

...about Rem Koolhaas

His writing gained him recognition as a visionary early in his career; later the combination of architecture, urban planning, research and writing solidified Rem Koolhaas' reputation. However with many major projects completed, it is not that easy to recognize an identifiable style. He considers that a compliment because working in so many different environments and under so many different conditions, the finished work must be different too. He's been called a modernist by some, and a deconstructivist by others, but he really defies categorization.

Rem Koolhaas was born in Rotterdam in 1944. By the time he was eight years old, his father who was a writer, theatre critic and director of a film school, was invited by the government of Indonesia to become their cultural director, so Rem spent four years growing up in an exotic environment, before moving back to the Netherlands. He began his career as a journalist with *Haagse Post* in The Hague, and later tried his hand at screen writing both in the Netherlands and Hollywood. He had a script produced by Dutch director Rene Daalder, which he describes as an allegory using images from B movies as a commentary on contemporary Europe.

By 1968, he attended the Architecture Association School in London. In 1972, he received a Harkness Fellowship for research in the United States. He studied with O.M.Ungers at Cornell University for a year, and then became a visiting Fellow at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York. It was while in New York that he wrote *Delirious New York* self-described as a "retroactive manifesto for Manhattan". It was published in 1978 and was hailed by critics as a classic text on modern architecture and society. It made him famous even before he had realized any buildings. He has described the book as "an exploration of the culture of congestion." The activities and conditions that coexist in the city, Koolhaas looks upon as "density with choice and potential." The book was re-released in 1994 coinciding with an exhibition of his work at the Museum of

Modern Art in New York, titled Rem Koolhaas and the Place of Public Architecture.

That same year, he published, in collaboration with the Canadian graphic designer Bruce Mau, a second book, *S,M,L,XL*. Described as a novel about architecture, the book combines photos, plans, fiction, cartoons, essays and random thoughts with work produced by Koolhaas' Office for Metropolitan Architecture. The book's title is also its frame work, projects and essays are arranged according to scale.

Since 1995, Koolhaas has been a professor at Harvard University. He is leading a student-based research group that is studying different issues affecting the urban condition. The projects include a study of five cities in the Pearl River Delta in China; a study called The Roman System, focusing on the ancient Roman city; Shopping, an analysis of the role of retail consumption in the contemporary city; and a study of the African city, focusing specifically on Lagos, Nigeria.

The Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) is the name of the company which Koolhaas founded in London in 1975 with Madelon Vriesendorp and Elia and Zoe Zenghelis. The stated purpose was to address contemporary society and build contemporary architecture. Three years later, they won the competition for an addition to the Parliament in The Hague. Appreciation for the Parliament design resulted in the opening of an office in Rotterdam and a major commission to develop a master plan for a housing quarter in Amsterdam which was completed in 1986 and is known as IJ-Plein.

Another early commission was the Netherlands Dance Theatre in The Hague, completed in 1987. The plan is composed of three zones: the stage and a thousand-seat auditorium; the rehearsal studio; and the smallest containing offices, dressing rooms, and dancers' common rooms. In the March issue of *Art & Antiques* magazine, Phyllis Lambert, founding director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal, named the Netherlands Dance Theatre as one of nine "top buildings of the 20th century."

Koolhaas has designed a number of residences, including the Dutch House in the Netherlands and the Villa Dall'Ava in Paris. The client for the latter wanted a glass house with a swimming pool on the roof, and two separate apartments - one for the parents and one for the daughter. They also wanted a panoramic view of Paris and the Tour Eiffel from the pool. Koolhaas conceived the house as a glass pavilion containing living and dining areas with two hovering, perpendicular apartments, shifted in opposite directions to exploit the view.

The Dutch House, built in a pine forest on fine sand is a program consisting of facilities for two permanent residents, the parents; and for three adult daughters, who are visitors at most. A floating deck supports the glass-walled parent's quarters. At ground level, a wall wraps around quarters and a patio for the visiting daughters.

