

Rem Koolhaas 2000 Laureate Essay

The Architecture of Rem Koolhaas

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There is Rem Koolhaas the architect, there is Rem Koolhaas the writer, there is Rem Koolhaas the urban theoretician, and there is Rem Koolhaas the figure to whom younger architects are drawn as moths to a flame. The Pritzker Prize jury has taken note of every one of these aspects of Koolhaas's rich talent, but to its credit, it has honored Koolhaas as much for his built work as for his ideas. For the truth about Rem Koolhaas is that he is, at bottom, an architect, a brilliant maker of form whose work has done as much to reinvigorate modernism as any architect now living. His statements about the inability of architecture to respond to the problems of the contemporary city may have gained him fame, but his best buildings belie his own message, for they prove that architecture can, in fact, continue to have meaning, that the possibilities of formal invention are far from exhausted, and that in an age of the virtual, there is a profound need for the real.

In this sense, it is hard not to think of Koolhaas in the same way one thinks of Le Corbusier or Frank Lloyd Wright, other architects who could speak in brilliant sound bites ("New York is a catastrophe, but a brilliant catastrophe," said Le Corbusier) which so easily distract from the originality, richness and complexity of their buildings. Unlike Le Corbusier, whose urban theories have turned out to be utterly misguided, Koolhaas's rhetoric about the city—which could probably be summed up as a celebration of what he has called "the culture of congestion," and a recognition that technology has made both urban and architectural form vastly more fluid and less rigid than it once was – gives every indication of being completely true. Unlike Le Corbusier, Wright, and most other urban theorists, Koolhaas is less interested in creating a universal model as he is in describing the unworkability of universal models; his is a kind of urban design for the age of chaos theory, and he has made much of the notion that in an age of cyberspace, conventional kinds of urban form, not to mention conventional kinds of architecture, cannot function as they once did, and therefore can no longer be expected to have the meanings they once did, either. Koolhaas wrote in 1994: "If there is to be a 'new urbanism' it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential; it will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form ... it will no longer be obsessed with the city but with the manipulation of infrastructure for endless intensifications and diversifications, shortcuts and redistributions—the reinvention of psychological space."

In a time when it is fashionable to decry the increasing sameness of places—the homogenization of culture—Koolhaas has had the courage to inquire as to whether the generic city, as he has called it, is entirely a bad thing. How much does physical form have to determine identity, he asks, and he has argued persuasively that an exaggerated belief in the value of the old urban center, far from helping urban identity, has so weakened peripheral areas as to assure their deterioration. The Generic City, Koolhaas has written, "is the city without history. It is big enough for everybody. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small it just expands. If it gets old it just self-destructs and renews. It is 'superficial'—like a Hollywood studio lot, it can produce a new identity every Monday morning.... The Generic City is what is left after large sections of urban life crossed over to cyberspace."

As Le Corbusier made much of dismissing the architecture of the past as irrelevant to the future, Koolhaas takes a certain pleasure in his own rhetorical excesses, but they often tend to contain blunt and astonishingly simple truths. "The future is here, it just hasn't been evenly distributed (yet)," he has written. Or: "The elevator—with its potential to establish mechanical rather than architectural connections—and its family of related inventions render null and void the classical repertoire of architecture." On the subject of Atlanta: "Atlanta is not a city; it is a landscape. Atlanta was the launching pad of the distributed downtown; downtown had exploded. Once atomized, its autonomous particles

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could go anywhere, opportunistically toward points of freedom, cheapness, easy access, diminished contextual nuisance.” And on the contemporary condition of urbanistic thinking: “We were making sand castles. Now we swim in the sea that swept them away.”

It is not so much the clever phrasemaking as the fact that Koolhaas’s writing—and his thinking—are so blunt and determinedly non-linear that accounts, surely, for his immense appeal to younger architects; they see in Koolhaas a fearless critic of the socio-economic and political forces that have shaped the modern city, a figure who professes indifference to power and yet seems, paradoxically, able to accept many things as they are. Koolhaas declaims in every direction at once, one part Jeremiah, proclaiming imminent ruin, and one part Robert Venturi, viewing the world with a fascination bordering on love that implicitly connotes a degree of acceptance. Never mind the contradiction—there is no contradiction, for this is how the world is, Koolhaas is saying, and how we must deal with it. Above all Koolhaas is an observer of reality, and he is utterly unsentimental. His deepest scorn, it would seem, is for those who would respond to the urgencies of this moment by retreating into the nostalgia of the past.

