

OMA/AMO: Whose Utopia?

Elâ Kaçel

Cornell University

In recent public lectures at Cornell University on 25 April 2005, and at the Harbiye Cultural Center in Istanbul on 17 May 2005, Rem Koolhaas addressed his current work as it pertains to the contemporary state of the discipline of architecture. A version of the following review of Mr. Koolhaas' remarks was first published in Turkish by the online architecture theory and criticism journal of the Arkitera Architecture Center, which hosted the latter event.

REM KOOLHAAS IS RELENTLESS ABOUT THE INTELLECTUAL POSITION OF ARCHITECTS in capitalist society. In recent lectures, his familiar maps celebrating the spread of ¥€\$ (the Yen–Euro–Dollar) are supplemented with pseudo-scientific bar graphs with which he laments the untapped potential of “architectural thought” squandered within the confines of traditional architectural practice. Not only are architects today “servants” of the private sector, but for Koolhaas, there is no escape from the web of capitalism, globalization, media, and the culture industry, which continually chips away at the professional and intellectual autonomy of the architectural discipline. The solution is for architects to move beyond simply *doing* architecture to *doing* media (beyond OMA to AMO). Koolhaas' autonomy is the product of the constraints he puts on the interpretations of his work in the media and of the means by which he differentiates his oeuvre from that of other “signature” architects.

Does the addition of the think-tank AMO to Koolhaas' more traditional practice really bring about a new autonomy from capitalism? After all, the applied research and media produced under the auspices of AMO are the apparatus by which Koolhaas' own interests, motivations, and image become indistinguishable from those of his institutional and corporate clients in fashion, art, education, government, and media – consider Prada, the Hermitage, the Illinois Institute of Technology, the European Union, and Condé Naste, respectively. While Koolhaas scoffs at clients who hope that a given architectural project will produce a “Bilbao effect” for the surrounding city or region, there is no real difference between this and the “Prada effect” that ripples through the media and the consuming public following the opening of one of his new stores. The distinction between Frank Gehry and Koolhaas is not in the real effects of their designs, but in how the designs are operationalized, legitimated, and managed in the media and in architectural discourse.

Koolhaas recognizes the power of media – not only to mediate between architects and various publics (or consumers), but to attach secondary symbols and meanings to a building that were never envisaged by the designers themselves. Because the popular media is obliged to appeal to its audience, it trumps critiques

from within the academic discourse, irrespective of how much more rigorously argued the latter may be. Jean Baudrillard's cogent discussion of Gehry's museum in Bilbao as "ready-made" and a "prototype of virtual architecture," gets nowhere in light of New York Times critic Herbert Muschamp's propagandistic edict that the museum is a "miracle." But while Gehry may be content to allow such secondary symbolic attachments to his building – or at least to profit from them – Koolhaas, in both his rhetoric and his architectural production, refuses to engage with the clichéd, aesthetic terms in which the popular media deals. Indeed, he refuses even to permit his designs to be described as beautiful or attractive. In contrast with the strategies of other "signature" architects, Koolhaas conspires to have the media acknowledge the value of his buildings without attributing particular values to them. It is not that he purposefully manipulates the public reception of his designs, but rather that whatever critical interpretations the public may choose to attach to his works are attributed to him and calculated into his prestige. The profit for Koolhaas is the same as for Gehry, but Koolhaas has the added benefit of being able to maintain the appearance of critical distance.

The judicious deployment of media by OMA and AMO is undoubtedly conditioned by Koolhaas' background in journalism. Koolhaas' inclination is clearly to shift the emphasis off the buildings themselves as aesthetic or functional objects and to focus instead on the ambiguities of their visual representation, whether it be in the 1344-page collage, *s, M, L, XL*, or the choreographed slideshows that accompany his presentations and lectures. The detached and ironic images, diagrams, etc. of the design, construction, and subsequent use of his buildings undermines the media's attempts to encapsulate his architectural and political ideology and to translate his buildings into easy "miracles." For instance, in recent public lectures Koolhaas presented a short series of images to show the fabrication of an "event" from an otherwise modest foundation-laying ceremony for the China Central Television building. He later showed an image of an unspecified protest taking place, incidentally, in front of his traveling exhibition celebrating the European Union. Just as in his books, these images seem to be offered up for intellectual and critical ends, but Koolhaas himself refrains from making an explicit comment on their political content. In a subtle and dangerously delicate maneuver, Koolhaas allows his audience to extrapolate from the images what they will. They attach their own values to Koolhaas' rhetoric – and subsequently to his buildings – not by virtue of any real correlation between them, but because of the visual association or adjacency that exists within the confines of the image. In Joan Ockman's words, Koolhaas is playing an "aesthetic mind game," but it is at the same time a strategic, political mind-game.

While Koolhaas claims that the autonomy of the architect can be regained only through media, cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu suggests that such involvement in the media is detrimental to the ability of intellectuals to actualize their work in the realm of politics. Writing on the potential of intellectuals in the modern world, Bourdieu points out the deleterious effects of mediatic "criticism" on the authority of intellectual criticism. He warns that "heteronomy" is not tantamount to democratization, but a threat to the rigor of discourse within intellectual disciplines. Only collective strategies and actions, as opposed to privatized, entrepreneurial ones, will result in an autonomous and politically effective intellectual world. Herein lies the conundrum for Koolhaas: his "strategy" is contingent on those other "signature" architects from whom he must differentiate himself; that is to say, he depends on the perpetuation of the very forms of architectural practice from which he distances himself. While Koolhaas



OMA's "Image of Europe" exhibition in Brussels and Jacques Tati's *Playtime*

may aspire to salvage the autonomy of the architectural discipline, in the end he rescues only himself.

This past April, Koolhaas wrapped up a public lecture at Cornell University with the aforementioned photograph of a crowd protesting in a Brussels traffic circle outside his colorful exhibition tent for the European Union. Koolhaas' suggestion was that the exhibition and tent created the public venue – created, if you will, the protest itself. Yet in defiance of Bourdieu's utopia of the collective intellectual, he remained willfully silent – perhaps ignorant – of the political content of a protest that he was more than willing to use for his own strategic, visual ends. Ironically, the image is reminiscent of the final scene of Jacques Tati's *Playtime*, in which a similar, nondescript traffic circle turns into a metaphorical carousel of everyday life. Tati's utopia for democratic urbanism, like Bourdieu's, springs from an affirmation of the values of universality: the collective and liberating creation of a carnival in the midst of the bald realities of the modern city. But even if we sanguinely choose to read such an interpretation or utopia into Koolhaas' image, we are still confronted with the ambiguity of the political and economic interests and boundaries that his exhibition and tent represent.

PLEASE CITE AS

Elâ Kaçel
“OMA/AMO:
Whose Utopia?”
Translation
and revision of
“OMA/AMO:
Kimin Ütopyası?”
Arkitera,
23 May 2005.
(http://www.arkitera.com/kose-yazisi-yazar_30_ela-kacel.html)