

# Koolhaas Views The Creation Of Difference As An Unavoidable Component Of Architecture

Whether writing about the mechanical cows at Coney Island or designing the seemingly impossible cantilever of OMA's CCTV building, Rem Koolhaas consistently wrestles with themes of the absurd and the unexpected. This thematic wrestling match stems from an understanding he developed early in his career, while studying the Berlin Wall at the Architectural Association, of how difference operates in architecture. In *S,M,L,XL*, he recalled this research, ultimately wondering, "Were not division, enclosure (i.e., imprisonment), and exclusion—which define the wall's performance and explain its efficiency—the essential stratagems of any architecture?"

Note two things from this quote. First, Koolhaas aligns the architectural and social connotations of "division, enclosure, and exclusion"—all bywords for difference—illustrating the wall's dual identity as both an architectonic and a social element. Second, he asserts that the Berlin Wall exemplifies the normative condition of the built environment. Additionally, he argues that the "psychological and symbolic effects [of the wall] were infinitely more powerful than its physical appearance." Taken together, this could be understood as the genesis of Koolhaas's interest in program, arising from the implication that the socially performative aspect of the wall (or of any architecture) is to create difference.

In Koolhaas's writings, two recurrent outside influences relate to his insistence that the creation of difference constitutes the essential quality of architecture. The first is the paranoiac-critical method employed by Surrealists. This technique entails actively seeking out relationships between things

that are not typically on the same side of a divide. The second is the appropriated Constructivist notion of the social condenser, which Koolhaas defines in *Content* as "programmatic layering upon vacant terrain to encourage dynamic coexistence of activities and to generate through their interference, unprecedented events."

These ideas lay the groundwork for *Delirious New York*. Koolhaas finds Manhattan as the urban manifestation of the multiplicity of absurd possibilities generated by marrying the paranoiac-critical method and the social condenser. That a person in New York's Downtown Athletic Club could be "eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked, on the 9th floor" ends up being a platonic ideal for OMA's practice.

Koolhaas's fondness for the absurd and his insistence on allowing programs and architectonic elements to collide become a method for subverting the quality of difference present in all architecture. In other words, because Koolhaas views the creation of difference as an unavoidable component of architecture, he is not interested in undermining differences, but rather in layering them, using the techniques of the paranoiac critical method and social condenser, to produce unexpected events that draw our attention to this essential quality of architecture and to generate new possibilities through chance encounters of programs, activities, and people. It is difficult to discern the intent of Rem's subversive proclivities, but his consistent mining of difference to produce the unexpected and absurd belies his desire for people to reexamine their world, and that is a radical proposition.