

A Weissenhofsiedlung For Amsterdam

Avant-gardes 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 times. . . . An historical project certainly cannot claim to preserve an eternal youth shielded from blows.

– Guy Debord¹

In Amsterdam, on Saturday, December 12, 1981, a group of people is 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.²

This cold December event 37 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 (1,375 units) and 1,000 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 '78, banks and developers start dreaming about offices and luxury apartments, but the city buys the site. In '79, 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.³ This remains a primary concern even during construction, as one of their banners on the building site illustrates: "Team IJplein: budget rent to the last pole."

The chief engineer of the city of Amsterdam, Hans Davidson, makes plans for massive, closed building blocks. Team IJplein 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 baker/biker-turned-politician-in-jeans who campaigned in '78 with the slogan, "You can't inhabit bullshit." His assistant, Frans Van de Ven, reads *Delirious New York*, and they ask Koolhaas and Jan Voorberg of OMA to design an alternative

1. Guy Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, trans. Lucy Forsyth (London: Pelagian Press, 1991), 63–64. Quoted in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2002), xviii.

2. "Insprekers in hogere sferen," *Wonen-IA/BK* 9, no. 1 (1982): 7.

3. Reinout Koperdraat, "Het IJplein komt er. Strijd met Den Haag blijft nodig," *De Waarheid*, March 29, 1984. For a contemporaneous overview of the IJplein and the compositional strategies used, see Bernard Leupen, *IJ-plein Amsterdam: Een speurtocht naar nieuwe compositorische middelen* (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 1989). For a recent article, see Lara Schrijver, "Stubborn Modernity: IJ-plein Amsterdam," in *OASE* 94. *OMA. The First Decade*, ed. Christophe Van Gerrewey and Véronique Patteeuw (Rotterdam: nai010, 2015), 109–12.



OMA, the IJplein district northeast of Central Station, Amsterdam, 1989. Photo © OMA.

project to Davidson's. The future inhabitants are now confronted with two very different proposals, but they still can't decide. During a meeting in 1980, someone suggests merging the plans, an idea that Schaefer doesn't like at all. Acting with a kind of perverse Judgment of Solomon, Schaefer asks both architects whether they consider the proposal of their colleague a disaster for the city. Davidson, overwhelmed and perplexed by this request for uncollegiality, hesitates; Koolhaas is immediately decisive: "Yes," he says, "the proposal by Davidson is a disaster for the city of Amsterdam." Schaefer turns his head and addresses Team IJplein: "It's clear: both planners consider each other's plans disastrous. Now you would like to merge two disasters? That will lead to a catastrophe. We won't do that. Inhabitants, which of these plans do you prefer?"⁴

And so it happens that Koolhaas and Voorberg, two architects with no building experience whatsoever, are appointed as "conditioning architects" and "supervisors for the urban design." Their commission – one of the main reasons for establishing the OMA office in Rotterdam – is

5. Bernard Leupen, "Inleiding," in *Integratiekollege IJplein. Propedeuse 83–84*, ed. Bernard Leupen, Niek Bisscheroux (Delft: Bouwkunde THD, 1983), 6. My translation.

6. Bernard Leupen, Niek Bisscheroux, "Interview Rem Koolhaas. 6 January 1984," in *Integratiekollege IJplein. Propedeuse 83–84*, ed. Bernard Leupen, Niek Bisscheroux (Delft: Bouwkunde THD, 1983), 53. My translation.

