A Weissenhof Siedlung
For Amsterdam

Avant-garde will not endure, and the most fortunate thing that might happen to them is, in the full sense of the term, that they should have served their time... An historical project certainly cannot claim to preserve an eternal youth shielded from flaws.

— Guy Debord

In Amsterdam, on Saturday, December 12, 1981, a group of people was hoisted — on a voluntary basis — into the air in a cherry picker. The reason is simple: they want to experience what it will be like to inhabit a high-rise building. But the experiment isn’t successful: the basket crane is late, it isn’t clear where it should be positioned, and future buildings, that might block the views, can’t be taken into account.

This cold December event 77 years ago is emblematic of a somewhat forgotten project by OMA/Rem Koolhaas. From 1979 to 1989, the office, commissioned by the city of Amsterdam, develops 16,000 square meters of social housing (1,755 units) and 3,000 square meters of education and leisure, for a site overlooking the body of water known as the IJ and across from Central Station, in an area surrounded by early 20th-century garden-city neighborhoods. When a dry-dock company closes in 178, banks and developers start dreaming about offices and luxury apartments, but the city buys the site. In 179, a team of appointed municipal services, housing associations, residents, and future inhabitants begins to examine how many units can be built as affordably as possible. This remains a primary concern even during construction, as one of their banners on the building site illustrates: “Team Up! Real estate at the last pole.”

The chief engineer of the city of Amsterdam, Hans Davidsson, makes plans for massive, closed building blocks. Team Up! is not satisfied, since it lacks an unobstructed view of the IJ and the city across it. The Socialist alderman for housing and city renewal is Jan Schaefer, a biker/lawyer—turned—politician—in—jeans who campaigned in 78 with the slogan, “You can’t inhabit bullshit.” His assistant, Frans van de Ven, reads Delicious New York, and they ask Koolhaas and Jan Voorberg of OMA to design an alternative
OMA, the IJplein district northeast of Central Station, Amsterdam, 1980. Photo © OMA.


OMA's master plan is the result of intense discussions with future inhabitants and the municipality. Team IJplein selects six additional Dutch architectural offices that will design and build the components of the project, following far-reaching rules, imposed by OMA, concerning typology, access, height, and materialization. As Voorberg indicates, these architects "design in the direction of Koolhaas" because they know the ambition of OMA: to build a "Weinachtskathedrale für die '80er." OMA professes an idiosyncratic strategy of participation—a break with practices common in the Netherlands since the heyday of Dutch structuralism in the '70s. In those matters in which inhabitants and associations are not competent, they are not heard. Team IJplein makes a list of projects the project should meet; OMA responds that "these people interfere with things they know nothing about." According to Voorberg, "We have shown them that urbanism is a discipline; all kinds of laymen cannot simply express their opinions." Koolhaas says, "We have systematically refused to underestimate the inhabitants. Right from the start, we have shown large quantities of urbanist material, so that we could talk at a high level with these amateurs (in the positive sense of the word) about all the topics we wanted to talk about."

OMA turns the discussions into history lessons by projecting canonical projects onto the site (from Le Corbusier, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Le Corbusier, O.M. Ungers, etc.) in order to get acquainted with its characteristics and the possibilities for development. Voorberg's role can hardly be overestimated: his personal archive contains thousands of photographs of modern architecture from all over the
world. Initially, OMA – which at the beginning of the decade wanted to "test" the thesis of Delirious New York in Europe by importing a "culture of congestion" – fantasizes about high-rise buildings. They want towers, first in a grid covering the site, later only in the southern part. Both proposals are criticized because of building expenses and maintenance costs for elevators. OMA gives in. "In this case," Koolhaas admits, "the wisdom in this reservoir [of inhabitants] was without a doubt superior to our insights." The height some of the inhabitants briefly experience in the cherry picker isn't decisive, but the experiment does show how profoundly this project is tested, discussed, and modified – and how the desire for Manhattanism isn't realized here, or at least not to its full extent.

