



# Rem Koolhaas

with Markus Miessen

## A refusal of obligatory extravagances

In the last year, several major magazines have reported on the frenzy of building that is Dubai. They all include images of the requisite landmarks of questionable taste, the "first" glimpse of Dubai's fantastic islands, and a description of the massive influx of business trekkers. The whole scene rushed into the world consciousness as being equal parts budding financial center and playground for the über-rich built by Sheikhs. Indeed, Dubai is growing at phenomenal speed: one in six of the world's cranes are here, and an estimated 500 skyscrapers are currently under construction.

Such magnitude attracts not only those seeking to turn a quick profit, but also savvy architects like Pritzker Prize-winner Rem Koolhaas, who, together with his Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) and its research studio and think tank AMO, has recently started a number of investigations and projects in the Middle East, including two master plans in Dubai, a master plan in Kuwait, and one in Ras Al-Khaimah. To accommodate a wide range and diversity of projects throughout the world, OMA maintains offices in Europe (Rotterdam), North America (New York), and Asia (Beijing). The Beijing office is responsible for OMA's largest project to date, the 575,000 m<sup>2</sup> China Central Television Headquarters (CCTV) and Television Cultural Center (TVCC), currently under construction in Beijing and due for completion in 2008.

This past July, Markus Miessen met with Koolhaas to discuss the future of Middle

Eastern cities, the "kinetic elite," and the changing nature and role of spatial practitioners acting upon the global production of space. Here Koolhaas, for the first time in public, talks about OMA's new Generics department. The office will show its current research on the Middle East in the Dutch Pavilion at the 10th Venice Architecture Biennale, running from September 10th through November 19th.

**Markus Miessen:** *You've recently been involved in a growing number of master-planning projects in the Middle East. Can you tell me about the nature of those projects?*

**Rem Koolhaas:** We were, for the first time, invited to the Middle East by Dubai Properties to participate in a competition for a project in a central district called Business Bay. This was our first occasion to visit the Middle East, in August 2005. That visit really triggered a whole series of considerations. It started with the realization that there was an ongoing effort to downgrade Dubai—and, by implication, the Middle East in general—similar to how Singapore had been ridiculed in previous decades. Not Disneyland death penalty but Disneyland boredom. And, just out of contrariness to that, I began to take it very seriously. We actively started to pursue a number of opportunities in such a way that we would get a real sense of the Middle East and the Gulf. We are now working in Kuwait on the completion of a project that started as a shopping center and that will now turn into a significant part of the city. In Qatar, where we are working on a new campus where Arata Isozaki has also done a number of buildings, we are doing a library and the headquarters of the Qatar Foundation. It is not really a master plan, but an architectural intervention. We are also doing the Renaissance

(a 300-meter-high revolving building conceived for an island in the center of Dubai), but we're doing it at a different site. We lost the competition to Zaha (Hadid), but we're doing it somewhere else.

**MM:** *So the building is happening? Is it still a revolving slab?*

**RK:** Yes, it's happening. Zaha is going there now, but now ours (OMA's design) has moved over to a beautiful point, where all the motorways converge. It's in a central reserve, where, now that everything moves around it, it doesn't have to move anymore. And it's very close to a bird reserve, so we have a very beautiful image where you see it against the backdrop of flamingos. So the Renaissance is happening. Then we're doing a master plan in that same Business Bay and at Dubailand (an entertainment complex under development that is expected to see completion some time between 2006 and 2007), and we're doing two buildings for Porsche, Porsche One and Porsche Two. It's very interesting: a country like this is not very big, but it has a number of invisible master plans everywhere, and those master plans are the products of Australian and British offices. One of them is called Halcrow, and it's creating long and unsustainable things. The client asked us to look at the whole thing, which is almost an entire emirate. We looked at the statistics of how, in Dubai, advertising is only using something like twenty-one percent of the human race in terms of input. There's an incredible irony because there's an unbelievable amount of pink-skin advertising, while the city is getting darker and darker.

