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1 OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Kunsthal, scale model. October 1988. Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut, MAQV 940.

2 Karl Schwanzer, Austrian pavillion at Expo '58 in Brussels. Photocopy included in OMA's files on the Kunsthal.

An investigation into how the architecture of the Kunsthal in Rotterdam reflects a period of profound change and anticipates OMA's break with its own past.

# Sweeping criticism: Rem Koolhaas' Kunsthal in Rotterdam and the new Europe

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Previous research on the Kunsthal Rotterdam – designed by OMA/Rem Koolhaas from 1987 to 1992 – has been limited in scope and depth, taking into account only a fraction of the available archival sources. The few scholarly articles to be published in the past twenty years have focused on the relation between interior and exterior (2003), the role of montage (2015), the concept of the 'pliable' floor (2018), and a first project for the Kunsthal that never materialised (2016).[1] The subject of this article, namely the relation between the project and its context of origin, has not yet been addressed. My argument is based on a research project that reconstructs the genesis of the arts centre in minute detail, drawing on extensive archival research and interviews with several OMA staff members and municipal representatives involved in the project.[2] The account dovetails with the discussion of three distinct phases in the Kunsthal's design – the first project, the inception of the second scheme, and the development of the project between 1989 and 1992 – with 'digressions' on the respective historical backdrop, concluding with the particularly intricate relation between the project and the prospect of European unification at the turn of the 1990s.

The Kunsthal reflects sociopolitical transformations of epochal proportions: the transition from the Cold War to globalisation, from Western post-1968 defeatism to the 'end of history', and from the welfare state and a split Europe to neoliberalism and the European Union. The building considers the state of architecture in the late 1980s, questioning postmodernism as much as deconstructivism and the emulation of modernist masters. The Kunsthal foreshadows the new: the era of the 'iconic' and the 'diagram' along with a profound transformation in OMA's production during the 1990s. It is essentially through form in the widest sense – the metaphors and connotations that form implies, the analogies and references it establishes, obscures, or eschews, and its mimetic, critical, and projective quality – that the Kunsthal reflects its context of origin: not mechanically 'informed by its time' but rather as the architects' creative and largely conscious response. The references, connotations, and formal analogies between the architecture and its context of origin that are discussed in this article are factual; the propositions made about the underlying motivations are hypothetical. But even if – as with any claim about human motivation – they ultimately cannot be proven, they are based on broad evidence such as Koolhaas' writings and interviews, interviews with members of the Kunsthal team, archival material on the project, and the first two decades of OMA's architectural production.[3]

Rem Koolhaas has always been a keen observer of his time, responding quickly to what he perceives, often with far-reaching consequences for OMA's architecture. In the course of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, he would rail against rationalism, contextualism, postmodern and deconstructivist architecture, Dutch structuralism, and the movements advocating the reconstruction of the European city, while siding with modernism, hedonism, American popular culture, and the entrepreneurial spirit of European integration. Opposition has been a hallmark of his writings, interviews, and projects.[4] Within the architectural scene, Koolhaas' criticisms (for instance, of postmodern architecture) as much as his advocacy and embrace of seemingly reprehensible ideas and developments (such as modernist utilitarianism and urban fragmentation) have helped to endow his discourse and OMA's production with unmistakable contours.[5] The Kunsthal reflects its context of origin essentially through the lens of this combative responsiveness, and thus understanding it requires a close look at the front lines of Koolhaas' architectural production and discourse in the very years when the project was being designed.

The fact, or even possibility, of individual authorship in architecture has been repeatedly contested, especially with respect to OMA's work.[6] Many people undoubtedly contributed substantially to the Kunsthal project, notably OMA's own staff and the structural engineer Cecil Balmond. 'Contingencies', particularly the demands made by the Kunsthal's first director, Wim van Krimpen, did entail significant adjustments to the design.

Furthermore, Koolhaas himself has argued that identifying the author(s) of OMA's work was pointless given that each project fuses a variety of ideas that may stem from anybody involved in developing the design.[7] Authorship, however, is more than the accumulative, indeed collective process of contributing ideas and solutions. Defining the initial topics and tasks, judging whether or not a proposition is good, and whether it should be pursued further or dismissed: these decisions are crucial for any project, especially if developed and implemented over a period of several years. In the case of the Kunsthal, it appears that this role was reserved for Koolhaas alone and that he should be accredited for actually steering the design process.[8] This is indicated by the account of former team members along with a vast quantity of archival sources: minutes taken during gatherings of the Kunsthal team, Koolhaas' own sketches, drawings he corrected, faxes he sent to various team members, often with concrete design specifications, and numerous drawings and faxes marked with either 'ok Rem' or 'Rem's no'.[9]

### After the party: the 1980s and OMA's architectures of discontent

Rotterdam's municipality commissioned OMA to design the Kunsthal in June 1987.[10] In the same year, the dance theatre in The Hague and the IJplein housing scheme in Amsterdam were completed. Together with the masterplan for Melun-Sénart, likewise dating from 1987, the projects illustrate OMA's major design strategies in the 1980s: firstly, a close approximation to either early or postwar modernism, secondly, a collage of multiple modernist references, and thirdly, park-like projects of programmed surfaces, drawing on OMA's competition entry for La Villette park in Paris (1982–3). All three design strategies were devised in opposition to postmodern architecture, stressing antagonisms such as programme vs form, utility vs meaning, modern vs premodern.[11] The message was heard. In 1982, Belgian critic Geert Bekaert wrote:

> This places him [Koolhaas] in a comfortable polemical position with regard to the many forms of so-called postmodernism, which still suffer from avant-gardism and desperately try to make the foundation of their identity. Koolhaas' identity is perfectly secure; his différence is unmistakable.[12]

And yet OMA's work of the 1980s had a number of things in common with postmodern architecture: a taste for pastiche and quotation, irony and the programmatic embrace of popular culture, a sense of a dominant past and an essential absence of future, and a bent towards the fragmentation of form.[13] The parallels appear to have had their roots in shared concerns regarding the condition of Western culture. It has been said about postmodernism at large that it reflects a series of disconcerting experiences, such as the war in Vietnam, the violent backlash against the thwarted revolutions of 1968, the two oil crises, stagflation, and the unemployment of the 'long 1970s', resulting in a pessimistic mood within much of the Western hemisphere. Victor Buchli, in a 2011 article, connects the propensity of postmodernist design and architecture to utilise fragmentation, quotation, parody, and pastiche to Lévi-Strauss's notion of bricolage, as outlined in the latter's book *Wild Thought*. What Buchli has in mind is not the amateur's arbitrary range of means but rather a cultural condition that imposes an essential indebtedness to the past, because the new and whole is no longer attainable historically. Buchli writes:

> It is no accident that postmodernism should have emerged in the wake of the collective disillusionment with progressive movements such as communism, following the Prague Spring of 1968. [...] What some might call a nihilistic impulse [...] can be understood more as an acknowledgment that the utopian promise of Western rationality was doomed.[14]

As a consequence, Buchli infers:

> [...] the bricoleur accepts the world as it is and reconfigures it, rather than anticipating a new world and inventing it. In this respect the bricoleur has a different concept of time compared to the modernist: one that is retrospective, based on the continuous reworking of the received elements of the world, as opposed to prospective and filled with imagined new conditions and possibilities.[15]

In 1983, Koolhaas himself compared the situation of contemporary architecture to a hangover after the party, referring to the lost faith in the ideological basis of modernism.[16] Unable to continue the modernist tradition of utopia, OMA's work echoed the collective experience of disenchantment and subdued expectations – just like postmodern architecture, and to some extent in similar ways, too.

