

Contents – Rem Koolhaas/OMA/AMO National Gallery, Berlin, Germany

I am just back from Berlin. Rem's exhibition is good. The way in which the monumental self-referential space of Mies is broken by the exhibition is a true revisiting of the National Gallery. Or better put, Koolhaas understands Mies potential better than Mies ever could. Content fits into the exhibition tradition of El Lissitzky, Alvar Aalto, Kiesler, the Independence Group, the Situationist and shows by Jan van Toorn. This exhibition is honest about the process of making architecture, allowing the visitor to participate in the experiment of how to produce, within late capitalism, an architecture that is not against the system but that explores the potential for liberating forces to emerge out of the of our commodified world. Visitors to the Content exhibition can dig deep or stay on the surface, touch models or be challenged to think a concept through. It is an exhibition like a Situationist happening: a look into the kitchen of experimentatio; architecture in the making.

This exhibition is not for “architects only”. The low walls bearing information allow a glimpse of people wandering through the space as Berlin is being rebuilt in the background. The models – raised on pedestals or floating above the walls – become part of the Berlin Skyline: the city, the world, to which the architect must relate. The entire exhibition is informal; the world the Koolhaas show creates is the opposite of Mies’s religious crypt in the basement.

Of course, there are many “buts”: the show is perhaps a bit too quickly produced; the information often comes to you a bit clumsily; enlarging book pages on wall panels is not necessarily an ideal communication solution for an exhibition. To read the information on the low walls can also be awkward; it would have been better had they been installed at an angle, for instance. Koolhaas’s own head projected onto a puppet reading the “junkspace” text becomes, junk itself, rather than doing justice to the idea; and we won’t speak of the T-shirt and other Koolhaas fetishisms for sale (if this is the true face of paranoid critique in action we’d better fast-forward).

Finally, the biggest ‘but’: “the patent-wall” – a display of innovative concepts developed by OMA overtime – is a travesty. Koolhaas acknowledged that he finds it horrendous to be on the front page of a magazine. Architecture is not about style, celebrity or narcissism but about individual and collective intelligence that can move the world – can reinvent the public, can create resistance, can be imaginative beyond personal agendas. To claim copyright as an architect is a travesty, because we know by heart that all architects learn and should learn from others’ histories. One could say that a bad architect copies and a good one steals. Koolhaas is a marvellously inventive and creative stealer – what he learned from Dali, in New York and many others has certainly to be acknowledged. But to claim patents, out of fear concepts are

forgotten, demonstrates a very limited understanding of what cultural capital can do for society: there are not many architects who deal with the world as it is and projects what could be next. I can only understand the wall of patents as a practical joke, to tease the architects who copy but are unable to steal ideas, falling victim to the style they copy from OMA. Trying to overcome this reality with patents is trying to fight a battle you cannot win.

However in a world of large egos, Contents sets an example of how architecture exhibitions can be communicative and inspiring for both the architects and the world we live in.

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