

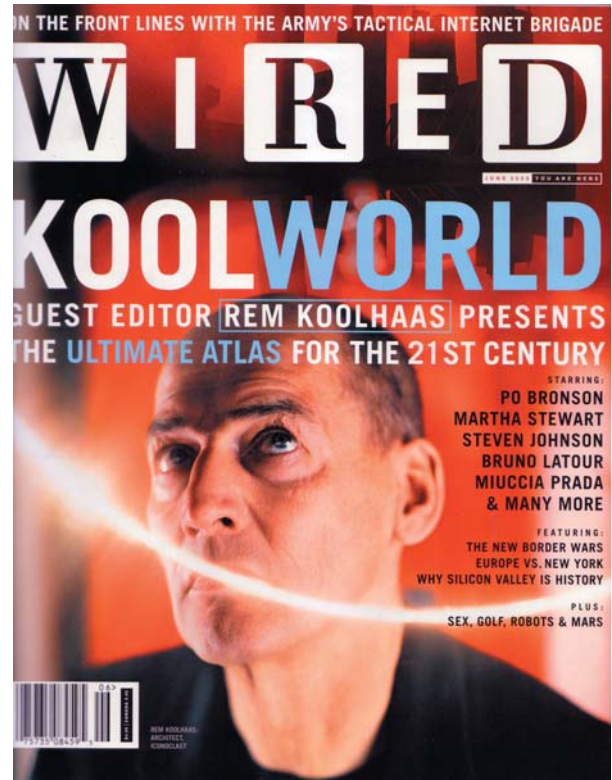
# The game of Architecture...

by Dominic Leong, 2006

*Don't hate the player, hate the game,  
Niggas, sharpen your aim,  
Every baller on the streets is searchin' fortune and  
fame,  
Some come up, some get done up, except the twist,  
If you out for mega cheddar, you got to go high risk,*

*It's a level playin' field, my games ' against yours,  
hustlin' wars,  
Roll the dice, risk your motherfuckin' life,  
Bank rolls and low hoes, anything goes...*

Ice-T



Rem Koolhaas, Guest editor of *Wired*

*...Specialization is in fact only a fancy form of slavery wherein the "expert" is fooled into accepting his slavery by making him feel that in return he is in a socially and culturally preferred, ergo, highly secure, lifelong position...*

Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manuel for Space Ship Earth*

After Modernism, Architecture, has had no dominant ideology guiding its development or legitimizing the perceived value of the profession. If, as Rem Koolhaas has stated, the market has supplanted ideology, where does architecture look for legitimation?<sup>1</sup> No longer able to justify itself according to lofty humanist ideals and totalizing schemas, Architecture must turn elsewhere for affirmation--to the marketability of its knowledge.

If one is to take Francois Lyotard's report on postmodernity seriously, the value of knowledge in today's advanced societies is not evaluated on the basis of ideological criteria but on criteria of "performativity," or how useful it is.<sup>2</sup> In fact, certain architecture circles have literally adopted the term "performance" as part of a rationalizing rhetoric that can easily translate design proposals into quantifiable effects that optimize the input/output ratios of business minded clients with tight budgets. Or, the rhetoric of "performance" is used as means to disarm the aesthetic shock caused by the formal gymnastics of digitally generated geometries. In other words, a way to make strange and unfamiliar shapes explainable in concrete and quantifiable terms. Arguments for new forms can then be leveraged on the terms of production costs and 'bottom lines' rather than matters of taste or the transcendent genius of an artistic vision. In this regard, "performance" is merely a resurrection of modernist functionalism re-qualified according to the logic of late-capitalism.

Architecture, however, would be better served with a more robust understanding of "performativity" applied to the entirety of architecture's body of knowledge. The porous boundaries of this knowledge extend beyond the expertise devoted to the design and construction of buildings. Without undermining the necessary combination of technical and design skills required to accomplish such complex feats as building a skyscraper, the conventional expertise of architects would best be exploited as a means for engaging more diverse contexts not limited to the built environment.

*"Architecture is a fuzzy amalgamation of ancient knowledge and contemporary practice, an awkward way to look at the world and an inadequate medium to operate on it. Any architectural project takes five years; no single enterprise – ambition, intention, need – remains unchanged in the contemporary maelstrom. Architecture is too slow. Yet the word 'architecture' is still pronounced with a certain reverence (outside the profession). It embodies the lingering hope – or the vague memory of a hope – that shape, form, coherence could be imposed on the violent surf of information that washes over us daily. Maybe architecture doesn't have to be stupid after all. Liberated from the obligation to construct, it can become a way of thinking about anything – a discipline that represents relationships, proportions, connections, effects, the diagram of everything."*

Rem Koolhaas, Content 2004

As the guiding experts in everything pertaining to the built environment, architects by necessity acquire a unique type of awareness that is formed by the convergence of disparate strings of information during the process of making architecture. In other words, without the focused set of skills (technical,

## The old game of Architecture.



SOM design for the “Freedom Tower”

## The new game of Architecture...



Rem Koolhaas, AMO design for the new EU flag.

organizational, collaborative, negotiating, etc.) that are needed to accomplish architecture, the discipline would lack any initial means of engagement. Architects have always built and will always build. But the survival of the discipline depends on whether the awareness or the “invisible” knowledge is brought forward to bare the responsibility of being publicly intellectual and therefore redefining what others expect from the profession. Architecture has reached its endgame. What is desperately needed is the invention of new rules in order to play a new game.<sup>3</sup>

But what would architects be without buildings? Paradoxically, without credit to architects (except maybe Daniel Libeskind), buildings are still a symbol for the vestiges of what could be considered post-modernity’s own grand narratives. Projects like the Bilbao Guggenheim (symbol of the merging of Culture and Capitalism), or the new Freedom Tower (symbol of the endurance of Freedom and Democracy) have elevated the emblematic status of architecture to that of the corporate logo. As a result, the “invisible knowledge” of architecture is expanding exponentially in order to accommodate the complexities of building in the global context. The difficult question for architecture is whether its identity as a discipline can be engendered in its instable and constantly mutating body of knowledge rather than the built products that architects place before the public’s gaze?<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A current discussion in architecture, appearing in many journals, is the issue of “post-criticality” or “post-theory.” Although it is arguable that a clear definition of “criticality” has been established, the main thrust of the post-critical debate surrounds the “usefulness” of architectural theory.

<sup>2</sup> ...[I]n games of perfect information, the best performativity...comes from arranging the data in a new way, which is what constitutes a “move” properly speaking. This new arrangement is usually achieved by connecting together series of data that were previously held to be independent. This capacity to articulate what used to be separate can be called “imagination.” Speed is one of its properties...Given equal competence (no longer in the acquisition knowledge, but in its production), what extra performativity depends on in the final analysis is “imagination,” which allows one either to make a new “move” or change the rules of the game. Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* p. 52, 1979

<sup>3</sup> “...[T]here are two different kinds of “progress” in knowledge: one corresponds to a new move (a new argument) within the established rules; the other, to the invention of new rules, in other words, a change to a new game.” Ibid. p. 43

<sup>4</sup> If this is a question of “proof”, unlike science, which can rely on empirical proof to demonstrate validity, architecture’s “invisible” body of knowledge, although extracted from “reality,” is largely speculative and therefore outside the realm of strict empiricism.