

# Imaginary Architecture and Spatial Immediacy

## Rem Koolhaas and Experimental Conditions of Architecture

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### Shape

Unbuilt and unbuildable architecture represents an imaginary world beyond the reality and experience of built architecture. Digital technologies have transformed not only the design process but increasingly blurred the frontier between the fictive and the real space. How can imaginary architecture relate to the experience of built space? Other than the previous lecture based on the "haptic in architectural design," I will focus on aspects beyond the physical qualities, like Sylvia Lavin who will speak here tomorrow. It is the *mood*, the *atmospheric*, to grasp characteristics that have been ignored in the abstract constructive and deconstructive way of architectural theory. Referring to the current discourse on projective practice, I will trace the idea of spatial *immediacy*, and "the effect of presence" that Michael Fried has defined as an essential characteristic of shape.

In the theory on the "critical" and the "projective" practice shape seems to operate by way of performative properties and spatial experience. Shape is interpreted as situational and contingent, in contrast to the essential, abstract, and immaterial realm of form. Its twelve attributes are hence, as Robert Somol suggests in *12 Reasons to Get Back into Shape*: "illicit, easy, expandable, graphic, adaptable, fit, empty, arbitrary, intensive, buoyant, projective, and cool."<sup>1</sup>

Shape operates with "the seduction of contour," with the "calculated vagueness" of the surface area that sometimes rely on the presence and mere *size* of large-scale buildings. For Somol, the work of Rem Koolhaas and OMA, such as "the twisted knot" of the Central Chinese TV building, operates with "the graphic immediacy of logos, generating a new identity" and thus seems to exemplify the specific qualities and potential of shape.<sup>2</sup> CCTV is a kind of cornered loop created by six approximately rectangular elements but with a deviation of a few grades. Its two main towers are interconnected at their basis by a common platform and joined at the top

via a cantilevered L-shaped overhang. CCTV represents a new species of an "exceptionally perceptive and adaptive organism," that accommodates all major functions of media at national scale within a single shape. Beside CCTV, other projects such as the NeWhitney, the Seaterminal Zeebrugge, or the Dutch Embassy also use this strategy of a "cake-tin architecture" for accommodating all programmatic elements within a single shape. Like a distorted rhomboid that is hollowed out at its core, they appear like a residue, a "leftover packing material for an object that has been removed."<sup>3</sup>

By characterizing it as a "minimalist frame for a monumental void," Somol paraphrases Carl Andre definition of the art object as "a thing is a hole in a thing it is not." However, to a much greater extent, he draws on Michael Fried's polemical description of minimal art, which he calls literal art in "Art and Objecthood."<sup>4</sup> For Fried, shape in minimal art decisively depends on "the effect of presence," because it implies both a specific environment and the beholder moving in it. Hence, it is "incurably theatrical", the shape objects are seen as *actors* on a stage deriving meaning from their singular effectiveness as *mise-en-scène*. When one perceives the shape object in its spatial context, in "the expanded field" of the architectural conditions, it significantly promotes an awareness of the physical "presence," and thereby "theatricalized the [viewer's] body, put it endlessly on stage."<sup>5</sup> This effect of *theatricality* is, for Fried, subversive, defiant, and to his mind, fundamentally inimical to the essence of sculpture. In his opinion, "art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre."<sup>6</sup>

### Experiments

Although Fried saw it as a negative impact on art, most artists in the sixties and early seventies thematized the involvement of the viewer in installation art and happenings, and considered it a positive and very creative possibility. Not only for artists but also for architects, this idea became central. They took utopian ideas as a metaphor for liberty and new social configurations, by presenting experimental projects and visions of non-plan, moveable environments, infinite megastructures, and floating entities. Archigram propose an urban concept of indeterminacy and "emergent situations" arising from spontaneous encounter. The environment is without any fixed spatial configuration and ideal form but rather emphasizes individuality of action and space. According to Peter Cook, "The 'building' is reduced to the role of carcass—or less," a concept that is close to Koolhaas' idea of a "cake-tin architecture."<sup>7</sup>

As an exploratory environment, the idea of a traveling Instant City airship introduces a moveable structure that only temporarily lands in a favored

place. Embracing both megastructures and small-scale "kit-of-parts" shelters, Archigram's projects do not only put emphasis on optimization and efficiency of standardized elements but also on the experimental aspects for the individual users. What is vital and more important than a technologically advanced structure is the experience supplied by a "responsive" environment. However, these prefabricated systems inevitably imply a high degree of predictability and control of the design.

