

# Architecture at Remdom; The Blinkers that Make the Visionary

A Conversation with Rem Koolhaas by Ole Bouman, Roemer van Toorn

## Introduction

Rem Koolhaas, or rather, the continuously jetlagged avant-gardist. His image has always been that of an architect who is not entrenched in his own discipline but who uses architecture as a base to carry out raids on the whole culture. His work is a non-stop running commentary on la condition contemporaine and its impact both on architecture and on our ideas. His work is distinctly conceptual, and contains hidden intellectual depths. He is not afraid of reformulating a given project in terms of a strategy that undermines outworn conventions. His work is a stumbling block, literally and metaphorically. OMA is not a company that deals in amenities, but a place where the future of our culture is discussed. It seems almost incidental that architecture and city-planning are the media employed. With his inimitable mix of paradoxical statements and spectacular objects and images, Koolhaas is an architect who has transgressed the limits of his specialism and has made inroads into the realms of economy, philosophy and art. In 1990, for instance, he participated in the huge exhibition, *Energies*, in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. His competition entry for the Très Grande Bibliothèque in Paris was shown there alongside the work of artists such as Bruce Nauman and Anselm Kiefer.

Koolhaas is an architect who has often expressed his disgust at the self-imposed limitations of his colleagues. This attitude has made him a fruitful subject for social analysis. A group of intellectuals and other trendsetters feels increasingly at home in Koolhaas' work. We however can't resist asking whether there isn't a certain contradiction inherent in his work: everything about it suggests that it does not so much point to a new direction as to lead us to the pseudo-organised no man's land of the present-day megalopolis. Once Fredric Jameson described Koolhaas as suffering from the 'bladerunner syndrome' which he describes as:

'the interfusion of crowds of people among a high technological bazaar with its multitudinal nodal points, all of this scaled into an inside without an outside, which thereby intensifies the formerly urban to the point of becoming the unmappable system of late capitalism itself: the abstract system and its interrelations are now the outside, the former dome, the former city, beyond which no subject position is available, so that it cannot be inspected as a thing in its own right, although it is a totality'.

It is clear that this architecture has a distinct psychopathological dimension. The city of the Fascinists has ceased to be a forum where public affairs can be debated; what it offers is the kick of a psychic dance on the edge of the abyss. Koolhaas' only objective to date, according to Jameson, has been 'to model what is no longer a public sphere or realm but rather a no man's land'.

Our heads must have been turned in another direction, because the very thing we wanted to talk to Koolhaas about was the importance of his approach for the public domain. We were interested to know what his almost cinematic atmospheres might mean to concrete human beings on the level of their concrete experience and above all what plans, hopes, ideas and critical potential an encounter with his work might generate. How do you escape the purely practical application of theoretical concepts? How do you prevent this adventure from only being interesting to the 'happy few' who

possess both the critical distance and the liquid assets to get the chance to actually enjoy Koolhaas' hyperreality?

We tried to get Koolhaas to talk about these and other matters. It wasn't exactly a success. The author of *Delirious New York* and other manifesto's is no longer with us. Language is not meant to clarify things but to make them more complicated. Koolhaas does not suffer from any shortage of words; they have, however, lost their innocence.

*We'd like to begin with a couple of quotes from you. 'The world is nostalgic for the architect as philosopher'. And: 'The world is ripe for the architect as visionary (...). What we require is a programme of reconstruction for the mythology of the architect'. Architecture for you is above all 'petrified thought'. That is presumably the reason why you have no qualms about pouring ridicule on your colleagues' lack of vision and lazy-mindedness, and the fact that they so often judge your work on the basis of purely technical criteria. Does this make sense?*

Ridicule? I never meant to sound so didactic. I think that part of our activity has to do with creating a sort of lebensraum, a context in which we can do what we want or rather, to put it more modestly, what we are capable of. As far as I am concerned, then, it has very little to do with some didactic need to give people a good ticking off. What does astonish me is that the things that are self-evident to us are not so for them.

