilt proposals—until just a few years ago. In the mid-’70s, for instance, Koolhaas helped the Dutch historian Gerrit Oorthuys resurrect graphic works by the young Russian-Constructivist visionary Ivan Leonidov. In 1979, he organized a controversial exhibition, “Beyond Good or Bad,” on the architecture of Wallace Harrison. (Harrison—whose structures include the U.N. building [after sketches by Le Corbusier], the Trylon and Perisphere at the 1939 World’s Fair, the Hall of Science at the 1964-65 World’s Fair and parts of Rockefeller Center, LaGuardia Airport and the Metropolitan Opera—was at that time a rather disdained figure, particularly after his creation of the bombastic Empire State Plaza in Albany, New York.) Koolhaas’s own proposals, meanwhile, were often near-misses. Most notably, his competition plan for the Parc de la Villette in Paris is widely touted—and not without remarkable affinities to Tschumi’s winning design.

Even today Koolhaas (whose professional association with the Zenghelis couple ended in 1985) has only some dozen buildings actually in existence, including the typically modest-sized but inventive Netherlands Dance Theater (1987) in The Hague [see *A.L.A.*, Apr. ‘88]. It is somewhat amazing, then, that this longtime “anti-architect” now finds himself in charge of the single largest building project in Europe.

**K**oolhaas’s most distinctive ideas—which tend to become increasingly radical when detached from specific works—reflect his belief that all viable architecture is now deeply conditioned by a worldwide population explosion. Even *Delirious New York*, accurately subtitled a retrospective manifesto, is a kind of rearview-mirror futurism. Exploiting a foreigner’s awe-struck perspective, Koolhaas analyzes the “unconscious” development of monumental modernism during the golden years that produced such flamboyantly non-European wonders as Radio City Music Hall, Coney Island and the

Empire State Building. Above all, he is enchanted by “Manhattanism,” a vision of the New York street grid laying out block-islands upon which—thanks to a solid stone substratum, steel skeletons and the invention of the elevator—towers of unprecedented population density could arise, each virtually self-sufficient through its vertical distribution of services yet visually (and physically) interacting in a monumental “culture of congestion.”

This vision reinforces Koolhaas’s conviction that today, more than ever, traditional spatial relationships will no longer suffice. The proper response to megadensity, the only response that *works*, is neither resistance nor nostalgia but wholehearted embrace of indeterminacy and superpersonal scale. Extra-large modernism—as a style, rather than a human-engineering ideology—is now the lingua franca of architecture throughout the world and should be accepted “without neurosis.”

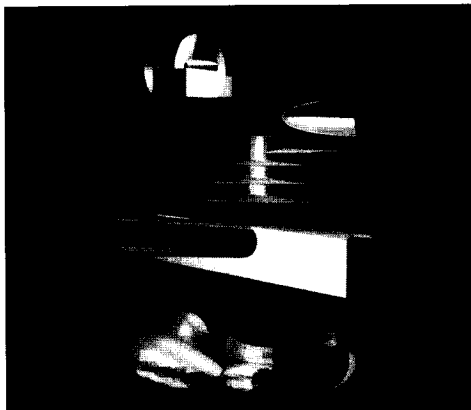
Do critics complain that every place is becoming the same, that national, ethnic and historical identities are being obliterated? Koolhaas reminds us that people everywhere are surrendering these identities willingly—because they know what strictures cultural “authenticity” has entailed in the past, because they sense that a greater freedom lies ahead, in emerging globalism. He, for one, is glad to contribute to the development of the “generic city,” whose examples are substantially—indeed eerily—alike whether situated in Australia or Peru. Do others bemoan the rampant spread of mall-like architecture and consumer culture? Koolhaas admonishes us that shopping is, after all, our last—and now defining—public activity. Do certain groups strive conscientiously to preserve and reutilize old city centers? Koolhaas champions “nowhere” peripheries that swallow up the old centers whole. (Indeed, the very concept of a “center” is one he considers defunct.) Do other architects agonize over the niceties of historic contextualization? Koolhaas argues that the forms we create today are, necessarily, the truest expression of our history and therefore always in their proper place. Do his competitors jealously protect the idea of “architecture” as the expression of personal genius, a memorably unique solution to practical and esthetic problems? He asserts that, within the parameters of a fully coordinated urban plan, each “Big Building” should be anonymous and multifunctional,