Conceiving "fit environments for human activities," Reyner Banham contrasts the *controlled* environment where one has a limited range of environmental choices with the *controllable* or *responsive* environment that provides the more fully background conditions for what he describes as an "inter-determinate open ended situation."<sup>8</sup> Due to the advances in plastic technology, the inflatables become a symbol of the responsive environment freed from the constraints that have bounded architecture. It does not reduce architecture to traditional aspects of space or construction that can be seen as its essence, but rather opens up new subjects. Banham's plastic dome, Michael Webb's *Cushicle* and Archigram's *Environmental Bubble* represent *une architecture autre*, a term that Banham derives from the French art critic Michel Tapié's *un art autre*, who connects this term to raw, seemingly unfinished, anti-formal experiences.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, Sylvia Lavin argues against the essence of things like plastic material that goes across the borders of art forms. In contrast to Fried's modernist position to reduce art to its very essence, plastic lacks essential characteristics that could be assigned. In contrast to the modernist materials

such as glass, steel, concrete or stone, plastic seems to be an artificial material without a nature. As a synthetic liquid material that is now after a molding process in a stable state, the jointless surface of plastic does not only allow a differentiation of material densities ranging from solid, translucent, to almost invisible. Plastic material is now virtually everywhere in everyday life, with a pervasive use within the human body. This condition resonates with Koolhaas' assumption that "the cosmetic is the new cosmic..."<sup>10</sup>

For Lavin, the deployment of plastic entails the use of techniques of *plasticity*. The new forms relate to the inventiveness made possible by new material conditions and material techniques. Lavin claims that, additionally, plasticity has given way to new structures and experimental conditions, and a new "density of experience."<sup>11</sup> Projects such as Diller/Scofidio's *Blur Building* operate with the plasticity of a solidifying atmosphere that provides the visitors' sight with changing opacity.

Koolhaas' early works in the seventies, such as *Exodus—The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture*, or the project of the new city Melun-Sénart, also represent an experimental architecture that put forward utopian visions of autonomy, indeterminacy, and instability of space. Based on his theory of the Manhattan skyscraper as a social machine, these projects are conceived as a kind of Constructivist *social condenser* for generating new forms of encounter.

In the Exodus project the territory of the Strip is conceived as a series of square public monuments, where the inhabitants can encounter experimental forms of community initiated by the institutional



setting. They can program their moods and have hallucinogenic experiences, or they can take part in a violent spectacle. By means of a hermetical enclosure, Exodus insists on its autonomous nature devoid of any kind of interaction with the existing urban context. Though its inmates are conscious of being kept in confinement, they flee from their private urban realm into this artificial paradise inside the wall.

In *Imagining Nothingness* Koolhaas assumes that "only through a revolutionary process of erasure and establishment of 'liberty zones,' conceptual Nevadas where all laws of architecture are suspended, will some of the inherent tortures of urban life—the friction between program and containment—be suspended."<sup>12</sup> Out of this Biblical theme of the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, architecture has become an instrument for migration, social interference, experience and freedom.

