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Melendez

**INEVITABLE THEORIES
BY REM KOOLHAAS**

“Through Delirious New York I was trying to describe a space in which I could later work... In SMLXL there are perhaps two different ambitions. One of them was to find a way to give an unbuilt project the same status as a building so that all the work we had done until that time could be presented as equal, without introducing the notion of success or failure.... It was basically a way of establishing the ‘reality’ of certain projects, regardless of realization. The second was to establish a heavily contextual framework to reveal the exact moment within globalization that they were produced, to which pressures they responded, by which political moments they were triggered.”¹

Rem Koolhaas,
From: Architectural Association, London,
1995

¹ KOOLHAAS, Rem; COLOMINA, Beatriz: “The Architecture of Publication. Rem Koolhaas in conversation with Beatriz Colomina,” *El Croquis* n°134+135. Office for Metropolitan Architecture: AMOMA, Rem Koolhaas [II] 1996-2007: teoría y práctica = theory and practice. El Escorial, 2007.

“Beyond a certain scale, architecture acquires the properties of Bigness. The best reason to broach Bigness is the one given by climbers of Mount Everest: “because it is there.” Bigness is ultimate architecture.

Fuelled initially by the thoughtless energy of the purely quantitative, Bigness has been, for nearly a century, a condition almost without thinkers, a revolution without program. Delirious New York implied a latent “Theory of Bigness” based on five theorems.

1. Beyond a certain critical mass, a building becomes a Big Building. Such a mass can no longer be controlled by a single architectural gesture (...). That is not the same as fragmentation: the parts remain committed to the whole.
2. The elevator and its family of related inventions render null and void the classical repertoire of architecture.
3. In Bigness, the distance between core and envelope increases to the point where facade can no longer reveal what happens inside. (...) Where architecture reveals, Bigness perplexes.
4. Through size alone, such buildings enter an amoral domain, beyond good or bad.
5. Together, all these breaks (...) imply the final, most radical break: Bigness is no longer part of any urban tissue. It exists; at most, it coexists. Its subtext is ‘fuck’ context.”¹

Rem Koolhaas,
From: *Bigness, or the problem of large* (1994). S,M,L,XL,
1995

¹ KOOLHAAS, Rem; MAU, Bruce; WERLEMANN, Hans: S,M,L,XL. The Monacelli Press. Nueva York, 1995.

REM KOOLHAAS AND THE INSTRUMENTAL CAPACITY OF SMLXL

The idea of “Theorem” is not new in Architecture theory. Actually there exist recent applications of it. When I was informed about the topic of this issue it came to my mind immediately, the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas had used this format to present the 5 key aspects that would define the theory of *Bigness, or the problem of Large*. It was 1994 and OMA, Office for Metropolitan Architecture, had been working on a number of projects which scale was in a way out of control. Certain projects were larger than ever, or at least, conceived and designed as huge volumes expected to contain libraries, media centers, or big conference and events centers. Beyond that, there was an inner conflict in the practice of OMA as they were also used to work on cities, in a much larger scale, not just in terms of construction or architecture, but also in respect to the kind and number of agents involved in them. When intervening in any urban operation, there are users, citizens, designers, public servants, politicians, (etc), who may not be present in every project of architecture, if limited to the boundaries of the building. So, what happened to buildings -and actors involved- that produced a remarkable impact on cities due to their large scale? What happened To buildings that, due to their size, suggested urban matters never questioned before out of the premises of urbanism? But also, as for the building itself, there was much for Koolhaas to consider about the resolution of new problems that just appeared in relation to new sizes. *Bigness* was apparently written to address part of these concerns.

Of course, its inclusion within the popular hefty volume *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large* – generally known simply as S,M,L,XL – the monograph about OMA published in 1995, provides a further glimpse of the relevance of sizes and

scales for the office, but not necessarily by being a scientific and obsessive classification of projects and ideas. It was more similar to an argument, or a proposition. It operated on a practical level, since the mere construction of an increasing sequence guided the audience through a sort of logical order. If there were a sequence, contents of both L (large) and XL (extra large) sections would be accepted as stages of it and their practice more naturally, as if it was obvious for architects to operate on the XL scale and in cities as well as vast territories. In other words, the largest architecture and urbanism would belong to a progression. Hence, OMA could easily integrate urban projects within the same practice of their office and, therefore, the limits between those two would be almost vanished, in respect to the capacity of architects to operate in the largest scales. Interpreted from this perspective, S,M,L,XL is a statement about the professional capacities of the architect in the 21st century.

