

A files

Afiles

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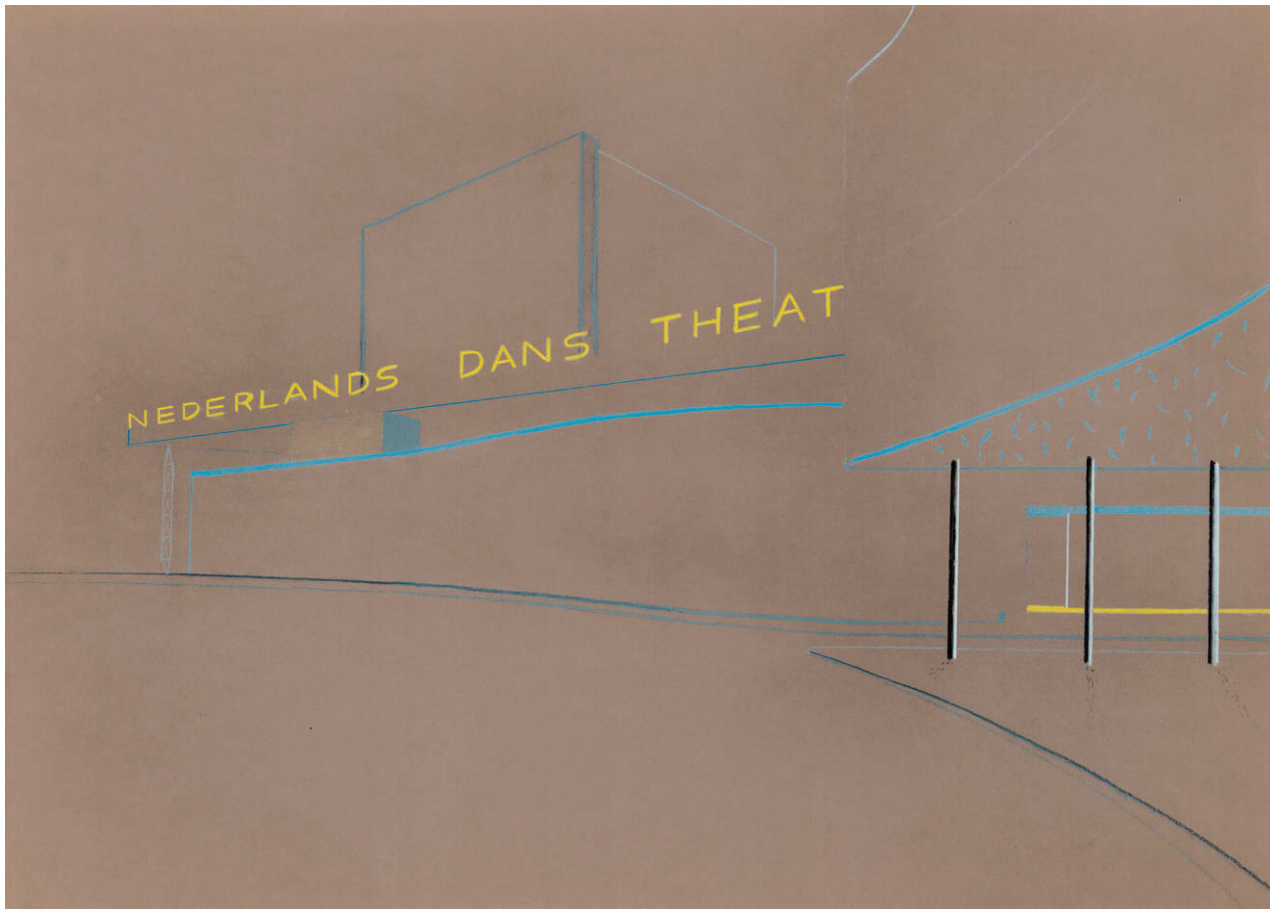
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A Note on the Display Initials

The single display initial in this issue derives from a logo that Joseph Rykwert produced as part of his commission to design the Wips nightclub in Leicester Square (see pages 17–20), and whose typography shares certain similarities with the typefaces then being developed by the artist and typographer Edward Wright, a close friend of Rykwert's (several of his paintings adorn the walls of the historian's home in Belsize Park). At Wips, Rykwert etched this logo into an entrance sign and the club's glass ashtrays. We have introduced the display into the essay by Rykwert himself – a grafting complicated by the fact that a full alphabet was never produced, only W, I, P and S, which meant a certain amount of editing was required to create an opening using one of only four letters. Rykwert's archive contains drawings of this logo in both black and a combination green/blue. Our own chromatic pairing in this issue uses similar cover and inside-cover colours, but these derive more from the signature turquoise and swimming-pool aquamarines of David Hockney, whose work has just enjoyed a retrospective at Tate Britain.

Goodbye Paper

Christophe Van Gerrewey



OMA, Netherlands Dance Theatre,
Scheveningen, second version, 1982
© OMA / Rem Koolhaas

Between 1985 and 1989 the Netherlands Dance Theatre (NDT) in The Hague, designed by OMA, featured on the cover of a roll call of international magazines: *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, *Architecture Moniteur*, *Continuité*, *Techniques & Architecture*, *De Architect*, *Archis*, *Quaderns*, *Architectural Record*, *Bauwelt* and *A+U*. The reason for this attention was paradoxical: it was the debut of an architect who had become famous because of his struggle to build. *House & Garden's* architecture and lifestyle critic Charles Gandee described this development in breathless tones: 'Ten years ago Rem Koolhaas was regarded as one of the most brilliant stars on the architectural horizon. Time passes, but save for periodic reports of stalled commissions and ill-fated competitions, little was heard from him. OMA admirers began to wonder about the *wunderkind*. Happily, Koolhaas's low-profile years have finally drawn to a close, and the 43-year-old architect is back in the professional spotlight.' The title of Gandee's article says it all: 'Fancy Footwork: Dutch Architect Rem Koolhaas Makes a Stunning Debut with his Netherlands Dance Theatre'.¹

This was not entirely accurate. Far from being low-profile, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture had become well-known thanks to exhibitions, publications and competition entries. Just a year after its foundation in 1975 an entire issue of *Architectural Design* was devoted to the work of Koolhaas, Madelon Vriesendorp and Elia and Zoe Zenghelis – the foursome that made up OMA at the time, and co-authors of Koolhaas's 1972 AA graduation project, *Exodus*. 1978 saw the publication of *Delirious New York*, which was widely reviewed, and over the following years OMA organised exhibitions at the Guggenheim, Max Protetch Gallery and the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and, among other institutions, the AA. The office came second in two major international competitions, one for Parc de la Villette in Paris in 1982, won by Bernard Tschumi, and another in 1986 for The Hague City Hall, won by Richard Meier. Koolhaas *had* also built prior to the NDT – a police station in Almere, begun in 1982, was completed during the last six months of 1985, but OMA felt it wise – the statement is still present on the office's website – 'to keep the champagne bottles in reserve a little longer'. Despite its efficient but playful organisation – a series of rooms assembled behind a long blue wall, adorned with the neon letters POLITIE – its construction appears to have been difficult. More successful was the attempt to keep the project out of sight, although it was reviewed in *Forum*, home base of the Dutch structuralists: 'The location is abominable, the concept is dead, the joke does not work, and the building is only photogenic when photographed at cruising height. It is literally shaking: there are cracks in the wall. We have lost an illusion: Dutch architecture will not be saved by OMA either.'²

It is unlikely that saving the art of building in the Netherlands was ever OMA's objective, but it must have been clear to Koolhaas that the police station could not mark his official debut. Another building that failed to qualify was a cheerful and tropically tinged bus stop in front of Rotterdam Central Station, completed in the spring of 1987 (but demolished in 2004 to make way for a new station). And then there were OMA's contributions to architectural exhibitions – all of them too temporary to serve as a major first achievement – such as the textile and transparent non-facade tucked away at the end of the Strada Novissima in 1980, or the Casa Palestra in Milan in 1986, a pastiche of the Barcelona Pavilion, as an iron bar curved by a body builder.