### A problem of distinction: deconstructivist architecture and the Kunsthal in 1988

OMA presented a first draft of the Kunsthal on 28 April 1988. Two months later, on 23 June, the 'Deconstructivist Architecture' exhibition opened at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, curated by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley.[17] OMA's 1981 project for Boompjes in Rotterdam was among the exhibits, alongside work by Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelblau, and Bernard Tschumi. In February 1988, Joseph Giovannini had already written about these and a few other architects in the *New York Times*:

> Unlike conventional designs that strive for architectural unity, theirs look fragmented and accidental: they splinter walls, unhinge corners and shift floors like so many tectonic plates. Uninterested in the 90-degree angle and parallel lines, they break a building into seemingly unrelated parts: walls don't meet floors; door frames are distorted.
>
> The Deconstructivists have been loosely inspired by Russian Constructivism, the revolutionary art movement of the 1920s, and by Deconstructionism, a contemporary French literary movement. They eschew the classical forms and sense of balanced symmetry that typify much recent design, especially post-modernism.
>
> [...] The designers have turned what they see as the instability of our times into an architectural virtue.[18]

Giovannini's article bespeaks the extent to which some cornerstones of OMA's architectural profile had become diffused in contemporary architecture and discourse by the end of the 1980s. Apart from the rejection of postmodernism, a modernist frame of reference, borrowings from the Russian avant gardes of 1920s and 1930s, and a sense of distortion, instability, and fragmentation – be it as formal features or catchwords – were about to become commonplace in what promised to become the latest architectural fashion. The MoMA show was like a spotlight cast on these and other characteristics, which Koolhaas' work shared to varying degrees with that produced by a significant number of his peers. The publicity was sustained by the 'deconstructivist architecture' branding, and the synonymous exhibition ultimately had a lasting impact that entailed the breakthrough of 'decon-' as a label for contemporary architecture.

Koolhaas must have been invited to participate in the exhibition by January 1988 at the latest.[19] The exhibition was preceded by a symposium and a special edition of *Architectural Design*, both on the topic of deconstruction in architecture. The symposium, held in March at the Tate Gallery in London, was opened by a recorded video interview with Jacques Derrida. Among the speakers were Wigley, Eisenman, Hadid, Tschumi, and Charles Jencks.[20] The issue of *Architectural Design*, published in April 1988, included essays by Jencks, Tschumi, and Elia Zenghelis among others, as well as an interview with Eisenman and projects by the architects due to be featured at MoMA. A second symposium was held in New York after the opening of the exhibition. The panel consisted of Rosalind Krauss, Kurt Foster, Anthony Vidler, Michael

Hays, Jeffrey Kipnis, and Mark Wigley. Koolhaas participated in neither of the symposia, nor did he contribute a text to the April issue of *Architectural Design*; however, he must have been aware of the stir the MoMA show was about to cause, even before it began, given his own involvement in the exhibition since January, the accumulation of big names, his familiarity with many of the main protagonists and their work, and the attention both the event and the 'Deconstructivists' received during the first four months of the year. The press covered the show extensively. At least fifty-five articles on the event were published between 1987 and 1989 in American magazines and journals alone.[21] Monographs on deconstructivist architecture and related subjects followed suit, showing work by OMA and other participants of the New York exhibition side by side with projects by Morphosis, SITE, Lebbeus Woods, Diller Scofidio, Mecanoo, Günther Behnisch, Steven Holl, Enric Miralles, Günther Domenig, Massimiliano Fuksas, Arquitectonica, and others.[22] Only in 1990 did Koolhaas break the silence and begin to distance himself openly from deconstructivist architecture, and he would continue to do so – with growing disdain.[23]

Back in 1988, he reacted to the advent of the new trend with design rather than with rhetoric. Between April and December, OMA came up with two schemes for the Kunsthal – the first of which, Kunsthal I, was abandoned in October – and the competition entry

3 OMA/Rem Koolhaas, OMA, NAi, 1988. Site plan showing the location of the future Kunsthal (left) and the Museum Park (centre).
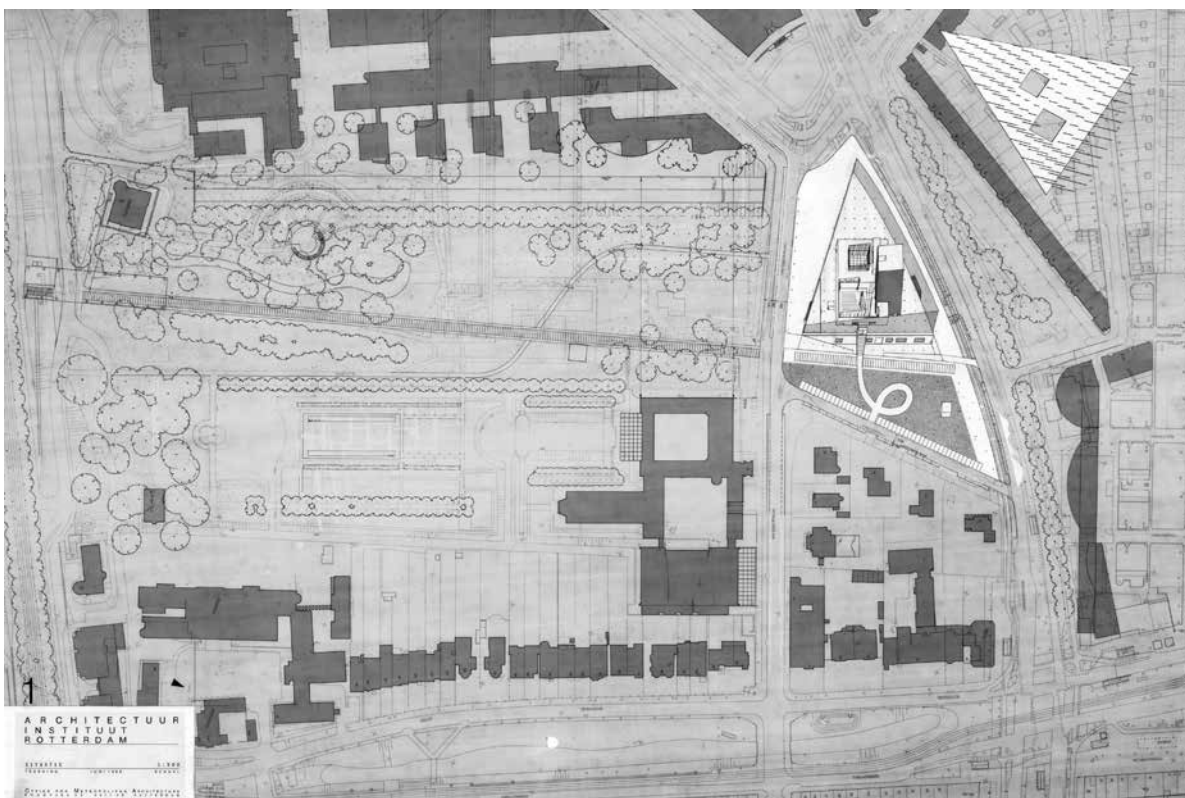


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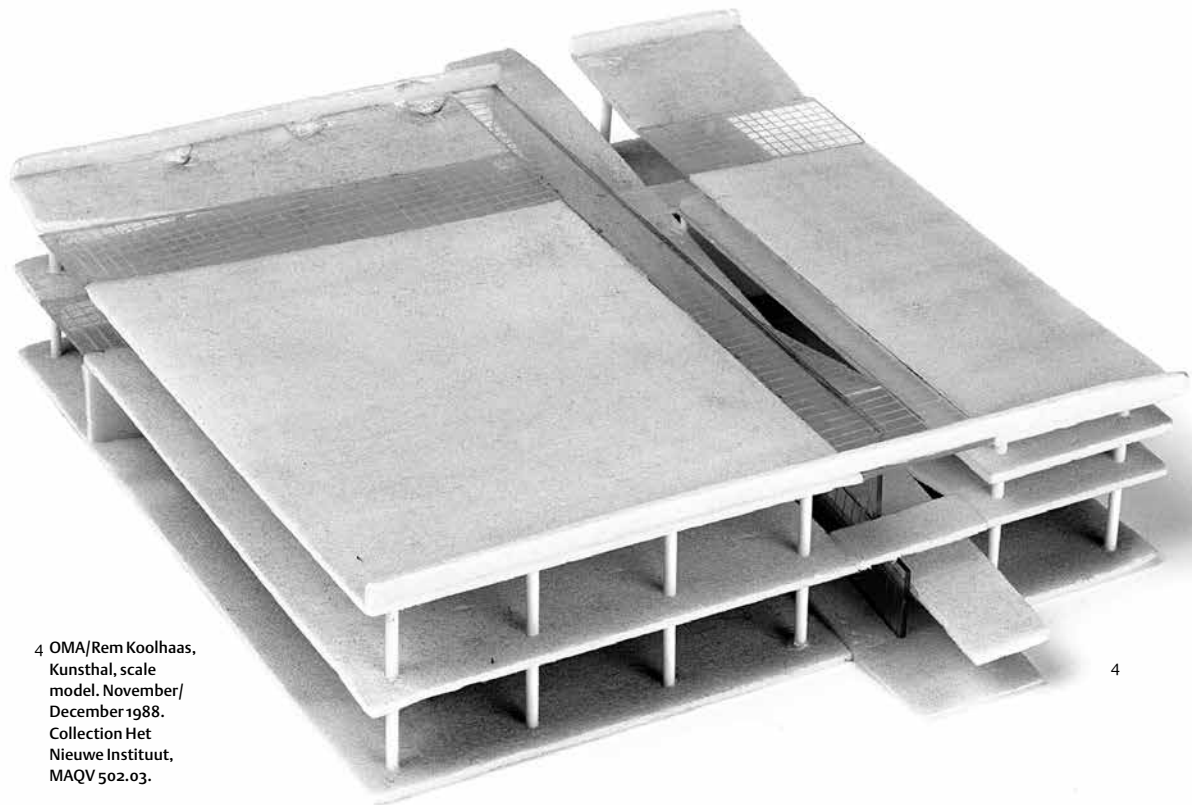
4 OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Kunsthal, scale model. November/December 1988. Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut, MAQV 502.03.

