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displaced by the earthquake of 2008. In addition, she is working on a doctoral dissertation titled "Rem Koolhaas and the architecture culture of the AA in the 1970's".

PANTS ON FIRE?

On February 9, the TVCC building in Beijing, designed by Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren of OMA, went up in flames like a giant lantern. For the author of *Delirious New York*, this must have had its paranoid justification, since it *was* the evening of the Yuan Xiao or ‘Lantern’ festival that marks the end of the Chinese New Year celebrations. The tower was part of the CCTV complex that also includes the headquarters of the Chinese State Broadcasting company. According to the CCTV news, the fire that demanded one life was ignited by illegal firecrackers set off by Beijing residents; later it was reported that the rockets had been fired by an illegal crew hired by the CCTV itself.

Western commentators have speculated that the destruction of the TVCC tower might be seen by the Chinese as a bad omen that could put an end to the habit of inviting Western star architects to design major monuments in the capital city.¹ Beijing’s \$40 billion Olympic modernization campaign encompassed Herzog & de Meuron’s Olympic Stadium, PTW’s National Swimming Center, Schuermann Architects’ Laoshan Velodrome and so on. At the same time, many other major projects were erected in different parts of the city, such as Paul Andreu’s National Grand Theater, Steven Holl’s Linked Hybrid complex, SOM’s World Trade Center and Foster’s airport terminal, along with new subway lines and new roads. Parts of the Forbidden City—Meridian Gate, the Hall of Supreme Harmony, and Qianlong Garden—were also renovated, although in this process much of the tra-

1 Rose, Steve: “Will the Beijing blaze come back to haunt European architects?” *Guardian*, Tuesday 10 February 2009. Online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/feb/10/beijing-fire-architect-cctv>.

Cf. Pasternack, Alex: *In the Ashes of Rem Koolhaas’s TVCC, a Chance for Revision?* Online at http://www.treehugger.com/files/2009/03/rem-koolhaas-tvcc-fire-and-the-future-of-cities.php?dcite=TH_sbr_design.

ditional courtyard house streets, or hutongs, were replaced by large-scale commercial or residential developments.² According to some estimates, 500 million square feet of commercial real estate have been developed in the city since 2006, more than all the office space in Manhattan, and this number does not include government projects. To date, 100 million square feet of office space are vacant, a supply that should not be exhausted for at least the next fourteen years. With the present downturn in global economy, also the Chinese building boom seems to be coming to a halt – even without the impact of the TVCC fire.

Bomb

The architecture critic of the *Guardian* and a friend of Koolhaas', Ian Buruma was critical of the state TV project from the beginning, pointing out that "CCTV is the voice of the party, the centre of state propaganda, the organ which tells a billion people what to think. ... It's hard to imagine a cool European architect in the 1970s building a television station for Pinochet without losing a great deal of street creed." Many other critics followed suit. Inga Saffron, architecture critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, saw in the CCTV a giant mushroom cloud: "Obviously, Rem Koolhaas' Office of Metropolitan Architecture isn't the only Western firm guilty of aiding and abetting China's authoritarian regime. A long list of prominent, and not so prominent, designers have provided the blueprints for the country's frenzied construction boom. But Koolhaas and partner Ole Scheeren may be remembered as the ones who gave China's state TV monopoly the architectural equivalent of the bomb. As with the atomic version, it's hard to avert your eyes from the brilliant flash made by Koolhaas-Scheeren's 768-foot-high, uh, megast-structure in Beijing's emerging Central Business District."³

Admittedly, the bomb metaphor sounds a bit extreme but on the other hand it actually resonates well with Koolhaas' own rhetoric, especially in the essay "Bigness."⁴ The *SMLXL* declares that the "programmatic alchemy" of Bigness re-

2 While the Chinese government estimates that 15,000 residents have been relocated throughout Beijing, human rights groups suggest that the number may be as high as 1.5 million. See Mattern, Shannon: "Broadcasting Space: China Central Television's New Headquarters." *International Journal of Communication* 2(2008), pp. 869–908.

3 Saffron, Inga: "Changing Skyline | For China, a huge, icy landmark." *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Online at https://listserv.miami.edu/scripts/wa.exe?A3=ind0611&L=TRADARCH&E=quoted-printable&P=15641874&B=-----%3D_NextPart_000_0005_01C713FF4F8DA6A0&T=text%2Fplain;%20charset=iso-8859-1.