**MM:** *Is the issue of demographics something you've been investigating for the Dutch Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale?*

**RK:** In Rotterdam we're currently working on a documentation of the entire

transformation of this coastline. So in a way, it's an accelerated engagement with the entire territory of the Middle East. What we're also trying to do for Venice is to really analyze Halcrow. Nobody has ever heard of them. They're 6,000 people strong. They have a base in Australia and in England, and there is another office called Atkins, which also nobody has ever heard about. And what they do is, they create architecture so extravagant that in my idea—and this is a private opinion—it will soon be very difficult for top-rate architects to be distinguishable from them. That is a serious problem in general. What we looked at is to simply densify it and how one could reduce it so that it all fits in a band. In Dubai, we were asked to look at a recent master and make an extension of it, which probably is going to happen. You could say that all these efforts are somehow happening under the heading of introducing seriousness in a condition that seemingly, or according to the current discourse, doesn't accept seriousness.

**MM:** Can you explain what you mean by seriousness?

**RK:** Well, of course, it's very difficult to answer this question. What is seriousness? During the first visit to the Middle East, we went to a massive real estate fair. It has a very ironic name: Cityscape. It really brought home the unbelievable vastness of the efforts there and the completely unknown quality of many of the people involved—the offices, the clients—a totally different world. Seriousness was in a way defined simply as nonparticipation in a quest for extravagance, either in a formal or thematic sense. And seriousness also forced us to look at issues like sustainability, shape, and continuity.

**MM:** How does one face the local realities on the ground when dealing with projects on such a scale?

**RK:** Maybe I should say that I feel that this engagement can have the same intensity—or, actually at this moment, has the same intensity—as our engagement ten years ago with China (at Harvard), where we also really made a concerted effort to understand a new culture, a political culture, an economic culture, as we were preparing ourselves to intervene. Here we're intervening, so it isn't just an a priori investigation. But, at the same time, I surprised myself. I thought that Asia, probably because I have lived there, would

have the advantage of familiarity. But somehow here I find it much more familiar and accessible, partly because everyone speaks English, but also because many of the people involved are educated in America or in Europe. And that is actually a very nice part of it. In China, there isn't a common language (which is exciting, in itself), but in the Middle East there are languages in common. We have been working with people with very mixed backgrounds. At Dubai Properties we talk mostly to a smart Syrian engineer, in Kuwait we talk to somebody with a Harvard MBA and somebody who studied at Columbia. In Ras-Al-Khaimah we talk to a Swiss person who has lived all his life in the Middle East, as well as to the Sheikh. So it's very mixed. We also talk to women; it's not only the male bastion that one might think it is.

**MM:** It's no secret that oil dependency isn't sustainable in the long term; a break away from economic dependence on oil can only be realized by reinvesting profits into holistic, long-term infrastructures and democratic reforms. How can an entity such as AMO help in terms of achieving long-term goals that outlive the age of oil-dependency in the Middle East?

**RK:** This is, of course, an ulterior motive. We are trying to commit ourselves to an effort that's based on a model where there will be a number of regular conferences, one centering on design and another one on politics. We have announced that intention, and we're looking for opportunities. I think our contribution in Venice will be a first, preliminary investigation.

**MM:** It seems that the Arab world is increasingly waking up to the fact that they need to provide an intellectual infrastructure for some of the things that are happening. For example, in a place like Dubai, it's clearly necessary to investigate urban curatorial strategies that go beyond the idea of the theme park, to take on a certain sociopolitical dimension to avoid international perceptions of that city as nothing but an agglomeration of copies. How can think tanks like AMO make use of this trend?

**RK:** That's what we are doing. But I think that so far we have simply done it as architects, rather than in the format of a think tank. The situation in Dubai is, in a way, more susceptible to a practical administration than to a theoretical framework.

I'm sure that eventually we will get there, but not yet. We had to start from the bottom, like everybody else. I imagine that at some point an all-encompassing project will fall in our laps.

