

Milo Bitters

Elan Fessler, Karin Grohmannová

Introduction to Discipline

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### The Architecture of Rem Koolhaas

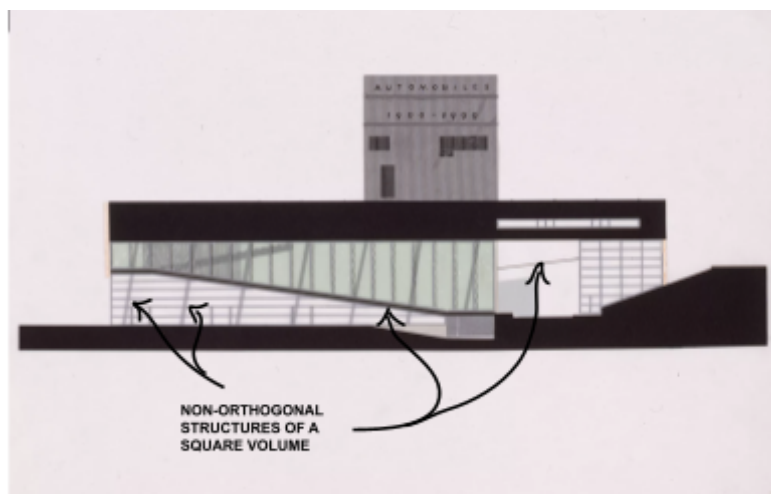
Rem Koolhaas is an architect that is hard to put in a box with words. He knows this too: In the introduction to his book '*S,M,L,XL*', a remarkable compilation of his writings and architectural endeavors, Koolhaas writes "Coherence imposed on an architect's work is either cosmetic or the result of self-censorship." He goes on to organize his 1,300-page volume solely by scale of the projects and writings within it. Koolhaas knows the only coherence, the "thread" through his work is the approach he takes in the conception of the ideas. Constantly aware of the state of architecture, Koolhaas knows that nothing in architecture can be truly permanent; architecture must accommodate the city and the instability that comes with it. Can an architect's works ever be "coherent" once they have been separated from the work and the work has been properly used? Ironically, Koolhaas achieves a sense of coherence across his works by knowing he can't. Koolhaas's book *Delirious New York*, published 1978, sums up his prominent ideas concerning architecture, cities, and their interaction. He constantly refers to these ideas in numerous other writings, talks, and publications. The following passage from *Delirious New York* encapsulates a thesis that he returns to over and over in his career:

"The permanence of even the most frivolous item of architecture and the instability of the metropolis are incompatible. In this conflict the metropolis is, by definition, the victor; in its pervasive reality architecture is reduced to the status of a plaything, tolerated as decor for the illusions of history and memory. In Manhattan this paradox is resolved in a brilliant way: through the development of a mutant architecture that combines the aura of monumentality with the performance of instability. Its interiors accommodate compositions of program and activity that change constantly and independently of each other without affecting what is called, with accidental profundity, the envelope. The genius of Manhattan is the simplicity of this divorce between appearance and performance: it keeps the illusion of architecture intact, while surrendering wholeheartedly to the needs of the metropolis.

Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture know that the fate of architecture is in the hands of the users, the city, time, though that does not mean he has no control over his works. In fact, through his works, Rem Koolhaas beckons the city into his work, mimicking the forms and patterns of the metropolis. He welcomes the users and the changes they bring. This theme is displayed in a triplet of his works:

Kunsthal (Netherlands, 1987-1992), De Rotterdam (Netherlands, 1997-2013), and Prada Epicenter New York (United States of America, 2000-2001).