4 Koolhaas, Rem: "Bigness or the Problem of Large." In: Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau (Ed.): *S,M,L,XL*. Köln, Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1997, pp. 495–516. **As is the case with many of Koolhaas' ideas, the inspiration may have come from Le Corbusier. After visiting the Soviet Union in**

invents the collective, reclaims maximum possibility, engineers the unpredictable, creates freedom, provides serenity and excites perpetual intensity; enthusiastically, he even promises that big buildings will start a nuclear reaction in the social world: “Like plutonium rods that, more or less immersed, dampen or promote nuclear reaction, Bigness regulates the intensities of programmatic coexistence.”⁵ Certainly, the CCTV building is OMA’s best realized example of Bigness as yet. Koolhaas and Scheren like to claim that the only building in the world that is still bigger is the Pentagon.⁶ This reference accentuates the aggressive rhetoric about the CCTV, but in truth the U.S. military headquarters in Washington, D. C. is not the largest building in the world. This distinction belongs to the huge flower auction warehouse in Aalsmeer in Koolhaas’ home country.

Void

Despite its immense size, the CCTV building is not overwhelming. At least this is what Koolhaas thinks, explaining that “amidst all the skyscrapers there, it’s relatively low. It will feel accessible.”⁷ Ole Scheeren goes on to elaborate that “if it was a pure gesture,” the structure might be frightening. “But since it’s actually a circuit of life inside, it’s a huge social catalyst,” he said.⁸

the early thirties, the functionalist master wrote an essay titled “Bolshoi... or the Notion of Bigness,” included in *The Radiant City* of 1934. Le Corbusier: *The Radiant City*. New York: The Orion Press, 1964, pp. 182–184. Even earlier, in 1927, he explained that “in every epoch, urban design has made use of all technological devices available and in fact has become the expression of technology. And today? Today we can build houses with 60 stories. That is the new fact. Let us consider the consequences.” These ideas were expressed by many others at around this time, including the Nazis, who despite their ideological conservatism were eager to exploit the potential of new technologies. In 1937, Adolf Hitler demanded that “we must make our buildings as big as the technical possibilities today allow and yet build for eternity.” As quoted in Jormakka, Kari: “Functionalism, Zeitgeist, Authoritarianism.” *Datutop 11*. Tampere: Tampere University of Technology. 1987, p. 41. The former quote comes from Le Corbusier: “Schöpferisches Städtebau.” *Das Neue Frankfurt*, 9/1928; the quotation from Hitler from his speech in 1937, see Hinz, Berthold: *Die Malerei im deutschen Faschismus. Kunst und Konterrevolution*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1974, p. 180.

5 Koolhaas, see note 4, p. 511.

6 Even the design strategies of the CCTV building and the Pentagon are comparable, as both apply a strong, iconic form collected around a void.

7 Pogrebin, Robin: “Embracing Koolhaas’s Friendly Skyscraper.” *New York Times*, Nov. 16, 2006. Online at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0DE1D8173EF935A25752C1A9609CSB63>

8 Ibid.



Fig. 1. Guards before the CCTV, Beijing, July 30, 2008.

Opposite page:
Fig. 2. Diagram of NeWhitney vs. Japanese pornography.

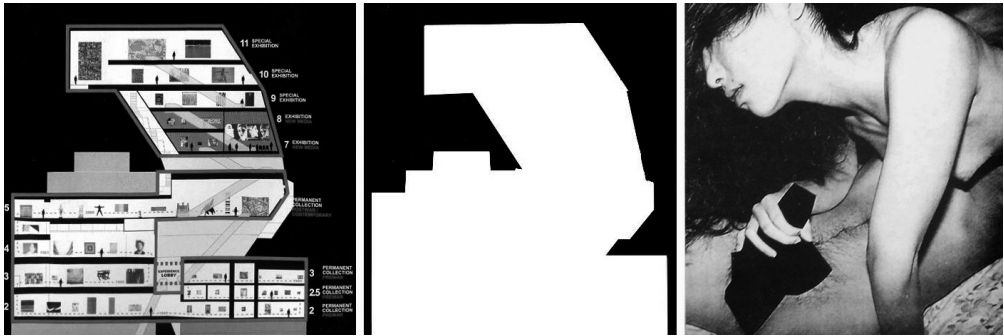
To put it in more precise terms, it is not just the immense mass of the building that matters, but rather the void it circumscribes. “Hardly any building really engages space,” Scheeren maintains. “Most skyscrapers exhaust space. This building leaves open the space it encapsulates. It activates the ground. It draws activities into the building.”⁹ (fig. 1)