The desire to build, together with the fear of being shelved as a paper architect, had been haunting Koolhaas since the beginning of the decade. In the introduction to an exhibition in Amsterdam in 1980 he wrote:

In the absence of specific commissions this work belongs to the recently invented category of 'paper architecture'. The effect of this status is ambiguous: the apparent advantage of a career as a paper architect is an accelerated development. More designs are made, so more problems are addressed and more themes are examined than in a conventional career. But the danger exists that drawing becomes a vicarious activity and the 'paper' reputation of its maker in the end stands in the way of realisation. His activity becomes a kind of fertiliser for 'real' architecture. The past four years (alarmed by the abundance of 'theoretical' projects – an almost overflowing reservoir of unproven claims and pretensions) OMA has taken to concrete projects in which previous assumptions can be tested. Goodbye paper!³

The experience of getting bored with his work, combined with the suspicion that everyone was imitating OMA, pushed Koolhaas away from the drawing board, the writing table and the classroom. Although he would later express wonder at the fidgety ambition of his former student – 'When I asked Koolhaas why we had to turn our backs so fast on what we had just done so well, his answer was that it was necessary to be ahead of being consumed'⁴ – Zenghelis seemed to agree, at least during the early years of OMA. 'The time for paper architecture is past', he declared to Deyan Sudjic in 1981. 'We decided that if people were going to take us seriously we would have to take the plunge, stop teaching and start building.'⁵

This explains why the 'three-dimensional' start of OMA was heavily anticipated and continuously deferred – sometimes of the architects' own volition, sometimes not. Even at the time, the NDT's debut seemed somewhat belated: Koolhaas's initial contact with its financial director Carel Birnie dates from early 1980. Birnie is the first defining client in OMA's pre-S,M,L,XL portfolio, followed by Jan Schaefer (Amsterdam's alderman for housing and instigator of the IJplein project), Dominique Boudet (client for the Villa dall'Ava) and Jean-Paul Baïetto (director-in-chief of Euralille). Koolhaas used his clients as intermediaries to inflate but also to negate his goals: Schaefer got a 1980s version of the Weissenhof-siedlung that prompted OMA to abandon, at the end of the decade, both the modernist canon and social housing; the masterful villa that Koolhaas built for Boudet elegantly mocked this cliché; and thanks to Baïetto, the predominantly economic ambitions of the European Union got turbo-charged in one small city in northern France. Birnie helped OMA to demonstrate that money is as indispensable for architecture as it is lacking, certainly in public projects. The tensions this provoked enabled Koolhaas to question the traditional values of architecture, hoping to resuscitate the discipline from within.

The idiosyncratic behaviour of Birnie may have been one of the reasons why it took so long to finish the NDT. A former medical student, amateur of opera and art, and a cultural entrepreneur and adventurer, Birnie bragged about his managerial skills, his independence from state support and his enormous courage. 'I take terribly big risks', he told a Dutch newspaper in 1987. 'Sometimes I take risks of a million, and nobody knows. I think it's foolish to keep on saying: the government, the government, the government. Always risks, always adventure, but in the end: it always comes together. That's what I find exciting.'⁶ The seven years that Birnie

and Koolhaas took to realise their project were undoubtedly exciting, and the relationship between client and architect was strained.

For the chapter on the NDT in *S,M,L,XL*, Koolhaas opted not for a precise presentation but an account of the building process and its unlikely accidents and disasters. When the building opened in 1987, the architect gave Birnie a silkscreen of an early drawing with the dedication: 'To Carel, for everything you made (im)possible'.⁷ Koolhaas spoke to a journalist about Birnie with a mixture of amusement and exasperation:

Carel had extremely tempting ideas at the time, about this incredibly Spartan simplicity he would pursue in the new theatre. He would even do without heating: if necessary, he would provide visitors with braziers in the winter to make sure they would be comfortable. As it turned out, he had somewhat peculiar ideas about what constitutes a brazier. He greatly exaggerated the simplicity of it all and subsequently proved incredibly ambitious. I quarrelled with Carel Birnie over just about everything. No hard feelings, though. Birnie isn't the easiest of men, he is Shakespearian, a mixture of Shylock, Prospero and King Lear.

Confronted with this characterisation Birnie replied: 'Such a remark says more about him than about me.'⁸

The NDT was co-founded by Birnie in 1959 as a splinter group of about 20 dancers distancing themselves from the conservative Dutch National Ballet, but also from the dominance of Amsterdam. During the 1960s and 1970s, the NDT moved between various locations in The Hague. At the beginning of 1980 Birnie invited three architects – Wim Quist, Carel Weeber and OMA/Rem Koolhaas – to make a proposal for a permanent base. He had converted the city to the cause, and also gave the impression that he had acquired sufficient funds. The NDT had been performing at the Circus Theatre in Scheveningen, a seaside resort of The Hague. Built in 1904, the theatre was 250m from the beach, with its monumental Kurhaus Hotel dating from 1885. Birnie's idea was to fill up the void area between the cupola of the theatre and an existing tramway with studios and offices. The first OMA proposal offered more: residual space between the existing theatre and new buildings could become a tent-covered auditorium. In what would become a constant balancing of supply and demand, Birnie raised his expectations: if an auditorium were possible, why not build one with red velvet chairs and a larger stage tower? Years later, when the project was finally under construction, the tables were turned: by that time OMA was constantly trying to raise the budget and the office archives hold numerous letters from Birnie threatening to end the collaboration: the expensive changes to the project needed to stop, and it would help if Koolhaas answered the phone for once.