**MM:** Do you feel like you are already plugging into an existing infrastructure of like-minded people, people thinking along the same lines?

**RK:** I can't say that we are meeting people who are thinking along the same lines. But we encounter people who have sympathy for what we are doing and for our arguments. The people we've met so far are all embedded in the business world, so that really dictates their perspective. Obviously we need to try to meet the political people; but that will happen sooner or later.

**MM:** In the past, you've described an international population whose personal lives are entirely subordinated to business demands, who travel hundreds of thousands of miles every year, who need not a home, but a home base—German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's "kinetic elite." Do you think that Dubai might contain the qualities for such temporal nesting?

**RK:** (laughs) For eight months of the year Dubai is incredibly nice, in terms of climate, and for four months of the year it's incredibly harsh, like fifty degrees Celsius, which I like. It's not a problem for me, but other people experience it as a serious obstacle. I am not sure yet whether it is Dubai or other entities in the Middle East that have some of the same qualities, maybe slightly more history and slightly more depth. For instance, what we have discovered is that in the early 1970s, each of these cities experienced outbursts of modernity, connected to the first moments when they found oil. As a result of that, there have also been sudden occurrences of interesting architecture, very smart architecture, also smart in terms of the climate. In Kuwait we met a gallerist in her eighties who was Andy Warhol's gallerist—Andy Warhol was in Kuwait thirteen times during that time and had an Arab boyfriend.

**MM:** If the city is only a base for nesting, how important is program and content?

**RK:** At one point I presented a more rhetorical take on the situation. It was important to me to introduce a different position vis-à-vis the importance of centers, cities, and architectural excellence. But now it's twelve years later, and I have to

say that in practice I have become rather stable. For instance, I live in Holland for three weeks and then travel for one and a half weeks. So the kinetic elite has changed into some kind of kinetic acceleration once a month.

**MM:** Looking at Dubai's urban growth, it seems clear that the construction industry has left architects on the sidelines. Within the realities of the recent hyperdevelopment, accepted architectural values have become meaningless. Is this the end of architecture as we know it?

**RK:** It very well could be, but there is always a way of articulating a particular position. I think Dubai is definitely a battlefield where this question will be determined, and of course we are trying to deploy a number of strategies in that context. One of them is to launch a department of the office called Generics, on the one hand characterized by a refusal of obligatory extravagance, but on the other hand also a serious effort to see whether we could align ourselves with the building industry. And that is actually also part of the critical notion of the Renaissance: a building that is generated out of an elevator shaft. So, yes, on a very workmanlike level, but also on a sublime one, I think that you could devise strategies to regain initiative. And also, they are definitely not the recognized ends of architecture. They think it's some kind of apotheosis of architecture. I don't think that we should define our terms so negatively that you collaborate with contempt or with a kind of Mike Davis effect.

**MM:** So, optimistically speaking, it's an opportunity.

**RK:** Yes, it's an opportunity and an obligation to be really intelligent and really fast, but also very experimental. That is one thing that it offers without any doubt: an incredible field for experimentation.

**MM:** Planners in Dubai and China outbuild their American counterparts by 4,000 percent each year. Is there still space for uncertainty?

**RK:** (laughs) You mean for doubt? Do you imply that the situation in Dubai, for example, suggests some kind of certainty? Because in my experience it's actually the reverse; you are building so much, one is building so much, a country is building so much, that perfection is receding, and there is a sense that you can make mistakes. Out of every eight projects, maybe



one or two are okay, and the rest are somehow a mistake.

**MM:** *What about the effects of such growth? If one constantly churns out new buildings, don't they, at some point, grow to an overwhelming physical mass and leave little space for micropolitical urban space in the sense of space for conflict, space where social contracts still need to be negotiated?*

**RK:** I think that the urban effect is really interesting—the language, the rhetoric, the aesthetic, the practice. That is a very important shift. Today we're not building cities, we are building resorts. The resort has become the dominant DNA, in a certain way. That is also why there is this incredible quantity of Anglo-Saxon architects with a fundamental hostility to Dubai. It's more an anti-city than a city, and that effect is already very noticeable.

