Doctoral Thesis

The ends of modernism: structuralism and surrealism in the work of Rem Koolhaas

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THE ENDS OF MODERNISM
STRUCTURALISM AND SURREALISM IN THE WORK OF REM KOOLHAAS

DOKTORANDIN DER

der

EIDGENÖSSISCHEN TECHNISCHEN HOCHSCHULE ZÜRICH

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Abstract

Statement of Intent
This dissertation looks at the intertwining of two philosophical discourses in the work of Rem Koolhaas. It examines the implementation of conceptual, pictorial and textual techniques associated with Surrealism and Structuralism. Koolhaas employs these movements that deal with the structure of the unconscious mind in order to expose the irrational side of the modern movement and its claims to functionalism, propriety and objectivity, all terms which can be addressed by the umbrella term sachlichkeit.

The dissertation is motivated by experience working in the office of OMA in 1993 and includes interviews with Koolhaas and others. It engages biography, formal analysis and historical criticism to locate in the writings, competitions and selected projects certain strategies of theoretical and critical production. It identifies and analyses the elements constituting the work, the deployment of those elements and their points of impact in light of the frameworks they originally targeted.

The work of Koolhaas is viewed as part of the expansion of the field of architecture as a cultural production of meaning, an effort made to recuperate the authority of a profession radically shaken in the sixties by the failure of modern architecture. My purpose is both to place Koolhaas in the context from which he emerged and to look at the significance of the history of modern architecture in the definition and achievement of his goals. This investigation aims to examine his attitude towards the history of modern architecture, his consciousness of its place in time and contemporaneity, i.e., his perception “not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”) and to view the work as a discourse on the notion of modern architecture in the present time.

Periodization
This work focuses on Delirious New York and SMLXL as bookends. In the years spanning these publications the Dutch praxis OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture), in which Koolhaas was one of four founding partners, became an international and multidisciplinary presence. The 1978 publication of Delirious New York provided a departure point for the practice of architecture as a transatlantic activity combining writing with visual arts with public presence and with building. This phase ends with the publication of SMLXL in 1995. SMLXL not only registers the further geographical expansion of OMA but also the
redefinition of OMA practice by the development of a shadow partner AMO. AMO took on
the work that expanded beyond buildings, continued the collaboration with Bruce Mau and
branched out to the Harvard Graduate School of Design research, to Microsoft, to Sanford
Kwinter, to a video company, to Hans-Ulrich Obrist, etc. It defined a situation that marked
SMLXL as a fulcrum, the end of a phase begun with Delirious New York and the beginning
of a fluid situation in which personnel and projectd could migrate through the system of
connections into and out of OMA.

**Methodology**

In the case study approach to architectural analysis, broad notions are often explored as
the foundation for the discussion of a particular architect or building solution. It is in the
nature of the case study that the subject becomes unavoidably the privileged example of
a particular phenomenon. My investigation wants to be the opposite. Structured to move
from the specific to the general rather than vice versa, it outlines aspects of Koolhaas's
biography and analyses the work's principles and intentions in their context. Certain
critical issues are identified, and interpretations of the work are referred to only as they
are relevant to those frameworks that the work originally addressed.

This investigation is motivated by and situated amidst wide-ranging and contradictory
interpretations of Koolhaas's architecture which, taken together, corroborate its uneasy
fit into a pre-existing ideological point-of-view. (The tendency of authors is to either
heroize Koolhaas or condemn him. In the proliferation of writing on OMA following the
monograph OMA/Rem Koolhaas in 1992, interpretations viewed the work through
complexity theory and new biology, i.e., ANY no. 9, 1994, Architecture and Urbanism, as
well as more traditional analyses. The latter praised Koolhaas's attention to the city while
denouncing his building construction standards (details, materials, etc.). In both cases,
the work was often reduced to overriding meanings. Still others departed from
Koolhaas's terms of self-description without closer examination, for example, Daidalos
"Bigness." The work of OMA was aligned with postmodern aesthetic practices, i.e.,
Werk, Bauen und Wohnen.) Many compelling insights have been made, issues and
frameworks raised. My concern is Koolhaas's work in relation to the modern movement.
For a look at the historiography of interpretations taken from this point of view see
Appendix 1. It has been shown that interpretations change over time, that they depend
more on the interpreter than on the object of interpretation. (This was shown in the
seventies by one of the first structuralist interpretations of an architectural history. See
Juan Pablo Bonta, An Anatomy of Architectural Interpretation: A Semiotic Review of the

Criticism of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, S.A., 1975.) Nevertheless, Koolhaas is generally viewed as an isolated phenomenon and his work is supposedly not about issues of history.

