

# WHAT THE AUTHOR OF JUNKSPACE TOLD MIES IN THE JUNGLE

## Abstract

There are a series of parallels between Ludwig Mies van de Rohe in the post-World War II era and Rem Koolhaas after the Cold War. One is that both dismiss the city as lost. "The city is no longer," Koolhaas concludes in his essay "Generic City" from 1994,<sup>1</sup> while Mies asserted in 1955 that: "There are no cities, in fact, anymore. It goes on like a forest. That is the reason why we cannot have the old cities any more [*sic*]; that is gone forever, planned city and so on. We should think about the means that we have to live in a jungle, and maybe we do well by that."<sup>2</sup> At the time, Mies thought he had found a way to come to terms with the jungle. The idea was a uniform, culture-wide type of architectural production that would match its epoch: "What I am driving at is to develop a common language. ... We have no real common language. If we can do that, then we can build what we like and everything is all right."<sup>3</sup>

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## Notes

1. Koolhaas, "The Generic City," 1264.

2. Quoted in: Detlef Mertins, "Living in a Jungle: Mies, Organic Architecture, and the Art of City Building," 618.

3. Quoted in: Mertins, "Living in a Jungle," 633.

4. In Michael Blackwood's documentary *Mies* from 1986, Arthur Drexler remembers: "Several years before his death, I had a conversation with ... Mies. And he began to talk about the condition of architecture as he saw it, not just in the United States but around the world. And he was quite depressed by it. ... If I may paraphrase him, he said that 'We showed them what to do. What the hell went wrong?' ... As far as

he was concerned, about everything had gone wrong. He thought that he had solved every kind of problem that architecture could possibly have to deal with. And he could not understand why people weren't satisfied to accept his solutions to that, and just continue to carry out his ideas." See also: Detlef Mertins, *Mies*, 440-441.

5. In a "manuscript of an important address Mies gave here [in Chicago] in German," Mies stated: "Formen zu erfinden, ist offenbar nicht die Aufgabe der Baukunst." ["Inventing forms is evidently not the task of architecture."]. In Fritz Neumeyer, *Mies van der Rohe*, 388. In 1950, Mies noted: "Nicht das Interessante und Einmalige, sondern das Selbstverständliche und Gültige ist das eigentliche

What Mies had in mind is usually referred to as the new Chicago school, or the architecture marked by his own teachings and the example of his practice in the United States. Toward the end of his life, Mies confessed to Arthur Drexler that he considered his efforts a failure.<sup>4</sup> But apparently he was not referring to his own work, nor to that of the architects following his example, but rather to those concerned with formal invention, “the interesting and singular,” “the spectacular.”<sup>5</sup> Koolhaas, to whom these descriptions would largely apply, saw Mies’s ideas disproved.<sup>6</sup> The latter’s American work—which, in Koolhaas’s terms, sought to be “generic”—had become “invisible,” could not compete with “the interesting,” “the signature.”<sup>7</sup> Koolhaas reasons that Mies’s alchemical “fusion of the sublime and the generic into a new hybrid ... could not be duplicated by others.”<sup>8</sup> The accent should be on “new.” Koolhaas is decidedly and visibly interested in formal invention. Against that background, architecture schools based on rules extracted from an exemplary body of work—such as Mies’s—are problematic. For in as much as the model is being “reproduced,” there is no invention.

### The Encounter

Koolhaas has repeatedly professed a long-standing fascination with Mies, traces of which have permeated the Office for Metropolitan Architecture’s (O.M.A.) work since the 1980s. The Campus Center in Chicago (1997–2003)—located on the Illinois Institute of Technology campus was master-planned and built largely by Mies himself—proved an occasion for Koolhaas to articulate a reply architecturally. His scheme embraces Mies’s Commons building on two sides, as if engaging in a private conversation. The guiding theme of the O.M.A. project is “him.” Mies’s large portraits aside, the building takes up the “grammar” of the campus. Faithful to its modular spirit, the Center adopts a 24x32-foot grid and steel frame construction of the Commons, which is most evident in its use of black, freestanding I-beam columns.<sup>9</sup> Like Mies’s clear-span buildings, the interior is sandwiched between two horizontal planes with a perimeter wall of glass.

Yet, it is thus all the more precisely that Koolhaas pronounces his objections to Miesian “lessons.” O.M.A.’s design distorts the language it starts from. The zigzag of its western façade defies the simple box (figure 1). The topography of the floor is varied; the roof partly sloped, as if squeezed by the weight of the “L” (the elevated train line) and the tube housing its rails. The diagonal corridors linking the campus west of State Street to the residential quarters to the east almost outdo the orthogonal order they cut into (figure 2). Koolhaas opposes Mies’s neutral space, conceived for flexible use, with his determinate own. The floor and the partitions react strongly to the program—the molded ground, the multiple materials and colors displaying the diversity of specified uses (figure 3). Only the uniform sheetrock ceiling recalls the “neutral” interior; the green panels and spackled joints left without finish, the craftless details all exposed. (figure 4).<sup>10</sup> It is as if Koolhaas were saying to Mies that his

architectural approach, based on an intellectual immersion in the spirit of the material, does not make sense if the materials are not steel or brick, but sheetrock or insulation meant to be clad with whatever will protect its amorphous substance. The Campus Center is no “school.” There is no discernible formula leading to a predictable result, no “language” calling for dissemination; rather, the design appears like a labyrinth, willfully built for “followers” to get lost in.