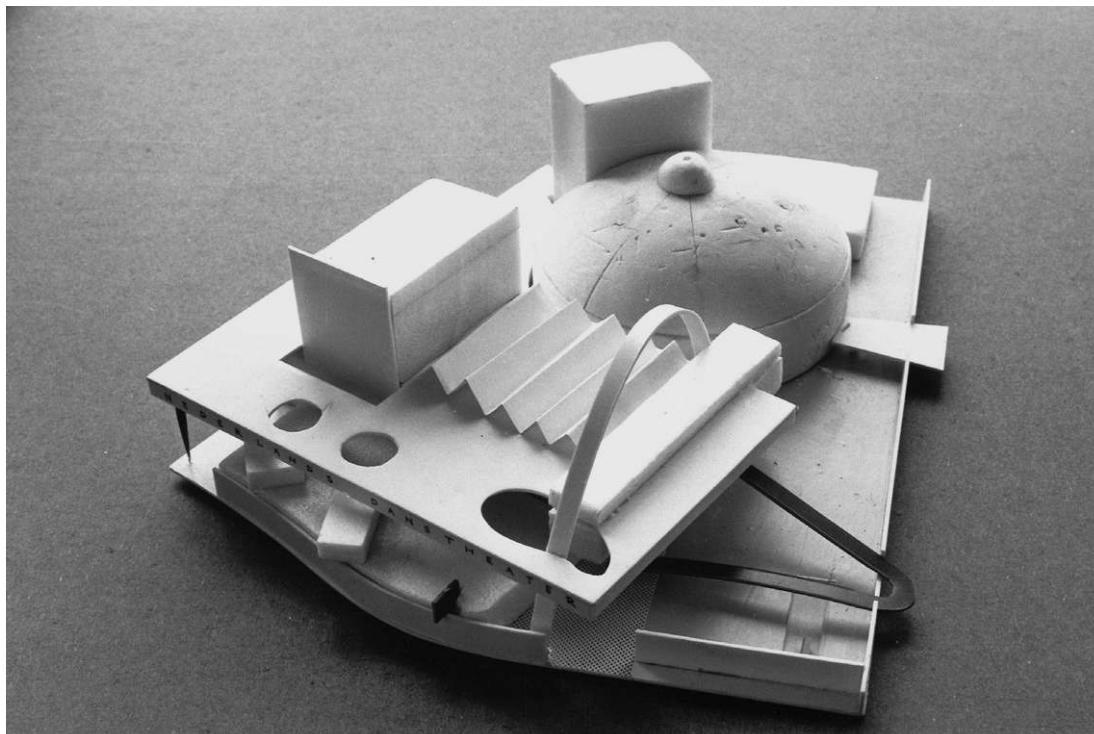
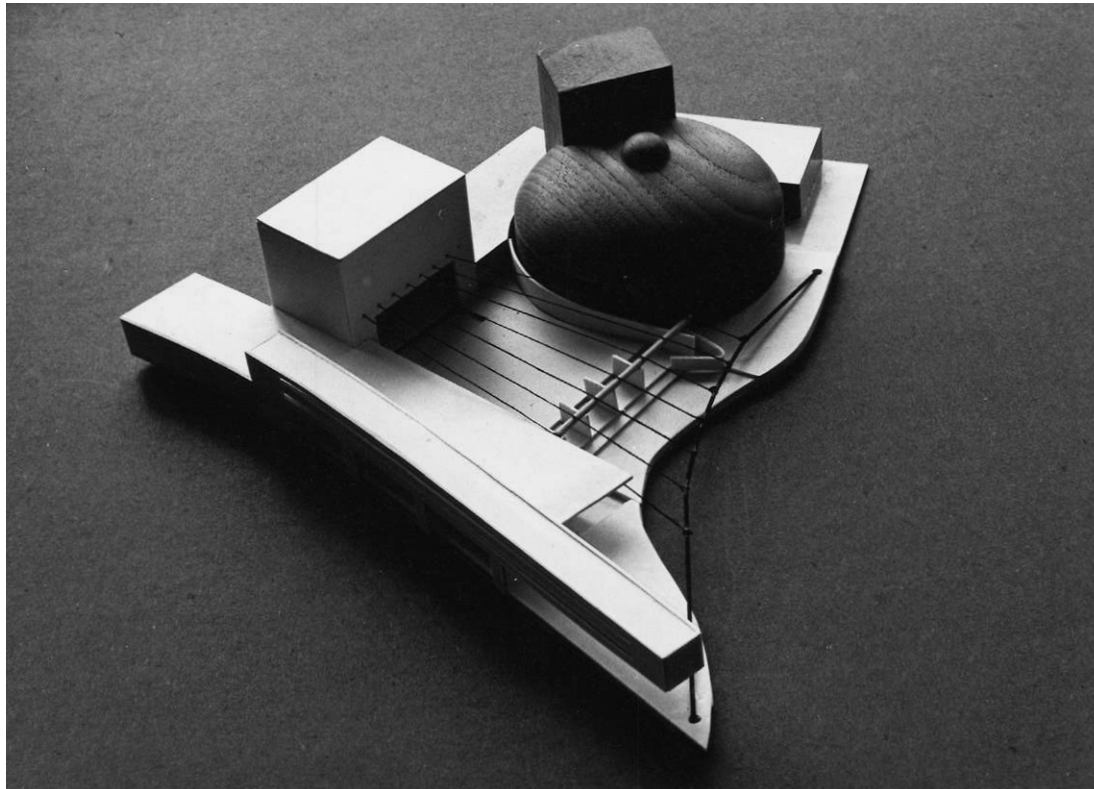
OMA's first design was simple, as an efficient red, black and white model shows. A threefold organisation divides the NDT into a curved beam with warm-up and dressing rooms on ground level, following the street; a straight beam with offices on top; and an auditorium with a proscenium and a theatre tower, next to the Circus Theatre. A foyer is generated as a triangular wedge – black in the model – between the functional zone and the theatre. This composition related both to the site and to the history of Dutch architecture and planning. In the 1960s the Circus Theatre was part of a plan for Scheveningen by Jaap Bakema, member of CIAM and Team X. Bakema designed a point grid of 60m² with towers to replace the existing fabric of cottages and hotels. The plan gave an even more dominant position to the Kurhaus hotel but decreased the size of the square in front of it in favour of apartment buildings.

Although Bakema's symmetrical plan remained largely unfinished, OMA decided to take up its challenge. An attempt was made at developing 'a chain of public events that would go from the theatres past some entertainment centres, past the hotel, and toward the pier, to articulate a sort of spectrum of attractions'.⁹ This proved unfeasible, but the first project did insert an informal diagonal route and a means of looking obliquely at the beach from the vantage point of the new building. Another reference was located in the other direction: a chapel, built in 1913 by Alexander Kropholler, a conservative Dutch architect who in the 1930s was a member of a fascist organisation. This controversial figure, author of an overview of twentieth-century architecture, was quoted in one of OMA's project files arguing that historical building could only profit from a variegated environment. Kropholler's church, with its slender brick tower flanked by nineteenth-century houses, is present in sections and facades, together with – on the other side – the atrocious apartment complex in front of the Kurhaus, built by a developer at the end of the 1970s in line with Bakema's plan.

NDT was typical of the contextualism of OMA's projects during the first half of the 1980s, evident also in projects like the Boompjes development plan for Rotterdam or the IJplein housing in Amsterdam. At the base of these proposals lay a stocktaking of information, and subsequently a narrative which reinforced the existing context and reclaimed architectonic, urban or cultural themes that up to then had been neglected or in danger of being lost, or had never even really existed, except as part of an individual or collective imagination. For OMA this was not only a means to anchor a building in a messy site, or to legitimise architecture in a sardonic way, making a show of explaining formal choices. As a method of developing a relationship with twentieth-century architecture it was also linked to Koolhaas's quest for self-renewal, and to his distancing from contemporary (or younger) architects. In this sense, the NDT enabled OMA to confront Dutch architecture (and the diametrically opposed generations of Kropholler and Bakema) and to develop a practice that neither wanted to erase projects or buildings, nor longed for a respectful or moderately contextual presence, but wished instead to exaggerate differences – to increase the tensions between contemporary, postwar and pre-war architecture to an almost ridiculous degree. 'Scheveningen is a reef', Koolhaas said, 'on which different architectonic and urban visions have run ashore'.¹⁰ At the time, the same could have been said of many urban or semi-urban contexts. Indeed, the strategy of OMA consisted of hunting down and exposing the wreckage of the twentieth century, and in showing 'what was no longer possible' – the true characteristic of *being modern*, as Roland Barthes wrote¹¹ – while triumphantly transcending these aporia.

This is also true for the second project, developed around the turn of 1982/83. After the municipality – hand in glove with a consortium of private investors – decided to re-route the tram line and to fix the borders of the adjoining parcels (earmarking them for a police station and an office building), the size of the lot was reduced and the allocation of cubic metres for culture curtailed to ensure a particular mix of housing, offices and parking. What happened next at OMA has been described by Zenghelis.