During the process of production of the monograph, the classification of project by their size was not the initial will. It was not a predetermined condition. The monographic volume started being an exercise of revision of the past, with several attempts of distribution of contents. Previous attempts and drafts tested classifications by location, name or typology, but none of these options seemed to work for a publication that needed to accommodate not only projects of architecture, but also pieces of theory and elements that would appear in the last stages of the process. Or, as Rem Koolhaas stated in the presentation of the monograph at the AA in December 1995: *the book is clearly designed to accommodate my eccentricities and incoherences*¹.

The whole duration of the process has proved to be longer than how one can deduct from the information within the

¹ KOOLHAAS, Rem. Public presentation of the book S,M,L,XL at the Architectural Association, London. December 1st, 1995.

book, as well as from some interviews. It started back in the late 1980s, when it was supposed to become part of a series of monographs of architecture published by Rizzoli in the USA. Simultaneously, Rem had launched the Groszstadt Foundation, a new entity parallel to OMA, that would have been used in order to develop some theoretical positions and ideas, as well as for the coordination of public interventions such as publications or exhibitions; among other curious strategies. One of the scopes of this “body”, was to foster research about the contemporary city and, in fact, it was the first actual theoretical venture after *Delirious New York*; and for this we can argue that the S,M,L,XL’s mission was to serve as a laboratory for testing ideas that would have later been part of a project alone, or of a broader curatorial opportunity led by the Foundation.

A PROJECT FOR A BOOK

When the opportunity to edit a monograph about OMA emerged in America, the intention to present a new theoretical proposition was already active. Koolhaas had been anticipating that in several magazines, including *A+U* in 1988, with the article “Introduction for New Research: ‘The Contemporary City’”.

Delirious New York was a search in the influence of the metropolitan masses and culture on architecture and urbanism. (...) The -never expressed- conclusion of the book is that between the two World Wars architecture did undergo a definite change. The cultural significance of traditional forms had lost unmistakably its univocability. (...)

The Contemporary City is a research into emerging forms of architecture in the city today, and wants to search in the consequences and possibilities of actual mutations. This will not be directed to the ‘official debate’, but to documentation and

*interpretation of a number of apparently spontaneous and independent processes.*²

At this point, in 1988, there was no evidence of any process for a book of theory –although some individuals involved affirm there was an actual intention – but a new period of reflection had started to produce results. One may think it was just a collection of texts, but the project of the monograph triggered their practice to the extent that theory and projects could not be separated anymore in the design of the volume. If we look only at texts and projects at that time separately we may not appreciate this joint exercise, but it becomes more evident when checking the documents and drafts of S,M,L,XL.³

Although it is not the main topic of this essay, it is important to mention that the monograph was about to be canceled due to the lack of actual interest from Koolhaas during the first stage. It had become a latent process, which only started to be interesting enough for Koolhaas when there was a more powerful reason for it to exist, particularly at the time when they assumed its capacity to blend projects and texts, so practice and theory, with the impulse provided by the designer Bruce Mau and other inner complicated situations at OMA⁴. The desire for a change forced the need to evaluate all at once. In this way, texts about a single project or about the contemporary city would be all part of the same volume, altogether with works of architecture or urbanism. A remark by Koolhaas is symptomatic of this situation: *a parking can be a text*.⁵

All in all S,M,L,XL became instrumental, to the extent that

² KOOLHAAS, Rem: "Introduction for New Research The Contemporary City", A+U no.217, October 1988.

³ Archives OMA, Rotterdam (2013), and Bruce Mau Design, Toronto (2014).

⁴ OMA was immersed in a financial crisis in 1992, the same year that Rem's father died.

⁵ Ibid. Rem Koolhaas. AA, December 1995.

documents and drawings related to some projects were eventually produced firstly for the book, and then were incorporated to the project, or to a lecture or intervention⁶ Events, books, texts and projects were more integrated than ever, and that was possible mainly because of the mission of the Groszstadt Foundation. Through it, OMA started to gain more capacity of intervention in their own exhibitions and books and, therefore, to acquire more influence on relevant decisions about how to be presented in public. since the late 1980s, books and exhibitions would have become means of exposure, as well as means of experimentation.