In '82, the proposals are published on the cover of Latas International. In the end, OMA chooses adapted versions of Ungerer's urban villa (in the southern and western areas) and Ernst May's Redenocide (in the northern and western areas). Both areas have rational repetition, parallelism, and an orientation almost perpendicular to the IJ to ensure a water view for all inhabitants. As part of the master plan, OMA is to build (at one edge of the site) a large apartment block divided into three sections with different points of access, a supermarket, a communal center, and a school. As Roberto Gargiani has indicated, these buildings (and the IJplein project as a whole) not only reuse modernist strategies but also are in dialogue with contemporary OMA projects: the "street in the sky" in the long residential block is also present in the 1982 project for Boenjes in Rotterdam, while the lower, shorter building, with its duplex apartments and metal staircases, mimics the project for Welfare Island. 13

In the spring of '89, while the project is under development, the IJplein is awarded the Amsterdam Housing Prize by the city newspaper Het Parool. The jury consists of Italian historian Francesco Dal Co, Belgian critic Geert Bekaert, Architectural Record editor Mildred Schnerrn, and French architect Josè Schelin. Schnerrn and Schelin want to give the prize to an infill project by Theo Bosch and Aldo Van Eyck; Dal Co and Bekaert are in favor of the IJplein because it focuses on change rather than on continuity in the city center and on the difficult and urgent challenge of estate planning. Dal Co appreciates that Koolhaas "wants to show people the way, and wants to educate them". Bekaert favors IJplein because OMA straightforwardly uses "the essential elements of architecture": walls, windows, doors, stairs, streets, and public squares. In the end, the chairman of the jury, film director Jan Vrijman, gives the prize to OMA. 18 Reporting on the competition for Architectural Record, Schelin notes that since Ronald Reagan became president, social housing has disappeared in the US. "The Dutch," she writes, "still think it is important to house poor and low-income people well, and they believe this to be government's responsibility..." Amsterdam, unlike New York City, does not have a conspicuous number of homeless people camping out on the streets. 16

For the IJplein, the political dimension is indeed determinative, and it is not easy to reconcile this project with the view of Koolhaas as the VGB Man and a champion of capitalism and neoliberalism: the largest realized design by OMA in the '80s is a project for low-income housing as the result of a socialist policy. 18 During that decade, 110,000 housing units are produced per year by the Dutch Ministry, only 10 percent free market. Reagan's term in office ends in January '89,
but the conviction that housing is not a government task and should be handed over to the market spreads throughout the Netherlands and Europe, and in '94 the Dutch government terminates its subsidary program for social housing.¹⁰

Of course, signs of this policy change are already apparent in the '80s and during the construction of the Ijplein. Alderman Schaefer resigns in '86, his successor, Louis Genet, who calls himself "the right-wing boy of the socialist party," decides to focus on owner-occupied housing by collaborating with developers. In '87, a national inquiry into the presumed waste of government funds in the housing industry is organized.¹¹

It is part of a political evolution that doesn't alter the creation of the Ijplein but determines its legacy and forces Koolhaas to adjust the kind of architecture his office aims to do. A project that starts as a Weissenseekredung for the '80s, reaffirming the possibilities of modern architecture for collective housing, turns, by the time of its completion in '89, into an anachronism - or at least into a project that can no longer serve as a starting point for future OMA projects. In a lecture in 1990, Koolhaas attributes this insight to a study tour of the US made by the municipality of Amsterdam in '87 - one of the many transatlantic trips that were decisive for the oeuvre of OMA:

The council made a number of supremely elegant but at the same time infuriating trips to America, armed with cameras and other state-of-the-art gear to see how housing could be done differently, and this council discovered, particularly in Baltimore and San Francisco, the vision as it should have been discovered for Ijplein, and should have been implemented. For us that moment represented a crisis, inasmuch as whatever we found and thought, we were faced with the hard fact that the Ijplein situation no longer gelled and failed to tie in with a development that had manifested and established itself en masse only three years after; in other words, from a number of quite objective events we could plainly conclude that the layout and concept of Ijplein were out of date.¹²