**MM:** *I have never been to Dubai. I've been to China a couple of times, and it seems possible to just about grasp the complexity of its urbanism, which, in many ways, is not too dissimilar to certain forms of Western urbanism. But then, if I think of Dubai, I only have this imagery of the towers and so on, and I never think of "city life," as it were. I suppose what I'm trying to get at, with these questions about uncertainty, is that, if there is urban culture, there is also necessarily space for processes that can't be planned.*

**RK:** There is an old part of the city; there are also nice parts of the city that are definitely urban. There is the boulevard with

the skyscrapers, and there are the resorts. We are now building some large complexes, and hopefully some of them in the end will turn out to produce urban space.

**MM:** *In terms of the kind of improvisational urbanism you encountered during your research project in Lagos, do you believe that Dubai is lacking what one might call an urban corruption, or deliberate zones of conflict?*

**RK:** There are definitely zones of conflict, and there is urban life, albeit of a fairly repressed nature. There is an enormous population of builders who live in camps, and you get a sense that inside these camps, life is far from pleasant. There are all kinds of uprisings. There are conflicts between different nationalities. But I think the totally unique thing about Dubai is that currently out of a population of 1.6 million, only 200,000 are said to be people from Dubai. So the expat is the main inhabitant. It's in that sense utterly fabricated by a huge sum of people who have a limited commitment to the city but who all bring their own tastes and cultures. It's the most incredible amalgamation; even in Kuwait it's fifty-fifty. It's really drastic how the expat is the founder of activity. What about Lagos?

**MM:** *I think that the juxtaposition of the two could be interesting.*

**RK:** I'm finishing Lagos right now. It took a long time before I knew how to do it. It's only recently that I understood what I have

to do. A very important part of the book (the forthcoming publication on the Lagos project) is about Lagos when it was new: Lagos in the 70s. When American, Japanese, Yugoslav, Chinese, Italian, and other architects really built all the apparatus of a modern society. In a way, there are some ironic similarities between Dubai and Lagos. The early descriptions of Lagos as a city-port being clogged by tankers full of cement is sounding totally like the Chinese condition, for example how Beijing is being prepared for a new future right now. So it's a blueprint you still recognize. That has now become the key of the book, and so the book will be written as modernity going in reverse.

**MM:** *Do you think that the recent events in Israel and Lebanon will have an effect on the nature of your projects in the region?*

**RK:** It's too early to tell. But I would like to reverse it and say that one of the reasons to take the region seriously is to try to work on that whole issue and to find confidence in the Arab world to address it.

**MM:** *You have said that the market economy has corrupted our political consciousness; in regards to such consciousness, how do you personally deal with a project in a place like Dubai, where literally everything is available to those with money, while migrant construction workers are living in shielded-off ghettos, held hostage out of sight from tourists?*

**RK:** Partly because it's in the Middle East, it's very politically inspiring and educational to be there. It feels very political being there, operating on a day-to-day basis, meeting people, and so forth. It is, of course, an extreme version of the market economy. Being deeply engaged in the political future of the entire area makes our involvement politically intense. I don't know whether you have seen it, but at some point we claimed that it's actually great that America has its own preoccupations because it introduces a new phase in globalization, which enables all the other parties to be much more themselves and to find their own, relative independence.

For the next twenty years, the issue will really be about how we approach Russia, China, India, and the Middle East. We have to find new ways of communicating, and that means inevitably that we have to renegotiate what "human rights" means, what copyright means, and what demo-

cracy means. There is a whole series of issues; at this point, neither side is in possession of definitive models or keys, so that's a very interesting part. We are trying to address some of those issues.