*All the same, after so many years of being astonished you should now be able to spot a number of examples of the Koolhaas recipe? I would have thought that you would gradually be beginning to see certain constants in the way that you and your approach are received.*

It is very difficult for me to see any constants because we have changed so much ourselves. In recent years in particular we have actually landed up in a completely different world with the result that I lead a sort of double existence. I have one life in Holland and another abroad. Life in Holland is hard and abroad it is ... certainly not easy but at least it is a completely different life. We also make different things abroad from what we make here. That means that people's responses are also different. The financial conditions under which one has to make architecture in Holland simply don't exist abroad in our experience; that also means that a number of criticisms that may be quite legitimate here, do not apply elsewhere. As far as use of materials and detailing are concerned, our block of flats in Fukuoka in Japan, for instance, is stunning in its perfection and everyone who has seen it so far as told us so. It even won the prize for the best building in Japan in 1992!

I felt that the building should have something Japanese about it but that it also shouldn't be too beautiful. For that reason we opted for a very banal polyester/polystyrene matrix that was cast in black concrete; I calculated that they would come up with such perfection that that would be enough to give it some dignity. Conditions and possibilities of this order don't occur in Holland.

To give you another example: I recently tried an experiment with the Byzantium building that we designed at the entrance of the Vondel Park in Amsterdam. I invited two foreign architecture critics, Klotz and Von Moos, who did not know who it was by. I asked them what they thought of it. They both thought it was an extremely interesting building. I've never managed to get a Dutch person to react that way, so you will have to put your question a little bit more precisely before I can really give

you a proper answer.

*Maybe there is a difference between the responses you get in Holland and elsewhere; what we're interested in, however, is the fact that you often criticise people for playing dumb about questions of historical conditions. You want to use architecture to renew a certain historical consciousness or, at any rate, to bring architecture up to date, to make it contemporary once more. This is, of course, an intellectual project that is way above the standard discussion in the trade in Holland at the moment; it revolves around a situation in which the whole western world is involved. This constant 'updating' of architecture is in this sense also a sort of struggle against the refusal to know; it is a critique of the deliberate attempt to ignore the present historical situation.*

I don't see it as a struggle against this negative attitude but as a professional operation that creates something like the wake of a ship but in reverse, something, that is, that opens up in front of you. Something that you yourself can use to operate practically in the theoretical space that is created. It is then a sort of communication about the status of our profession and about what themes are important, sometimes as an intuitive registering of things that will become important, that you can feel coming before you have encountered them in reality. This can be explained quite simply and banally by saying that you are someone who is on the lookout for these things and that that gives you the right to be active in the front line of architecture.

*Do you imply by this that you are taking up an avant-garde position?*

My approach has never been that of a guerrilla or a member of the avant-garde, if anything the opposite. *Delirious New York* (Oxford, 1978) is a 'retroactive' manifesto about what has happened and not about what has got to happen. What it actually dealt with was the possibilities, the relations between architects and power, without making any claim to be subversive. The front line is not exclusively the terrain of the avant-garde. It is not only the reformers who are active there but also the researchers. In *Delirious New York*, Manhattan was the Rosetta Stone and I was Champollion.

*Is it really just an individual need to establish a position for yourself in the world of architecture, or is there more at stake? Are you in fact operating in a context where you are concerned not just with gaining a position as an individual, but where you also have to bring about a change that will be of benefit to architecture or have even wider implications? If that is the case, then you could well describe the critical activity involved as 'exposing to ridicule'.*

I have a horror of the expression, that's all. But this feeling of horror is probably just a form of hypocrisy, because I can't bear to see myself as a sort of schoolmaster. It is true of course that it does have two aspects: on the one hand I am concerned with publicising our own work as individuals and as a firm of architects and on the other hand with my capacity or need to make statements about what has taken place in architecture and about what will or could happen in this field in the future.