for the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) was produced in April and May. The NAi and the Kunsthal are located at opposite ends of Rotterdam's Museum Park, and all three schemes from that year are closely related in terms of design. Kunsthal I is as far from looking deconstructivist as it is from looking postmodern [1]. The restrained modernism of the exterior barely recalls the visionary Soviet architecture of the 1920s and 1930s, nor do the interlocking volumes feel fragmented or in conflict with one another. The scheme is instead reminiscent of the more moderate Miesian modernism of the postwar decades. In fact, photocopies of Karl Schwanzer's Austrian pavilion at Expo '58 in Brussels, which were included in OMA's files for the Kunsthal, indicate that the scheme was modelled on this particular building [2].

Conversely, OMA's competition entry for the NAi does appear unstable and fragmented and, just like Hadid and Tschumi's projects shown at MoMA, its exterior approximates an assembly of 'suprematist' shapes. Nevertheless, the scheme introduces ideas that would be key to OMA's work in subsequent years, to some extent anticipating a new approach devised to alienate its production of deconstructivist architecture. After the plans for the parliament in The Hague (1978), many projects by OMA were composed of multiple volumes that were distinguished from one another by different materials and colours, in a manner reminiscent of Gehry's one-room houses. OMA's most successful projects of the 1980s – the Netherlands Dance Theatre in The Hague (1981–7) and Villa Dall'Ava in Paris (1984–91) – were of this kind. The scheme

the NAi is the first to internalise the collage-like assembly of solids, which were for the most part enclosed by a single overall volume, thereby counteracting the cliché of the deconstructivist disintegration of form [3].

In October 1988, Wim van Krimpen was announced as director of the Kunsthal.[24] His disapproval of the first project necessitated a new scheme, which Koolhaas and Japanese architect Fuminori Hoshino developed in an intense and close collaboration over a period of several weeks.[25] Retrospectively, Hoshino recalls the collaboration with Koolhaas as follows:

> [...] I never really knew beforehand when he would come exactly. So I needed to be ready all the time to discuss with him whenever he showed up. I got used – whatever the issue is – to find two or three at-least-reasonable solutions, pay attention to the consequences for the rest of the design, and to keep the dossier in a pile. Whenever Rem came, I grabbed the whole pile and went through it with him.[26]

According to Hoshino, the main design choices were made on such occasions, and models were the favoured tool for testing out ideas:

> Of course, some of the issues we could solve in 2D. [...] Then, of course, we could make a sketch and based on the sketch we could make decisions. But the crucial issues we checked in the model.[27]

Judging from the number of surviving models and sketches, Hoshino produced at least eight different schemes in November, each worked out at a scale of 1 to 500 in a set of cross sections, floorplans, and a foam model.[28] Several sketches, which were at least partly executed by Koolhaas, capture ideas that
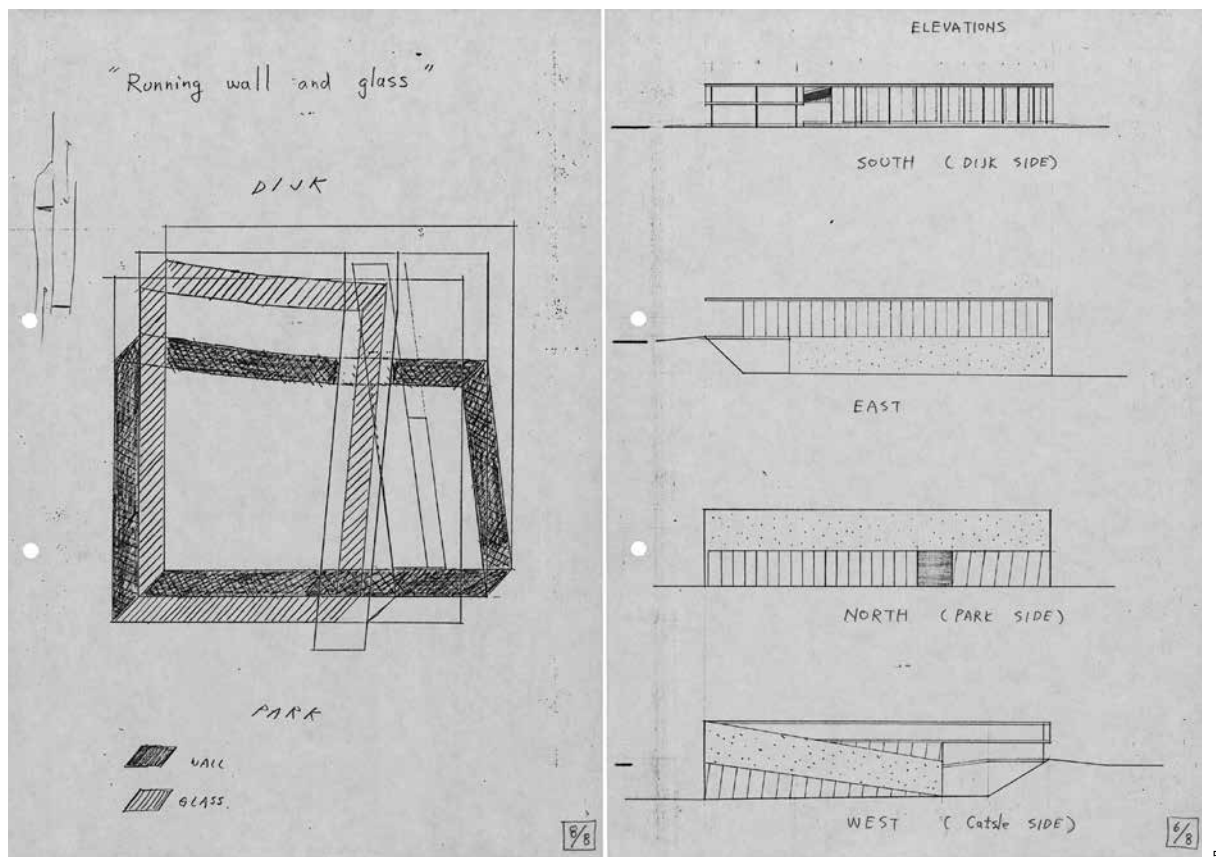
5 OMA/Rem Koolhaas,
Kunsthal, elevations
and axonometric
sketch, 2 December
1988.

recur in most variants from early November, as if
assembling a tool kit to resolve the scheme.[29] The self-
imposed task was to reconcile two intersecting
public routes and a continuous gallery space in a
square prism. The conundrum inspired what would
become the showpiece of the design: an ingenious
circuit, first conceived as a loop on two levels, then as
a spiral on three [4]. On 2 December, Hoshino sent a
fax to Koolhaas with the first complete version of
Kunsthal II, which was the design that eventually
materialised.[30] The elevations, enclosed in the fax,
reiterate the route taken by the circuit [5]. As an
axonometric sketch illustrates, a ribbon with two
opposite sections – one 'wall', one 'glass' – wraps
twice around the building. The materials switch at
the halfway point, supposedly to evoke the image of a
Moebius loop's twisted surface. Indeed, Koolhaas has
referred to the circuit more than once as a Moebius
loop.[31] The elevations and the axonometric sketch
dating from 2 December were a perfect match. The
fact that the circuit and its hurdles informed almost
all major aspects of the scheme – the main interior
spaces, the fluid relation between interior and
exterior, the layout of the façades based on the
Moebius loop, and the layout of the roof depicting
the public routes crossing over – made it possible to
envisage what had been achieved at La Villette in
architecture: namely conceiving the form of a
project as analogously to the way it is organised.
With regard to deconstructivism, the approach

offered the prospect of leaving behind the common
territory of modernist references, whether
constructivist, suprematist, or otherwise.