The emphasis on the void resonates with Taoist metaphysics that has been popular among architects at least since the 1960s, i. e. since Koolhaas’ generation. Tao Te Ching famously muses over “creative nothingness”, arguing that “thirty spokes join together in one hub – just this non-being: the wheel’s usability/ Mould clay, thus form a vessel: just this non-being is the vessel’s usability/ Chisel out doors and windows thus form a living space: just this non-being is the room’s usability / Therefore: the being—it thereby takes advantage, nothingness—it thereby gets usability.”¹⁰

Some of the central concepts of Taoism, such as those of a formless void (*wu ji*) or a natural chaos (*hundun*), seem to come up again in Koolhaas’ theories in the late 1980s, although tinged with both Zen Buddhism and overtones of chaos theory. Even the title of his essay “Imagining Nothingness”—which begins with the famous quip, “Where there is nothing, everything is possible. Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible”—definitely recalls Eastern meditation. This notion was developed into a design method for OMA’s entry to the Melun-Senart competition in 1989. The “strategy of the void” involves defining not that which should be built, but that which areas should be left as voids in the urban

9 Ibid.

10 Lao-Tzu: *Tao Te Ching*, §11. An alternative translation by James Legge: “The thirty spokes unite in the one nave; but it is on the empty space (for the axle), that the use of the wheel depends. Clay is fashioned into vessels; but it is on their empty hollowness, that their use depends. The door and windows are cut out (from the walls) to form an apartment; but it is on the empty space (within), that its use depends. Therefore, what has a (positive) existence serves for profitable adaptation, and what has not that for (actual) usefulness.” Legge, James: *The Texts of Taoism*. Vol. 1. New York: Dover, 1962, §11.



fabric.¹¹ In Koolhaas' project, the voids eventually trace a figure that he describes as "almost Chinese".¹²

Still, the origin of the strategy may just as well be Japanese. Koolhaas illustrates the essay on the void with a Japanese pornographic image, where the man's private parts have been covered by a black figure (fig. 2).

Elsewhere, Koolhaas explains that the first commandment of Japanese censorship is that pubic hair may not be shown. This generates intellectual issue: ... larger sexual impact through elimination of responsible parts."¹³ Is it just an accident that this figure looks so much like the shapes of Koolhaas' buildings? The pornographic origin of the strategy of the void also suggests an explanation why Koolhaas is so obsessed with size or Bigness, which he describes as something that "breaks with ethics" so that it can "sustain a promiscuous proliferation of events in a single container" through its "rigidity." And "like plutonium rods that [are] more or less immersed;" "Bigness *fucks* context", until "a kind of liquefaction" follows and "elements react with each other to create new events" that connect "with a web of umbilical cords to other disciplines."¹⁴ It should be mentioned that all these obsessive tropes come from one page of the essay, "Bigness."

Recently, though, Koolhaas denied making any sexual suggestions, despite the fact the he liberally sprinkled all of his writings with sexual imagery since day one. In June, 2009, retired architecture professor Xiao Mo accusing the architects of the CCTV building of "genital worship," pointing to illustrations in *Content* that

11 In 1993 Koolhaas wrote a text stating that the Berlin Wall was for him the "first demonstration of the capacity of the void—of nothingness—to 'function' with more efficiency, subtlety, and flexibility than any object you could imagine in its place." Here, like in his discussion on pornographic images, Koolhaas jumps from the void to the substitute. Koolhaas: "Field trip (A)A Memoir, The Berlin Wall as Architecture." In: *S, M, L, XL*, p. 228.

12 Koolhaas: "Surrender, Ville Nouvelle Melun-Sènart France competition 1987." In: *S, M, L, XL*, pp. 977, 981.

13 Koolhaas: "Learning Japanese." In: *S, M, L, XL*, p. 102.

14 Koolhaas, see note 4, pp. 511–512.



juxtapose the hindquarters of a naked woman with the headquarters building.¹⁵ “I cannot think of any reason not to blow it up;” was Xiao’s conclusion. Another writer, He Qing, declared: “Doubting the new CCTV, kill the designer” for humiliating the Chinese. The Communist Party organ *Zhongguo Qingnianbao* (China Youth Daily) took a more relaxed approach to the controversy, pointing out that “the worship of procreation is a widespread custom in primitive societies.”¹⁶ In response, Koolhaas insisted that the building is “the positive and shining symbol of a changing world order” and that there no other hidden messages.¹⁷ But more important is to examine whether there is beyond the rhetoric a principle that works (fig. 3).