Koolhaas inscribes various lineages into his work. His goal is to multiply not diminish associations and categories, and he has a talent for addressing more than one thing at a time. Statements of intent are direct, if manifold. These aspects, compounded by the work's appearances in the popular, academic and professional presses, make what begins as a simple idea (or a number of them) complicated. The cumulative oeuvre is a kaleidoscopic structure in which everything seems to lead to something else that leads in turn to the next thing and interplay between various components is a predominant characteristic. My purpose is not to identify all of categories under which the work can be discussed, only certain ones key for my argument. Sections providing a biographical overview emphasize aspects important to the perspectives I have chosen to elaborate. That a biographical reconstruction would be difficult in any case to recollect is secondary to the unavoidable issue of theoretical instrumentalisation. My investigation is also not limited to a closer reading of one particular aspect because this is not the spirit in which Koolhaas makes architecture. He formulates his work to appeal to different audiences and responds to many discourses. He purposefully seeks to circumvent the linear progression of ideas in which the determining factor is to build upon what went immediately before. Concepts and influences do not precede or follow the work but weave through it, slipping in and out and around it.

Summary of Chapters
Introduction
The introduction departs from the reconceptualisation of "culture," of which the study of language in the late sixties and the seventies was a part. The advances of structuralism were a major influence on the debates of architectural theory and the notion of architecture as a language. Manfredo Tafuri was seemingly the first to import the thought of Roland Barthes into architecture. Parallel to the advances in the study of language, Koolhaas was actively was involved in various genres of writing--from 1958 to 1968 working as a journalist for a Dutch weekly magazine, as an author of screenplays, and conducting historical archival research (on Ivan Leonidov.) The knowledge he gained from these activities was directed and formalised when he went on to study architecture at the Architectural Association in London, Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in Manhattan. These were places from
which architectural theory emerged in the seventies and where debates centering on the nature of architecture as a language were a defining influence on both the practice of critical design and theory. This period saw the founding of OMA with four partners. The introduction also looks at the evolution of the historiography of Surrealism following WWII in order to comprehend the position of Surrealism in the 1970s, when Koolhaas was researching Salvador Dali.

Part 1
The Revolutionary Revision of Modern Architecture
Part 1 analyses the theory, practice, strategy and ethic laid out by *Delirious New York* and the projects made parallel to the writing. It examines how Koolhaas legitimized his manifesto through the mythification of history and the uses of metaphor, allegory, symbol and irony. It looks at how poetic language is put to the use of presenting Manhattan as a model of reality and the city as a discourse, an infinite chain of metaphors that reverberates at the level of not only verbal devices but also objects, concepts and issues. *Delirious New York* is composed almost entirely of dialectical tropes—opposites, odd couples or alter egos—on the level of verbal devices, buildings, symbols and movements. It aims to bring together the real and the ideal, fact and fiction, the metaphorical and the literal. In so doing, *Delirious New York* realizes Surrealist goals. The nature, intentions and derivation of Salvador Dali’s paranoid-critical method (pcm) is addressed, both its relation to the automatism founded by Andre Breton and Koolhaas’s adaptation of Dali’s method. It identifies the way in which *Delirious New York* is both an explanation and a demonstration of pcm.