**Koolhaas declares that his work is designed “to generate density, exploit proximity, provoke tension, maximize friction,” but his structural vocabulary is often surprisingly spare and reductivist.**

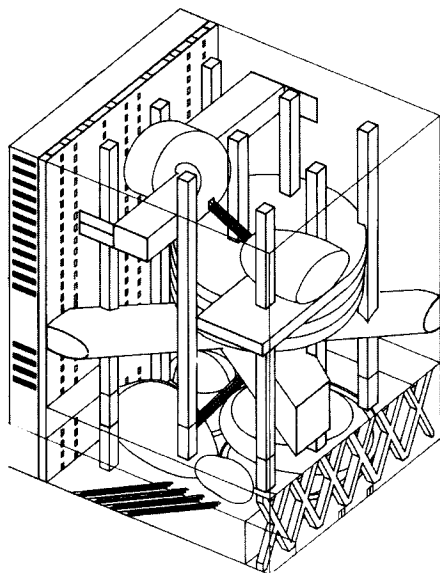
too internally complex to be subsumed into a single unifying design gesture.

A handwritten passage reproduced on a gallery wall at MOMA could serve as his credo. “BIGNESS,” he claims, “is ultimate architecture.” Once a certain size threshold has been passed, building parts become virtually autonomous; the outer envelope can no longer communicate the structure within. Thus the classical concern with just proportion as an emblem of moral probity can be summarily dismissed.

Through size alone, such buildings enter an amoral domain, beyond good and bad. Their impact is independent of their quality. . . . Together, all these breaks—with scale, [with] composition, with tradition, with transparency, with ethics—imply the final, most radical break; BIGNESS is no longer part of any urban tissue. It exists; at most it co-exists. Its subtext is [f]uck] context.



*Koolhaas's proposal for the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. Above, a computer-generated rendering of the public spaces and below, an axonometric study.*



*West facade of the Kunsthall, Rotterdam, completed in 1992. Photo Hans Werlemann.*

Those who protest that this sounds like a prescription for the corporate-fortress strips that now ring the remains of real cities would be told, in effect, “It’s here. Get used to it.” In Koolhaas’s lectures and tracts such insouciance routinely takes the place of argumentation: “What if we simply declare that there *is* no crisis?” The Nietzschean playfulness is self-conscious. Not only are BIG structures putatively beyond good and evil, but they contribute to a new concept of “lite urbanism” with analogies to Nietzsche’s “gay science” of post-theistic liberty. “In a landscape of increasing expediency and impermanence,” he writes, “urbanism no longer is or has to be our most solemn decision.”

Koolhaas’s confidence sometimes prompts him to ignore existing environs and to couch his OMA proposals in their “future context.” So enamored is he of the almost-lost profession of urbanology that he can speak sympathetically of much-maligned Eastern Bloc city planners who, for all their disasters, at least operated according to grand organizational schemes. (Mart Stam, a Rotterdam architect who worked in Moscow, provided a link to these technocrats. Several Soviet planners, as well as various Third World modernizers, have returned the compliment by studying Koolhaas’s projects first-hand.)