Figure 1: O.M.A./Koolhaas. Campus Center, IIT Chicago. Model. (Photo courtesy of Anne Filson.)



Figure 2: O.M.A./Koolhaas. Campus Center, IIT Chicago. Model, detail of the interior. (Photo courtesy of Anne Filson.)

baukünstlerische Thema.” [“Not that which is interesting and unique, but that which is self-evident and valid is architecture’s actual theme.”] In Neumeyer, *Mies*, 393. In 1953, Mies stated: “Too often we think of architecture in terms of the spectacular.” In “A Chapel—Illinois Institute of Technology,” *Arts and Architecture*, 18–19. Quoted in Neumeyer, *Mies*, 393.

6. “The Generic City proves him wrong: its more daring architects have taken up the challenge Mies abandoned, to the point where it is now hard to find a box.” Koolhaas and Mau, “Generic City,” 1260.

7. Koolhaas, “Miestakes,” in Lambert, *Mies in America*, 718–719.

8. Koolhaas, “Miestakes,” in Lambert, *Mies in America*, 734.

9. An explanatory drawing by O.M.A. explains: “Exposed I-shaped Miesian columns follow Mies’ Campus-wide planning grid.” In *El Croquis* 131/132 (2006): 346. The reason for deviating from Mies’s H-beam columns and using I-beam columns instead is not commented on. The

grid used in the Commons is mentioned by Cohen, *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe*, 118. It differs from the 24x24-foot grid generally used for the rest of the campus.

10. In the presentation for O.M.A.’s competition entry, Koolhaas explains that the roof was conceived in metaphorical analogy to a violin. It was to be covered with wood, also underneath. The idea had to later



Figure 3: O.M.A./Rem Koolhaas. Campus Center, IIT Chicago. Computer stations and lounge. (Source: Photo by the author.)

Crown Hall is some two hundred yards down the street. Its symmetry implies hierarchy and a center—although as Colin Rowe has shown, the homogeneity of the underlying grid, along with the partitions in the middle of the building, undermines the notion of spatial centrality.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the theme of the center is voiced, bespeaking the idea of a whole, just as the overall impact of regularity suggests an all-encompassing order, asserting unity. The tension between the neutral and the centered space evokes the double nature of the grid as described by Rosalind Krauss: the grid as bridge from materialism to the spiritual.<sup>12</sup> It corresponds to Mies's commitment to the "facts" of material and technology, aimed at giving architecture a spiritual dimension.<sup>13</sup> The Campus Center avoids symmetry. It is no oasis of order. There is no structure in terms of construction

or geometry that would unify all parts of the design. The roof, as the strongest agent of unity, struggles—sliced, creased, in places eclipsed.<sup>14</sup> The truth of this architecture is not a shining example of transcendental perfection, but a modern, enlightened truth about the mess we live in. In his essay "Junkspace"—like this project emanating from the late 1990s—Koolhaas claims as the recent condition of architecture a fundamental loss of control.<sup>15</sup> The Campus Center deals with that. It is as if Koolhaas were saying, "Architecture, too, has turned into a jungle."

be abandoned: "Fire codes would have necessitated hanging the finish below a sheetrock layer, and Koolhaas found this a ridiculous waste of both money and building logic." In Aaron Betsky, "The Architecture of Value Engineering," 65.

11. In "Mies van der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries," Robin Evans distinguishes between the non-hierarchical bilateral

symmetry of duplicated halves and monumental symmetry, halfway between which a "third term" is added. The plan of Crown Hall obviously belongs to the latter category. In Evans, *Translation of Drawing to Building and Other Essays*, 270–271.

12. Krauss, "Raster," 51–66.

13. Fritz Neumeier, in his essay "A World in Itself: Architecture and Technology," describes "the idealistic construction of a philosophy of opposites" as the "essence of Mies's architecture": "Modern technology could also help in building a bridge on which the spirit could enter into a world of otherwise meaningless facts and resolve the limited being into a higher, metaphysical reality—one in which the opposing

elements of mind and matter coincide as self-completing parts of a whole." In Detlef Mertins, ed., *The Presence of Mies*, 81.





Figure 4: O.M.A./Rem Koolhaas. Campus Center, IIT Chicago. West façade. (Source: Photo by the author.)

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14. The character of the exterior differs significantly from that of other O.M.A. projects from those years. The monolithic façades of projects like the Rotterdam towers (1997–2013) conform to the claim in "Bigness" that "interior and exterior become separate projects, one dealing with instability of programmatic needs, the other ... offering the city the apparent stability of an object." In Koolhaas and

Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, 501. All the more, the forcefully composite exterior of the Campus Center seems to oppose Mies's idea of the "common language."

15. Koolhaas's essay "Junkspace" goes back to the lecture "Learning from the Mall of America," given in Minneapolis in 1997—the year of the Campus Center competition. As an essay, "Junkspace" was

published in *a+u* in 2000, followed by an extended version in the *Harvard Guide to Shopping* from 2001; it was also included in the catalogue of the exhibition *Content* from 2003, the year the Campus Center opened.