Utopian visions of other worlds, other times and other states of mind, and the quest of ideal society always function as social and political criticism. According to Henri Lefebvre, "utopia has been discredited, it is necessary to rehabilitate it. Utopia is never realized and yet it is indispensable to stimulate change."<sup>13</sup>

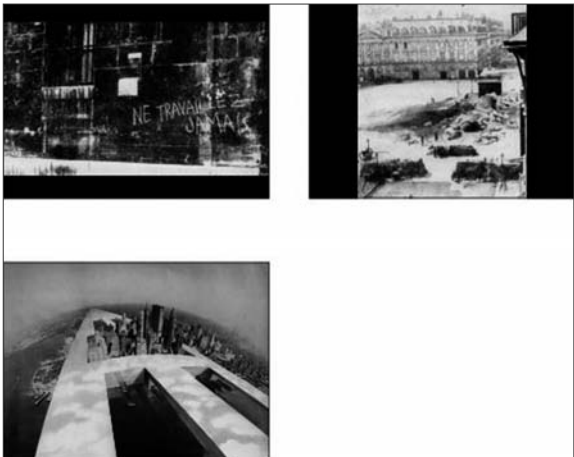
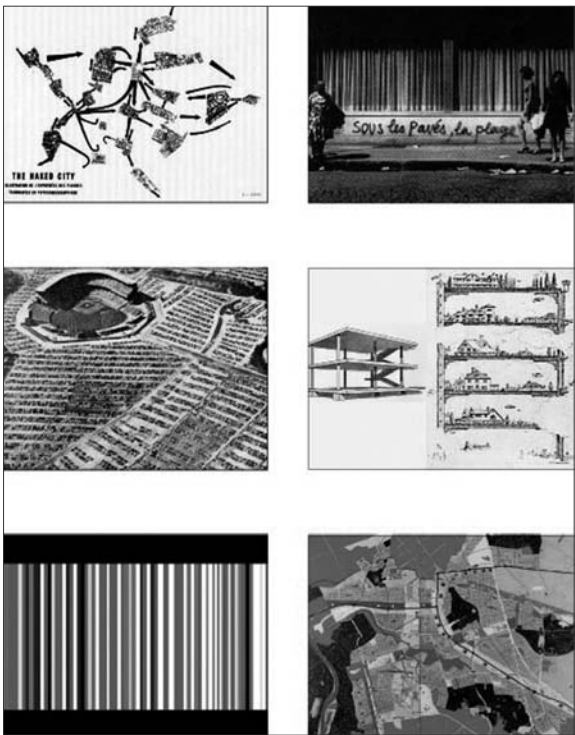
Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* presumes the total alienation of social relations in a space that is a mere collection of images, a stratum of commodities. Instead of further visions of an ideal plan, Debord emphasize the importance of imaginations in order to change our perception of urban space. People should become aware of the ephemeral nature of the city and the next civilization to come. Transforming both space and social life

means to construct new situations and encounters by chance in everyday life. The new social event is then the immediate experience initiated by architecture, the revolutionary event, such as the 68' student revolting.

### A tool of the virtual

Likewise in the recent architectural discourse decades later, the qualities of shape are described to enable alternative realities, to promote the emergence of new social events, the virtual in architecture. In *Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism* Somol and Sarah Whiting outline the new conditions of shape in the architectural practice are an instrument for "projection."<sup>14</sup> Though arguing against "the oppositional strategy of critical dialectics," they present the binary model of shape versus form, the critical versus the projective position, representation versus performativity, dialectic versus atmosphere. Further, this view is synonymous with difficult and easy, autonomy and instrumentality, index and diagram, the acting methods of Robert De Niro and Robert Mitchum, as well as with hot and cool media.

The reference to Marshall McLuhan's distinction between "hot" and "cool" media should demonstrate the different effects of the performance on the user. In contrast to hot media such as film, radio, or the photograph, which are well filled with data, and hence "high-definition," cool media like television, the telephone, or a cartoon provide only a small amount of precise information so that much has to be filled in by the audience. For McLuhan, "hot media are, therefore, low in participation," while "cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience."<sup>15</sup> Introducing a scientific metaphor that is perceivable and measurable such as the Doppler Effect in architecture should explain the effects of the virtual, its multiple contingencies and overlaps with politics, economics and theory. However, the Doppler analogy in architecture remains vague and inexact, because it is not clear what terms should be related to each other.