**T**he contradictions in Koolhaas’s thinking emerge most forcefully in his city plans. He speaks compellingly of the “new urbanism” as a process of opening up, advocating “the irrigation of territories with potential . . . the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized in definitive form . . . the manipulation of infrastructure for endless intensifications and diversifications, shortcuts, and redistributions—the reinvention of psychological space.” In practice, the urban proposals on view have either a kitschy commercial promiscuity or the sort of terminal bleakness that has plagued architecture since the bad old days of Le Corbusier’s 1922 Contemporary City for Three Million Inhabitants. (This is particularly ironic since *Delirious New York* casts Le Corbusier as the villain who killed Manhattanism.)

Koolhaas’s “new urbanism” often manifests itself as a Derridean fascination with voids and absences, a vir-

tual horror of building: “According to Derrida we cannot be *Whole*, according to Baudrillard we cannot be *Real*, according to Virilio we cannot be *There*.” The port city of Yokohama, Japan, provided OMA with a chance to maximize “congestion” without excessive construction. Koolhaas was assigned one of five redevelopment sites surrounding the city’s harbor. Two huge wholesale market halls (active only between 4 a.m. and 10 a.m.) dominate the area, both indispensable because the neighboring site, Minato Mirai 21, has been designated an official subcenter for Tokyo. It will, within three decades, attain a concentration of perhaps three million persons per square kilometer. Already the harbor vicinity is home to Big Buildings of the type Koolhaas endorses: “completely inarticulate container[s] with no architectural pretensions, whose only purpose is to accommodate certain processes.” OMA’s 1992 proposal (shown in diagrams and discussed in a wall text) is a “single warped plane”—an undulating structure that, on several levels, replicates the rise and fall of a roadway, allowing for the interweaving of shops, a stadium, parking lots and entertainment facilities, thereby fulfilling a prime OMA goal of “minimal containment, minimal cover, minimal articulation of mass, to generate the greatest possible density with the least possible permanence.”

Something of the same impulse informs the drawings and text for a *ville nouvelle* at Melun-Sénart, France. Last of the urban developments that the French government commissioned for the encirclement of historic Paris, this project occupies a natural landscape “too beautiful,” in Koolhaas’s estimation, to be subjected to uncontrolled exploitation. So his 1987 solution entails an uncommon forfeiture of design prerogative. We are now, he contends, incapable of orchestrating a coherent—to say nothing of a dignified—civic milieu: “It would require a second innocence to believe, at the end of the twentieth century, that the urban—the built—can be planned and mastered. Too many architects’ visions’ have bitten the dust to propose new additions to this chimerical battalion.” He therefore indulges in a double surrender.

As a concession to the Green movement, Koolhaas identifies various “bands”—along highways and rail-

way tracks, near forests, around historically significant buildings, through stretches of land that are exceptionally lovely—and declares that they will be left untouched, or else reserved for “the implantation of supermarkets and individual headquarters.” Yet between these pristine strips, which form something like a colossal Chinese ideogram, will be “islands” of urban development given over to structural anarchy. Not only will each island be allowed to evolve under “different architects, different styles, different regimes, different ideologies” but, for the sake of contrast with the unsullied bands, they will be abandoned to commercial chaos, “to what the French call *merde*—to the average-contemporary-everyday ugliness of current European-American-Japanese architecture.”

It is, therefore, with a certain trepidation that one approaches the master plan for Lille’s International Business Center, a.k.a. “Euralille” (after its combined public-and-private sponsoring group), the transformation of a provincial French city (current population about 950,000) into a 21st-century European megalopolis. The dimensions of the project are mind-boggling: 300 acres to be developed over 15 years (work began in 1989), encompassing—at a cost of \$1 billion—a station for the high-speed TGV trains, six mammoth high-rises, a World Trade Center and 10 million square feet of space devoted to retail outlets, offices, parks, residential buildings, hotels and cultural facilities. With the fast trains now running between Paris and London via the newly opened Channel Tunnel, Lille is less than two hours from either capital, and some 50 million to 60 million people live within 90 minutes of its massive rail-and-highway nexus. All the project supporters—and none more than the suppos-