*But do you mean in architecture itself, or do you think you need to be active outside architecture as well? Your work still seems to take what is utilitarian very much as its point of departure; it is very project-dependent and it tries to express an idea or an*

*atmosphere that is inherent in the project. This means that you touch on matters that in themselves don't have any direct relation with architecture, that refer rather to other aspects of our culture.*

We are totally dependent on the culture; that's exactly why it's so important that we make some kind of statement about it from an architectural point of view. I am writing a book about Tokyo, Paris and Atlanta at the moment. The book deals with the thesis that the only relation an architect can have with chaos is to take his rightful place in the army of those who struggle against it. It is through our a priori failure in that struggle, moreover, that chaos comes into being. This isn't something that you can deal with as though it were a matter of style or aesthetics. The book argues for a total review of the situation; I relate architecture to all kinds of developments: in politics, in culture and in economics. In any case I want to carry out an analysis of the sphere of influence in which architecture operates. Although it looks at present as though the context is the most important factor, it is the architecture in fact that remains the most important thing for me. I want to work out in detail the way that we can most effectively relate and respond to what is going on at the present moment.

*But is your architecture only a neutral mirroring of the age or does that mirroring also imply criticism?*

In everything that we do there is a critical layer. An operation such as we are carrying out in Lille (the Urban Plan for International Business Centre) is a thousand times more than just a neutral reflection. We are involved either in sending a large part of Europe to hell or else we are giving it a completely different character. The question then of whether or not what I do is to reflect what is going on becomes a bit academic. I myself have the feeling that it no longer has anything to do with reflecting what is going on. Existing possibilities and conditions have been assessed and interpreted so many times and have been subjected to so many different trends, some critical and others ecstatic, that you can't speak of being a mirror any more.

*Is there a moment when this processing of existing conditions becomes 'fashion', or aren't you interested in that particular connection?*

It is interesting to me only for my own count; the others can do what they like. For myself I always try to retain an element that is hard to assimilate. I can think of nothing worse than becoming really popular, being all the rage: we should always retain something that is difficult. On the other hand there is some very fashionable architecture that I find really attractive. I experience it as very difficult to pass any moral judgement. All I know is that I myself don't want to circulate effortlessly in those smooth circles; I need the sound of grinding cogwheels too.

*You once described a very particular moment: the moment when you are allowed to do whatever you want coinciding with the moment that you can no longer think up anything. Does the fact that you are at present so preoccupied with that moment mean that it is rapidly approaching, or was it always a danger right from the beginning of your career?*

I think that it is by definition a constant danger; one of the ways of exorcising that fear or danger is by carefully studying the career of other architects. How did your

colleagues deal with it? Self-criticism and just keeping on one's toes also remain essential. Up till now I don't get the feeling that we've run out of ideas or that we have succumbed to the temptation of repeating ourselves. In one thing at least we have been successful: there is no predictable trend in our work.

*Your social and cultural diagnosis makes your architecture a cultural medium of some significance; in the long term this is perhaps more important for the world than any purely architectural intuitions that in a specific place or at a specific time lead to certain design choices. The narrative element in your work is the diagnosis. Isn't that also the most essential element of your criticism in the long run?*

As an architect I want to make one thing quite clear: it is very important not just to be an artist with language or a talented diagnostician. As far as that is concerned the block of flats in Japan, the Villa dall'Ava in Paris and the Media Centre in Karlsruhe are, in our view, unusually aggressive ventures that also give one an extremely good idea of the spectacular and spatial aspect of our work. I wouldn't like to say which of the two buildings I prefer. One of the great problems with what usually passes for criticism is that it is too one-sided. We are so ambitious that we want to do everything at once. And that immediately turns out to mean we can't do everything at once. No critic has succeeded in understanding this dialectic. Take for instance the problem of detailing; this is something that we are beginning to be reasonably good in. In fact we got a prize for the best building of 1992 with the Villa dall'Ava. It is also strategically important at a given moment to avoid being constantly carped at for reasons like that. But I would never criticise it in isolation as critics of architecture usually do.

*You talk about the question of detailing as though it was the opposite pole to the general cultural significance of your diagnosis, but couldn't you imagine a brilliant theory of culture about an architecture that is not itself refined or polished and which rejects detailing as a sort of cultural prise de position?*

Something resembling this theory does in fact exist, but it doesn't explain everything. In the Media Centre in Karlsruhe there are things that are pretty rough, but anyone can see that they are deliberately rough; they aren't just accidents. What we are doing is using a kind of failure in detailing as a sophisticated form of detailing. In the Danstheater in The Hague there are some details that come into that category, but others that don't. However that may be, I refuse to be identified with what is no more than one aspect of our work.