Koolhaas’s own architecture, it need hardly be said, does nothing of the kind. And yet Koolhaas’s modernism, brilliantly inventive, nonetheless does not ignore the past, either. The Villa Dall’Ava in Paris, of 1991, may be the most original commentary on Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoie that has been produced—or at least it was until Koolhaas returned, more obliquely, to it in the design of a very different house in Bordeaux, in 1998. The Villa Dall’Ava is a dazzling and deft comment on the Villa Savoie, taking a modernist icon that has generally been considered so fixed and complete an object of perfection as to be impervious to anything but adoration, and blows it apart. Koolhaas’s design is at once lighter and more industrial; it has a loose, temporary spirit to it, as if the Villa Savoie were being rebuilt as a high-tech shanty. Corbusian modernism becomes in Koolhaas’s hand not the object of distant veneration and awe, but the stuff of lively engagement.

In Bordeaux, the program was unusual, and of paramount importance: a house for a man confined to a wheelchair following an automobile accident, and his family. The man told Koolhaas that he wanted “a complex house because it will define my world,” and the architect responded with a three-level structure with a glass room in the middle that moves up and down, at once an elevator allowing the man to move about the house, and a discreet space in itself. The primary visual image of the house is of a strongly horizontal metal object, the upper level, floating on the glass planes of the middle level—the Villa Savoie again, this time made more abstract, and breathtakingly beautiful. And yet the basic idea of this design, the parti, is not a homage to the Villa Savoie at all, but an attempt to find an architectural solution to the unusual demands of a bookish and intellectually active client who wanted a house that would at once create an extraordinary environment for himself and a comfortable environment for his family. Koolhaas started with this—the client’s needs—not with the form.

Koolhaas is not known primarily as an architect of residences, and with good reason—he generally prefers to be able to address larger issues than ordinary domestic life offers an architect. His greatest concern is public life, and the extent to which architecture can still be a force to sustain it. His major public buildings—the Euralille and Lille Grand Palais in Lille, France; the Netherlands Dance Theater in The Hague; the unrealized designs for the Tres Grand Bibliotheque in Paris, the Jussieu Library at the University of Paris, the art and media center in Karlsruhe, Germany, and the Seattle Public Library—are all designs that suggest movement and energy. Their vocabulary is modern, but it is an exuberant modernism, colorful and intense and full of shifting, complex geometries. Not for nothing was Koolhaas among the first architects to look seriously at the work of Wallace K. Harrison, and to understand the remarkable and often painful struggle it represented between romantic form and pragmatic impulse. Like Harrison, Koolhaas wants to shape huge swaths of cities, and like Harrison he is determined to find a point of intersection between the pressures that force banality and his own love of exuberant, swooping form. By force of personality Koolhaas has often gotten his way, and that way is at once wild and plain, at once voluptuous and ordinary.

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Koolhaas's urban buildings are not rigid classical structures, defined by a formal order that is fixed and unchanging; they seem in their very being to be in flux, to suggest that while they may look this way today, they might well be turned into something else tomorrow. It is not always the case that Koolhaas's buildings actually realize the generally unrealized modernist dream of total flexibility—they give off the aura of change more often than they possess the reality of it—but it can surely be said that they are designed to be open to social and programmatic evolution. Koolhaas's desire as an architect is to design the stage, not to write all of the lines to be spoken on it.

Yet it can be too easy to talk about Koolhaas in these terms, and to begin to think of him almost as an anti-architect. If he were that, however, he would never have won the Pritzker. His architecture is the antithesis of neutral, and it could not be farther from casual. If his work does not aspire to the elegance of Mies, he is every bit as obsessive about detail, and a lot more concerned about the nature of what goes on in his buildings. He is profoundly interested in programs; indeed, he sees the program—what actually happens in a building—as a primary generator of its form. Koolhaas embarked on a long study of libraries and what they might mean in the digital age before designing the new public library for Seattle; he has studied shopping and consumerism before taking on the project of creating a new generation of retail stores for Prada. His Prada designs are based on the notion that the store is increasingly becoming a place of events, a place of theater; he is taking this one step further and making the store literally an environment for performances. For an architect who is far from a formalist, Koolhaas is creating forms of undeniable importance. In Seattle, he is trusting in a powerful form of copper mesh in a glass façade to create a physical space exciting enough to make the library, once again, a kind of common room for a larger community. Here, as in so much of his work, he is using architecture to create real space that will be compelling enough not just to exist in the age of virtual space, but to ennoble it.

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