After the meeting in which they learned that half of the volume needed to be eliminated everyone in Rotterdam was ready to quit: they had been working on this project for more than a year! And then Rem proposed to circumscribe a large open space with a long wall, covered by an



OMA, Netherlands Dance Theatre,
Scheveningen, first and second version, 1981-82
© OMA / Rem Koolhaas



OMA, Netherlands Dance Theatre,
Scheveningen, second version, 1982
© Jan Voorberg Archive /
Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam



*immense flat roof. There was not much enthusiasm, but he nevertheless made a small model. When he showed it to me he still had his doubts, but because he had succeeded in liberating himself from all these obstacles I was convinced this was the best project ever made by OMA.*¹²

The trick was pure bluff: a space bordered exclusively by a wall or by a ceiling is not a space and does not account as cubic metres. As Koolhaas put it in *S,M,L,XL*: 'wall without roof or roof without wall = 0m³; therefore, architecture of walls and roofs'.¹³

The second project continued as a collection and collision of elements, with as much open-air circulation space as possible. Another result of the 'discovery' of an 'architecture of walls and roofs' was that the NDT no longer tried to 'pimp' Scheveningen, but turned away from its surroundings. The cantilevered office strip above the exercise spaces was bent back and reduced to a wall, circumscribing the building lot and creating a forecourt. The other defining element was a floating and flimsy rectangular roof hovering over almost the entire site, and punctured to let light through. The roof was constructed with one beam, supported by – among other things – a conical pilaster, steel cables and a strut. A parabolic arch was placed diagonally over the flat roof, leaping away from the dome, as an afterimage delineating its shape. The auditorium and the stage remained where they were, next to the Circus Theatre as cut-outs in the shelf above the site, but the hall was covered with a distorted corrugated roof inspired by the school Gaudí built next to the Sagrada Família.

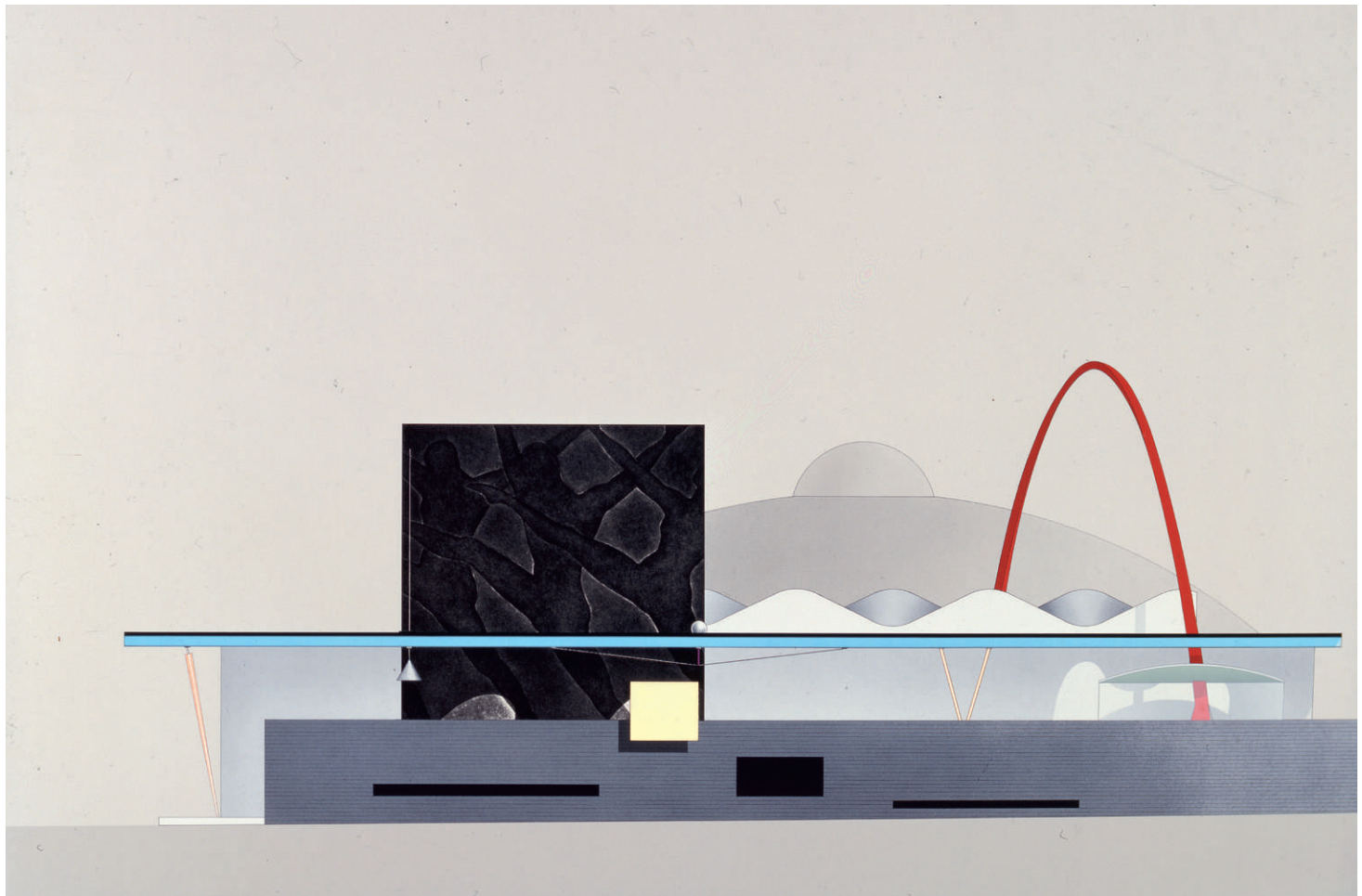
Essential for the development of both structures – the flat roof and the smaller wavy one – was the German-Hungarian Stefan Polónyi, recommended by O M Ungers when Koolhaas found no Dutch engineer adventurous enough for his liking. Looking back in 1993, Polónyi commented on the collaboration. It was important not only to create architecture with walls and roofs, but also to ensure that the roof was not recognisable as such – it needed to be a levitating object, not so much supported by a selection of elements as almost accidentally touched by them, while the elements themselves seemed liberated as individuals from the constructive function they could only fulfil collectively. 'Here on the left', Koolhaas encouraged Polónyi, 'let's attach a cone of solid steel underneath and, on the right, let's put a sphere of steel on top.'¹⁴

OMA wanted to avoid traditionally defined spaces at all costs. This second project for the NDT is in this sense a piece of architecture without architecture, in which the abstraction and reduction typical of the modernist canon is asserted, not only in terms of the elements used, but especially in the way the elements *meet* – or rather don't meet. This position was discussed when Koolhaas presented the brand new second project for the NDT in November 1982 at the University of Virginia – a presentation and ensuing discussion collected in *The Charlottesville Tapes*. 'We considered it a series of walls', Koolhaas concluded, to which Rob Krier – who together with his brother Leon in many ways represents the anti-Koolhaas, although opposites can attract – replied: 'This is exactly what I criticise in your designs. This is anti-space, not formulated space.' Koolhaas wittily dismissed the criticism: 'I have admitted in earlier conversations with you that I have a blind spot for space. That is a problem I am struggling with, but I think I have come a long way for somebody who is so handicapped.' Laughter erupted, but Krier's objection was justified: the second NDT project shows how OMA in the 1980s – and this would change in the 1990s – did not set out either to invent a new architecture or to reinstall a previous one.