*That's fair enough, but the diagnosis you are offering is of course the diagnosis of a situation where you can no longer identify with just one aspect of your work, if only to be able to continue to take yourself seriously.*

That's quite true. What is involved is a permanent process of adaptation. It is a case of cultivating new forms of recalcitrance or difficulty.

*But supposing we take spatiality and, by implication, the profession itself as our point of departure. You constantly stress that emptiness is more important than space, because as you once said: 'Where nothing exists everything is still possible, and where architecture exists almost nothing is possible any more'. For the outsider who*

*is intrigued by your architecture but doesn't necessarily want to know about any problems you may have had of a technical-professional nature, the interesting thing is just that historical transformation from space to emptiness that you have apparently made into your theme.*

If you want to refer to the profession in general, I would rather talk in terms of going from volume to emptiness. Some of the empty areas we have devised are exceptionally spatial, so I don't understand what you mean by 'transformation'. But go on please.

*You seem in your work to address yourself more to a notion of an atopia than to the positive idea of space that the modern architects wanted to break open to liberate a utopian energy where everyone could have their say in society. Emptiness as an architectural principle is of great cultural importance because it is a commentary on the positively interpreted space of the moderns.*

I think I've entered a new phase. I think that what you say is a good interpretation of our work but I see absolutely no reason for further comment on it. In any case I never conceived of it so precisely. It wasn't my intention to deliver a deliberately cynical attack on the idealism of the modernist architects, by opposing their space with a notion of emptiness. In some respects what I was doing was much more banal and literal. Everything that has been built has become increasingly unmanageable: for that reason if for none other the things that have not been built are of great importance.

*Our interpretation is also based on your speech in the symposium on 'How modern is Dutch architecture?' You gave a brilliant speech about Nietzsche and the Modern Movement, that had at least a latent intention of encouraging your audience to draw conclusions about the architectural element in it.*

I certainly don't want to give you the idea that I am an uncomplicated person; on the contrary, I am really interested in the moments when my articles cause a furore. But it is also exactly these moments when I'd rather have kept my mouth shut. There's nothing unusual about that, surely?

*It's still a problem for us. As authors of this book the temptation to go deeper into that is irresistible. That's why we'd like to ask you what you think of the notion of the German historian of architecture, Michael Müller, who made a comparison between your architecture and the 'destructive character' of the modern to use Walter Benjamin's expression Benjamin talks about the execrable *Étui-Mensch*; with you it is more a case of holding people up to ridicule, or providing diagnoses or wanting to explode the present situation to which people continually respond by deliberately thinking up yet another reassuring answer.*

Of course that's something I'm interested in. But some of my articles, such as the one in which I present the architect as philosopher and visionary are exaggeratedly rhetorical. That aspect of my work is based on a momentum in myself that I can hardly stop, an attitude that has something to do with my sort of intelligence. So it's definitely not something I think of as a personal message, but rather as a commentary on an incurable condition. I'm always looking for that sort of thing; I have a feeling

for that sort of contradiction, that sort of sentimentality.

*That's okay, but if someone in your audience takes you seriously and openly takes issue with you about it, you have to take some responsibility for that, surely. Do you really think that once you've done your performance, people can make of it what they like?*

Maybe I feel dreadfully responsible; that's my business. But I don't feel that obliges me to orchestrate the verbal aftermath. It's been enough for me to have had a bit of fun saying things that have apparently stirred something up. One of the things that I regard as extremely questionable in the present-day architectural world is the notion of important people. You may be an important architect but that doesn't mean that you are an important person whose seal of approval is required for all kinds of things or whose opinions have some kind of hierarchical status. We talked about bringing architecture up to date. Or rather about seeing that contemporary trends are actually incorporated into architecture as it is practised. One of the most typical features in that project is the confrontation you get with the people who want it to be 'easy' and don't look at contemporary developments that are anything but easy. You could say that architecture is an ideal medium for clearing the intellectual backlog; but you might also say that, from the point of view of its limits as a discipline, architecture is neither the only nor necessarily the best means for doing this. I am once more, quote-unquote, seriously involved in writing. That is of course another means of expression. In the Centre Pompidou, where they now give the new media the same status as painting, there is a virtual reality project in progress. I'm taking part in it. Public appearances and teaching is in a sense a sort of sideshow. For the moment I don't get the feeling that I've hit my limits. On the contrary I feel more and more enthusiasm for defining the territory myself. By the same token I could have been a writer and I think that that wouldn't have changed very much. For humanity, maybe, but not for myself.