Part 2
Some Critical Issues
Part 2 addresses some critical issues relative to the intellectual context of the late sixties and seventies. Corresponding roughly to the professional itinerary of Koolhaas, who from 1958 to 1968 worked as a writer, from 1968 to 1979 studied architecture and in 1980 opened an office, it outlines the dominant approaches to design determined by the principles of modern architecture in the sixties as the background against which whole project of modern architecture was put into question; and in which a number of different tendencies and approaches emerged. Koolhaas’s attitude and position towards the dominant debates in architectural discourse is identified.
Part 2 examines retroaction, the operation that registers an event only through a later occurrence that recodes it, by linking its logic and pattern to the notion of deferred action. The writing of Roland Barthes conceptualizes deferred action as the condition essential for the formulation of historical discourse. I address the genealogy of thought from Surrealism to the structuralist activity that leads from Dalí to Barthes, and which concerns how the unconscious mind becomes evident in vision. The thesis is that Koolhaas's book proposes other ways of formulating historical discourse. Just as in the studies of language that distinguish between the history and the system of a language, so can we differentiate between the history related by *Delirious New York* and how the discourse is formulated.

Koolhaas's notion of retroaction is proposed as the the positive corollary to Manfredo Tafuri's concept of operative criticism. This is evident in *Delirious New York* as well as in the chronological correspondences between the production of Koolhaas and Tafuri, their parallel concerns with history and myth, and their concomitant uses of language and art.

**Part 3**

**Modernism after Modernism**

Part 3 pivots around the historical juncture of the 1980s, between the first publication of *Delirious New York* in 1978 and the beginning of work on *SMLXL* in 1990 that were pivotal for Koolhaas's thought process and a critical turning point for OMA. In this decade the notion of the avant-garde was put into question by art and criticism, part of the discourse on modernism after modernism, on the notion of modernity and the avant-garde in the present time.

During this time, Koolhaas formulated his views and framed OMA work—for symposiums and lectures in the US, in articles for international architectural journals, competitions for La Villette and IBA, and at the Milan and Venice Biennale. He questioned the legitimacy of architecture and the place of historical modernism in the articles "Architecture: Pour qui? Pour quoi?," "Arthur Erickson vs. the All-Stars: The Battle of Bunker Hill" and "A Foundation of Amnesia." His acceptance speech on the occasion of winning the Dutch Maaskant Prize in 1986 was titled "De wereld is rijp voor de architect als visionair."

Koolhaas's shift in focus from studying to establishing an office with the intention to build was accompanied by a corresponding shift in his writing. This shift reflected the attitudes characterizing art and cultural criticism, which emphasized interaction, (rather than
opposition as in the late sixties/seventies) between the post and pre-war avant-gardes. Such views include the notions of postmodern avant-garde and neo-avant-garde; the view of deconstruction identified at the MoMA exhibition; the identification of postmodernism in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, one of the first compilations of interdisciplinary interrogation to reach architects and architecture students; “The Incomplete Project of Modernity” by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas that linked modernity to European Surrealism; and the concept of the (post)modern sublime.

Part 4
Performing Modernism

Part 4 examines *SMLXL*, looking at work that followed the winning of the Maaskant Prize and the completion of OMA’s first major public commission for the Netherlands Dance Theater, awarded in 1980 and construction completed in 1987, in a period of activity stretching into the mid-nineties to 1995, the year *SMLXL* was published.

The examination includes: 1) the situation and constitution of *Delirious New York* and *SMLXL* as forms of architectural knowledge. Aspects concerning binary thinking and figures of speech, the relationship between form and content, autobiography and criticism traverse the two books. It is proposed that the notion of retroaction which is derived from pcm is extended in the concept of psychological space in *SMLXL*. 2) The salient characteristic of the utilisation of visual mediums in *SMLXL*, the manipulation of images to look like other images. This aspect of the work is related to the practice of copying images in which the copy was given an aura of it’s own. Examined are the projects and buildings that copy, distort and exaggerate the well-known objects and urbanism of Le Corbusier. 3) The ideology of the void that first appeared in Exodus is a thematic in several the projects of the mid-eighties on formal, metaphorical and conceptual levels. Koolhaas made explorations into the void by connecting it to art. Also examined is how the void was also already inscribed into the modern movement and the work of Le Corbusier as well as its alter ego, Manhattan.