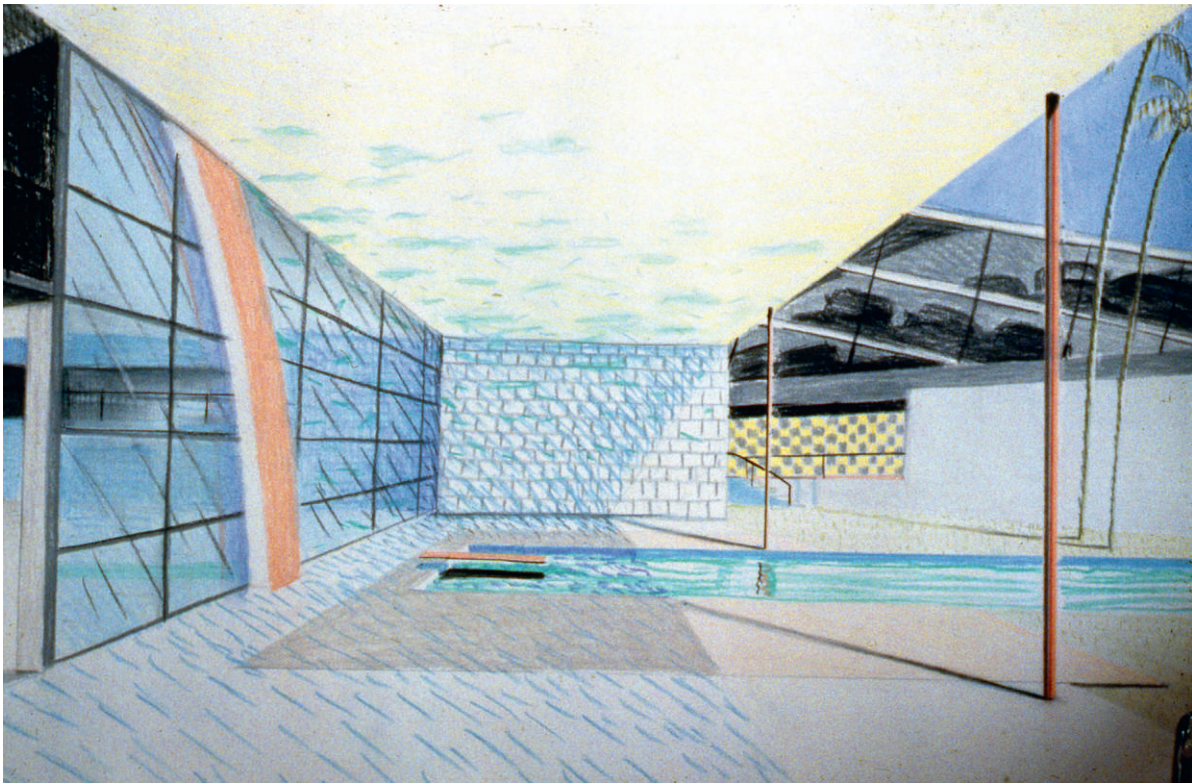
Instead, they approached the tools of modern architecture as a set of clichés that could be appropriated and given new life by incorporating them into unorthodox formulations and compositions.

Of decisive importance in this regard was the early OMA collaborator Jan Voorberg, a self-taught woodworker-architect who operated without any kind of technical diploma. In 1980, when the competition for the Parliament Extension in The Hague was still undecided, Voorberg, who lived only 200m away from the site, published a plea in favour of the design by Koolhaas, Zenghelis and Hadid.¹⁵ This action, though unsuccessful, not only contributed to OMA's notoriety, but also resulted in an invitation to work for Koolhaas (as project architect for the NDT and for the IJplein housing). Voorberg's appointment coincided with the setting up of the Rotterdam office. As numerous photographs in his archives show, he travelled around the world feeding his obsessional interest in twentieth-century architecture. It was Voorberg who compiled the database of urban projects that informed the IJplein housing, but his omnivorous attention was also directed towards vernacular architecture. One picture, taken during a trip to the US, shows a McDonald's restaurant with several parabolic arches like the one in the second design for the NDT – two arches as part of the front and back facade, but also a double arch in the isolated logo of the fast-food chain.

Voorberg made several models of the first and second designs for the NDT, and one of them is reminiscent of the photographs in *The Sausage Series* by Swiss artists Fischli & Weiss from 1979 – urban landscapes or situations made out of food, cardboard boxes or domestic residual materials. The model likewise demonstrates how no material is too banal or too boring to be excluded from the realms of art and architecture. The Circus Theatre accordingly becomes a sandwich, the stage tower is a piece of cake, the wall a thin slice of bread; the roof and the arch are coated with sugar sprinkles, while the (anticipated) police station and office building materialised in the form of a packet blancmange and some slices of dark ham. As with almost everything OMA did or produced, the model and the design were in no way unequivocal. Each seemingly programmatic or dogmatic intention could be countered by some nuance or objection, as the rest of *The Charlottesville Tapes* conversation about the second NDT project makes clear. Following Krier's remark on anti-space, Cesar Pelli accuses OMA's design of nostalgia because of 'the constant reference to Miami Beach, palm trees, McDonald's arches, kidney-shaped swimming pools'. Robert Stern agrees: Rem's 'nostalgia is supposed to be okay, but everyone else's isn't', while Rafael Moneo notices 'an attitude towards modern architecture as a kind of vernacular populism'.¹⁶ Both the populism and the nostalgia in the second NDT project are contradictory. OMA never wanted to appeal, in an anti-intellectualist fashion, to a larger or popular audience – for this, Koolhaas is not naive or idealist enough. The references, the materials, the 'anti-spaces' formed by loose walls and planes – everything is directed at the architectural community. Koolhaas, then, did not try to abandon the boudoir that Manfredo Tafuri famously promoted in 1974; rather, by importing elements and methods from the outside world he wanted to show his colleagues how they were unwittingly living and working inside it. The nostalgia was – as Stern indicated – never his own; what he wanted to do was reveal the nostalgia of the other architects, because everyone else was still making all too traditional architecture, no matter how postmodern, pop or eclectic they pretended to be.



OMA, Netherlands Dance Theatre,
Scheveningen, second version, 1982
© OMA / Rem Koolhaas



OMA, Netherlands Dance Theatre,
Scheveningen, second version, 1982
© OMA / Rem Koolhaas

Koolhaas experienced this at the reunion that would lead to *The Charlottesville Tapes*.

*What I find most nostalgic about this gathering is not its nostalgia for any particular style or any particular period, but nostalgia for an order, for a specific role for architecture, for the role of the architect as some kind of gentleman who appears and unfolds a drawing. I find that kind of nostalgia very unhealthy because it forces us to take part in these gloomy gatherings where nothing is right, everything is a mess, and we have to make beautifully noble statements. What I tried to do in [the second NDT project] is to show some of that.*¹⁷

The difficulties involved in the realisation of the NDT were likewise brought into play to criticise architecture as an institution, as a profession and as a supposedly collegiate activity – to show architects how they were dominated by processes that were not only beyond their control but simply beyond their reach. This is narrated in *S,M,L,XL*. On 23 September 1983, OMA's second design was accepted by the city council. To celebrate, Voorberg went on holiday to Brazil. On 11 October he was murdered during a visit to the Pedregulho housing complex in Rio de Janeiro, killed simply because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Later that week, The Hague decided to cancel OMA's project in Scheveningen and to relocate the NDT to the city centre. The building volume doubled but the budget remained the same. Faced with the 'sterility of the site', Koolhaas declared their initial response was to 'take the embryo of the Scheveningen project, nourished in a more promising womb, and implant it here. Such an operation would have saved both a great deal of time and a large part of the architects' fee.'¹⁸ This is the kind of trick, again challenging conceived notions of site-specificity and 'good practice', that OMA would repeat in a more radical form in 1999, when a house designed for the suburbs of Rotterdam was displaced and rescaled to become the Casa da Musica in Porto in 2005. But in the case of NDT the design underwent many changes from early 1984 on, in response to the site and to other buildings that were under construction at the same time.