*But isn't the far-reaching specialisation that is typical of our society also a limitation? Or, rather, doesn't it lead to an illusion of freedom that this society creates and which makes it impossible to bring about any real changes any more?*

Do you really think there is so much specialisation? All the people who try to get me to do something else, films for instance, I really have to brush them off like flies. For the time being at least it's my own limitations, my own caution that is the problem.

*We meant something else by that. Have you never had the feeling with a commission, that another problematic ought to playing more of a role than the one dictated by the project? Haven't you ever felt boxed in because you were called in as a specialist in design and your client never asked you to make any kind of statement about the social character of the project?*

There is a correlation between the sort of commission you get and the kind of architect you are. I've noticed that particularly recently. Take for example the (cancelled) Media Museum in Karlsruhe where the definition of the commission was one of the most essential parts of the design. The same goes for domestic architecture. With the housing project in Fukuoka that I just mentioned I was almost given carte-blanche to do what I liked. For the time being then I really can't say that I am limited

in what I am allowed to do; and I won't use other people's limitations as an alibi for any limits in my own content.

*So, it's not architecture that's the problem, but your own limitations. If the occasion arose, could those people whom you once talked about hypothetically as being potential visionaries, also succeed in being so in the realm of architecture? Does architecture really allow one the space to be visionary?*

I certainly think so. At the present time architecture has an enormous potential for influencing the course of culture. But perhaps that opportunity will only be there for a moment. Perhaps it's just a small opening that will last about four years. I'm not going to make any predictions about that.

*Can you give an example of a work of architecture having had a decisive impact?*

It depends what you mean by decisive. I can imagine that a building like the Media Museum in Karlsruhe might have had that sort of impact on the classical idea of the museum; that the new media may be able to bring about a sort of redefinition of what architecture actually is. One of the temptations with that project was to make as great a use of the media as possible, but in the end that was of course somewhat naive because the media themselves are exposed to a sort of ongoing process of change; and for precisely that reason they need a sort of crude skeleton for them to remain viable themselves. I also have the illusion that something like that can happen in Lille. Perhaps it doesn't amount to a revolution in European culture, but it is certainly a decisive intervention in Northern Europe.

*The question of course is which came first. Isn't it rather a case of architecture being called in to give a helping hand during a certain period of historical transition?*

Yes, of course! But then I never claimed to be the first in the field. On the contrary. In the seventies and eighties the situation was so arid that we all went round with a host of ideas that nobody wanted; we were like lovers who had been rejected. The situation is more exciting now and possibly more dangerous. In contrast with the previous decade, I get the feeling that we are now actually being called on to give some kind of coherence to a number of operations that are under way. These operations are by no means unambiguous, but at the same time it is clear as daylight that a movement is going on that is wider than architecture alone.

*But even if you come second, you claim that your influence is decisive. But what proof is there for that? Is it an influence on space or the debate about space or on the iconography of buildings...?*

On everything in a way. If Lille turns out to be a success, then it will above all be as an irrefutable proof of Virilio's propositions, that distance doesn't exist any longer and that everything has turned into time and speed. This means that a number of things are eliminated and that a number of other things become prominent. I believe that this is the direction we are heading in. The spatial dimension will in this case therefore have to be interpreted as making a sort of commentary on our time and I also hope that a

sort of equivalent iconographical expression will emerge.