The promoters of shape further construct a contrast between Peter Eisenman's highly articulate forms, and Koolhaas' diagrammatic and non-specific shape projects. In Eisenman's indexical reading of the frame structure of Le Corbusier's *Maison Dom-ino* the substantial architectural parts are not reduced to mere geometry of the structural requirements. It serves as a self-referential *sign*, which Eisenman defines as the "minimal conditions for any architecture."<sup>16</sup> Hence, he interprets the specific location of the columns as a deliberate configuration that intentionally reinforces the particular geometric relationship between the two different sides of the rectangular plan. By contrast, in Koolhaas' reading the frame structure, namely the steel skeleton of the typical Manhattan skyscraper, is the most potential architectural *diagram* for instigating unprecedented events and behaviors. Projecting a multiplicity of virtual worlds on a single metropolitan site, the diagrammatic section of a skyscraper such as the Downtown Athletic Club becomes an instrument of the spatial discontinuity for producing new events. Hence, "the diagram is a tool of the virtual to the same degree that the index is the trace of the real."<sup>17</sup>

In this discourse on "post-criticality" the projective practice is conceived as a model, in which the architect is finally freed from many responsibilities to program, society, or technological resources. It gives rise to new design creativity as well as professional efficacy in an expanded field beyond the disciplinary constraints. By contrast, the critical position is blamed that it has exhausted the architectural practice by inhibiting originality and excluding any interdisciplinary approach.

Paraphrasing Michael Fried's notion of the *objecthood* of minimal art, Pier Vittorio Aureli claims that architecture by Koolhaas, Herzog & de Meuron, Diller + Scofidio, or MVRDV is merely concerned with its *contenthood*. For Aureli, "the superficiality of Shape is nothing but the solidification of excess content, metaphors, meanings, and symbols without sense ... Shapes can be interpreted as hieroglyphics; incomprehensible, yet their stubbornly figurative and symbolic character wants to be deciphered."<sup>18</sup>

Once more, it is the work of OMA that is considered to perform a bridging between the efficacious business practices and an avant-garde architecture. In 1994 Koolhaas presumes that "the problem with the prevailing discourse of architectural criticism is [the] inability to recognize there is in the deepest motivations of architecture something that cannot be critical."<sup>19</sup>

Under the "regime of the Y€S" now "maybe some of our most interesting engagements are uncritical, which deal with the sometimes insane difficulty of a project, with the incredible accumulation of economic, cultural, political but also logistical issues."<sup>20</sup> The new tasks of a consultancy such

as AMO, the reverse of OMA, is to reorganize large corporate identities, so that the architect has become a content and "identity providers" for a targeted group of consumers, an urban ethnographer and fieldworker, a collector and manipulator of statistical data who grounds his projects in analysis. Despite his earlier celebration of the generic and the typical, Koolhaas characterizes the CCTV building as "a new icon... not the predictable 2-dimensional tower 'soaring' skyward, but a truly 3-dimensional experience, that symbolically embraces the entire population."<sup>21</sup>

## Autonomy and the avant-garde

This current position has challenged the dominant paradigm of criticality in architecture that understands autonomy of the arts as the precondition for engagement, "enabling critique, representation, and signification."<sup>22</sup> The historic avant-garde movement has always been related to issues of political and social transformation. It calls for critical resistance against a system, in which architecture is rendered as a pure economic factor stripped of its social tasks. In *Architecture and Utopia* Manfredo Tafuri cites Victor Shklovsky's defense of absolute autonomy in art, because this attitude will render the design unsuitable for any propagandistic purpose.<sup>23</sup> Shklovsky's idea of *ostraneniye*, or "making the familiar strange" of the artistic language, means a semantic distortion of the established code and thus enables new configurations both in artistic and social terms. Yet, Tafuri distinguishes between avantgarde art and architecture, because, operating in the real space, architecture alone is able to reprogram the urban organism as a "social machine." There cannot be a specific class aesthetic in art or architecture but only an *operative* criticism, which essential task is "to do away with impotent and ineffectual myths, which so often serve as illusions that permit the survival of anachronistic 'hopes in design'."<sup>24</sup> Hence, architecture should abandon the position of realistic proposals and turns to utopian visions, because those concepts contain unexplored and unlimited possibilities.