BIGNESS

If the question is whether *Bigness* was written in order to legitimize a way to address big scale architecture, or if it was a theoretical reflection that turned into a piece of theory - undoubtedly - the former would be an immediate reaction to the demands of clients at the time, but not necessarily a need for public or even specialized validation. In other words, socioeconomic, technological and programmatic contemporary parameters may have fostered a new scale for buildings and, therefore, architects would simply fulfill the expectations of the audience and the society at large. Legitimation would just assure correctness or consensus. But also, the latter argument might be a feasible option, given the tendency in the field to contribute to architectural discourse, mainly in the circles Koolhaas belonged to. As a result of any of these positions, *Bigness* would be finally rendered and shared by the time of its publication in 1994, it would be just an instrument to frame new architectural operations into a more stable scheme, as if one could deduct that, if it is written and accepted, it must be true and solid.

⁶ SIGLER, Jennifer. Interview. GSD, Harvard University, Cambridge, February 2013.

However, if we look carefully at the transition of concepts developed by OMA during the previous years, it is possible to find out that there was a more exhaustive development of the idea of *Bigness*, precisely emerging from previous theoretical propositions. So it was not an invention created overnight, or an urgent answer to large-scale demands. Hence it was not invented, neither imposed. In a way it just happened after a series of attempts. In this respect, the emergence of *Bigness* would be more transitional than providential.

Just to provide some specificity, we can prove that, back in 1989, Koolhaas introduced the first notions of the text in a lecture at Columbia University. In that moment he talked about what the images of architecture he was projecting to the public represented.⁷ After some interventions, where the way of naming the main points had been showing little differences, we find evidence of it in a rolling monographic exhibition Paris-Lille-Barcelona. In its turn in Spain in 1991, on the occasion of the opening, Rem gave a lecture and introduced again a number of key aspects of a new proposition to the audience. It was *Bigness*. At that point, this proposal was not made of theorems yet, but of *axioms, indications, laws or points*;⁸ he used all of these terms. There was no more doubt that he was about to complete the argument of *Bigness*, and to come to the conclusions of the impact this may have on architectural production and the experience of it:

My thesis is that through Bigness alone, through size alone, this architecture becomes completely different from all the classical architecture. (Rem Koolhaas. Barcelona, 1991)

⁷ Lecture by Rem Koolhaas at Columbia University in 1989, reproduced in KOOLHAAS, Rem: "We are like a surfer on the wave: Work Methods at OMA", Rem Koolhaas: Projectes Urbans / Urban Projects. 1985-1990. Quaderns. Barcelona, 1990.

⁸ KOOLHAAS, Rem: OMA - Rem Koolhaas. Lecture at COAC, Barcelona, February 5th, 1991.

The same exercise could be done about other pieces of S,M,L,XL, including the book itself. But focusing on *Bigness* alone can help to discuss further Koolhaas' approach to ideas that become theory; particularly if they concern hard-to-discuss concepts such as congestion - when describing New York - or shopping and consumption at the beginning of the 21st century. The same for the mid 1990s with *Bigness*, when the size of buildings may have potentially been so large to even not being solved as conventional architecture, but more as independent bodies that could might have even ignored their closest urban environment; as Koolhaas puts it: *fuck context*⁹.

CONCLUSIONS

A characteristic of his texts and some public interventions is the capacity to face certain risky arguments or inconvenient realities. According to Bekaert, Martin and other critics, Koolhaas operates abruptly by accepting the reality, as the only possible way to foster change:

*Only by recognizing and acknowledging the given situation can he [Rem Koolhaas] act upon it -much to his credit- and try to find a solution, thereby quashing its seeming inevitability. Recognition is itself is a crucial intervention, the first stage of the design. It creates a distance.*¹⁰

*To negativity and resistance, Koolhaas opposes an exhilarating acceleration of the real as the only strategy for achieving change.*¹¹

This attitude towards reality is also interesting as it appears in testimonies and texts that narrate crucial episodes of

⁹ KOOLHAAS, Rem: "Bigness, or the problema of large". S,M,L,XL.