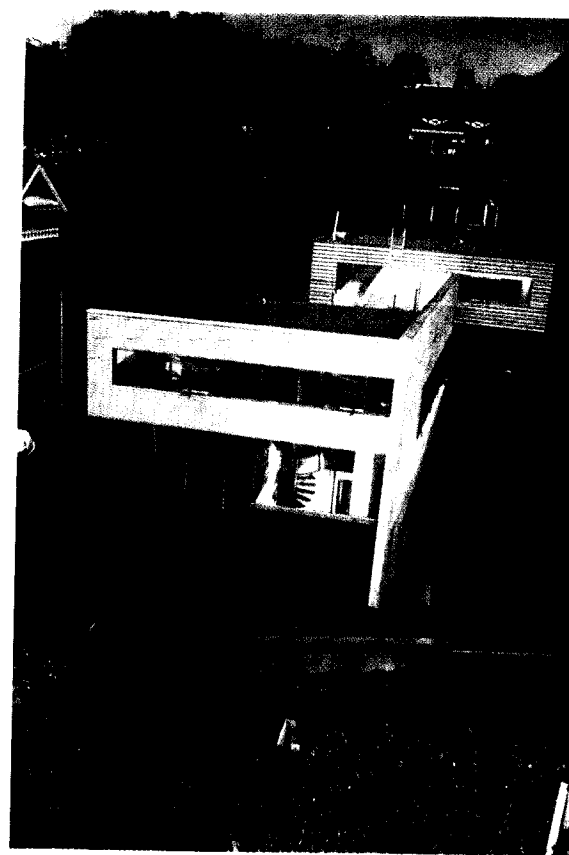
edly anti-centrist Koolhaas—are betting that Euralille will become “headquarters of the theoretic community” created by these infrastructural changes.

This questionable *Field of Dreams* reasoning apart, it would be gratifying to find something formally wondrous in the Euralille plan—but such is just not the case. The show’s model, photographs, drawings and video reveal only a coordinated assembly of contemporary business-as-usual structures, backed by an inflated rationale that refers, without redeeming irony, to making Lille important “in a completely synthetic way.” Great spaghetti bowls of train tracks and expressway interchanges, graceless boxlike towers, desolate plazas, the annihilation of any possibility of small-street life—all the now-familiar elements of ex-urb sterility are here. In fact, so detached is the conceptual thinking from sensual experience that OMA’s creation of an oppressively disorienting “Piranesian space” (a passage of suspended walkways and angled escalator ramps at the transfer point between the underground train tracks and the station proper) is treated as a virtue.

Located on the site of the old city walls and connected to the existing railroad station, the new complex, a narrow two-kilometer-long “zone of hypermodernity” between the historic city and its current suburbs, is taking shape as a medley of works by various architectural hands. Japan’s Kazuo Shinohara is erecting a hotel; Jean-Marie Duthilleul of the SNCF has designed the new train station in collaboration with Peter Rice; Jean Nouvel, architect of the Institut du Monde Arabe and of the Fondation Cartier, is creating a gigantic commercial center; 1994 Pritzker Prize winner Christian de Portzamparc, who realized the Cité de la Musique as one of the Grands Projets in Paris, has erected a standing-L-shaped commercial tower for Crédit Lyonnais.

Koolhaas’s major architectural contribution to this mix is the Grand Palais, better known as Congrexpo, a low-rise ovoid convention center, 300 meters long, that divides internally into three vast enclosures: Congress, a conference space that itself contains three large auditoriums; Expo, an exhibition hall of 20,000 square meters; and Zenith, a concert hall with 5,000 seats. Two large metal doors between Expo and Zenith can be opened to create one enormous “theater,” and additional apertures then render the entire structure a single arena for Koolhaas’s beloved programmatic interactions. Indeed, he prefers to think of Congrexpo not as a conventional building—and therefore not as “architecture”—but something like a flat-roofed corral that “creates and triggers potential, in an almost urbanistic sense.” He foresees, for example, a 30-minute event in 1996 which would culminate with 5,000 car dealers walking onto the floor of Expo and driving out 5,000 new Mazdas.