**Modernism obsolete: a new approach for a new Europe**
Since the second half of the 1980s, the process of
European integration had been visibly gaining
momentum. It was during these years that the most
significant achievements were made in a process
which, by the turn of the century, had transformed
the European Community into the European Union
with open internal borders, a single market, a single
currency, a central bank, and a partial yet minimal
transfer of national sovereignty to European
institutions. Since the 1970s, European business had
been struggling to compete with big corporations
from the United States and Japan, which were 'far
ahead in technological research and development of
the most modern high-tech industries' such as
computer and communication technology.[32] The
situation was further aggravated during Ronald
Reagan's presidency (1981–89), marked by a policy of
*laissez-faire* capitalism, privatisation, deregulation of
the financial sector, low taxes, and a belief in the
self-regulation of markets,[33] which turned the USA
into the first so-called 'post-industrial' society,
privileging finance over production.[34]

As historian Ivan Berend puts it, 'American
influence and dominance in international
organizations allowed the sweeping neo-liberal
deregulatory regime adopted in the US to function
as the cultural-ideological companion and driver of
globalization.'[35] Measured by the yardstick of the
new regime, Europe's major deficits were: 'the

*fragmentation* of markets, inadequate *size of firms*, and lack of significant state sponsorship', followed by low labour market mobility, rigid wage structures, and high social benefits.[36] What seemed deficient in the late 1980s at least partly coincided with what until then had been deemed achievements of the welfare state. It was under the acute pressure of American and Asian competition that a 'joint venture' of European politicians and corporations – 'sensing that the danger of marginalization was a real one'[37] – succeeded in overcoming Europe's 'backwardness', and entered a new dimension of European integration, comprising such achievements as the introduction of the single market and the euro.

Koolhaas, for his part, announced the introduction of the large-scale building in Europe as a belated catch-up with America, perhaps for the first time in January 1989.[38] That year, OMA indeed saw an unprecedented commitment to the large scale. In 1989, OMA began with the masterplan for the 800,000-square-metre development at Lille's new TGV station (1989–94), while participating in four large competitions: the national library in Paris, the media centre in Karlsruhe, the sea terminal Zeebrugge, and the office complex at Frankfurt Airport, with the requisite floor surfaces ranging between 31,000 and 250,000 square metres. All these projects connected palpably to the dynamics of European integration, just as they directly or indirectly contributed to the synchronisation and expansion of Europe's physical infrastructure on land, water, and in the air. In a project statement on the sea terminal in Zeebrugge, Koolhaas introduces the scheme as a Tower of Babel 'for the new ambition of Europe'.[39] As of 1990, Koolhaas gave a series of essays and talks in which he began to reframe the notion of the large-scale building that he had outlined a decade earlier in his book *Delirious New York*. This process of reworking his ideas on the Manhattan skyscraper into an architectural agenda would evolve until the mid-1990s; it can be traced back to the lecture 'Atlanta' that Koolhaas held in 1988, then appears again in 1990 in the essay 'OMA – fin de siècle innocent?' and in 1991 in the talk 'Precarious Entity', while receiving its most elaborate form in his manifesto 'Bigness' and other essays from the 1990s included in his book *S,M,L,XL*.[40]

There are multiple parallels between the ideas expressed on these occasions, that is, OMA's projects in 1989 and the process of European unification: there is the notion of Europe lagging behind the United States and Japan, and the notion of Europe in need of catching up, the emulation of American economic policies and the emulation of the American city, the deregulation of financial markets and the deregulation of urbanism, the promotion of big corporations and the promotion of big buildings, and the need to overcome Europe's fragmentation and the contraction of fragmented programmes into the 'whole' of a large building. Apart from embracing 'the new ambition of Europe' and the expansion of its transnational infrastructure, Koolhaas did not make much comment about the 'alignment' of OMA's new

approach with Europe's economic and political restructuring, and the act of synchronisation may have been partly intuitive. But that does not change the actual fact of these parallels.

The Berlin Wall fell in November 1989. Five months later, in his farewell lecture at the Technical University in Delft, Koolhaas asked for an 'ideological response to the sudden disappearance of socialism which in almost all cases has latently nourished and provided the justification for our modern architecture'.[41] In the passage quoted, Koolhaas was referring to OMA's own work, namely the IJplein development in Amsterdam, and likewise to the recent architecture of his Dutch peers, which had seen a revival of early modernist 'idioms' in the course of the 1980s. However, his observation implied at least as much a critique of deconstructivist architecture and its formal dependence on the particularly ideologically charged modernism of the early Soviet avant gardes, which had lost its legitimacy after 1989. Later in 1990, Koolhaas commented on OMA's competition entries of 1989: 'With these last projects we also wanted to break with deconstructivism, with this attachment to the past [*passéisme*] in order to take a contemporary position.'[42] In 1989, Koolhaas viewed breaking with deconstructivist architecture as meaning 'the smallest possible number of references',[43] as well as an emphatic display of volumetric unity. Several statements made in the 1990s indicate that during those years Koolhaas considered formal fragmentation to be a key characteristic of deconstructivist architecture, and thought that it was vital for him to come to terms with it. 'My scepticism about deconstructivists is based on [suggesting] this naive, banal analogy between a supposedly irregular geometry and a fragmented world', he explained in 1992.[44] In 1993, in a thumbnail sketch of the impact of French theory on contemporary architecture, he tagged Derrida – on whose ideas Tschumi's, Eisenman's, and Wigley's notion of deconstructivism rely – as the theorist 'who says that things cannot be whole anymore', stating: 'I think – since 1989 – there has been an onus on architecture to oppose these tendencies.'[45] And this was exactly what happened with OMA's architecture, which was marked by a sudden preference for compact volumes or the disappearance of fragmented ones. This was manifested initially in the designs for the NAi and Kunsthal II and then, ever more obviously, in the competition entries for Zeebrugge, Karlsruhe, and Paris in 1989, the Congrexpo in Lille (1990–4), and the scheme for the convention centre in Agadir (1990).

### Seeming contradiction: the development of the design 1989–92
In 1989, OMA began to work out the scheme for Kunsthal II in more detail.[46] Especially in the first half of the year, a great deal of inspiration for significant developments came from outside: from Ove Arup's engineers, above all, but also from the client and the municipal authorities.