In Kunsthal, Koolhaas stresses experience with composition. He makes the city inhabit

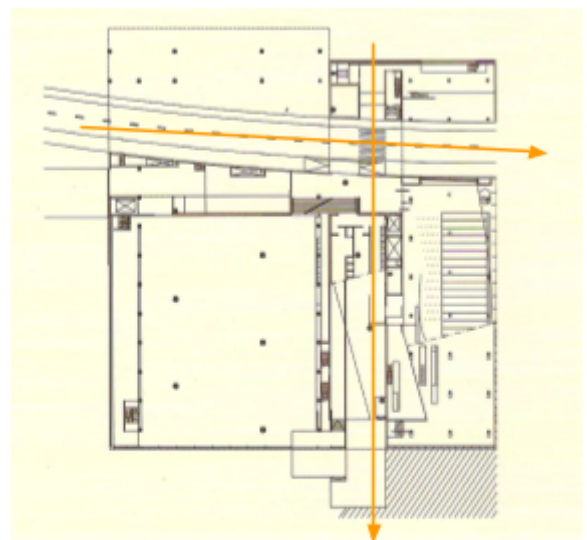


KUNSTHAL WEST ELEVATION COLLAGE  
<https://www.oma.com/projects/kunsthal>

and flow through the building.

The composition of the building is intended to stir the viewer: a square 60 by 60 meter box is relatively plain when initially perceived, but the nonorthogonal elements fool the viewer: the beams at irregular angles, the gentle ramps running through the volume, and the perception of space from the inside exterior path

that cuts through the building. The Kunsthal is situated on a challenging site: between a main highway and a museum district, elevated on a dike, and cut into four squares by two perpendicular paths. Denied his original plan for the site, the built second plan, which Koolhaas refers to as “Kunsthal II,” was conceived with the question “How to imagine a spiral in four separate squares?” The execution of the spiral flow was essential to the success of Kunsthal. When Koolhaas describes Kunsthal in *S,M,L,XL*, he photographically takes the reader on a journey through the Kunsthal’s path, page by page, emphasizing how important it is to the



KUNSTHALLE PLAN SHOWING EXTERIOR AXES/THEIR INTEGRATION INTO THE BUILDING

<https://en.wikigallery.org/wiki/kunsthal/kunsthal-plan>



continuously new silhouette of the building. In De Rotterdam, Koolhaas fuses the idea of both interior and exterior impermanence. His design gives the building its deserved “monumentality” while maintaining its “performance of instability” (Delirious New York, Koolhaas, 1978). This project perfectly encapsulates Koolhaas’s vision of architecture interacting and accommodating the city.

Shopping became a significant focus for Koolhaas, OMA, and his Harvard graduate students as they moved into the 21st century. The dichotomy of Koolhaas’s position regarding shopping as an architect is unique: he designs for Prada, a luxury brand while also, in a fairly negative way, argues alongside his Harvard GSD students that shopping is “one of the principal—if only—modes by which we experience the city” (The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping, 2002). Koolhaas exploits this reality with his opportunities to design Prada’s flagship stores and centers (it should be noted that Koolhaas and OMA work closely here with Mrs. Miuccia Prada, who shares an interest in disruption and facing consumers with the unexpected).



EVER-CHANGING FULL-BLOCK MURAL

PRADA EPICENTER NEW YORK INTERIOR, BROADWAY ST. ENTRANCE

<https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/11071706/prada-the-store-that-changed-the-way-we-consume-fashion>

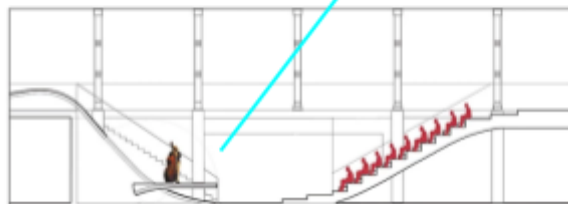
Reinventing shopping at the luxury fashion level is a powerful position for Koolhaas and OMA



SPACE THAT ROTATES OUT OF THE WAVE

BASEMENT ENTRY VIEW OF THE VALLEY AND "THE WAVE", DIAGRAM OF SPACE MANIPULABILITY

<https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/11071706/prada-epicenter-11071706>