Similar ambitions, on a considerably smaller scale, inform Koolhaas’s competition proposals for two library buildings in France. As conceived in 1992, the box-shaped Library for the University of Paris, Jussieu, houses the humanities and science collections in one multi-story “folded” structure that uses a continuous ramp to connect its nine interior levels. The roiling “warped interior boulevard”—when combined with unwallled lecture spaces, an auditorium whose seating droops on a bowed disk from one floor to the next, and various other inter- and intra-story openings—causes function to bleed into function, instigating countless urbanlike interactions in a



*The Villa dall’Ava, 1991, with rooftop swimming pool, in Saint-Cloud, on the outskirts of Paris. Photo Hans Werlemann.*

process Koolhaas calls “liquefaction.” His hope is that these devices will evoke, amid seven ranks of thin interior columns, the multisenatorial simultaneity experienced by a Baudelairean flaneur. (To judge from the model, old-fashioned scholarly quiet and privacy are not high priorities in this library-as-boulevard.)

The one genuinely daring design in this exhibition is OMA’s 1989 proposal for the National Library of France. This 20-story, 250,000-square-meter building, envisioned for eastern Paris near the peripheral highway, would have contained a record of all words and images published in France since 1945. Koolhaas’s version—which came in second in the competition—is at once a stupendous vertical block with translucent exterior walls, and a latticework of struts that supports five futuristic volumes. It is designed to house a reference library, a film archive and screening room, a repository for recent acquisitions, a scientific research library and a catalogue collection. Suspended in formation by the interior columns and trusses, and embraced by glowing walls, its stretched, twisted, coiled and corkscrewed forms—perhaps inspired by Salvador Dalí’s sausage-on-a-crutch illustration of the Paranoid-Critical Method in *Delirious New York*—play off against the “voids” (i.e., negative spaces) that are so essential to Koolhaas’s architecture of absence.

This spatial dialectic seems particularly appropriate to the library’s conflicted new-age agenda. Once the archival materials were amassed, they would be eliminated, in a sense, by being absorbed into an integrated electronic system designed to supersede all individual sources—books, films, periodicals, data bases, microfiches, videos, laser disks, etc.—while making their contents instantaneously available on electronic “magic tablets.” The Very Big Library would have been, therefore, an ideal Koolhaasian paradox: both a “solid block of information” and a brave-new-world denial of physicality.



*Study model of the proposed Center for Art and Media Technology, Karlsruhe, Germany, showing metal wall that functions as an electronic billboard.*

Koolhaas's 1989 rationale for the Center for Art and Media Technology in Karlsruhe, Germany, could stand as a mission statement for nearly all of his projects: "To generate density, exploit proximity, provoke tension, maximize friction, organize in-betweens, promote filtering, sponsor identity, and stimulate blurring." This is no easy matter in a structure relegated to the outer margin of a town determined to ignore its geographic centrality in the new Europe and to retain its historically Baroque character. But Koolhaas is adamant—even derisory—in his opposition to treating once-vital city centers as pseudo-historical theme parks. Hence the most immediately striking feature of OMA's proposal is a 10-story, in-your-face metal wall used as an electronic billboard. Onto its huge exterior surface would be projected shots of current exhibitions, CNN segments, commercials, railway bulletins and other images advertising the center's involvement with nontraditional esthetics: contemporary art and music, media technology, video and virtual reality. Though Koolhaas won the competition, thus gaining his first truly major commission, the city later reneged on the project.