Brain

The CCTV building is a marriage of two Koolhaasian themes, ‘void’ and ‘bigness’. They are ultimately variations of the same notion, that of the “social condenser”, as imagined by Russian Constructivists in the 1920s. At a symposium at Tsinghua University in August 2003, Koolhaas assured the audience that the CCTV design “was not an intellectual or aesthetic experiment ... but, rather, a building whose form embodied the Chinese tradition of collectivism”. The CCTV tower was, he said, a “diagram” of “collective inhabitation,” a design that “you would never do anywhere else.”¹⁸ By virtue of bringing together ten thousand CCTV employees in

15 Xiao writes: “I was never able to figure out why the overhang grew higher the further out it went, or why the two verticals were inclined outward at a 6-degree angle, but now I have the answer: it turns out that the problem is because of the structural similarity of the ass and the CCTV headquarters building.” Xiao Mo: *The Structural Similarity of the CCTV Headquarters and Hindquarters*, Online at http://www.danwei.org/architecture/rem_koolhaas_and_cctv_porn.php#xiaomo

16 <http://www.examda.com/life/Other/20091009/103057225.html>

See also <http://bjtoday.yinet.com/article.jsp?oid=6355280>

17 <http://china.globaltimes.cn/society/2009-08/461190.html>

http://www.danwei.org/architecture/rem_koolhaas_and_cctv_porn.php

18 Zalewski, Daniel: “Intelligent Design: Can Rem Koolhaas kill the skyscrap-

Opposite page:

Fig. 3. Hindquarters vs. headquarters.

Right:

Fig. 4. CCTV, detail of façade.



a “shared conceptual space” the building is promised to create a “chain of interdependence that promotes solidarity rather than isolation, collaboration instead of opposition”. In the book *Content*, he boasts that the project will be a “catalyst for urban and social change” because it “eschews the atomized organization of media production”. More generally, Scheeren described the building as a “three-dimensional physical construct that would inscribe a particular organizational structure that would ultimately affect the way that people inhabit the structure, [so] that people work in the structure differently.”¹⁹ To put it in a nutshell, “the brains will know what the hands are doing”.²⁰ (fig. 4)

This last statement is not to suggest that the building would function as a control device. On the contrary, “the building introduces accessibility and maybe even something like accountability . . . that is entirely new to CCTV—or perhaps to any TV station,” says Scheeren.²¹ At the outset of the project, Koolhaas suggested that by the time his tower was completed, China’s censorship of the airwaves might well have changed and the country could be freer than Britain.²² Over the years, Koolhaas and Scheeren have repeated this suggestion, claiming that OMA “re-

er?” In: *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2005. Online at http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/03/14/050314fa_fact_zalewski

19 Dodd, Philip: “Interview with Ole Scheeren.” BBC Radio 3, Night Waves, March 26, 2008. Online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/nightwaves/pip/8fz0j/>

20 Walters, H.: “OMA’s race to construct in China.” *Time*, Nov. 9, 2006. Online at http://images.businessweek.com/ss/06/11/1109_cctv/index_01.htm

21 Dickie, Mure: “Towering change for China: The new HQ of a Beijing TV station is proving somewhat controversial.” *Financial Times*, Nov. 19, 2007. Online at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7a8db09e-970b-11de-b2da-0000779fd2ac.html>

22 Pogrebin, Robin: “I’m the designer. My client’s the autocrat.” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2008. Online at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/22/arts/design/22pogr.html?_r=1&oref=slogin.

See also “Die Freiheit ist größer denn je.” *Die Zeit*, 05.06.2008 Nr. 24. Online at <http://www.zeit.de/2008/24/Koolhaas-Interview>. Consult also Hawthorne, Christopher, “Ethics’ place in China’s building boom.” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 5, 2008. Online at <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/arts/la-et-ethics5-2008aug05,0,7583948.story>

ceived many indications, including explicit statements, that CCTV was interested in becoming more liberal and independent and was seeking a building that would facilitate these changes.”²³ In an interview, Koolhaas stressed: “In the CCTV building there is a utopian nostalgia that is the foundation of architecture.”²⁴ According to Scheeren, freedom will be generated by the loop that “acts as a non-hierarchical principle, with no beginning and end, no top and bottom,” thereby breaking the traditional hierarch of the vertical line.²⁵ With the CCTV building, the designers take the criticality inherent to projective practice to its very limits, “tickling the tail of a sleeping dragon,” to quote Richard Feynman’s description of the criticality experiments that were part of the Manhattan Project.²⁶

Horse

Of course, the actions of the CCTV during the fire of its neighbor do not really support Koolhaas’ optimism. The CCTV tried to block the net community from posting videos and photos of the fire on the Internet and accused unnamed passersby for starting the fire. Only later did it take part of the responsibility for the destruction. And last week, the officials blocked YouTube in China, once again.