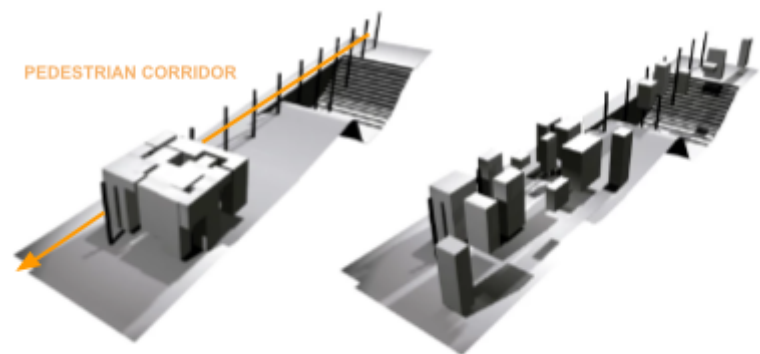


to be in, and they make the most of it. Prada Epicenter New York is commonly regarded as a store that does not operate like any other store, and this is exactly what OMA intended to create. This project differs from the one previously mentioned as it is not a new construction, rather an interior design, and

therefore does not have the obvious physical monumentality that Kunsthal and De Rotterdam share. Yet Prada Epicenter New York displays monumentality in its own way. The Prada Epicenter store in SoHo, New York City has a variety of multifunctional features that follow Koolhaas's goal to welcome the city and its instability: retractable clothing racks and cages hanging from the ceiling and a curvilinear wood ramp (dubbed "The Wave") fitted with a face rotating out into a stage. Large steps descend towards "The Wave" creating an unusual product display that serves as spectator seating for events on the stage. The mural spanning the length of the store changes regularly in accordance with the exhibitions and cooperates with the digital screens hung on clothing racks to make the Prada Epicenter New York more volatile (more like the very city it inhabits)- and no longer primarily a luxury clothing store. This extravagant approach to designing a small clothing shop increases its business, by its wonder but also by its interior chaos. "The Wave" can be seen as the monumental figure in this OMA project. It interests the consumer and the

critic. If the contrast between the building and the interior programs is what constitutes metropolitan architecture for Koolhaas, then "The Wave" is the building in this case. A design that is unequivocally OMA: monumental, interesting, bold, but functional. In fact, its form without the stage would serve

close to no purpose (it's not even skateable). This equilibrium, the controlled chaos of the internalized city, both in "The Wave" and in the whole shop, is what makes this an essential Koolhaas/OMA project. While the Prada Epicenter New York integrates the city into itself in the previously mentioned methods, it also quite literally lets the city in, being a perfect thoroughfare for pedestrians wishing to pass through from Broadway to Mercer street. It is a feature repeated from Koolhaas's Kunsthal: the simple idea of architectural window shopping. Thus, Prada Epicenter New York absorbs the city, the people, and the energy. It merges the architecture and the metropolis, inviting the "performance of instability" in (Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*,



MODEL SHOWING THE ATTRACTIVE PRADA EPICENTER NEW YORK. VOLUMES REPRESENT POSSIBLE SPATIAL MANIPULATION OF HANGING CLOTHING DISPLAY CAGES

<https://argallieducurviva.com/works/prada-epicenter-100q/134idw5>

1978). Prada Epicenter New York succeeds because it has a provoking yet functional design. The public-intriguing architecture was perfectly commercial for a financially-struggling Prada in 2002.

Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture strive to be both rational and irrational. They care to both relinquish their architecture and inform through it. In these ways, Koolhaas is consistent differently than other architects. While one may look at his work and not find visual patterns as they may in Frank Gehry or Zaha Hadid architecture, Koolhaas and OMA are very consistent in their *approach* to architecture. The obsession with metropolitan architecture is what fuels and strings together the seemingly endless creations stemming from Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture.



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