The Kunsthal in Rotterdam, completed in 1992 [see "Front Page," Feb. '93], echoes this challenge in a less aggressive fashion. Instead of a wall of visual announcements, it presents a glass facade that seductively discloses much of the structure and activity within. (This is a possible allusion to the windows in Holland's red-light districts, where ladies of the evening sit, visible from the street amid enticing boudoir interiors. Or it may simply reflect the Dutch custom of keeping ground-level curtains open, day and night, unless one "has something to hide.") At one end, the building straddles a service road that runs alongside a dike; at the other, a translucent gallery wall faces a museum park. Visitors march (somewhat laboriously) up and down two ramps—one of them split by a glass wall—through four rectilinear areas devoted to contemporary art exhibitions, lectures and dining. In one high-ceilinged gallery, peeled tree trunks function as columns.

Something of this cavalier attitude toward old-fashioned harmony of elements—and toward clients' daily lives—manifests itself in the models for Koolhaas's houses. (After the opening at MOMA, these models were moved from the prime exhibition space to the education area on ground level.) In the domestic sphere, where urban randomness cannot easily be simulated, OMA's approach becomes almost formulaic: each domicile includes a clever but comfortless use of space, a sprinkling of cheap materials and at least one fundamental design gimmick.

The Villa dall'Ava (1991) in Saint-Cloud outside Paris was produced for a client who requested a masterpiece. Mounting a narrow inclined lot, its two corrugated box forms are stacked askew and conjoined by a rooftop swimming pool. On the lowest level, a cluster of slanting polelike columns in a variety of colors visually "support" one of the cantilevered overhangs. Inside, a maddeningly placed wall runs through the main living area, creating two cramped parallel corridors where one would otherwise expect a clean sweep of space. The house's basic components are rendered in steel and concrete, but the pool is bordered on one side by astro-turf and a loop of orange plastic fencing. The Lemoine House (1993) in Bordeaux features a huge external roof beam that looks like a piece from an oversized erector set, as do all the exterior walls. At one end of the immense steel girder, structural tension is transferred to a cable that drops from the rooftop to the edge of the

building lot, where it is held taut by a dangling boulder. Inside, a major section of floor can be raised or lowered one story, occasionally leaving a life-threatening void. By contrast, Holten House (1994) in the Netherlands, seems a mild instance of classic modernism: a glass envelope with a walled-in core proportionately larger than that of Johnson's uncompromising archetype.

"More and more," Koolhaas recently told an audience at the Urban Center in New York, "the city is all we have." Appropriately then, "The Place of Public Architecture" is an exhibition which invites the prime architectural question: "What would it be like to live and work in these spaces?" The answer that it unwittingly suggests, "somewhat amusing but fundamentally bleak," is clearly not in keeping with Koolhaas's well-stated intentions. This is no great surprise, however, since the very terms of OMA's game preclude the desired solution. Ultimately, the fault for this divorce between means and ends lies neither with the museum (which has accurately represented the work) nor with the architect (who has taken on perhaps the trickiest design issue of his time) but with a cultural condition they both seem unable to escape. Koolhaas claims—and we have every reason to believe—that his aims are "urban" in the richest and most positive sense. But if the desired effect of city life is to multiply, intensify and improve the experiences of a populace, the choice of late geometric modernism as one's working paradigm can only result in frustration.

To be sure, some of the confusion arises from Koolhaas's own mutually incompatible goals. How is he, or any architect, to reconcile a Robert Moses-like passion for master planning with a determination to avoid prescribing the use, or "program," of particular spaces? How can variety and complexity, to say nothing of delirium and pleasure, be sustained by means of a reductivist style? How is fluidity to be fostered in a cityscape of BIG monoliths? Koolhaas often repeats the story of his first interview for the Euralille project. When asked by a board of solemn officials how he would go about resolving the juncture of the underground TGV tracks with a ground-level expressway, he felt a profound unease. As "a member of the May 1968 generation," he had never expected to confront such materially consequential—and utilitarian—questions, which he had assumed would always be handled by "bureaucrats." Even now he wonders if they shouldn't be left to someone with a "less delicate nervous system."