Apparently, the CCTV is not big enough to generate the emancipatory effects of real Bigness.

23 Fong, Mei: “CCTV tower mirrors Beijing’s rising ambitions.” *Wall Street Journal*, November 7, 2007. Online at <http://newsgroups.derkeiler.com/Archive/Soc/soc.culture.romanian/2007-11/msg00500.html>

24 Leonard, Mark: “Profile of Rem Koolhaas.” *Financial Times*, March 6, 2004. Online at <http://fpc.org.uk/articles/243>

Not everyone agrees. Mattern quotes Edwin Heathcote’s view of new architecture in China: “In Beijing, the world’s greatest architects have virtually given up on the idea of the city. This is modernism minus utopia, and with no context—physical, topographical, political, theoretical, or urban. The simple, single image is everything. Any of these buildings could have been built anywhere else. Beijing is becoming a realization of the most superficial aspects of a contemporary design culture obsessed with the gesture and the icon, with the cleverness and complexity of its own structure. This is architecture as stage set for the Olympics, for a regime determined to demonstrate its modernity and its emerging economic and cultural power. Radical architecture has let itself be used for spectacle and propaganda.” The original source is Heathcote, Edwin: “Modernism minus utopia.” *Financial Times*, Dec. 29, 2007, p. 17. Here quoted from Mattern, see note 3, p. 880.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 882. The source is A Lian [sic]: “Interview with Ole Scheeren.” Online at <http://www.feedmecoolshit.com/interviews-archive/ole-scheeren/>

26 The goal of these experiments was to determine the critical mass of nuclear material that would sustain a chain reaction. Two researchers, Harry Daghlian and Louis Slotin, died during the criticality experiments at Los Alamos.

However, given that the new architecture has not been able to release Western-style political freedom, at least not just yet, the question arises whether foreign star architects should have accepted these commissions. In an interview with the *Spiegel*, Jacques Herzog was very clear on where he stands on the issue: “Only an idiot—and not a person who thinks in moral terms would have turned down this opportunity—would have said no.” Herzog went on to describe the Bird’s Nest as an act of political resistance: “We see the stadium as a type of Trojan horse. We fulfilled the spatial program we were given, but interpreted it in such a way that it can be used in different ways along its perimeters. As a result, we made everyday meeting places possible in locations that are not easily monitored, places with all kinds of niches and smaller segments. ... in a country like China these kinds of urban spaces acquire a different, almost political meaning.” He elaborates: “our vision was to create a public space, a space for the public, where social life is possible, where something can happen, something that can, quite deliberately, be subversive or—at least—not easy to control or keep track of.”²⁷

To Nicolai Ouroussoff, the architecture critic of the *New York Times*, Herzog explained that after the Olympics, the building was to be transformed into an open public forum. To the critic’s comment that the government was going to build a fence around it, Herzog responded: “The building is made to be open ... It is a work of public sculpture ... Even if they put up a fence, they can take it down again one day in the future”.²⁸

Possibly to the disappointment of the architects, the CITIC group that operates the stadium announced on January 31, 2009 that the Bird’s Nest will be turned into a shopping and entertainment complex in three to five years. While the maintenance of the 250,000-square-meter National Stadium costs 60 million yuan or 8.5 million dollars a year, it has proven difficult to find interested users for the venue in a country with more than a billion people. The only confirmed event at the stadium this year is Puccini’s opera *Turandot*, to be performed once on August 8, 2009 to mark the first anniversary of the Olympics’ opening ceremony. Incidentally, *Turandot* used to be banned in China because the government felt the original libretto – with its blood-thirsty ice princess, Turandot, who has unsuccessful suitors beheaded – depicted the country in negative terms. In the officially approved

27 “Nur ein Idiot hätte nein gesagt.” *Der Spiegel* 31/2008 (28.07.2008). Online at <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/0,1518,568274-2,00.html>

28 Ouroussoff, Nicolai: “In Changing Face of Beijing, a Look at the New China.” *New York Times*, July 13, 2008. Online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/13/arts/design/13build.html>

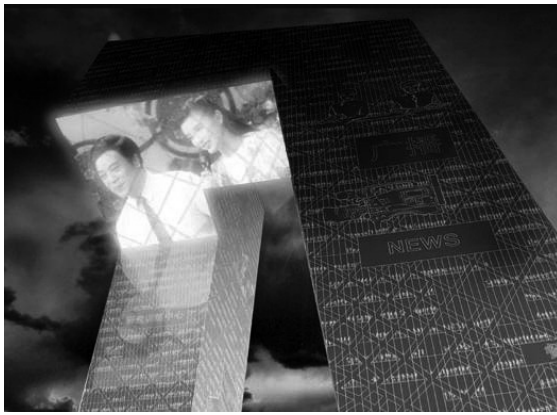


Fig. 5. CCTV, media screen.