Close to Central Station, the Spui neighbourhood was an impoverished area with a mix of workers' housing and small companies. After it was heavily bombed during the Second World War it was the subject of many abortive plans, often developer-led, such as Pier Luigi Nervi's 1962 proposal for an ensemble with hotels, shops, restaurants and a 140m office tower. In the late 1970s demolition was followed by redevelopment, beginning with the construction of two ministries and a large overpass. The area in front of the ministries was earmarked for a city hall with a public library and a concert hall and hotel, linked by a parking garage – a remnant of the Nervi-plan. A competition for the city hall was organised in 1986: the jury, chaired by Aldo van Eyck, selected OMA, but the municipality implemented the project by Richard Meier. In models for OMA's city hall, the NDT – under development – was always present, although the mutual influence was limited to the sunken plaza in the former that connected to the triangular open space in front of the latter. Losing the commission to Meier in 1987 was almost as dramatic as finishing second in another competition in 1988, when it was decided that the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam would be built, not by OMA, but by Jo Coenen – a loss that was partly responsible for a change in OMA's design for the Kunsthal on the opposite side of the Museumpark. Twice, in The Hague and in Rotterdam, OMA had had the opportunity to design two public buildings connected by a square and in both cases only one would be built.

Two other projects under development at the Spui were decisive for the NDT: a hotel, designed by Carel Weeber, and, above all, a concert hall for The Hague Philharmonic Orchestra (RO), designed by Dick van Mourik. The relocation to the Spui was partly for financial reasons, but it also had to do with the programme: the NDT was to be the world's first dance theatre. It is perhaps understandable that the municipality should have had its doubts about this first-of-a-kind achievement, even though the NDT already enjoyed a worldwide reputation – at the end of the 1980s there was talk of the American choreographer William Forsythe becoming artistic director, but he only wanted to come if Birnie was prepared to leave, which he wasn't.¹⁹ According to Koolhaas, OMA's second NDT project was cancelled at the end of 1983 after van Mourik's office helpfully suggested to the municipality that considerable savings could be made if the NDT were combined with the concert hall at the Spui. 'They posited', Koolhaas said, 'the ridiculous thesis that the entire complex could be built for 18 million guilders. So the fate of our design for Scheveningen was decided. It was a paragon of the typically collegiate behaviour that prevails in the Netherlands, and it prompted us to reduce to a minimum the collaboration with van Mourik.'²⁰

Nevertheless, a minimum of collaboration seemed expedient. Within an urban plan by Carel Weeber, and on top of the grid of the parking garage, van Mourik had been developing a concert hall. When the municipality was considering moving the NDT, one of the scenarios was to build a single stage, but with a different auditorium to the left and the right. Another possibility was a theatre hall overbuilt with a concert hall – an option that Koolhaas designated as 'the bull's model',²¹ because the RO seemed to mount the NDT. Out of aversion for these proposals, which would have cancelled out OMA's authorship, the office began making sketches emphasising cohabitation or neighbourliness. The NDT at the corner of an L-shape with the hotel positioned partly in front, creating a kind of alley – a shared rectangular foyer between the two halls would be designed by OMA, the entrance hall in front was part of the design by van Mourik. 'We had to resign ourselves', Koolhaas said, 'to the fact that we couldn't exercise any influence on their project. So we decided to react to the things they proposed. That would turn out to be the only form of collaboration. We acted as if their building was already there. The two buildings give a kind of depth to each other. Although I have to say that they never reacted to our design.'²²

OMA's project became – to use terms proposed by the office – one half of a Siamese twin, or a *cadavre exquis*, the surrealist technique for the collective assembly of words or images. The functional elements of the second project – stage, auditorium, backstage, dressing and rehearsal rooms, swimming pool, offices, storage and restaurant – were compressed into three strips 'inside a rectangular plan, as in the layout of a newspaper page',²³ to quote Roberto Gargiani. In extending this metaphor, the offices could be seen to form the masthead, closest to the square (and the hotel); warm-up rooms made up the headline, while the auditorium with the stage was the leading article. Connecting the three parts as a column on the left was the foyer. This rational order, however, only appeared in the plan. One compositional strategy of OMA – eminently present in the design for La Villette or the 1989 Paris World Expo – was the distorted and animated grid, a mechanism found throughout *Delirious New York*. In Scheveningen, this grid was suggested by the plan of Bakema; in the razed and undetermined environment of the Spui OMA decided to create, within the container of the building, both

the grid and its distortion – both the order and the moments in which it is suspensefully threatened.

In contrast to the Scheveningen design, the exterior of the final project was quite simple, and all the energy (as well as the majority of the budget) was invested in the interior. In Koolhaas's phrasing: 'Consider this building as a neutral grid, with now and then little areas that are quite special.'²⁴ Although views were created between, say, the studios and the dressing rooms, and although the functional zoning created an abrupt succession of programmatic difference, only the foyer contained a dizzying density of incidents. The most spectacular of these was the elevated metal Skybar, balancing on one glowing red beam and stabilised by a pole and a tie-rod – a structure developed by Polónyi, and a vestige or even a summary of the second project for Scheveningen. A balcony between the red wall of the dance theatre and the soft pink wall of the concert hall formed a platform to look at the foyer, but also an extension of the floor of the auditorium. Supported by coloured columns, it carved out a space for a cafe at ground level, slowly tapering off until the ceiling height was reduced to less than half a metre, with the lowest space being brightly lit as if it were the most essential part of the building. At either end of the long foyer was a glass facade, directed towards the city, while at the front of the building a golden cone was inserted into the entrance, like a nail knocked into the ground, but only halfway, to indicate the dividing point between concert and theatre hall. This shining volume, partly inside the foyer, partly inside the entrance hall, contained the ticket window on the level of the ground-floor foyer, while the widening upper floor housed a restaurant like a watchtower, with views onto the two adjacent buildings, but also the city.

The presence of the NDT was undeniably striking, but at the same time hardly clear-cut. There is a photograph by Hans Werlemann that shows the NDT in the dense and diverse setting of the Spui, and it is impossible to tell where the building begins and where it ends. This was a consequence of the composition of the volumes and the facades, as Jacques Lucan ascertained: 'The theatre is not a unitary building that affirms itself in an absolute and independent singularity; on the contrary, it almost becomes a chameleon if one considers all the different views of its different faces, responding, point by point, with their own means, to the multiple givens of the built environment.'²⁵ It also reveals the extent to which the NDT was, or was not, indebted to Robert Venturi and his theory of the decorated shed. In the absence of a singular form, it is more correct to describe the NDT as a collection of facades, each seemingly belonging to a different shed, and articulated or materialised in response to the adjoining parcels.

This idea is illustrated in a triptych of the facades: on the fly-tower on the front Madelon Vriesendorp painted slightly abstracted dancing bodies, whereas the rear facade, clad in black corrugated sheeting, has a roofline like a disrupted graph, first following the backstage spaces and the stage tower, and then the waves of the theatre itself – another device taken from Scheveningen. Here, the formal independence of the different parts and their facades was ensured by the decision to keep the supporting beam under the roof, rather than make it part of a hanging construction above. Inside, 1,001 seats were collected in a dark blue interior – Birnie had asked for an auditorium for 'at least 1,000 visitors'. Under the undulating roof with its visible beam structure, three gold-coloured acoustic screens hung against the large sidewall.