Nowhere is this dilemma seen more clearly than in Koolhaas's treatment of the show's principal theme—public space. In essence, his strategy is to dodge the problem through structural equivocation. Yes, his convention complex, libraries, city plans and museums will accommodate public functions, but, he insists, they will not seek to define or influence the events they contain. They will not be "architecture."

We can only hope such a statement is facetious. First, despite Koolhaas's tendency to dismiss classicism and to describe his public voids as applications of up-to-the-minute continental theory, the dynamic of built and unbuilt in fact has an ancient pedigree. The hippodrome, coliseum, boulevard, theater, catacomb, public bath, dome, triumphal arch and, indeed, the city grid were all classical structures. Likewise, Koolhaas's insistence upon designing for unforeseeable ad-lib activity is difficult to distinguish from the motive behind the agora, stoa, circus, piazza, courtyard, cloister, park, village green, urban arcade and—most important of all

because it is today so traduced—the city sidewalk. In short, public gregariousness was a living commonplace before modernism, with its basic misapprehension of human proclivities, turned open space into an urban desert by expanding it beyond the limits of sensual tolerance and surrounding it with the blank, unarticulated walls of a prison.

A second factor tainting Koolhaas's treatment of the collective sphere is his evident condescension toward "the masses," as he repeatedly calls ordinary citizens in *Delirious New York*. His attempt to create social arenas by default, like his conviction that most people seek only distraction (rather than elevation and intimate community), exacerbates a contemporary crisis of faith. In its Brasilia-like vacuity, Euralille confirms that there can be no noble—or even agreeable—public space without belief in a worthy and exacting public.

Willy-nilly, Koolhaas's projects do exert a conditioning effect, of course—physically on the architectural spaces he creates, and psychologically on the people who use them. But given the anomie induced by so many 20th-century master plans, and given the association of many others with fascism, it is easy to understand why he wants to eschew the appearance of control. Swamped by urban sprawl, he alleges, "modernism's alchemistic promise—to transform quantity into quality through abstraction and repetition—has been a failure, a hoax." Yet the struggle for alternative styles produces only a quasi-urban muddle: a succession of doctrines negating each other in turn and reducing architectural discourse to "an incomprehensible string of disjointed phrases."

This logical conflict is what gives OMA's proposals their schizoid character, a maddening amalgam of grandiosity and coyness. The wall texts insist upon abnegation, while the models evince something more closely resembling hubris. Before long, one simply wants Koolhaas to come clean and admit (as he once did in *Delirious New York*) that architecture, by its very nature, imposes its esthetic alterations—on the landscape, on the populace—in a way that no other art form (and few other human endeavors short of war) ever can. We don't just live with the dreams of our architects, we live *in* them—and they in us.

Once one has absorbed the many technical renderings and long swaths of Euro-intellectual prose incorporated into this exhibition, there is no denying Koolhaas's provocativeness as a thinker. Yet his ability as a designer of truly habitable structures remains in some doubt. He seems, on balance, a man formally indebted to Mies, Le Corbusier and Niemeyer, who nevertheless, in his need to be hipper than thou, is much exercised by populist impulses—that brand of populism which, through a failure of moral imagination, equates democratization with the crassest displays of mass culture. Endowed with vitalistic instincts offset by severely rationalistic formal means, Koolhaas advocates an urbanism strangely impervious to actual human desires—among which is a longing for order, taste and integrity of a sort inimical both to machine-city mandarins and to career avant-gardists. □

"OMA at MOMA: Rem Koolhaas and the Place of Public Architecture" opened at the Museum of Modern Art [Nov. 3, 1994-Jan. 31, 1995]. It is currently on view at the Canadian Center for Architecture, Montreal [Feb. 21-Apr. 21], and will travel to the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio [May 6-Aug. 13]. Monacelli Press has reissued Koolhaas's *Delirious New York: A Retrospective Manifesto for Manhattan and will release S, M, L, XL this spring.*