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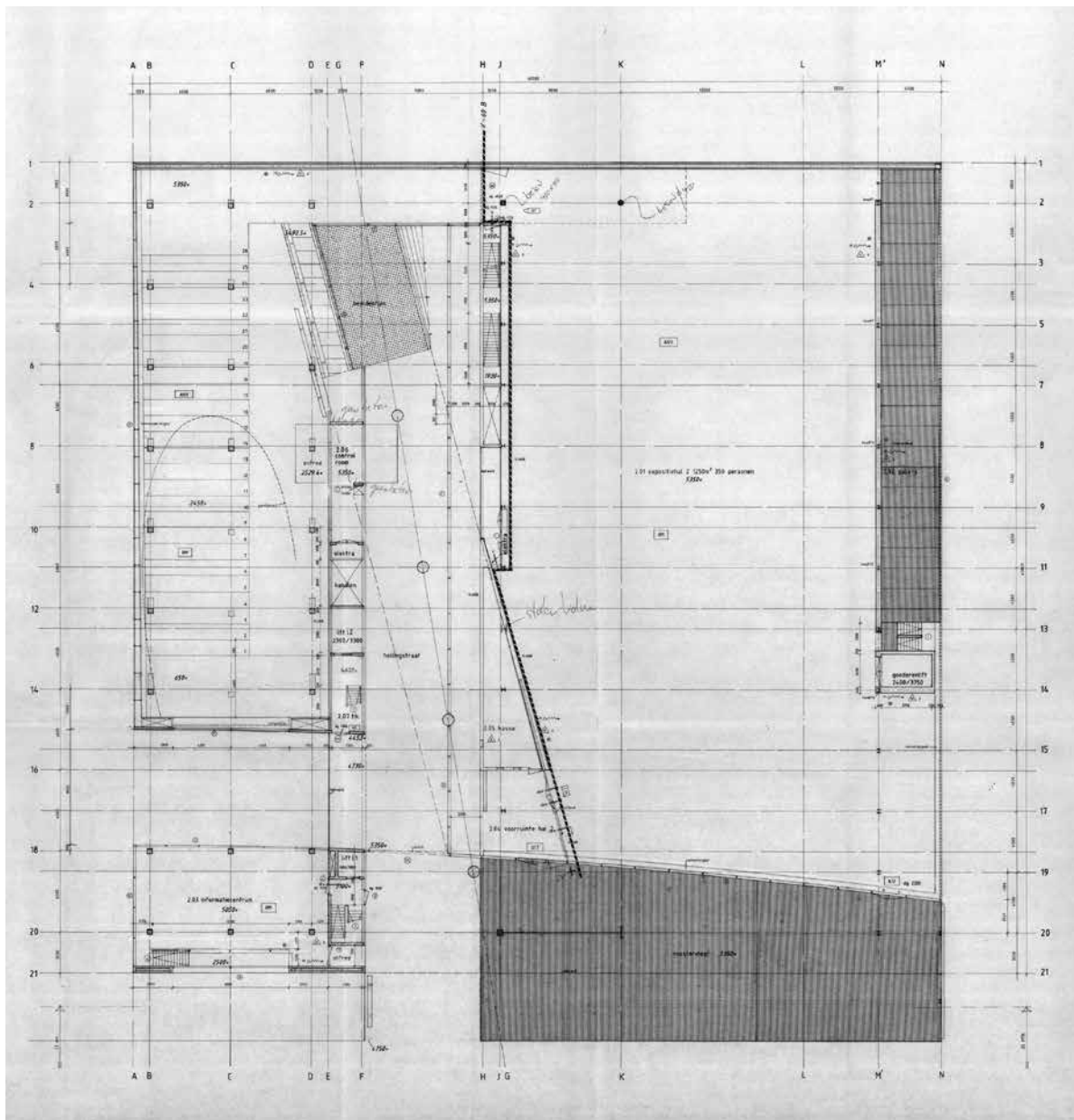
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Adjustments to the programme, changes imposed by savings, and the specifications of the structural system and the building services all needed to be incorporated into the design. Given the increasing number of planners and third parties involved, the architects were flooded with ever further requirements, proposals, and 'solutions'. OMA submitted the schemes for Zeebrugge, Paris, and Karlsruhe between April and August.[47] Only thereafter, especially between November 1989 and April 1990, when OMA handed in the drawings for the building application and the bidding process, did work on the architectural project intensify once more. On the basis of these drawings, the detailing was worked out and reworked until summer 1992. How did the development of the Kunsthal II design during those years relate to the simultaneous revision of Koolhaas' architectural approach – a revision, which was first and foremost a reaction to the rise of deconstructivist architecture, the process of European integration, and the fall of the Iron Curtain?

The subsequent development of the project was marked by an ever-increasing fragmentation of form and accumulation of modernist references, contrary to Koolhaas' rhetoric against both. From 1989 onwards, the binary character of the façades was incrementally blurred through an almost excessive diversification of materials, colours, and fenestrations. After the opening of the Kunsthal in October 1992, critics were unable to 'read' the unifying motif underpinning the layout of the façades. The more recent suggestion that 'each elevation seemingly [belongs] to a different building' bespeaks the impact of fragmentation resulting from the diversification of parts.[48]

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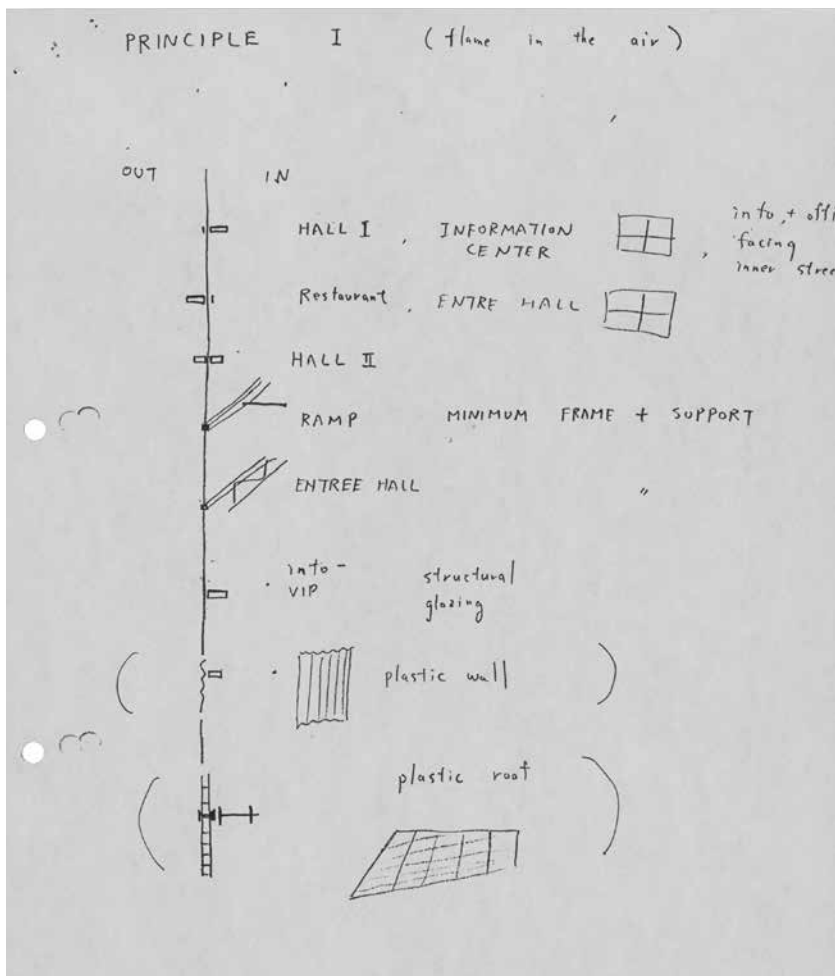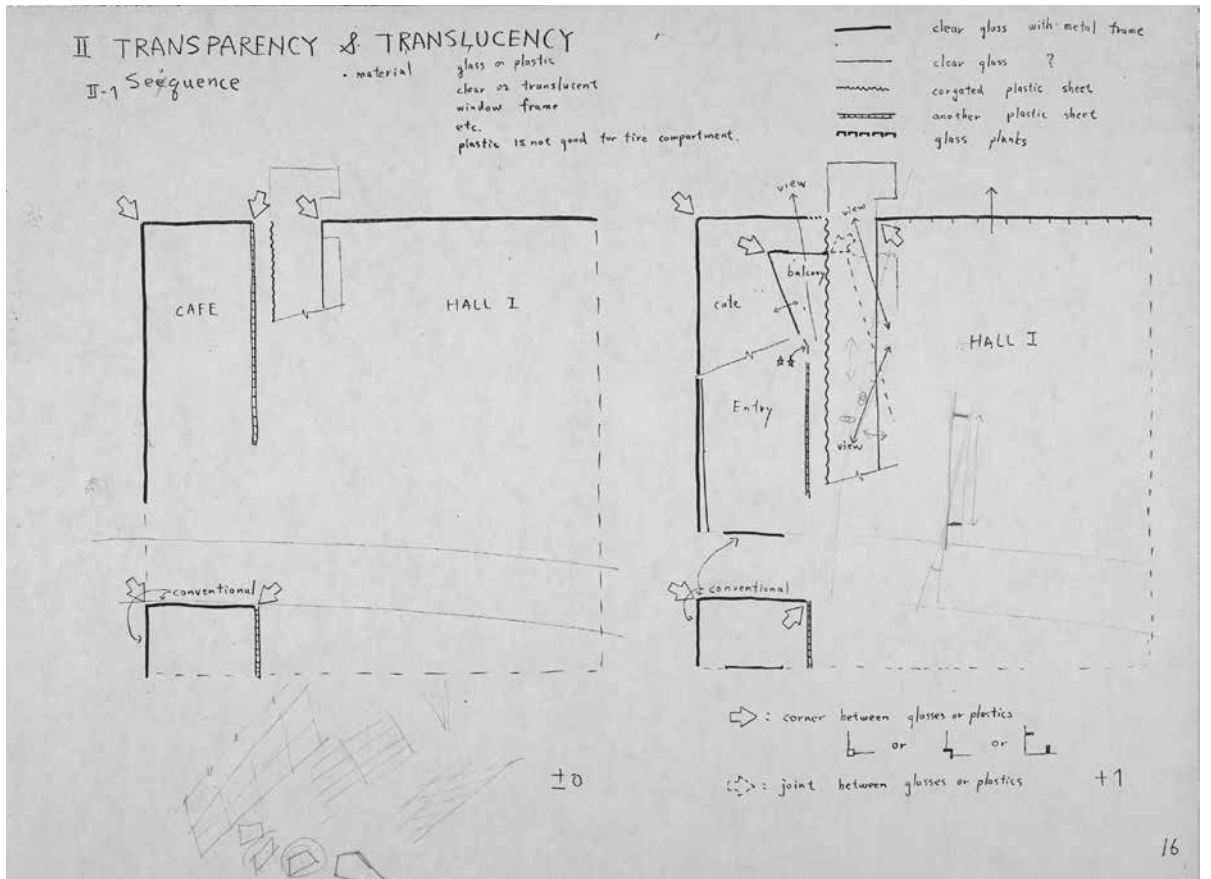
7 OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Kunsthal, 'Inventory of Problems'. Joints between transparent and translucent surfaces. Levels 0 and +1, November 1989.