*A number of your colleagues have appropriated that iconography in advance without taking any account of what you call the impact on our time. The reputation of your oeuvre is based on its design vocabulary. Even though one would think this iconography was a good expression of a certain attitude towards all these rapid changes, there seems to be a rather 'Beaux-Arts' response to this iconography. What do you think of that? That hardly suggests that it is having a decisive influence on what's going on?*

We are not interested in being original and I am trying to get the firm to give up its habit of looking at things that way. We know that in a lot of ways we are not particularly original. Luckily that realisation has so far always helped me to avoid making the mistakes of others. For the rest, I agree completely with your comment. As far as that is concerned, France is at present a very good example because their whole idea of what is modern is completely conservative and reactionary. Instead of symmetry they now give us asymmetry; instead of the classical materials everything is now transparent and made of steel and glass. It is actually extremely vulgar. In fact I think that you can also say that about the Institut du Monde Arabe, even though it is an absolutely fascinating building, even including the fact that it is so absurd. That wall with the diaphragms is really crazy and that makes it a sublime success, but if one thinks about it, its impact on the city is rubbishy. I really admire that building, yet there is nothing dynamic or modern about it, even though that's exactly the feeling it was supposed to convey. It is important to realise that inherent in every project is an upper level of what you can achieve with it. With the Media Museum in Karlsruhe, for instance, where that level is very high, we were for the first time able to identify 100% with the aims of the commission. That is also a sign that the culture is pressurising architecture to come up with things that are new. In Delirious New York the question was still how conscious or unconscious an architect had to be to ride the waves of modernity like a surfer. The thing that was really brilliant about the first generation of New York architects is that they were extremely intelligent while still managing to avoid being so self-aware that they had to automatically distance themselves from their own self-awareness. They preserved an artificially maintained innocence. Most masterworks have been a result of this combination of intelligence and innocence. They embodied a collective ideal while at the same time managing to provide a distanced commentary on it; they enabled the aspirations of the collective to coincide effortlessly with those of their client. I had the idea that this was something we would never see again. That we were condemned to consciousness. The remarkable thing is that in our recent projects we have the idea that this innocence can return again. That this total identification has again become possible. Only in this way can architecture also be more than an illustration and succeed in inspiring a cultural movement instead of merely commenting on one. *When is someone too conscious to be capable of doing anything?* You can always do something, of course. Even someone as hyperconscious as Eisenman still does something. But in some cases we notice that we are much less committed and this means that a more cynical building is erected than in cases where our commitment was more genuine. In the first half of the eighties we were tending much more in that direction; that's why it's such a good thing that we have regained a certain innocence. Recently interviews have also become a problem for me because they force you to speak in terms of complex

motivations that are in some respects of minimal importance to me right now. I'm not so naive that I think that if you know what motivates you immediately lose it. That was the classical reason why people refused to see a psychiatrist: that you would no longer be creative if you did so. At the present time however it is very important for all of us to insist on the rights of our unconscious. Part of these rights involve a reserve about explaining all our motivations.

*That could make it difficult for us to continue this interview.*

Just carry on. Look, I think it is certainly interesting for you to ask me what my motives are but I don't think it is interesting for me to answer you. Tomorrow if I feel like it, I defend my right to be interested in space and space alone and to build an extremely reactionary building. That could even be an incredible challenge.

*Are you waiting till the programme fits in with that, or should every programme fit?*

Perhaps the end result will sometime even have to go completely against the project. I don't want to discount any possibility. Currently there is in any case a tendency towards behaving recalcitrantly or at least people have a sense of the importance of being difficult, something that expresses itself in an inexplicable discrepancy in statements. It can of course be a very good thing if at a certain moment we say that speed is totally unimportant or if we punctuate that speed with something that doesn't go past in a flash.

*In other words your themes may change but your recalcitrance marches on? My question then is: why? To stay innocent?*

No, definitely not. One of the things that interests me in a way that is almost literary is how the career of the average architect looks. I am extremely fascinated and spend a lot of time trying to understand how someone like Meier or Isozaki function, and how it is that some people have nothing more to say while others are doing new things all the time. For that matter it's no more than a kind of curiosity that has everything to do with my own self-interest.

*Isn't it almost a fear of becoming old-fashioned?*

No, not at all. There is a well-known drawing that shows the correlation between one's creativity and one's portfolio of commissions. An awful lot of people operate in the execrable right-hand area. Maybe it is a great pleasure to operate there but in any case it is not particularly respectable. This recalcitrance and unwillingness to be pinned down have a lot to do with this. Tactical considerations are very important for me. There are a lot of things about running a firm with forty people that are of course anything but pleasant. That means that in one way or another I have to get some kind of pleasure out of life.