After the building opened in September 1987 the question most critics asked was not unexpected: how do OMA's architectural

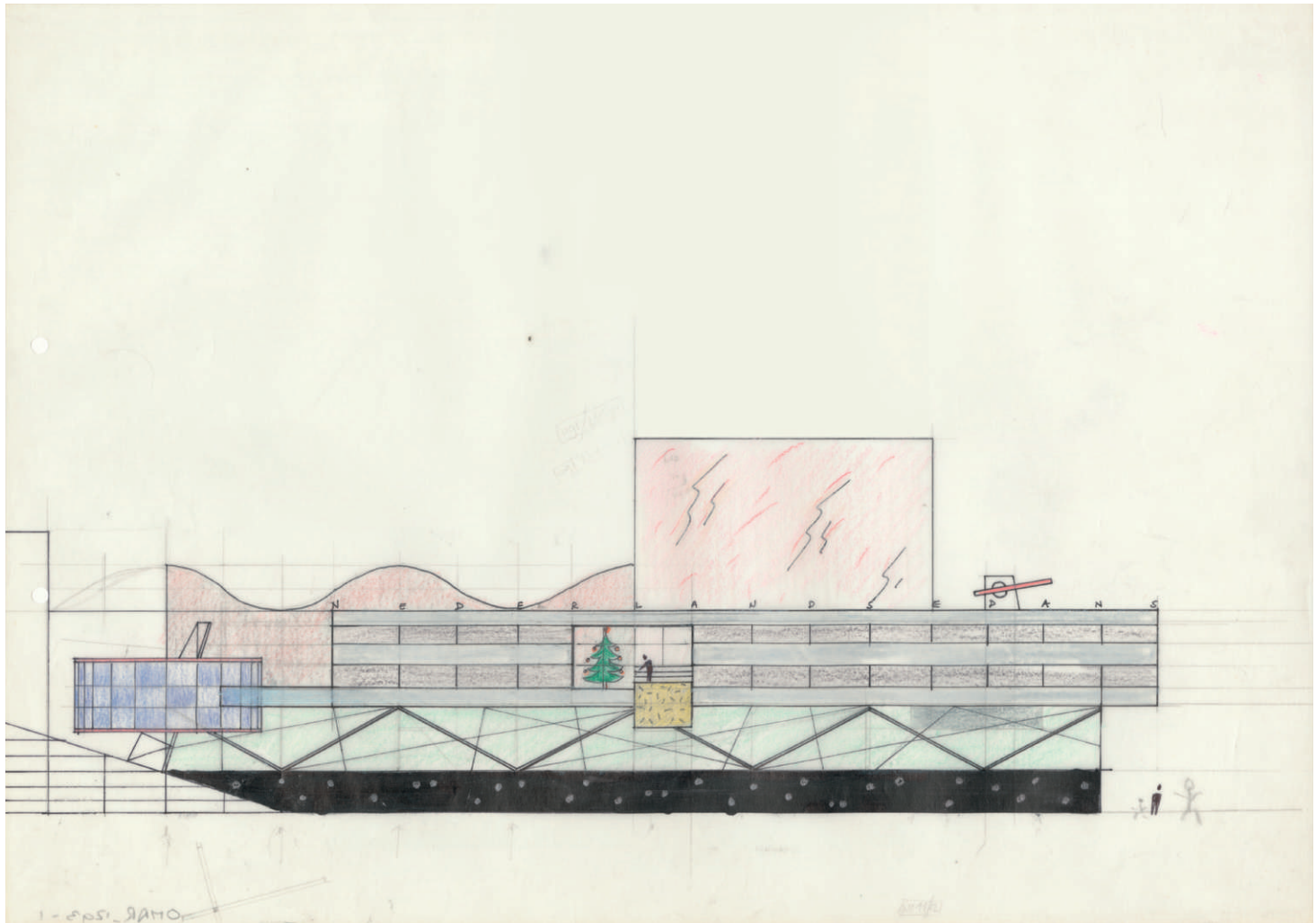
provocations function in the real world, now that Koolhaas has said goodbye to paper? Again, Koolhaas answered the question himself – or rather, he tried to argue that it didn't apply. 'It is better', he said, 'to regard the executed design for the NDT as a sketch for a building. A statement about a building that could have been; a *fata morgana* that, in order to be really built, would have cost three times as much.'²⁶ So, he had made his long-awaited debut as a real architect, and even now it wasn't for real! Once again, here is proof of Koolhaas's prodigious talent for making himself invincible, a superhero in a bulletproof suit woven of nothing but words. Almost everything that happened to him or to the projects of OMA would be reinterpreted – after the fact – as part of a plan.

Notwithstanding Koolhaas's comments, the NDT was received at the end of the 1980s as a real building, albeit an unconventional one. 'Those who are disappointed or dismiss the building for its lack of, or tacky, detail rather miss the point', Peter Buchanan argued in *The Architectural Review*. 'It is misleading to judge the building in conventional architectural terms.'²⁷ Writing in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, Olivier Boissière went even further:

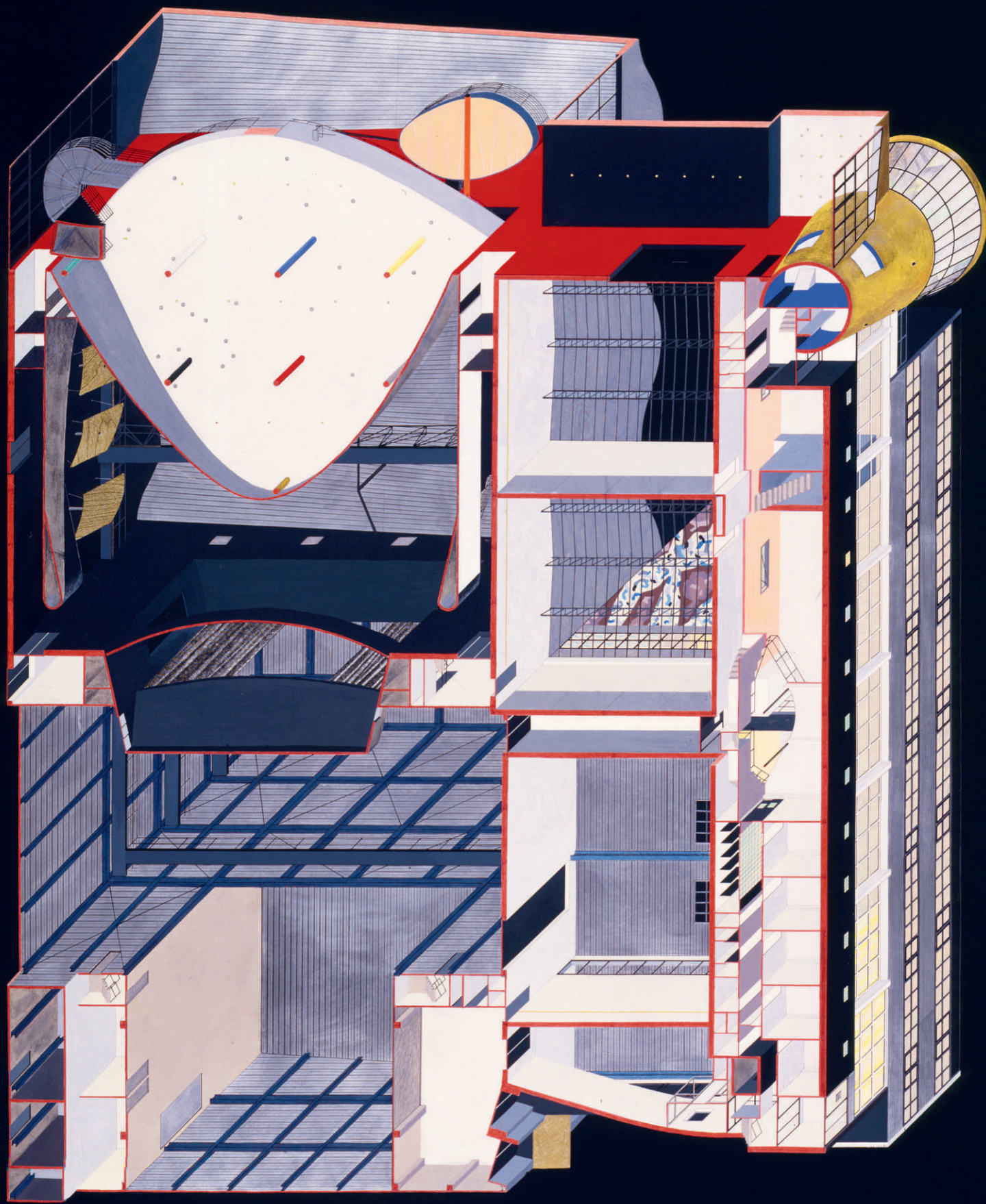
*Does he know how to build, one wondered. The answer is yes! With a razor tight budget, Koolhaas offers a constructive exercise in which he demonstrates the savoir faire that he admired in some American buildings, a mixture of resignation and meticulous attention: of course no detail in the Scarpa-sense of the term, but the right way of juxtaposing coating panels without joining them, for example, or of refining, without having room, a space for rest, of treating an invisible space as a piece of work in itself.'*²⁸