¹⁰ BEKAERT, Geert: "Dealing with Rem Koolhaas" (2004), Rooted in the Real: Writings on Architecture by Geert Bekaert. WZW Editions & Productions, Ghent University. Belgium 2011., p.477-504. (p.492)

¹¹ MARTIN, Louis: "Fredric Jameson and Critical Architecture", The Political unconscious of Architecture: Re-Opening Jameson's Narrative. Nadir Lahiji (ed). Ashgate Publishing Group, 2011., p.169-208

projects within S,M,L,XL. That is the case of Euralille or ZKM. A short essay or caption tells more than a classical piece of theory, since one can understand the nature of a political environment, or the repercussion of the cancellation of a project for an office of architecture. For instance Congrexpo, the architectural sole intervention of OMA in Euralille¹², could be described with a list and types of events that could have taken place in its huge spaces, then talking clearly about program, circulations or equipment, without intricate architectural terms. Using an atypical presentation for architecture, as Koolhaas aimed and declared at the presentation of S,M,L,XL, the boundaries between theory, physical and unbuilt architecture were blurred.

Some events mentioned that could be hosted at Congrexpo:

1 day

- *Host the World Chess Association Conference*
- *Host the European Grand Tractor Pull*
- *Cater a banquet for butterfly collectors*
- *Prepare 400 croque-monsieurs to go*
- *Serve a formal dinner for 250*
- *Provide refreshments at any of 17 bars*
- *Park 1,200 cars*
- *Sell 6,000 concert tickets*
- *Register 2,350 electronic ballots*
- *And hang 10,000 coats*
- *... With space left for 17 independent meetings, each for 80 or more people¹³*

What is possibly most interesting about S,M,L,XL, is the fact that it functions as a device to articulate theory and projects all at once. By combining and balancing both aspects of the whole practice of architecture - that is thinking and doing - the understanding of inner difficulties in architecture or

¹² OMA acted as Director of the Master Plan in its first stage, until 1995.

¹³ Ibid. S,M,L,XL.

contemporary demands and the solutions or projects seem to be more logical. We wouldn't say define it as a deductive process, but as an articulation of different components, as if we were presenting all the necessary ingredients for a chemical formula. What is more, once we dig into previous stages of a text or theoretical proposition by Koolhaas, as it has been explained with *Bigness*, it generally happens that there is more deep development of the ideas, all of them tested in distinct scenarios such as books, shows, lectures or projects¹⁴. A remarkable public moment related to *Bigness* is the inscription of the theorems in a solo exhibition at MoMA, also in the midst of this S,M,L,XL production period (1994)¹⁵.

Koolhaas determination to blend all his work in a single practice, including also dissemination activities, skips old controversies such as dualistic theories (“yes” or “no”), that used to be the center of debates, such as the one between Michael Speaks (*After Theory*) and Reinhold Martin (*Leave Theory alone*)¹⁶. Instead of insisting on the relevance of theory, Rem just uses it and integrating it in a whole. This becomes quite evident in the chapter “Large”, where the main projects of OMA in the late 1980s, that is the big library of France in Paris, ZKM or Zeebrugge (among others), are presented together with the text *Bigness*, but also with a written intervention by Cecil Balmond, included in order to add a proper structural explanation to the problems/solutions related to the huge scale of these projects.

¹⁴ This became a conclusion of the PhD Dissertation presented in January 2016, where the trajectory of OMA and Koolhaas between 1988 and 1997 was studied.

¹⁵ OMA at MoMA. New York, 1994. Rem himself wrote the Five theorems with chalk on a wall of the room of the exhibition. He repeated it in the next two exhibitions of the same series, in the USA and Japan.

¹⁶ SPEAKS, Michael: “After Theory: Debate in architectural schools rages about the value of theory and its effects on innovation in design”, *Architecture Record*. Junio 2005. In response to that: MARTIN, Reinhold: “Leave Theory Alone”, *Architectural Record*. Agosto 2005. “This humorless, anti-intellectual attack on theory was gratuitous at best, cynically opportunistic at worst.”

Exposed in this way, the whole represented by the book seems to be almost inevitable, as it is the impression we can get after reading *Bigness*' theorems. We can argue then that Koolhaas elaborates full statements, not just a piece of theory or isolated projects, since they become indistinguishable to him. Perhaps this ability to show "the inevitable", as he does by showing "the reality", is the most challenging feature of Koolhaas' propositions. A feature that becomes true before being public. Yet, if not inevitable, they shall be, at best, progressively validated by facts, or multiple appearances disseminated in projects and media.