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## **Rem Koolhaas**

### **ZKM, Zentrum fur Kunst und Medientechnologie (Project)**

**Karlsruhe, Competition 1989 (1st Prize), Final Design 1991**

#### **Jacques Lucan**

*Architecture's final function will be to create symbolic spaces that correspond to the most enduring longings of the community.*

The above statement represents one of the aims that Rem Koolhaas had in mind in his extraordinary project for the 1989 Bibliothèque de France competition. The same ambition permeates his prizewinning design for the competition to build a Center for Art and Media Technology (ZKM) in Karlsruhe that was produced at the same time as the French National Library project, though its development continued up to 1991.

Situated on the far side of the local station on a narrow elongated plot running along the railroad tracks, the center lies at the interface between the city center (whose famous Baroque town plan has streets radiating from a central palace block) and its outskirts. It comprises a vast and somewhat enigmatic "cube," 40 meters plus along each side and more than 50 meters high, whose four outer sides simultaneously hint at and mask what might take place within.

It goes without saying that the center could not be conceived of as a conventional museum made up of rooms intended simply to house artifacts and provide exhibition space. Instead it had to be able to accommodate many different kinds of activity and fulfill a number of divergent aims. The goal was for it to become a kind of contemporary Bauhaus that could be used for staging events, organizing conferences, and undertaking research and experiments, and for training in upcoming communication technologies: in short, it was to be an electronic Bauhaus, where art and the new media technologies meet head-on. The prizewinning project of 1989 appeared as follows. A long gallery running beneath the tracks linked the Karlsruhe station concourse to the center itself. The gallery was bisected by a glazed partition: one side provided a thoroughfare giving access to the station platforms; the other side was occupied by a "time tunnel" presenting a chronological overview of the history of technology. Bordering the tracks and extending in perpendicular bands front the platforms lay the research departments with their studios, laboratories, and workshops, together with a library and multipurpose hall. At the end of this "professional" area and beyond the gallery confines lay the contemporary museum "cube" itself, including a theater equipped with the latest technology and a number of floors with exhibition spaces, conference halls, and seminar rooms, while the rooftop (like an updated equivalent of the area in front of the rail station) housed a restaurant and an open-air terrace suitable for many kinds of event or for the presentation of scientific or artistic work in progress.

The center's "cube" was moreover banded by "rings" that made up the building's four façades. Toward the station (and therefore in the direction of the city) a network of elevators, walkways, and escalators move up the side of the building, providing an ever more impressive view of the

cityscape below. On the opposite side - that is to say, toward Karlsruhe's outskirts - a "robot façade" incorporated technical equipment and moveable construction elements that could display public information or be arranged into "electronic décor" for each space; a visual device amounting to a declaration of intent, outlining the center's activities and readily visible from the nearby free way. The two other opposing sides constituted 1) a strip containing the services necessary for the proper functioning of the whole, and 2) a circulation strip upon whose frontage giant pictures could be projected.

This brief description of what is a "machine building" brings out a dialectic that has been at the center of Rem Koolhaas's concerns as a town planner and an architect since the beginning: the dialectic between "architectural specificity" and the "instability of the program." Fulfilling the criterion of specificity amounts to ceaselessly probing what exactly our "modernity" consists of and to questioning the given requirements of planning programs so that buildings may be designed that allow for novel uses as they arise. Fulfilling the criterion of instability implies an attempt to allow architecture to remain unfixed, so that a discrepancy, a near state of flux, exists between planning and the formal solutions arrived at. Preserving indetermination and even injecting it in a heightened dose combats the unholy tendency of architects to do so much (even too much) architecture.

The Karlsruhe project thus displays an approach to architecture that Rem Koolhaas has in the past sometimes sought to summarize in four at once overlapping and interconnected tenets:

1. Whenever a building mass is possessed of large dimensions, no "humanistic" relationship between the interior and exterior can exist. The pre-eminently "modern" formula holding that form proceeds from function is well and truly jettisoned. Architecture indulges in a carefully calculated schizophrenia. The container need not readily reveal the nature of its content; the carcass is a project in itself and as such can directly confront the local environment.

2. Individual parts are autonomous within the overarching unity of the building. Viewed from the outside, there is no knowing how the interior space is divided up. If it comes to it, a building need not articulate its various components but instead can superpose in an overall plan a number of fragmentary projects.

3. Transportation systems between stories (elevators and escalators) establish connections between the parts so they no longer have to be designed as a suite of interdependent elements. The elevator has eroded architecture's traditional power base: it also performs a liberating role, since it removes the need for fixed architectural links between different components that - now "undisturbed" - can simply be placed one on top of the other.

4. The preceding conditions mean that a large-scale construction, a very big building, adopts an almost "amoral" position ("beyond good and evil," as Rem Koolhaas himself will put it), its urban impact being perhaps quite independent of its intrinsic quality.

Rem Koolhaas was soon to feel the need to add a fifth point to the four already cited. In 1994 - as the Grand Palais at Lille (his first large-scale building to be actually constructed) was nearing completion - Koolhaas encapsulated the conclusions from the "Theory of Bigness" he advocates in an untimely fifth proposition of singular violence and radicalism: "Fuck context." Rem Koolhaas, as he hammered out these by now five architectural propositions, was in the end simply trying to explore new possibilities far removed from the hackneyed processes of architectural composition, be they historical or "modern." At the same time, however, he harks back to the preoccupations aired in his 1978 publication *Delirious New York*. This book-cum-manifesto proposed a method of investigating architecture and urban planning, a blueprint for a "culture of congestion," in which exploiting the density of the planning program was acknowledged as the paramount value of today's urban space. The foremost architectural symbol in New York was the skyscraper: it is an "automonument" that thrives on the schizophrenic separation exemplified in its separate floors, that

permits (perhaps demands) instability in any program - all the while offering a cityscape of breath taking self-evidence.

With these "buildings of the third kind," such as the Center for Art and Media Technology (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Rem Koolhaas wishes to recapture the lost innocence of the architects of Manhattan. No bland naïveté this: on the contrary, it is a new-found lucidity for today, an optimism capable of transcending ironic distance, of going beyond mere commentary (postmodern attitudes both characteristic of the seventies and eighties). As the century draws to a close, such clear-sightedness and positive thinking strive to return to what Rem Koolhaas has called the "real fire of modernity."