Koolhaas was one of five architects invited to design for Nexus Housing in Fukuoka, Japan. The project consists of 24 individual houses, each 3- stories high, packed together for two blocks. Each house has a private vertical courtyard providing light and space in the center. A white pebbled patio is just inside each door. Individual rooms are on the second floor. The third floor is a suite of living, dining, open air and Japanese rooms where screens and curtains generate different configurations.

The Kunsthal is a building primarily for displaying travelling exhibitions in Rotterdam. The program demanded three major exhibition spaces which could be used jointly or separately; an independently accessible restaurant; and an auditorium all spiralling around a pedestrian ramp crossing the building.

Educatorium is a name alluding to a factory of learning. The building is a facility to be shared by all of the faculties and research institutes of the Utrecht University. It marks the first phase of the university's modernization based on an OMA master plan. The Educatorium contains two auditoria with seating for 500 and 400; three examination halls; a cafeteria accommodating 1000; and parking space for 1100 bicycles.

One of the largest urban planning projects of the nineties in Europe was the OMA plan for Euralille, the major high speed train hub in the north of France that is the interchange between the Chunnel and the continental railway system. This is certainly his largest realized urban planning project, a business and civic center containing individual buildings by Nouvel, Shinohara, and the 1994 Pritzker Laureate, Christian de Portzamparc, as well as the Lille Grand Palais, designed by Koolhaas: a convention center, described as a hybrid building with a mixture of uses: congress, exhibition hall, and concert hall, all combined under an oval shaped roof.

Another of Koolhaas' designs in France, the Maison à Bordeaux was hailed by *Time* magazine as the Best Design of 1998. The house was the result of the needs of a couple whose old house had become a "prison" to the husband who is confined to a wheelchair following an automobile accident. The couple bought a mountain that overlooked the city, and the husband told Koolhaas, "I want a complex house because it will define my world." Koolhaas proposed a house of three levels. The lowest part he describes as "cave-like, a series of caverns carved out from the hill for the most intimate life of the family". The top part is divided into spaces for the couple, and spaces for their children. Sandwiched in between is an almost invisible glass room, half inside, half outside, where the client has his own room for living. An elevator, 3 X 3.5 meters (10 X 10.75 feet), allows the man access to all levels. One wall of the elevator is a continuous surface of shelves providing access to books for his work.

Recently Koolhaas released the design of a new 750,000 square foot OMA - designed headquarter for the Universal Studios, in Los Angeles, part of the master plan. The building is a generic office block, corresponding to a fast changing, energetic company. The volume is lifted up by four towers with specific facilities that promote interaction. They provide spaces for research, communication, distribution and privacy.

In a major competition in the United States, Koolhaas was selected

to design a new Campus Center at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. The building will be the first new structure in many years on the campus where 20 of its 50 buildings were designed by Mies van der Rohe. The IIT campus is one of the country's most significant architectural sites and draws thousands of visitors every year. When the commission was announced, the chairman of the jury said, "Koolhaas recognizes that a primary imperative facing the IIT campus is to create an urban intensity with a relatively low density of population. His innovative design creates an urban condition within the campus itself. It brings the students together not only physically, but spiritually."

Just a year ago, the Seattle Library Board of Trustees awarded Koolhaas the commission to design a new \$156 million main library. Koolhaas was selected in a competition over 29 other firms. When asked what the library might look like, Koolhaas replied, "We pride ourselves in having no preconceptions, but we relish the opportunity to work on such a stable symbol of collective life."

The main activities in Europe at the start of the new century are a planning study on the possible relocation of the Netherlands' main airport to an island in the North Sea, and what positive impact such an operation could have on the identity of the country. Also in the Netherlands, the OMA is working on a new city centre for Almere, near Amsterdam. In Portugal, he has designed a new concert hall for Porto, European Capital of Culture in 2001. In Berlin, Koolhaas has designed the new embassy for the Netherlands, in September 2000 the queen of the Netherlands will lay the ground brick. Today, Koolhaas' Rotterdam office is the creative workplace for some 85 architects and designers, housed on the top floor of a seven story building overlooking the city center.

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