7. Janny Rodermond, "Bestemmingsplan ADM-terrein Amsterdam," *De Architect* 12, no. 10 (1982): 85. My translation.

8. *Ibid.*

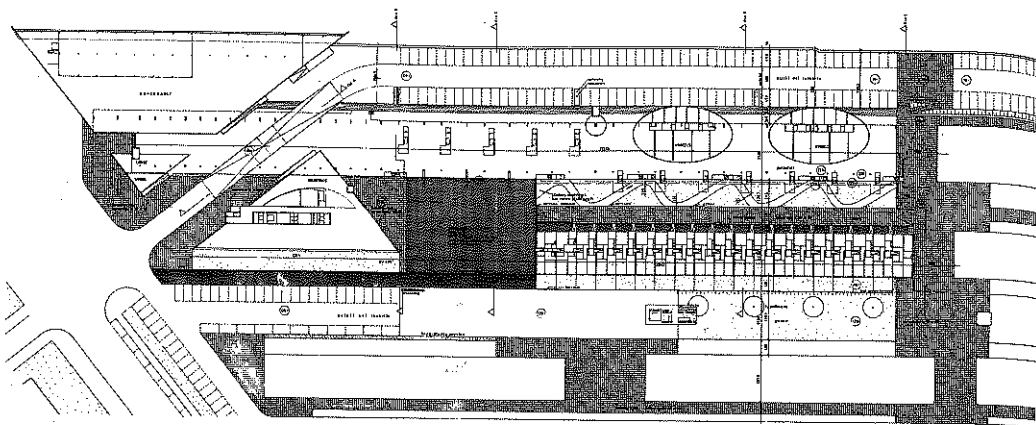
9. Tineke Reijnders, "We hebben systematisch geweigerd de bewoners te onderschatten: Rem Koolhaas, conditionierend architect," *De Groene Amsterdammer*, no. 43 (1982): 15. My translation.

straightforward: "develop an urban plan that takes sufficient account of the qualities of the terrain, the desires of the inhabitants, and the proximity of the IJ and the city."⁵ The OMA project needs to resolve opposing desires. The inhabitants want to remedy the lack of services in the area, but they also desire a continuation of the monofunctional atmosphere of the existing garden cities. Koolhaas and Voorberg conceptualize this contradiction: the northern and eastern areas get a village-like character, while the southern and western areas closer to the city are denser. In between, a public park is created. As Koolhaas indicates in an interview in '84, revealing a commonly used OMA trick, this division between an urban and less urban area is rhetorical: the notion of a garden city "is a magical formula that gives way to a kind of uprising of possibilities and inspiration."⁶

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 Weissenhofsiedlung for the '80s."⁷ 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 points 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."⁸ 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."⁹

OMA turns the discussions into history lessons by projecting canonical projects onto the site (from Léon Krier, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Le Corbusier, O.M. Ungers, etcetera) 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

4. Louis Hoeks, *'In geouwehoer kun je niet wonen': het leven van Jan Schaefer* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, 2017), 265. My translation.



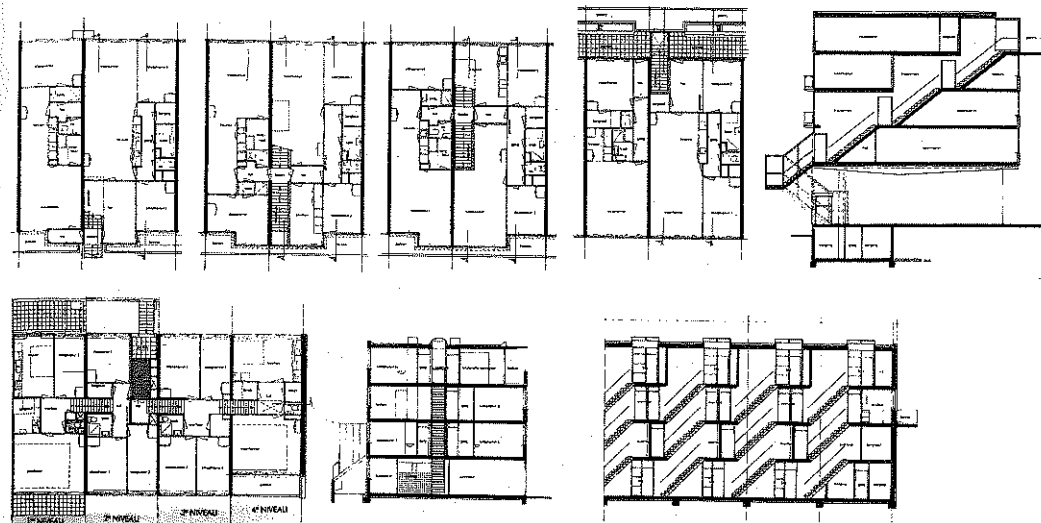
Above and opposite page: OMA, plans and sections for apartment buildings in the IJplein, Amsterdam, 1989. Drawings © OMA.