**MM:** *How does building in autocratic states differ from working in democratic regimes?*

**RK:** You would expect a fairly easy answer, but I really don't have an easy answer, because in all conditions it is about communication, conviction, negotiation, and compromise. Perhaps the greatest difference is that—theoretically—in dictatorial states, you could get away with projects of a much more radical emptiness or lifelessness, let's say. But that has never been a temptation. In China, for example, there is absolutely no ability or ambition of the state to ram something down people's throats; the friction or resistance with the city and the population has been stronger than anywhere else. In a way, this is not what you expect, and it totally reverses your thinking. That's why, right now, it is very hard to generalize about these kinds of questions.

**MM:** *In 1974, you wrote a script with Rene Daalder, the story of a group of wealthy Arabs buying up the Hollywood film archive to build a computer through which any celebrity could be reinvented on screen. How about your reinvention of the Arab World?*

**RK:** I think the word reinvention is the key word of today. I think also this is what we were trying to do with the twenty-four-hour interview marathons at the Serpentine Gallery in London. It's a word that I have always cherished, more than invention. I don't know why—out of a profound sense of history, I guess. One is always part of a chain.

**MM:** *Sometimes not building is the right answer. Could today's architect be portrayed as an inquirer into hidden relationships, a space invader who ventures into territories that lie beyond conventional delineations of knowledge?*

**RK:** I think it's important to comment on the role of the architect, because ten or maybe twenty years ago, I was really skeptical about it. It seemed crazy to address contemporary issues with knowledge that, in many cases, was more than 3,000 years old. But I think with a kind of subsequent flattening of almost every discipline, the architectural education is one of the surviving dinosaurs that accumulates many different kinds of knowledge in the same pro-



cession. By default, we have the benefit of an awkward combination that gives us the strength and the confidence to invade territories of knowledge that we are not familiar with. Right now, few professions have that. It's a fluke, but it's very beneficial.

**MM:** *Architects are always too late when it comes to responding to a given condition. There seems to be an immense discrepancy between the acceleration of culture and the continuing slowness of architecture. How do you feel about patience in architecture?*

**RK:** One cannot rate it highly enough. It is, for architects, an absolutely crucial aspect of the work, not only in terms of the scale and the duration of a particular building, but also in terms of how long it might take, through a never-ending series of aborted efforts, in order to achieve something. It's a crucial part of architecture and, like the kinetic elite, was a rhetorical ploy at a certain moment. I think that the whole notion of acceleration is actually much less dramatic because you can read everything as transforming continuously and recognizably, but you can also see repetitions and almost stagnation. The discovery of Lagos's condition in the 70s and Beijing's condition today is a good example of that.

**MM:** *You have argued that, in order to participate intelligently in development, one needs to abandon traditional architectural values. Attempting to create an alter-*

*native program often takes rhetoric that reveals the contradictions contained in existing spatial organizations. Do you think that reprogramming—like you did with the Serpentine Gallery in London this summer—can be applied to larger, urban scales?*

**RK:** What do you think?

**MM:** *I think it can.*

**RK:** I think so, too. And what is interesting is that by simply doing master-planning, it was also a way to reconnect with one significant part of our own past. It seemed that the ability of the unbuilt to structure conditions might be superior to the ability of the built. I think it's not exactly that, but the reprogramming of public space, for instance, is a vast enterprise right now. And it is an enterprise that we are also working on in Dubai. I gave a lecture in Holland recently where I didn't start with Dubai or with China, but I started with America and Europe, basically showing how incredibly distorted our public realms have become. In that context, Dubai doesn't look like an acceleration, but simply like a version of the same aberration. I think it will be highly interesting to look at the urban domain as a reprogramming effort. ■

Previous page: Visit to Dubai, existing site September 2005 with collage of Dubai Slab. Copyright Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Top: Dubai Slab, Dubai Renaissance. It proposes a single monolithic volume constructed like an elevator core, in one continuous operation—200 meters wide and 300 meters tall. Copyright Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Left: Kuwait City Masterplan, Rendering, 2006, copyright Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