The American influence was certainly there. A steel skeleton was coated with corrugated steel, brick, aluminium or (on the inside) sheetrock: 'That's the way they build in California', Koolhaas said. 'I could never have made this building if I hadn't stayed so long in America.'²⁹ It was therefore a way of not only obeying budgetary requirements, but also of making materials meaningful and ideological – and using cheap and inferior American sheetrock to construct a public building was a provocation, certainly in the Netherlands. If in 2001 Koolhaas would make the pessimistic claim that junkspace was 'conceived in an incubator of sheetrock',³⁰ 20 years earlier it had still seemed possible to apply it as a critical tool and as an architectural element that intentionally provoked interpretation. Indeed, OMA's entire first decade had been more or less dominated by this strategy of using imported American elements – architectonic and urban – to expose Europe's stultifying conservatism, but the NDT project marked the first time a building material played a major part. 'We also use sheetrock', Koolhaas said in 1985 to Mil De Kooning, 'because it is a "different" material. For the world likes nothing better than that you continue making the same thing over and over.'³¹

This perhaps helps to explain the greatest but also the most puzzling praise bestowed on the building. In a review in *Architecture Mouvement Continuité*, Hubert Damisch wrote that a visit to the construction site in the spring of 1987 inspired thoughts of Jean Prouvé. In the context, this seems far-fetched. Prouvé's ethos as a constructor – 'You do not calculate folded sheet metal, you experience it', as Damisch would later describe it³² – is in no sense the guiding light of OMA's work. Even in the case of the NDT, constructional methods and materials were first and foremost *discursive* – they were used to express ideas, to criticise customs and to produce culture. Even Polónyi suggested as much: 'Koolhaas is particularly interested in the external image, in what might be called architectonic sculpture.'³³



OMA, Netherlands Dance Theatre,
The Hague, third version, 1986
© OMA / Rem Koolhaas /
Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam



Maybe Damisch wanted – and he was not alone in this – to clearly approve of Koolhaas as a builder. The philosopher and the architect had become friends in 1972 in Ithaca; according to Koolhaas, the first time they had dinner together, Damisch's wife Teri told her husband, who preferred to remain childless, that she was pregnant.³⁴ At the same time, there is something in Damisch's conception of construction that is particular enough to apply to Koolhaas. 'The proof that this first realisation delivers', Damisch wrote in his review, 'is that architecture today cannot be called *interesting* unless it stubbornly acts against the suppression that construction suffers from, in all senses of the term'.³⁵ Damisch therefore understood *construction* in a philosophical sense, as an activity that adds separate elements together to obtain a meaningful and stable whole. This is a conception that is also, and not coincidentally, present in Paul Valéry's hymn to the art of building, *Eupalinos ou l'architecte*, in which he describes how the world is formed out of a chaos of isolated particles and objects, from which nothing can emerge without human and cultural intervention: '*Me voici, dit le constructeur, je suis l'acte*'.³⁶ Damisch's nomination of Koolhaas as a *constructeur* in this way represents on the one hand a late refusal of strict functionalism, but it is also a timely rebuttal of deconstruction, a theory that during the 1980s tried to rid architecture of all its ordering, interpretative, assembling and indeed constructive characteristics – and a movement that nevertheless included OMA at the 1988 MoMA exhibition 'Deconstructivist Architecture'.

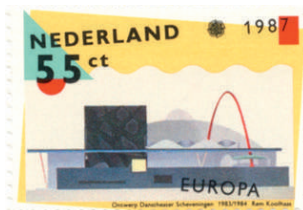
For sure, the NDT was a building in which the constructive features of architecture continued to be defended, but against all possible odds. It was an iconoclastic building, made up out of images; a singular object that was almost impossible to distinguish from its environment; a piece of architecture that criticised the discipline but could not have been conceived without its conditions, traditions and limitations; a material construction that in a hyperconscious

way needed to underline its cultural position; and a final exam for an architect who would remain sceptical of the profession but would also lift it to unprecedented and unsound fame.

As the final chapter in the history of the NDT, it may even seem fitting that it was demolished in 2016 as a consequence of the never-ending saga of politicking around the development of the Spui area. In 2010 Neutelings Riedijk Architects – Willem Jan Neutelings was an OMA collaborator on the third and final version of the NDT – won the competition for the Spuiforum, gathering concert, ensemble, opera and dance hall under one roof. The project attracted unwavering opposition, and one political party won an election in 2014 simply by campaigning against it. In 2015 a new cultural complex was presented. Designed by Jo Coenen, it should be completed in 2019.

Barring a few amused tweets, the disappearance of OMA's NDT has barely provoked any public comment. 'There was almost nothing, almost zero', Koolhaas reflected in a rare vulnerable moment. 'It has been very surprising, and that element of surprise has in a way pre-empted a feeling of tragedy or loss.'³⁷ But seeing another project in its removal, OMA asked Hans

Werleemann, who had photographed the building after its completion, to also document its destruction. It was again a paradox that an architect who since the turn of the century has been provocatively criticising preservation should suddenly be confronted with a disregard for the protection of late twentieth-century architecture. The consensus that the NDT was obsolete, despite its continuing functionality, may also point to the decreasing cultural value assigned to architecture in the Netherlands today, or even to Koolhaas's increasingly mixed reputation in his homeland. His status at home has, admittedly, always been somewhat ambivalent, but in 1987 the Netherlands did ascribe official value to his work, producing a festive 55c postage stamp which featured the second project for the NDT in Scheveningen. But of course that was only a paper achievement.



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OMA, Netherlands Dance Theatre,
The Hague, third and final version, 1987
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Peter Eisenman is a New York-based architect and teacher. Educated at Cornell and Columbia University, he then completed his PhD at the University of Cambridge. Back in the US from 1963, he taught at Princeton University before setting up the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in 1967. His subsequent career has combined academic appointments – at Harvard University, the Cooper Union, Ohio State University and currently at Yale, where he is the Charles Gwathmey Professor in Practice – with professional practice and the completion of numerous projects, from a series of private houses in the 1970s to the recent City of Culture of Galicia in Santiago de Compostela. In addition, his many books include *Diagram Diaries* (1999), *Giuseppe Terragni* (2003) and *Ten Canonical Buildings* (2008).

Simona Ferrari studied architecture at the Politecnico di Milano and Vienna's Technische Universität, obtaining her masters degree at Tokyo Institute of Technology as a Monbukagakusho fellow. Since 2014 she has been working for Atelier Bow-Wow on various international projects, competitions and exhibition designs, among them the recent exhibition 'The Japanese House: Architecture and Life after 1945' at the MAXXI Museum in Rome and the Barbican.

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Michael Hill is head of art history at the National Art School in Sydney, Australia. His interest in San Carlo was sparked 30 years ago by a teacher who told him that the interior was like music, and his work on Borromini has also led him to study the writing of the art historian Leo Steinberg. He is currently researching how civic space can be shaped by the siting of public sculpture.

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