10. Leupen, "Inleiding," 55. My translation.
11. Roberto Gargiani, *Rem Koolhaas/OMA: The Construction of Merveilles* (EPFL Press: Lausanne, 2008): 100–01.

world. Initially, OMA – which at the beginning of the decade wanted to “test” the theses 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.”¹⁰ 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 *Lotus International*. In the end, OMA chooses adapted versions of Ungers’s urban villa (in the southern and western areas) and Ernst May’s *Siedlungen* (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 1980 project for Boompjes in Rotterdam, while the lower, shorter building, with its duplex apartments and metal staircases, mimics the project for Welfare Island.¹¹

In the spring of ’84, while the project is under development, the IJplein is awarded the Amsterdam Housing Prize



12. On Thursday, May 10, 1984, an annex is published with Amsterdam newspaper *Het Parool*, including interviews with the four jury members. My translation.

13. Mildred F. Schmertz, “Low-income housing: A lesson from Amsterdam,” *Architectural Record* 173, no. 1 (January 1985): 134.

14. See Joan Ockman, “The ¥€\$ Man,” *Architecture* 91, no. 3 (2002): 76–79.

by the city newspaper *Het Parool*. The jury consists of Italian historian Francesco Dal Co, Belgian critic Geert Bekaert, *Architectural Record* editor Mildred Schmertz, and French architect Ionel Schein. Schmertz and Schein 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.¹² Reporting on the competition for *Architectural Record*, Schmertz admits 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.”¹³

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 ¥€\$ 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.¹⁴ During that decade, 120,000 housing units are produced per year by the Dutch Ministry, only 10 percent free market. Reagan’s term in office ends in January ’89,

15. See Marja Elsinga and Frank Wassenberg, "Social Housing in the Netherlands," in *Social Housing in Europe*, ed. Christine Whitehead and Kath J. Scanlon (London: London School of Economics, 2007), 130–47.

16. Hoeks, 308.

17. Rem Koolhaas, "How Modern is Dutch Architecture?" in *Mart Stam's Trousers: Stories From Behind the Scenes of Dutch Moral Modernism*, ed. Crimson, Michael Speaks, Gerard Hadders (Rotterdam: O10 Publishers, 1999), 160–61. The character of this journey to the US is corroborated by civil servant Roeland Gilijamse, who described it as "quite a fascinating school trip of an entire week." See Roeland Gilijamse in *Krassen op de eeuwigheid. De jaren negentig: Amsterdam in ontwikkeling*, ed. Bob Duynstee (Amsterdam: Ontwikkelingsalliantie, 2008), 111. My translation.

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 subsidiary program for social housing.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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 Weissenhofsiedlung 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 clownish but at the same time infuriating trips to America, armed with camcorders 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.*¹⁷

Such an ascertainment is dramatic for Koolhaas: he has consistently argued against the ability of architecture to autonomously resist historical and political developments. This does not mean that his work hasn't been reactive or critical toward architectonic 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

18. Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären III: Schäume* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 87. My translation.

19. Roland Barthes, "Requichot et son corps," in *Oeuvres complètes, Tome IV: Livres, textes, entretiens, 1972–1976* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 397.

20. IJplein is, however, present in the OMA book edited by Jacques Lucan, published in French in 1990 and in English in 1991.

21. Maristella Casciato, *Domus*, no. 702 (February 1989): xix. Hilde de Haan and Ids Haagsma, "De grootse, slordige dromen van Rem Koolhaas," *De Volkskrant*, September 9, 1988.

revolution, but explicitation."¹⁸ 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 coauthored, 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 egalitarian 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's 1973 definition of modernity is useful here: "Being modern means knowing what is no longer possible."¹⁹ Koolhaas not only tracks 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 IJ.