Such an ascertainment is dramatic for Koolhaas: he has consistently argued against the ability of architecture to autonomously rest historical and political developments. This does not mean that his work hasn't been reactive or critical toward architectural developments - it simply means that OMA projects try to formalize and even exaggerate dominant historical changes by means of architecture rather than oppose them. Il faut être absolument moderne - it is true for Koolhaas, but only according to Peter Sloterdijk's definition from 2004: "The real foundation of modernity is not revolution, but explicitation."¹³ The strategy of OMA is to imagine the immediate future just before it takes place. This way, everything that happens, no matter how terrible, seems in retrospect to be courted, and facing the consequences of your own creation is always preferable to having to deal with a fait accompli. Even if Koolhaas remains a voluntary prisoner of architecture, he will never allow himself to be a victim of history. At the beginning of the '80s, the project for Ijplein manifests an egotistical and progressive socialism and makes explicit, in an architectural way, a society that believes in the unfinished project of that other kind of modernity - not the one Sloterdijk defines after the turn of the century, but following the less conservative meaning of trying to emancipate or even liberate as many people as possible. By the end of the '80s, however, the Ijplein presents a worldview and an architecture that seem to belong to the past, and that would certainly, when reactivated in future work, give the impression of nostalgia and of a lack of lucidity. Roland Barthes' 1957 definition of modernity is useful here: "Being modern means knowing what is no longer possible."¹⁴ Koolhaas not only breaks down the impossibilities caused by the storm of historical progress, but also shows them by developing the next options, which he already deems unavoidable - options that are of course, nearly always quite productive for an architectural office. This is tied to OMA's wish to remain avant-garde - to abandon previous achievements and to reveal what is new for a specific era without worrying too much about the value of these cutting-edge developments - and is reflected in both their handling of the Ijplein and in a project from a few years later for the banks of the Tj.*

Upon its completion the suddenly dated character of the Ijplein housing immediately leads to nothing but OMA's denial of the project, which is omitted - despite its size and its scope - from the firm's first monographic issue of 31 Compan, in '89, and from 5, M.E., XL, in '95.¹⁵ Moreover, the project, once finished, isn't quite well received, certainly not at home. Although Marietella Casciato praises its "exciting mixture of constructional purism" in Domus, in an article titled "Renz Koolhaas's Big, Sloppy Dreams," major Dutch newspaper critics suggest that the Ijplein project proves that Koolhaas might have impressive ideas but that he can't build: the list they provide of defects in the use of materials, detailing, and finishing is long.¹⁶

Moreover, during the '90s, the recuperation of modernist techniques that so defined the Ijplein project had become

¹⁷ See Roland Barthes, "Renaissance et nomadisme," in Oosterhuis, ed., Structuring the City.
¹⁸ See Roland Barthes, "La jalousie, la pensée en outre-mer," in Oosterhuis, ed., Structuring the City.
work of both professors and alumni. In the end, the enor-
mous ambition to build a Weißenhofiedlung for the 30s
in Amsterdam is only partly realized, which in itself is not
very surprising: the six other collaborating Dutch archi-
tects (Kees de Kaj, Heinz van Mees, Groep 69, Hein de Haan, Kotaar & Boogers, and Sier van Rhijn) who implement the major-
fic of the housing units, are not quite of the same stature
as, let’s say, Peter Behrens, Victor Bourgeois, Josef Frank,
Hilbersheimer, Bruno Taut, or J.J.P. Oud.