*Learning lessons from the careers of others, however, is a bit of a long way round; you can hardly call it an inner necessity. You are not only conscious of your own position, but also of the way others have managed to escape falling into traps. Isn't*

*the appeal to allow room for the unconscious and to put innocence back on the stage, particularly strong in your case just because you are already all too aware of a similar switch in your own career?*

I don't believe its possible to be 'all too aware'. In my opinion you can never be conscious enough, but let's say for the sake of argument that there needs to be another source of inspiration parallel to the conscious one. Perhaps it is a naive illusion that these are a sort of communicating vessels; that the more that consciousness increases, the less there remains for the unconscious. It could be the case that when the one increases, the other does so too. It is at any rate very important for you to keep on working and not to get bogged down in endless ruminations. That almost always ends up in gloomy generalisations. I have an enormous dislike of all the prophesies of the merchants of doom; I refuse to join in the forecasts of disaster that have for so long now been a sort of signature tune for intellectuals analysing society. I get the feeling that it leads to an enormous blindness. The simple fact that the apocalypse continually fails to show up becomes problematic for thinkers like Virilio. At a certain point anxiety becomes an end in itself. I think it is just as rewarding if one postpones one's apocalyptic view of life - a tendency I also have latently - for as long as possible.

*And what do you think of the reaction of people like Siza, Ando and Frampton in his critical writings who fall back on the notion of the 'tactile'. What do you think of Siza when he says: 'If the world is speeding up I respond by deliberately making peaceful-looking buildings and I put the materials first'?*

The Villa dall'Ava in Paris is also tactile and very physical just because it is a house. What I mean is that with regards to the body the relation is so undeniable and self-evident that tactility is almost inevitable. I also feel a great deal of sympathy with that attitude. But if you look carefully at these people you will notice a sort of speeding-up right now; Ando and Hertzberger, for instance, are adapting their own sobriety to a sort of mobility. The curious thing about Ando is that the less you see of Ando, the more impressive he is, and the more you see of him, the more it strikes you that he employs the same aesthetic regardless of the project involved - a boutique, a sort of Zen Buddhist monastery, a Protestant church or a dwelling. I hardly need to say that at a certain point it becomes hard to take him seriously.

*But don't you think that a certain commitment is beginning to develop that this architecture is also a part of? Or do you think that is also just a passing fashion?*

The tactility of his work is undeniable and it is everywhere, even in his most streamlined and so least tangible design. That's the first point. I also think that in a number of his projects it has a lot to do with his frustration about scale. There are any number of good architects who work on a scale that is too small, especially in America. That leads to an obsession with tactility or with the craft. The tactile is given a preference and attention that is completely one-sided. Someone like Holl, as soon as he gets to make a public building or something large-scale, I think he'll turn out to be completely different. It is a phenomenon that is easily explained; it's almost sociological. Or take Morphosis, those people are involved with an obsession that is quite ridiculous, but that has to do quite simply with the scale of their megalomania; I mean they are megalomaniacs, but are condemned to realise their megalomania in

minimal projects.

*What about your own sense of commitment?*

I thought the library in Paris was an interesting project in that it showed that there is something really quite important that still remains: that is, a large collective space where (as far as that goes 'shelter' isn't the right word) fragmented humanity at any rate now and then for specific reasons can reconstitute itself; that a process of reuniting of a collective population, a regrouping can take place.

*But is that still collective? Is that space not just a symbol of the impossibility of forming a new collective? Is the fact that a project of this sort is included in an exhibition with a neutral name such as Energies (Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum, 1990) not in itself, to say the least, indicative of this anonymizing and decollectivising tendency? A certain abstraction is introduced that is subversive of collectivity in all its aspects.*

It is more an answer to the question of what collectivity means now. Or of how you might be able once again to give form to the collective. I think that the word collective is very applicable to it. I think that at the moment one question is particularly relevant: in the light of the dissolution of matter, the disappearance of the need for centralisation, what roles of architecture are in any case made redundant? Apparently some of the roles remain relevant, if only through the fact that we ourselves continue to exist. That is another meaning for the collective value of our architecture: to investigate and determine the implications of our profession for the present moment in our culture.

*We are beginning to run out of steam...*

I know what you mean. Have some more coffee.