

Reinventing the Public Sphere

OMA's Souterrain & Architectuurstudio Herman Herzberger's CODA

The public sphere in Western cities has been radically transformed into a private sphere. The architect no longer works for the public but primarily for private developers and wealthy individuals. Almost every square metre is subordinate to the flow of money, control, individualization and traffic. Urban and architectural interventions that represent the ideology of a monarchy, a religion or at best a democracy in public space are no longer of decisive importance for the city. Commerce is penetrating deeper and deeper into what were once the free domains of human existence. How urban design and architecture can be used to generate a sense of community, the meeting of different cultures, a place for the unknown, spontaneity, and forms of protest is no longer a topic of discussion for many clients and architects. How the organization and form of a building, a square, a street or a piece of infrastructure can be used to represent and activate an idea of democracy would seem to be a thing of the past.

Yet there are still architects who refuse to resign themselves to this loss and who continue to devote themselves to the public cause. This would seem to be the case, for example, in two projects by Hertzberger and Koolhaas featured in this Yearbook. A lot has changed, of course. Nothing prospers nowadays unless it makes money. In OMA's Souterrain you need money for the car park, for the tram and for the shops. And in the CODA cultural department store by architectuurstudio Hertzberger, you are part of the 'cultural industry' – whichever way you turn, you come up against a museum shop or restaurant. At first glance both projects seem to be textbook examples of the flow of money, but there is more going on here. These projects reveal a sort of dual coding. Supported by the government's financial contribution for infrastructure and public institutions, Koolhaas and Hertzberger manipulate the contemporary money-making reality and manage to smuggle in a free space for the public sphere.

For Hertzberger the main challenge was not the creation of a beautiful object but the question of what kind of spatial organism he could realize inside the building for the people who meet one another there every day. 'The expression is on the inside,' Hertzberger has said of CODA. The visibility from the street of the interaction between the different cultural programmes in the building, is intended to lure people inside. Which is why the facades are of glass; only that of the top floor, which houses the archives and storerooms, is of black concrete. For OMA the challenge was to demonstrate that architecture can have a positive influence on the rigid regime of transport pragmatism. How to turn a piece of infrastructure into a public building? As part of a new above- and underground ring road in The Hague, which links car parks and conducts heavy transport into the city centre, OMA's tram tunnel transforms the centre's underground into a 'La Defense in reverse'.¹ The tram tunnel functions as a kind of spinal column whose sophisticated nervous system connects the individual 'organs' of the city.

The open structure, the intensity of activities and the many possible physical and visual connections between different parts of the programme in both the interior of CODA and in the Souterrain, demonstrate that the typology of the street is an excellent instrument for

creating a public sphere. The connecting routes determine the organization of the building. In contrast to a square, of which much is expected by the various parties concerned, the street's advantage is that as a simple connector it permits many freedoms. In both the Koolhaas and Hertzberger projects, the various connections shoot over, under and across one another. The result is a complex but efficient interlacing of sight lines, belvederes, stairs and circulation routes for various kinds of traffic. Owing to the open nature of the routes, the local expansions – such as the broad, plaza-like platforms of the Souterrain stations – and the way you can look into the exhibition spaces from the CODA restaurant, unexpected relations develop between the various traffic flows. The street functions here as a public, non-hierarchical network where everyone can move around freely. It gives rise to what Hannah Arendt called 'the space of appearance': 'The space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly'.²

Never before have the ideas of Koolhaas and Hertzberger displayed so much similarity. Has Hertzberger learned from Koolhaas and Koolhaas from Hertzberger? Yes and no. The provocative remark Koolhaas directed at Hertzberger as to whether he was still designing little awnings for milk bottles, must have hit its mark. There is no sign of any cosiness revolutions in Hertzberger's buildings these days. Designing from the realm of the individual, which is to say repeating the unit of human measure to arrive at an urban scale, as in his famous Centraal Beheer office in Apeldoorn, belongs to the past. Hertzberger is no longer afraid of the monumental effects of strong forms. And Koolhaas' portentous 'Junkspace' essay about the effects of neoliberalism, was not without its effect on him, too. Surfing the waves of late capitalism is no longer a beatific experience.

Nevertheless, there are ideological differences between the two architects. Unlike most underworlds, the Souterrain is not at all claustrophobic; indeed, it is even luxurious due to the contrasting detailing of the rough concrete retaining walls in combination with chic materials and a sophisticated level of lighting. Like Andy Warhol, Koolhaas embraces our mass culture, only not by glamourizing populism but by transforming it. The cinematographic jokes, like the roundabout with bamboo forest on the parking deck, the motorway crash barriers along the parking ramps and the sketchy and informal detailing of the tram track that almost has you crossing from one side of the platform to the other, surprise, astonish and delight. The unusual approach to comfort makes us feel at home while at the same time challenging us to experience reality differently. Koolhaas' aesthetic in the Souterrain testifies to an optimistic, cheerful uncertainty that seeks communication with the public by embracing the schizophrenia of daily life. Hertzberger on the other hand goes in search of harmony, a building in the form of 'micro-city' where, as Hertzberger has put it, you feel at home in the same way as on the steps of a piazza. In the past Hertzberger puzzled out precisely where the public and private realms began at each step that a user took. This architectural paternalism no longer defines the quality of Hertzberger's work; users can move more freely around in the CODA building. Yet Hertzberger continues to look for a social-democratic balance free from urban alienation, confrontation or subversive behaviour. It is no accident that all the routes in CODA lead to the restaurant.

Suddenly it has grown suspiciously quiet in the shopping street filled with clamouring advertisements above the Souterrain in the centre of The Hague and in the street beside the CODA in Apeldoorn. While urban life is losing freedom at the level of the city, Koolhaas and Hertzberger generate a new public sphere by conceiving the interior of a building as a

Article by Roemer van Toorn, Architecture Yearbook, NL

network of traffic flows.

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1 OMA's description in their project notes; see: www.OMA.nl

2 From Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) as quoted in: George Baird, *The Space of Appearance*, Cambridge, Mass., 1995.