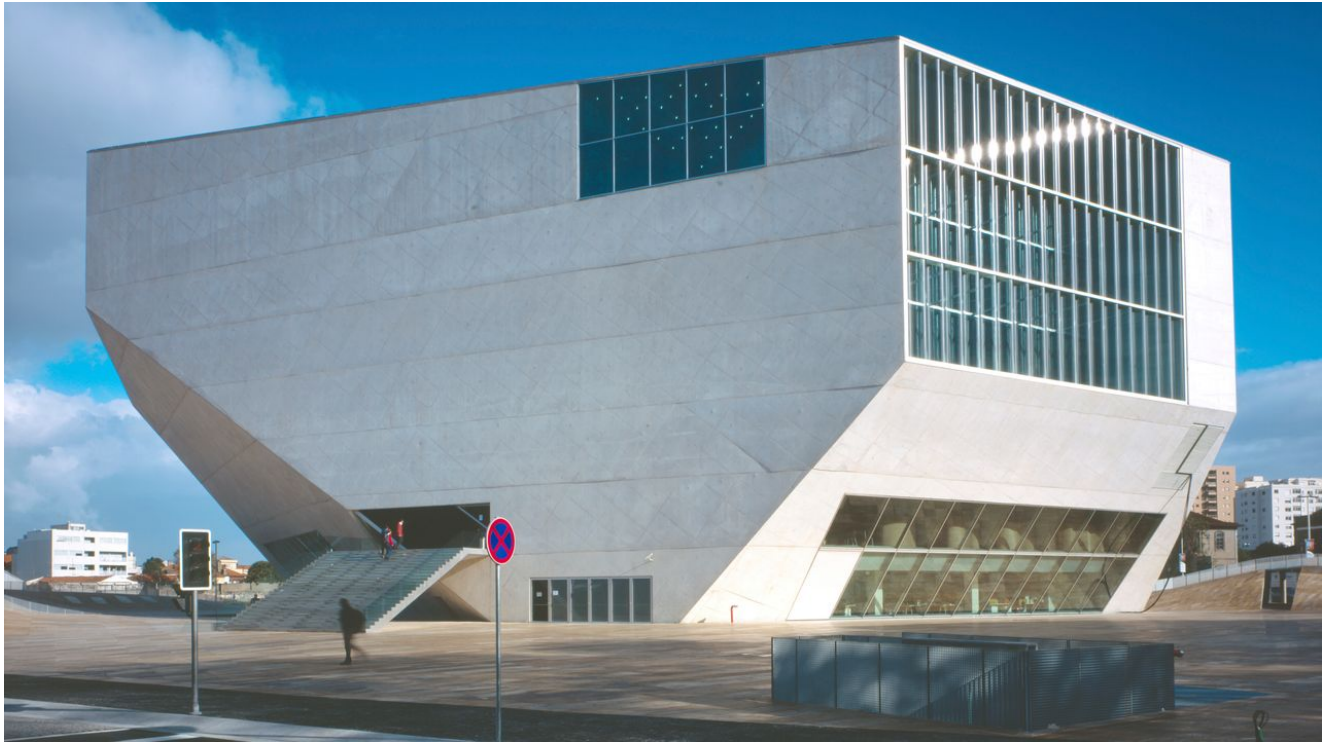


Rem Koolhaas Takes Silicon Valley

OZY ozy.com/news-and-politics/rem-koolhaas-takes-silicon-valley/36643

December 28, 2014



*Source*Getty

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

For all the convenience and ease technology offers, it might strip away our freedom without our even knowing about it.

It is warm, but Rem Koolhaas wants to sit in the sun, so we walk past the palm tree shadows and into Stanford's quad. The architect is as tall and slim as a palm-tree trunk, almost too slender; his shoulder blades press sharp against a navy-blue sweater.

"So, what are *you* disrupting?" Koolhaas asks me. He is 70, with a reputation for brusqueness, but when he smiles, he looks like a child. He's just returned from a meeting with a tech mega firm, another stop on his Silicon Valley tour. Eventually, the moguls may know him. For now, I'd hazard that few do. Silicon Valley is not known for its architecture or architecture lovers.

Elsewhere, of course, Koolhaas is known. He may be the most important architect of his generation — the Pritzker Prize is the least of it — and a prominent urban theorist, too. Much of what he builds looks improbable. The China Central Television building, which

opened in 2012 in Beijing, looks like a steel-and-glass Möbius strip. Renderings for the Taipei Performing Arts Center show a giant metal sphere growing out of a boxy building, a suspended sculpture to sit in. Under his direction, New York's Prada store became an auditorium, too, a place to play and display.