8 OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Kunsthal, schematic overview of the detailing of the fenestration, March 1991.
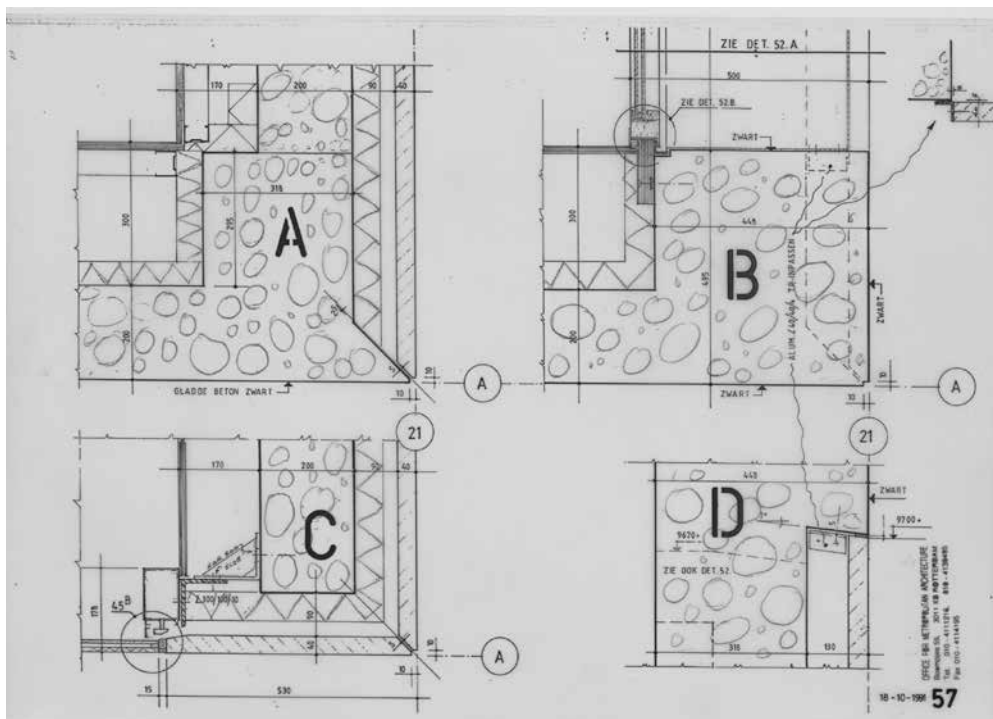
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9 OMA/Rem Koolhaas,
  Kunsthal, elevations
  (details), April 1990.

The principle of diversification governed the development of the project as a whole. The structural system is a hybrid of three largely independent sections, two in concrete and one in steel, each of which is based on a different grid [6]. Structural members like the columns clad in tree trunks in Hall 1 and the orange steel plate girder protruding from the portico disintegrate visually from the construction they are part of. Inside the building, the main spaces of the circuit are 'individualised' in terms of daylight, view, illumination, finishes, and colours, thereby counteracting the spatial continuity and unity that were so important for the design. The initial purpose had been to diversify the character of the main circuit's different sections in order to provide a spatial experience as varied und surprising as possible. Only from 1989 onwards was the principle of diversification incrementally transferred to the façades.

In late 1989, Hoshino compiled a booklet of some thirty pages, which he called the 'Inventory of Problems'. The booklet gives an idea of the issues at stake at that point, most of them yet to be resolved. A series of sketches indicate about thirty corners between transparent and translucent surfaces [7]. Each would ultimately be detailed in a different manner. Another sketch from March 1991 lists eight details for four types of mullions, six types of glass, and two types of translucent polycarbonate panels, all corresponding closely to the structure as it was built [8]. The mullion's structural parts alone comprise miniature open-web trusses, glass fins, and rectangular tubes in steel or aluminium, the latter's position switching from the interior to the exterior. The size, proportion, and rhythm of the fenestration differ visibly from one glazed surface to the next, at times within a single façade [9].

There is certainly a distinct shift away from OMA's earlier modernist collages, such as the Dance Theatre or Villa Dall'Ava. Instead of juxtaposing multiple fragmentary volumes, the solitary volume of the Kunsthal is being dismantled into a collage of largely autonomous screens. In other words, the (deconstructivist) fragmentation of volume was methodically transformed into a fragmentation of surface. Much of the detailing bespeaks the effort to make the construction appear flat. The mitre joints between concrete and travertine at the corners is the most obvious example [10].

The diversity of references corresponds to the diversity of construction and form. The floor plan – and indeed the same could be said about the binary halves of the façades – is divided into a Corbusian and a Miesian half [6 refers]. The auditorium recalls a distorted Maison Domino with tilted columns, the curved curtain rail underlining the principle of the 'free plan'. Hall 2, in turn, evokes the 'neutral plan' and clear-span structure of the late Mies. What is visible of the columns makes the reference explicit: H-columns in steel, painted black, just like those that Mies used after his emigration to the USA. The portico features an assembly of five different columns: a Miesian H-column, a Miesian cruciform column, a Corbusian pilotis, a Corbusian column in concrete, next to a castellated column in steel [11]. If all this points to the modernist past, other parts of the building refer to the architecture of the present. The insistence on the quote itself appears to mimic postmodern architecture, and the same applies to the 'irony' of the tree trunk handrail and the protruding truss above, the use of bright orange, and the walls clad in travertine [12]. On the other hand, there are parts that look genuinely deconstructivist: the rotated ramp of the roof garden violently penetrating both adjacent halves of

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the building, and the tilted columns of the auditorium, conveying a sense of instability and distortion [13].