Chinese version, with a new 18-minute ending composed by “China’s Champion,” Hao Weiya, conflicts are resolved and “love lights up the world.”²⁹

Icon

For sure, Puccini’s unfinished opera allows for different readings and even different endings. This kind of openness is also what Koolhaas aspires to with the CCTV building. Even though he describes the building as iconic, he stresses that it has no single meaning.³⁰

By contrast, many of the recent monuments in Beijing seem to have been fixed in terms of meaning. The National Stadium is internationally known as a bird nest, the National Swimming Center has been dubbed a “Water Cube”, the ceiling of the Lao Shan Velodrome calls to mind a bicycle wheel, the Beijing Shooting Range Hall has been designed to evoke the shape of a pistol or a hunting bow, the facades of the Digital Beijing building resemble computer motherboards, the National Grand Theater is called “The Duck Egg” and the Terminal 3 of the Beijing Airport is said to refer to a dragon. Toyo Ito suggests that the “underlying connection between communism and mass symbols” might explain this figurative fixation. He adds: “In today’s China, the demand is for size, expressions of immensity ... What I envy in China is, while neither the client nor society has any clear idea of what to symbolize, still there’s a strong expectation of architects as creators of symbols.”³¹

This certainly applies to the OMA building. At the groundbreaking ceremony, during which the design was never discussed, the president of CCTV, Zhao Huayong, walked to the podium and stated: “CCTV will keep serving our Communist Party and people with complete faith.” He was followed by Xu Guangchun, the

29 “Hao Weiya:” Online at <http://english.cri.cn/4406/2008/03/06/1122@330721.htm>

30 “This iconic new addition to the Beijing skyline,” Online at <http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/people/faculty/koolhaas/projects2002.html#cctv>

31 Ota, Kayoko (2004): “Toyo Ito: Big Time Dilemmas” In AMOMA & Koolhaas, R. (2004). *Content*. New York: Taschen, pp. 448–449.

head of the Chinese film-and-radio authority, who on behalf of CCTV vigorously pledged “complete loyalty” to the Communist Party; the new headquarters, he said, would become a “revolutionary symbol.”³² (fig. 5)

To concretize the revolutionary symbolism, CCTV proposed various names. An early favorite was ‘Knowledge Window’ or *zhichuang* (智窗). The effect of this lofty word was, however, somewhat tempered by the fact it is homophonic with the more common expression, *zhichuang* (痔疮) or ‘hemorrhoids’.

Other proposals included: Harmonious Gate (和谐之门), Happy Geometry (幸福几何), Peak of the Ages (时代尖峰), New Angle (新视角), TV Magic Cube or TV Rubik’s Cube (TV魔方), Future Window (未来之窗), Great Gate of Luck (幸运大门), 3D Window (多维窗) and, finally, Pattern Space (样式空间), a Chinese pun on CCTV. Astonishingly, none of these stuck, and Chinese netizens came up with such alternative descriptions as Wild Man (猛男), Slanting Stride (斜跨), Trestle (劈腿), High Altitude Kiss (高空对吻) and Big Underpants (大裤衩) which seems to be the most popular of all. The concreteness of the alternative metaphors is thoroughly in line with the style of OMA who often promote cartoony and zoomorphic interpretations of their buildings, as the illustrations in *Content* show.

The proliferation of names illustrates the deconstructionist commonplace that those aspects which let a shape suggest any one meaning usually also suggest many other meanings, including contradictory and unwanted ones. Pragmatically, polysemy is not very hard to achieve. True, Roland Barthes argued that the Eiffel Tower was the perfect monument because it meant everything and nothing, but the same might be true of quite a few other things as well.³³ The towers in Paris and Beijing attract readings because their massive size calls for a justification, not because their shape is particularly polyvalent or undecidable.

Power

Given that it is notoriously difficult to determine—or, for that matter, design—such referential meanings, is it possible to articulate any of the performative meanings of OMA’s colossus? Koolhaas used to be an apostle for the Typical Plan and the Generic City, anonymous structures whose lack of identity was instrumental in generating new events. For his Chinese clients, and presumably for Prada and many others before, he dropped this argument in favor of a more

³² See note 18.