In 91, what the future inhabitants see from their ver-
tage point in the cherry picker are the banks of the IJ, the
Central Station, and the city center, across the water. In 91,
barely two years after the IJplein project is completed, OMA
is invited by a public-private partnership (including the new
and no longer Socialist municipality) to make a master plan
along this waterfront for a “Central Business District.”
The project that Koolhaas presents live on television to the inhabit-
ants of Amsterdam totals 1,150,000 square meters, creates nine
new islands in the IJ for offices, shopping malls, cultural infra-
structures, and high-income housing, and puts Central Station
under a gigantic dome. It is necessary, Koolhaas says, for
the city to finally dare to evolve and expand, and to join
the competition raging between capital cities all over the world.
For this, rehabilitation of the city’s office space is necessary:
the “prefab instrument of capitalist exploitation” could,
Koolhaas suggests, when “redeveloped,” lead “to a new idyll.”

In a way, the proposal transfers the “dynamique d’enfer,”
raging as OMA is building Euralille, to Amsterdam by mak-
ing explicit—or even outperforming—the economic eupho-
ricia of the early 90s, given the hot-brained fin de siècle
conviction that it is impossible to invest too much in finance,
trade, and real estate. In 91, OMA’s project is shelved when
the municipality decides instead to develop an office park to
the south of the city center. Nevertheless, some of the more
recent developments of the area of Central Station—and even
of the rest of Amsterdam—can be brought back to OMA’s
plan vicina for the 90s, which clearly shows—with a euphe-
ussm, or perhaps dysphemeism—the unexplored possibilities
of city development.

Meanwhile, in 2018, the city center of Amsterdam is suf-
fering under vast numbers of tourists. The new mayor has
introduced “moosong pauses,” in which streets are tempo-
rarily shut down so they can be cleaned. Other Venetian-like
curtailments and access restrictions are being considered,
while rents for housing can only be paid by the happy few.
The houses of the IJplein project – tranquil, orderly, with a lot of open public space, and only a little bit worn – are occupied by 2,100 inhabitants, although this year the municipality has wondered whether or not something more “diverse” could be developed, with more shops and a higher density. So far, inhabitants’ protests have averted these threats, together with a study commissioned by the city that has indicated “the cultural-historical value” of the IJplein because it represents an important period in Dutch architecture. 13 In 1980, Montered Taffuri described the social housing of Red Vienna as “an ambiguous monument, and as an object of reflection.” The same can be said about this early OMA project, largely because it shows how different things were not even half a lifetime ago.

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**44 Low-Resolution Houses**

The houses have an exhaustively long history in architecture. It has been a protagonist of formalism through modernism and postmodernism. It has been a recurring problem for urbanism. Simultaneously, it has been considered a solution for urbanism and a problem for formalism (think: Levittown). The house has been at the center of phenomenological questions (dwellings), a frequent site of the everyday vernacular and the primary subject of the digital/virtual (complex, animate, and de-materialized). But for this particular exhibition, houses were chosen simply because there are a lot of them circulating on the internet, available to gather. As such, the house has seemingly become more and more of a desirable design object, an image, a stage set, a thing, a product with a philosophy, often by itself, and culturally understood. The house reflects our world, our desire to be and how we act upon it. The house has become a receptacle for identity and technology, similar to our phones.

“44 Low-Resolution Houses” thinks about houses through a double technological and representational-aesthetic lens. All 44 houses fall into one or more of the following categories of low-resolution: first, houses that vaguely resemble houses, using familiar house elements like pitched roofs, chimneys, windows, doors, porches, etc.; second, houses that are to be constructed, in that one can see the structure, joints, and materials, and have a sort of cheap, unfinished quality; and third, houses that are composed of basic geometric primitives – squares, circles, triangles – arranged (primarily planometrically) in a non-compositional or abstract manner. By these terms, low-resolution is against high-resolution architectural sophistication, gestural complex curvature, bodily organic figuration, and architectural paradigms focused on seamlessness and integrated smoothness.

This polemic, framed through resolution, suggests that high-resolution architecture operates as a form of distraction, a special effect, while low-resolution architecture engenders attention by being slightly off, crude, or oblique. The loss of resolution directs us to think about architecture’s construction, its techniques, references, typologies, and materiality.