## Excess is always a bearer of consciousness

There was no technical reason for this diversification of parts in terms of structure, construction, finishes, and references. Neither Van Krimpen nor the municipality or the engineers demanded the multiplication of details of the fenestration, the mitre joints, the stress on surface as opposed to volume, let alone the references to the work of Le Corbusier and Mies. It was the architects who pushed the project in that direction, methodically and consistently. Even if Cecil Balmond devised the structural system, its hybrid character was no technical solution to a practical problem, but in all likelihood a proposition by OMA.[49] All visible elements of the structure needed the architects' consent. Arup's proposals that were rejected by OMA and Koolhaas personally bear witness to that.[50]

The resulting sense of fragmentation conveyed by the Kunsthal has been one of its most discussed features. It has been variously interpreted as a response to the site, as a nod to surrealism, or as a quality that is indebted to film and filmic montage.[51] However, a whole range of partly obvious, partly subtle implications have not yet been explored: fragmentation, for instance, as a metaphor of a pluralist society, a derailing welfare state, or an escape from a Foucauldian system of control. With respect to the issues raised in this article, it is the extreme of fragmentation itself that appears significant. '[E]xcess', as Tafuri famously suggested, 'is always a bearer of consciousness.'[52] The Kunsthal's excess of formal fragmentation indicates a wilful exaggeration that ought to thematise and critically denote ideas about architecture. It turns fragmentation itself into a subject of persiflage. Further, amassing references – which are without equal in OMA's work in terms of their boldness and scope – challenges alleged oppositions, namely those between modernism and postmodernism, between postmodernism and deconstructivism, between these 'isms' and OMA's work in the 1980s, insisting that each is dependent on a modernist past of some kind. From what has been said, it is clear that Koolhaas was critical of both. As of 1989, Koolhaas' thinking turned against such dependence, and he must have been well aware of the fact that the extreme diversity of the architecture would convey a sense of fragmentation, which ran counter to his critique of deconstructivist architecture ever since 1990. The building application plans, which were worked out between November 1989 and April 1990, along with numerous details and significant changes that continued being elaborated until late in 1991, stress the autonomy of parts and the clashes between them ever more forcefully.

Was the Kunsthal simply at odds with the ideas



11

11  OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Kunsthal, portico.

12 OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Kunsthal, south façade.

13 OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Kunsthal, photograph of the construction site with the rotated ramp of the roof garden at the centre.

through an almost diagrammatic approximation to the project's organisation. The compact volume, as a shift away from formal fragmentation, resonates with both Koolhaas' reserve towards deconstructivism and the agenda of Europe's economic and political restructuring; the diagram, in turn, presented a way of generating form without relying on modernist models – that is, distinguishing OMA's work from deconstructivist and contemporary Dutch architecture as Koolhaas saw them at the turn of the 1990s. Both precepts were key strategies of OMA's new approach. The 'sudden disappearance of socialism' one year later lent OMA's abandonment of modernism unexpected topicality, in as much as early modernism did depend on socialist ideology, allowing Koolhaas to conclude that it had lost its legitimacy.

But what should be made of the overtly inconsistent embrace of modernist references, 'postmodern' quotation and irony, and 'deconstructivist' fragmentation of the project that developed between 1989 and 1992? As a critique in the above 'Tafurian' sense it demands a new departure. Intellectually, the architecture forestalls the adherence to the past, OMA's own included, so as to coerce the embrace of the new. At a strategic level, Koolhaas had only been able to abandon OMA's architectural approach of the 1980s and let it shine in the light of the very flames consuming it, as it were, thanks to the prospect of a different world and a different OMA. The unification of Europe, the end of the Cold War, and the beginnings of what soon would be called globalisation and neoliberalism seemed to offer this perspective, allowing OMA to leave behind the doom and gloom of the past two decades. Moreover, the competitions of 1989 had shown that a new departure was indeed possible. The Kunsthal, as a radical self-critique of OMA's dependence on the modernist past, reflects this shift from 'postmodern' pessimism to an optimist embrace of the present, which was ideologically further legitimised by the failure of socialism that the fall of the Berlin Wall appeared to imply.

that Koolhaas advocated at the turn of the 1990s – his opposition to deconstructivism and the Dutch modernist revival, and his embrace of the New Europe? The opposite was the case with the scheme of December 1988. As has been seen, it anticipated the confinement of all complexity into a single compact volume and the generation of form

## Notes

1. Michel Moussette, '"Do We Need A Canopy For Rain?": Interior-Exterior Relationships in the Kunsthal', *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 3/4 (2003), 280–94; Aarati Kanekar, 'Space of Montage: Movement, Assemblage, and Appropriation in Koolhaas' Kunsthal', in *Architecture's Pretext: Spaces of Translation* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 134–54; Roberto Gargiani, 'The Pliable Surface', in *The Companions to the History of Architecture*, ed. by Harry Francis Mallgrave (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2017), vol. IV, *Twentieth Century Architecture*, ed. by David Leatherbarrow and Alexander Eisenschmidt, pp. 653–60; Jacob Comerci, 'The Robot of Kunsthal I', *Log*, 36 (2016), 63–7.

2. Abundant archival material – comprising sketches, drawings, models, correspondence, minutes, and reports – is held by OMAR Archives of Het Nieuwe Instituut (HNI), Rotterdam, Stadsarchief Rotterdam, Rotterdam, and Arup London Archives, London.

3. By 'evidence' I do not understand proof, but the body of verifiable facts in support of the propositions made in this article. Koolhaas' statements about his intentions, too, will be compared with the actual choices he and OMA made in terms of design.

4. The inclination to oppose has often been noticed and partly acknowledged, partly rejected by Koolhaas himself. See Patrice Goulet, 'La deuxième chance de l'architecture moderne ... [The Second Chance of Modern Architecture ...]', *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 238 (1985), 2–9 (p. 4); Jean-François Chevrier, 'Changing Dimensions', *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 361 (2005), 98–107 (p. 102).

5. Apart from his response to postmodern and deconstructivist architecture, Koolhaas' opposition

to the premodern European city as a universal urban paradigm is a further obvious example. See Rem Koolhaas, 'Eloge du terrain vague [Elegy for the Vacant Lot]', *L'Architecture* d'Aujourd'hui, 238 (April 1985), 46.

6. See Albena Yaneva, *The Making of a Building: A Pragmatist Approach to Architecture* (Oxford: Lang, 2009); Albena Yaneva, *Made by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture: An Ethnography of Design* (Rotterdam: 010, 2009).

7. See Camiel van Winkel and Bart Verschaffel, '"Ik ben verbluft over de rechten die het artiestieke zich aanmeet." Vraaggresprek met Rem Koolhaas [I Am Baffled by the Rights the Artistic Assumes]', *de Witte Raaf* (May–June 2004) <https://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/ik-ben-verbluft-over-de-rechten-die-het-artistieke-zich-aanmeet/> [accessed 2 June 2022].

8. It has been repeatedly observed that Koolhaas was taking the decisions, at least with respect to the 1980s and 1990s. See *Reference: OMA. The Sublime Start of an Architectural Generation*, ed. by Bernard Colenbrander and Jos Bosman (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 1995), p. 15; Philipp Oswalt and Matthias Hollwich, 'OMA at Work', *Archis*, 5 (1997/98), 21.

9. I am referring to a series of unpublished interviews I conducted in 2017/18 with Fuminori Hoshino, along with Koolhaas as the leading design architect and Toni Adam, the Kunsthal project manager at OMA between 1989 and 1991. Hoshino's account makes it completely clear that any decision in terms of design had to be agreed with Koolhaas, on the basis of either drawings or scale models.

10. There was no architectural competition. The commission was announced to OMA in February 1987. See J. Laan (Ruimtelijke Ordening, Verkeer en Vervoer), letter to Rem Koolhaas, 6 February 1987. A commission for a preliminary draft followed in June. H. E. Bakker (director Stadsontwikkeling), J. Doets (director Grondbedrijf), letter to OMA, 11 June 1987. OMAR Archives, Rotterdam.

11. The term 'postmodern architecture' is used here in the sense it was understood at the time. I refer to seminal publications and events of the 1970s and 1980s dedicated to the subject or commonly associated

with it, as well as the projects shown on these occasions. Examples are Charles Jencks's *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's *Collage City*, Heinrich Klotz's *Moderne und Postmoderne*, and the 1980 Venice Biennale *The Presence of the Past*.

12. Geert Bekaert, 'The Odyssey of an Enlightened Entrepreneur: Rem Koolhaas', in *Rooted in the Real: Writings on Architecture by Geert Bekaert*, ed. by Christophe van Gerrewey (Ghent: Ghent University, 2011), pp. 278–97 (p. 293). First published in Dutch in 1982 as 'De Odyssee van een verlicht ondernemer: Rem Koolhaas', *wonen-TA/BK*, 13–14 (1982), 50-7.