³³ Barthes, Roland: *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*. Tr. Richard Howard. New York: Hill & Wang, 1979, p. 4 et passim.

traditional strategy of creating unique, iconic monuments.³⁴ Although OMA's Casa da Musica in Porto may turn out to define a new style—in Los Angeles there is a small house by Johnson Marklee Associates and in Prague another by KSA that seem to come from the same factory—the CCTV headquarters are not likely to suffer from any imitations in the foreseeable future. Of course, it is not as unique as the Phoenix: it could be related to Peter Eisenman's Max Reinhardt Tower or to Steven Holl's American Memorial Library, both projected for Berlin. Still, the lack of economic and structural rationality in the CCTV concept makes it unlikely to set a trend.³⁵ Moreover, as Scheeren likes to boast, the structure “breaks every single building code in China.” In order to give the design a building permit, the officials formed a special commission that overrode existing legislation.³⁶

Of course, the whole complex was part of a larger building program that included the demolition of many hutongs.³⁷ Christophe Hawthorne, a critic for the *LA Times*, argues that “if officials clear out a vast tabula rasa in a prominent location and then give an architect the freedom to produce something truly innovative,

34 Perhaps unfairly, Alex Pasternack claims that “design itself is not Koolhaas's strong suit; the shape of CCTV, for instance, was devised by a young associate at OMA, Fernando Donis: ‘I think if you asked Rem he would probably say he's a writer, not an architect,’ the former colleague added.” Pasternack, Alex: “Strange Loop.” *The National Newspaper*, Jan. 23, 2009. Online at <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090123/REVIEW/926069221/1008>

According to OMA, the competition team included Rem Koolhaas, Ole Scheeren, Shohei Shigematsu, Alain Fouraux, Fernando Donis with Johannes Buchholz, Catarina Canas, Guillaume Colboc, Erez Ella, Mamen Escorihuela, Adrienne Fisher, Sarah Gibson, Anu Leinonen, Shiro Ogata, Tammo Prinz, Torsten Schröder, Hiromasa Shirai, L. E. Tsao, Victoria Willocks, Zhaohui Wu, Yimin Zhu. The construction was led by Ole Scheeren along with project manager Dongmei Yao, as well as project architects Anu Leinonen and Andre Schmidt.

35 Fong reports that Rocco Yim, one of the judges at the design competition that eventually picked the square tower, says he initially had great reservations about the “extremely irrational design.” But gradually he came to see it as representing “a certain spirit that is just what the new China is all about ... Irreverent, a can-do spirit, fearless and extremely confident.” Fong, see note 23.

36 MacLeod, Calum: “China puts twist on traditional skyscraper.” *USA Today*. Online at http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-01-16-chinatower_N.htm

See also note 21, and note 23.

37 For Koolhaas' sympathetic comments on the hutongs that were cleared away to make space for the CCTV, consult Glancey, Jonathan: “Welcome to the future.” *Guardian*, Aug. 27, 2007. Online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2007/aug/27/architecture.chinaarts2008>. Consult also Pasternack, Alex: “In the Ashes of Rem Koolhaas's TVCC, a Chance for Revision?” Online at http://www.treehugger.com/files/2009/03/rem-koolhaas-tvcc-fire-and-the-future-of-cities.php?dcite=TH_sbr_design

that very freedom can become a mechanism for promoting state strength.”³⁸

More symbolically, the formal language of the CCTV speaks of power. For Saffron, the CCTV Tower will always remind you of how small you are, and how big the state. A gravity-defying cantilever will make it clear to anyone standing beneath it who has the power to make things happen.³⁹

Such feats are only possible with strong centralized power. Fully aware of this condition, Scheeren argues that “Historically architects have built for those in power. ... How else are great buildings made? Or paid for?”⁴⁰ If architecture necessarily has to comply with power, then it is logical to argue, as Koolhaas does, that “a position of resistance seems somehow ornamental... the more radical, innovative, and brotherly our sentiments, the more we architects need a strong sponsor.”⁴¹

Not surprisingly, Koolhaas likes to refer to “embedded activism”, a concept coined by Groningen professor Peter Ho.⁴² While China has experienced an extraordinary economic development, there has been no radical political transformation. Nonetheless, a gradual shift towards a pluralist society has been consistent. China’s semi-authoritarian limitations on the freedom of association and speech are restrictive of, but according to Ho also conducive to, nationwide collective action with less risk of social instability and repression at the hand of the governing elite.