Focusing on the work of Rem Koolhaas, I have related the qualities of shape thematized in current architectural theory to the visions of the sixties and seventies, their intentions, experiments and imaginary architecture. Both periods aim at generating new forms for social events by architectural means. And both rely on the performative qualities of space implying an "effect of presence" and immediacy that appears to be theatrical, contingent, situational. These visions involve a *psychogeography* of space, though most of these projects are fictive, unbuilt and probably unbuildable,

Even further, in the modernist lineage of self-referentiality and criticality it seems to be good and

favorable for the design concepts, if they are not built. To built for instance Constant's New Babylon, Archigram's Instant City or Koolhaas' Exodus project would require the most devious plans and laborious and costly operations, an imagination which would only confirm that they are amongst the purest paper architecture ever planned. For the Constructivists, unbuildable projects became almost a norm for inverting conventions of the given, despised building types. To imagine the unfeasible, the deliberate impossible in architecture, Vladimir Tatlin's monument to the Third International with living spaces that would have to rotate at three different speeds up and down the spiraling tower is a

case in point. These ideas are less grounded in reality than in utopian visions, closer to "nothing is impossible" in constructive and social terms.

However, though the new practice has a lot of similarities with the imaginary visions of previous periods, where is the revolutionary force to shake the foundations of society? Rather, it is cynical to interpret CCTV as a building "generating a new identity", an "experience, a canopy that symbolically embraces the entire population." Even if the ideas of the sixties and seventies are naïve and idealistic imaginary architecture, and most of the projects are unbuildable, this utopian moment is currently not there.

#### Notes:

- 1 Robert Somol, *12 Reasons to Get Back into Shape*, pp. 86–87.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, in: *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 10 (June 1967), reprinted in: Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968, pp. 116–47.
- 5 Michael Fried, *Form as Shape*, in: *Art and Objecthood, Essays and Reviews*, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 42.
- 6 Michael Fried, see note 4, p. 20.
- 7 Peter Cook, *Control and Choice*, reprinted in: Peter Cook, ed., *Archigram*, London: Studio Vista, 1972, p. 68.
- 8 Reyner Banham, *Softer Hardware*, in: *Ark*, Sommer 1969, p. 11.
- 9 Michel Tapié, *Un Art autre*, Paris: Gabriel Giraud et Fils, 1952.
- 10 Koolhaas, *Junkspace*, in: *Content*, p. 171.
- 11 Sylvia Lavin, *Plasticity at Work*, in: Jeffrey Kipnis, Annetta Massie, ed., *Mood River*, Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2002, p. 80.
- 12 Rem Koolhaas, *Imagining Nothingness*, in: Rem Koolhaas, Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL*, New York: Monacelli Press, 1995, p. 201.
- 13 *Henri Lefebvre*, in: Patricia Latour, Francis Combes, *Conversation avec Henri Lefebvre*, Paris: Messidor, 1991, pp. 18f.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media, The Extensions of Man*, London: ARK, 1987, p. 39.
- 16 Peter Eisenman, *Aspects of Modernism: Maison Dom-ino and the Self-Referential Sign*, in K. Micheal Hays, ed., *Oppositions Reader*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998, p. 191.
- 17 Robert E. Somol, Sarah Whiting, *Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism*, Perspecta 33, pp. 74f.
- 18 Pier Vittorio Aureli, *Architecture and Content: Who 's Afraid of the Form-Object?*, Log, Fall 2004, pp. 29f.
- 19 Rem Koolhaas, quoted in George Baird, 'Criticality' and its Discontents, in: *Harvard Design Magazine* 16, Baird quotes: *The Canadian Architect Magazine* 39, August 1994, p. 10.
- 20 Koolhaas quoted by Beth Kapusta, *The Canadian Architect Magazine* 39, August 1994, p. 10.
- 21 Rem Koolhaas, see note 10, p. 489.
- 22 Robert E. Somol, Sarah Whiting, see note 17, pp. 74f.
- 23 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1976, p. 64.
- 24 Ibid, p. 182.