13. I am referring to 'fragmentation' as an aesthetic motif in the sense that Mary McLeod once suggested with regard to deconstructivist architecture, explaining that 'we use the word when designs look "fragmented", not because they are literally broken.' Mary McLeod, '"Order in the Details", "Tumult in the Whole"? Composition and Fragmentation in Le Corbusier's Architecture', in *Fragments: Architecture and the Unfinished, Essays Presented to Robin Middleton*, ed. by Barry Bergdoll and Werner Oechslin (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), pp. 291–322 (pp. 291, 316).

14. Victor Buchli, 'On Bricolage', in *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970–1990*, ed. by Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt (London: V&A Publishing, 2011)*,* pp. 112–15 (p. 115).

15. Ibid., p. 113.

16. Franco Raggi, 'Edonista-puritano [Puritanical Hedonist]', *Modo*, 58 (1983), 26-8 (p. 28).

17. *Deconstructivist Architecture*, ed. by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, exhibition catalogue (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988).

18. Joseph Giovannini, 'The Limit of Chaos Tempts A New School of Architects', *The New York Times*, 4 February 1988.

19. See Simone Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus in der Architektur? Eine Analyse der Ausstellung 'Deconstructivist Architecture' im New Yorker Museum of Modern Art [Deconstructivism in Architecture? An Analysis of the Exhibition 'Deconstructivist Architecture' in the New York Museum of Modern Art]* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), p. 31.

20. Editorial, 'Deconstruction at the Tate Gallery', *Architectural Design*,

3/4 (1988), 7.

21. See Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus in der Architektur? Eine Analyse der Ausstellung 'Deconstructivist Architecture' im New Yorker Museum of Modern Art*, pp. 350–4 (bibliography).

22. See *Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume*, ed. by Andreas Papadakis, Catherine Cooke and others (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1989); Aaron Betsky, *Violated Perfection: Architecture and Fragmentation of the Modern* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1990); Charles Jencks, *The New Moderns: From Late to Neo-Modernism* (London: Academy Editions, 1990); Gert Kähler, *Dekonstruktion? Dekonstruktivismus? – Aufbruch ins Chaos oder neues Bild der Welt [Dekonstruction? Deconstructivism?]* (Braunschweig: Bauwelt Fundamente, 1990).

23. Chantal Béret, 'Rem Koolhaas: La condition métropolitaine', *Art Press*, 148 (June 1990), 18–22 (p. 19).

24. See Gemeentewerken Rotterdam, 'Verslag van de 5e Bouwcommissie Nieuwbouw Kunsthal [Report of the 5th Building-Committee Meeting]', 7 October 1988. OMAR Archives, Rotterdam.

25. In *S,M,L,XL*, Koolhaas mentions 'the future director's dislike for the design'. Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (New York, NY: The Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 429. That he had rejected OMA's first scheme has been confirmed by Van Krimpen himself in an interview with the author, held on 28 July in Amsterdam.

26. Interview with the author on 25 July 2017.

27. Ibid.

28. For the models, see OMAR MAQV 502.02-08. According to Fuminori Hoshino, the model of the final version has been lost. Interview with the author on 25 July 2017. For the drawings, see OMAR 1546-1548, 1567, 1692.

29. See OMAR 1546.

30. Fuminori Hoshino. Fax to Cecil Balmond, 2 December 1988. OMAR 1555.

31. See Emmanuel Doutriaux, 'Le Kunsthal de Rotterdam', *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 285 (1993), 6–14 (p.7).

32. Ivan Berend, *The History of European Integration: A New Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 112.

33. Ibid., p. 136.

34. Henk Overbeek and Kees van der Pijl, 'Restructuring Capital and Restructuring Hegemony: Neo-Liberalism and the Unmaking of the Post-War Order', in *Restructuring Hegemony in the Global Political Economy: The Rise of Transnational*

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*Neo-Liberalism in the 1980s*, ed. by Henk Overbeek (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1–27 (pp. 19, 20). First published in 1993.

35. Berend, *The History of European Integration*, p. 112; An extensive exploration of this subject is found in Stephen R. Gill, 'Neo-Liberalism and the Shift towards a US-Centred Transnational Hegemony', in *Restructuring Hegemony in the Global Political Economy*, ed. by Overbeek, pp. 246–82.

36. Berend, *The History of European Integration*, pp. 108, 110.

37. Ibid., p. 149.

38. Tracy Metz, 'Nederland mist respect voor de architect', *Avenue*, 24 (January 1989), 63, 64 (p. 64).

39. OMA/Rem Koolhaas, 'Une tour de Babel pas comme les autres [A Tower of Babel Unlike Any Other]', *Architecture Mouvement Continuité*, 4 (September 1989), 22.

40. Rem Koolhaas, 'Atlanta', *Quaderns*, 1 (1990), 104–13 (p. 110); Rem Koolhaas, 'OMA: fin de siècle innocent?', in *OMA: Fin de Siècle: Rem Koolhaas à l'I.F.A.*, ed. by Rem Koolhaas/OMA and Donald van Dansik, exhibition catalogue (Paris: IFA, 1990), n.p.; Rem Koolhaas, 'Precarious Entity', in *Anyone*, ed. by Cynthia Davidson (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1991), pp. 148–55. Koolhaas and Mau, *S,M,L,XL*.

41. Rem Koolhaas, 'How Modern is Dutch Architecture', in *Mart Stam's Trousers: Stories From behind the Scenes of Dutch Moral Modernism*, ed. by Crimson with Michael Speaks and Gerard Hadders (Rotterdam 010 Publishers, 1999), p. 163. First published in 1990 under the title 'Hoe modern is de Nederlandse architectuur?'.

42. Chantal Béret, 'Rem Koolhaas: La condition métropolitaine', *Art Press*, 148 (June 1990), 18–22 (p. 19).

43. Marta Cervelló, 'I've Always Been Anxious with the Standard Typology of the Average Architect with a Successful Career', *Quaderns*, 183 (1989), 78–104 (p. 84).

44. Alejandro Zaera Polo, 'Finding Freedoms', *El Croquis*, 53 (1992), 6–31 (p. 29).

45. Nikolaus Kuhnert, Philipp Oswalt, Alejandro Zaera Polo, 'Die Entfaltung der Architektur [The Unfolding of Architecture]', *ARCH+* 117 (1993), 22–33 (p. 24, author's trans.).

46. Unless otherwise specified, the information in this paragraph is based on extensive archival research conducted by the author at the OMAR Archives in Rotterdam, Arup London Archives, and the Stadsarchief Rotterdam.

47. Holger Schurk, *Project without Form: OMA, Rem Koolhaas und the Laboratory of 1989* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2022), p. 136.

48. Kanekar, 'Space of Montage: Movement, Assemblage, and Appropriation in Koolhaas' Kunsthal', p. 142.

49. Hoshino's scheme of 2 December 1988 and earlier versions dating from late November already suggest that OMA envisaged a hybrid structure. That is indicated both by sketches of individual columns and the arrangement of the columns, indicating a varied structural grid that is partly appropriate for concrete and partly for steel. See OMAR 1548, 1555.

50. See fax to Ove Arup, 20 January 1989. OMAR 1492. The fax is an example of how deeply Koolhaas was involved defining the visible parts of the structure. Faxes to Balmond, the Kunsthal team, and the construction supervisor, were among the means Koolhaas used to steer the design.

51. See Bart Lootsma and Jan de Graaf, 'In dienst van de ervaring: KunstHAL van OMA in Rotterdam [In the Service of Experience: KunstHAL by OMA in Rotterdam]', *De Architect*, 1 (1993), 19–34 (p. 25); Sabine Schneider, 'Kunsthalle in Rotterdam: Trügerische Transparenz', *Baumeister*, 11 (1992), 40–5 (pp. 41, 44); Cynthia Davidson, 'Koolhaas and the Kunsthal: History Lesions', *ANY*, 21 (1997), 36–41 (pp. 39, 40).

52. Manfredo Tafuri, 'The Ashes of Jefferson', in *Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), pp. 291–303 (p. 297).

**Illustration credits**

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The author declares none.

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