OMA’s intervention in Beijing may be seen as this kind of embedded activism, although in this case the activism does not spring out of a broad social basis but rather from foreign experts. Actually, *Vanity Fair* writer Kurt Andersen may have hit the mark best when he pointed out that “if the Chinese are deferring to and succeeding at the highest levels of global architectural taste, that’s one more way they’re acceding to the liberal global order.”⁴³ The CCTV building demonstrates how architecture can function as an agent of globalization, asserting the superiority of the Empire over a nation state. It does not affect the life of the em-

38 Hawthorne, Christopher: “Beijing’s building boom, driven by the Olympics, mixes daring design with a totalitarian theme.” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 3, 2008. Online at <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-ca-china-architecture3-2008aug03,0,5744284.story>.

39 See note 3.

40 See note 23.

41 See note 24.

42 Vriesekoop, Bettine: “Ingebed activisme; Rem Koolhaas over zijn gebouw voor de Chinese staatstelevisie.” *NRC Handelsblad*, 4.6.2008. Online at <http://www.lexisnexis.com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/nl/business/frame.do?tokenKey=rsh-20.17>

43 Andersen, Kurt: “From Mao to Wow!” *Vanity Fair*, Aug 2008.

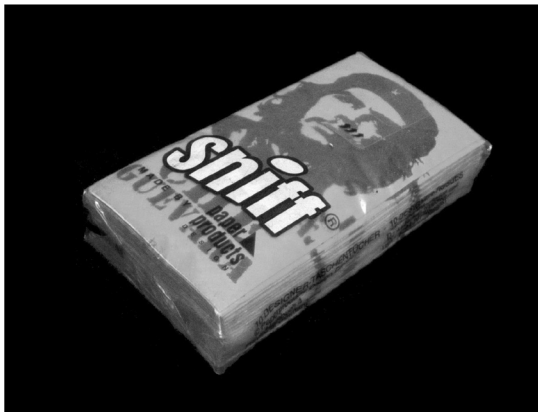


Fig. 6. Sniff tissue paper by Paperproducts Design GmbH, 2008.

ployees or the city's population directly but it may inculcate the values of Western high architecture—which may perhaps be described as liberal in some sense but which are also almost necessarily antagonistic to the values of the majority—in the Chinese elite and thereby affect the future development of Beijing.⁴⁴

As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri acknowledge, the rise of the Empire is not a bad thing in every way.⁴⁵ There is no doubt that globalization has brought remarkable advantages in the economic, social and political realms to many countries across the world; the standard of living has often risen and political freedoms have been expanded for many people. However, it is not clear that Chinese leaders can substantially advance their society by embracing Western high architecture culture. Nor is the architecture vindicated by the fact that it is accepted by a political system different from the one that begot it. Such an acceptance could even be seen as a suggestion that this architecture has lost its capacity to effect change.

Maybe the global success of OMA can be compared with the famous photograph of Che Guevara that Alberto Korda Gutierrez took back in 1960.⁴⁶ In the fateful year of 1967, culminating in Che's demise in the small Bolivian pueblo of La Higuera, Korda gave two copies of the image to a foreigner whom he took for

44 A Chinese news release comments on the design: "While elaborating on his design concept, Ram Koolhaas, designer of 'Z crisscross' said: 'It's the architecture that China needs—I bring it to you now!' Wu Yaodong, vice general architect of Tsinghua Architecture Design Institute, pointed out "The open attitude shown in selecting design schemes of this high caliber has surpassed the architecture itself." A member of the review committee said, 'the designer of the new CCTV (China Central Television) site changed from a domestic master to an international master. The pressure it brought is not whether the scheme is backward, but rather the futurist design may not be accepted by the general public'." China.org.cn by Wang Qian and Daragh Moller, "Four Great Buildings to Shape Olympic Beijing." January 16, 2004. Online at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2004/Jan/84895.htm>

45 Hardt, Michael; Negri, Antonio: *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. v, 42-63, *et passim*.

46 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guerrillero_Heroico.

a supporter of the cause but who actually was Italian publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. Soon, images of Che started to appear on posters and later on T-shirts, beach towels, napkins, energy drink cans and so on all over the Western world, without Korda ever receiving any royalties. According to the Victoria & Albert Museum, Korda's photo has been reproduced more than any other image in the history of photography. The successful dissemination of the Che portrait is proof that it carries no political meaning and posits no threat. The success of global architecture is a similar proof of its political conservativeness: it makes no difference (fig. 6).