

Obligated to be Honourable. The Transgressions of OMA/Rem Koolhaas

During an interview in 1995, Rem Koolhaas complained about architecture's obligation to be honourable. 'A writer can easily combine his career with that of drug addict, fornicator, criminal or any other excess. The same goes for painters, script writers and producers. But none of these models is possible for architects.' Of course, Koolhaas consistently and eloquently explored the boundaries of that supposedly impossible model of an architect who does not pretend that his activities are beneficial for the public good and for that of the individual. OMA's oeuvre thrives on the transgression of the codes and rules stipulated by architecture's silent agreement with society to keep each other in balance.

The question I would like to answer by re-entering the work of OMA is twofold. Firstly, how can architectural transgression be, perhaps paradoxically, beneficial to society after all? What was the value of an approach that associated itself with inferior or questionable phenomena such as superficiality, ugliness, roughness, brutality and antisociality? Put differently: wherein lies the attractiveness of an architecture that defies or refutes traditional qualities? Secondly, what is the historicity of this theoretical position? The work of OMA (and the biography of Koolhaas) originates in an era dominated by social-democratic politics, and by a welfare state that apparently wanted the best for everyone. Specifically in the Netherlands, this created a society (and an architecture) that could be experienced as patronizing and mendacious, because it tried to hide its power beyond a smokescreen of friendly humanism. Piercing that blindness was an important motive behind OMA's strategy, but it might also be the reason, given the political evolutions of the past three decades, for its actual irrelevance. Whether this means that architecture today is left with no option but to be honourable, remains an open question.

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Books as author

Higher Knowledge. SANAA'S Rolex Learning Center at EPFL since 2010, EPFL Press, Lausanne, 2021 (forthcoming, also in a French edition).

Choosing Architecture. Criticism, History and Theory Since the 19th Century, EPFL Press, Lausanne, 2019 (also in a French edition).

Architectuur, een gebruiksaanwijzing: theorie, kritiek en geschiedenis sinds 1950 volgens Geert Bekaert, A&S/books, Ghent, 2015.

L'architecture en Belgique: 25 ans en 75 projets, Lannoo/Racine, Tielt, 2014.

Edited volumes (recent selection)

Ups & Downs. Reception Histories in Architecture, Edited with Jantje Engels and David Peleman, NAI010, Rotterdam, 2021.

OMA/Rem Koolhaas. A Critical Reader from Delirious New York to S,M,L,XL, Birkhäuser, Basel, 2019.

Schools & Teachers. The Education of an Architect in Europe (OASE 102), Edited with David Peleman and Bart Decroos, NAI010, Rotterdam, 2019.

Action and Reaction in Architecture (OASE 97), Edited with Tom Avermaete and Véronique Patteeuw, NAI010, Rotterdam, 2016.

OMA/Rem Koolhaas. The First Decade 1978-1989 (OASE 94), Edited with Véronique Patteeuw, NAI010, Rotterdam, 2015.

Essays and reviews (recent selection)

‘Drawing Rescues Architecture’, *Log*, no. 51 (2021), forthcoming.

‘We know too much. Reading Pevsner Reading’, *AA Files*, no. 77 (2020), 145-151.

‘The right to architecture. Geert Bekaert, a critic from Belgium’, *Journal of Architecture*, no. 4 (2020), 444-471.

‘Outreach Extensions. A Short History of OMA/Rem Koolhaas Exhibitions’, *Architectural Theory Review* 23, no. 1 (2019), 90-113.

‘Steel magnet. De Krook by RCR and Coussée & Goris’, *Architectural Review*, no. 1459 (2019), 136-145.

‘Lampens’ idiosyncratic Brutalism’, *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, no. 425 (2018), 58-65, with Fredie Floré.

‘The facts have the floor’, *SAN ROCCO*, no. 14 (2019), 11-14.

‘Goodbye Paper. The Netherlands Dance Theater by OMA/Rem Koolhaas (1980-2016)’, *AA Files*, no. 74 (2017), 98-111.

‘Something Completely Different’, *E-Flux Architecture*, November 2017, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/history-theory/159239/something-completely-different/>

Book chapters (recent selection)

‘Transparency and obstacle in architecture, from Le Corbusier to Rem Koolhaas’, in *The Limits of Transparency*, Edited by Emmanuel Alloa, Leuven University Press, Leuven, 2021, forthcoming.

‘Luc Deleu says farewell to architecture’, ‘The Red House’, in *Luc Deleu & T.O.P. Office*, Edited by Peter Swinnen and Anne Judong, Flanders Architecture Institute, Antwerp, 2020, 26-28, 162-165.

‘Seven aims and claims of the architectural model’, in *Isle of Models. Architecture and Scale*, Edited by Cyril Veillon and Nadja Maillard, Triest Verlag, Zürich, 2020, 25-29.

‘TXT’, in *URA. Architectural Projects 2002-2020*, Edited by Iwan Strauven and Lisa De Visscher, Koenig Books, London, 2020, 18-16.

‘Features of the Human Scene. People’s Expectations and Architecture’, in *Robbrecht en Daem: An Architectural Anthology*, Edited by Maarten Van den Driessche, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017, 402-408.

Public lectures, conference papers, and invited presentations (recent selection)

‘Change is Now. Architecture and Society in the 21st Century’, invited closing lecture, *Shifting Positions*, Ghent University, April 1st, 2021.

‘Repairing the future’, public conversation with Rem Koolhaas and Laura Herman, BOZAR, Brussels, August 26, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ1ACbsCs-Y>

‘Reading Rem Koolhaas’, invited lecture, Architecture Foundation London (100 Day Studio), The Royal College of Art, Kensington, July 28, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWjUu_mMIYA