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 *El Croquis*, in '89, and from *S,M,L,XL* in '95.²⁰ Moreover, the project, once finished, isn't quite well received, certainly not at home. Although Maristella Casciato praises its "exciting mixture of constructional puritanism" in *Domus*, in an article titled "Rem 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.²¹

Moreover, during the '80s, the recuperation of modernist techniques that so defined the IJplein project had become



The long series of duplex apartments and metal stairs recall OMA's Welfare Island proposal, which appeared in *Delirious New York*. OMA, IJplein, Amsterdam, 1989. Photo © OMA.

22. Hans van Dijk, "The Architect is Obligated to Be an Honourable Man: Interview with Rem Koolhaas," *Archis*, no. 11 (1994): 20.

23. Mil De Kooning, "OMA in Nederland. Rem Koolhaas in gesprek," *Vlees & Beton*, no. 12 (1989). My translation.

omnipresent in Dutch architecture. In other words, the ideology behind this housing development is gone by the '90s, but its architectonic language seems more prevalent than ever in contemporary Dutch production – which horrified Koolhaas, who hates the idea of being imitated or creating a school of followers. When asked at the end of '94 about the omission of this major achievement from *S,M,L,XL*, he says, "I found it unacceptable to show yet again all the diagrams and precedents involved in the IJplein project. That strategy, interesting as it was, could legitimize the lack of inspiration as found in Dutch modernism."²² In an interview with Belgian historian Mil De Kooning, Koolhaas indicates this clearly: *I feel as if the epigones have forced me permanently on the run; it truly is revolting. Here's another thing about the Netherlands: one of the things I detest most is the inflated vanity with which the architectural world boasts about how it resisted postmodernism and thus managed to remain 'daringly modern.' In my view, in, far and away, most cases, that was the result of pure obliviousness. I am also shocked at how our work has somehow led to the formation of a school – or more particularly, at the fact that it did not prove immune to it, complex enough to resist it.*²³

Not coincidentally, in 1990 Koolhaas stops teaching, after a tenure of only two years, at Delft University of Technology, where the cut-and-paste method of the IJplein has indeed become omnipresent in studios and publications, and in the

work of both professors and alumni. In the end, the enormous ambition to build a Weissenhofsiedlung for the '80s in Amsterdam is only partly realized, which in itself is not very surprising: the six other collaborating Dutch architects (Kees de Kat, Hein van Meer, Groep 69, Hein de Haan, Peters & Boogers, and Sier van Rhijn) who implement the majority of the housing units, are not quite of the same stature as, let's say, Peter Behrens, Victor Bourgeois, Josef Frank, Hilberseimer, Bruno Taut, or J.J.P. Oud.

In '81, what the future inhabitants see from their vantage 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 inhabitants of Amsterdam totals 1,250,000 square meters, creates nine new islands in the IJ for offices, shopping malls, cultural infrastructure, 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 "preferred instrument of capitalist exploitation" could, Koolhaas suggests, when "redefined," lead "to a new idyll."²⁴

24. René Zwaap, "Waterhoofd: De IJ-boulevard van kapotte dromen," *De Groene Amsterdammer*, November 25, 1992.

In a way, the proposal transfers the "dynamique d'enfer," raging as OMA is building Euralille, to Amsterdam by making explicit – or even outperforming – the economic euphoria 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 '93, 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 voisin* for the '90s, which clearly shows – with a euphemism, or perhaps dysphemism – the unexplored possibilities of city development.

Meanwhile, in 2018, the city center of Amsterdam is suffering under vast numbers of tourists. The new mayor has introduced "mopping pauses," in which streets are temporarily 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.

25. Bart van Zoelen, "Renovatie eerste keus voor IJplein," *Het Parool*, March 8, 2018.

26. Manfredo Tafuri, *Vienne La Rouge: La politique immobilière de la Vienne Socialiste 1919–1933*, trans. Catherine Chatin (Paris: Pierre Mardaga, 1981), 28. My translation.

The houses of the IJplein project – tranquil, orderly, with a lot of open public space, and only a little bit worn – are occupied by 2,500 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.²⁵ In 1980, Manfredo Tafuri described the social housing of Red Vienna as “an ambiguous monument, and as an object of reflection.”²⁶ 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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