Koolhaas would rather acknowledge commerce and the productization of everything than pretend to some impossible purity. This can make clients uncomfortable. For instance, Koolhaas was a shoo-in to design an expansion of the Museum of Modern Art, until he showed renderings of a giant tower called MoMA Inc. "A first-rate provocateur who, even in our conservative times, just can't seem to behave," wrote architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff — yes, but mostly Koolhaas provokes delight, wonder, happiness that such buildings can exist.





Architect Rem Koolhaas.

Koolhaas says he came to the Valley to try to understand the digital revolution and the Internet of Things, which “will transform our relationship to cars, buildings, cities.” The Harvard professor says he wants to understand whether the changes to come — smarter cities, intelligent refrigerators, driverless cars — are “desirable or scary.” What does his intuition tell him? “I don’t know,” Koolhaas says. He is being diplomatic, I suspect.

What’s lost in the Internet of Things, according to Koolhaas? *“Adventure. Risk. Transgression.”*

One of the few tech gurus who engages with Koolhaas, at least now, is Tony Fadell, the CEO and founder of Nest Labs. It started with intelligent thermostats but aims toward something Fadell calls the conscious home. (Yes, it’s the company Google bought for upward of \$3 billion.) “We had a nice polemic this morning,” Koolhaas says, his bright blue eyes dancing. When the two men meet, they spar, as they did at the Venice Biennale for Architecture this summer. Fadell extols the thermostat’s intelligence — it makes life more efficient and comfortable — while Koolhaas worries about it. Not only for the privacy reasons, which Fadell insists are moot, but also because of what’s lost in the quest for improvement.

“Adventure. Risk. Transgression,” Koolhaas tells me. Technology’s promise to make life easier and more secure comes at the price of our freedom, he says. When a thermostat tells us we’re using more energy than our neighbors, or a car tells us we’re going too fast, we

tend to comply. And Koolhaas worries that such directives are essentially authorless. No one will claim responsibility for them.

Koolhaas came of age in a different world, one that was not quite so intent on eliminating risk. He was born in Rotterdam, his father a leftist journalist; the family decamped to Indonesia, then a Dutch colony, in 1952. From age 21 to 25, Koolhaas was a journalist — “I got to waste time,” he says, which young people don’t do as much anymore. There was a segue into screenwriting. But he began to see how buildings were like articles and scripts, how the transition from episode to episode is like that from a façade to a foyer to a staircase.

I’ve seen enough imperfection that perfection doesn’t offend me.

— Rem Koolhaas

At 34, he published *Delirious New York*, which came in the late 1970s — the city’s nadir, by conventional wisdom. No, Koolhaas said. He celebrated the mess, the chance encounters, the energy. “Manhattan has generated a shameless architecture that has been loved in direct proportion to its defiant lack of self-hatred, respected exactly to the degree it went too far,” he wrote. Shamelessness, going too far: That was Koolhaas’ city of delirium, and he’d be the first to acknowledge it no longer exists, if only the sentiment weren’t clichéd.

“But isn’t Stanford too perfect, everyone too healthy?” I goad. I tell him a friend feels the need to light a cigarette every time he steps onto the campus.

Koolhaas laughs. “I’ve seen enough imperfection that perfection doesn’t offend me.”



The Seattle Public Library's Central Library, designed by Rem Koolhaas.

Source Splash News/Corbis

With that we rise from the bench to start a tour, first of Stanford's d.school — an area design hub — and then onto its architecture department, which seems in comparison an afterthought or worse. With us are Koolhaas' assistants from his Office of Metropolitan Architecture, based in Rotterdam, as well as a lecturer and a student in the university's architecture department. We all stand a bit awkwardly around a table that dominates a large room. There are sketches on the wall.

Before the presentation starts, the student, a gangly third-year with big eyes and pimples on his face, buttonholes Koolhaas. He has just read *Delirious New York*, he says, and he can't get it out of his head. "Are you working on a sort of corollary?" the student asks. "No," Koolhaas says, a bit sharply. Then, more gently, "But I am working on a book about the countryside."

Koolhaas has a question for the lecturer. "We architects are hopelessly stuck in developing prototypes that will never be produced. Is there some way here that students can commercialize their work?"

The lecturer says something about how Stanford encourages students, no matter their discipline, to think critically and tries to provide them a way to think about the world. The architecture program is intensely collaborative, says the lecturer. “I’ve designed a building on my own exactly never,” he says. “We don’t believe in the solitary genius, the *éminence grise*.”

Koolhaas’ answer comes a beat later, deadpan: “I have to leave.”

This OZY encore was originally published Oct. 21, 2014.

Pooja Bhatia
