

Rem Koolhaas 2000 Laureate Ceremony Acceptance Speech

I have prepared a short speech. And maybe I should start with an anecdote. It may be a strange anecdote, but coming from the Netherlands, and being born in 1944, meant paradoxically that I was ignorant of the issue of Jewishness until the age of twenty-one. In my youth, in my country, it was, completely unusual to indicate anyone's religious or racial background, and it was an issue that we never spoke about. That changed drastically when I first came to New York, and was welcomed, on the Institute for Architecture and Urban studies, led by the architect Peter Eisenman, who deserves, in my view, the Pritzker Prize even more than me.

The first time I was there, Peter Eisenman took me by my coat like this, in a very aggressive way, and said, "Do you know why you're here, Koolhaas?" And I said, "No." "You are here to represent the Gothic element." So that put me in my place, and probably explains some of the feelings of my situation here.

Anyway, I want to begin by performing my thank you's. I thank Cindy Pritzker and the Pritzker Family and its foundation for their exceptional identification with architecture. I thank the jury who make such an inspired decision this year. I thank my partners at my office O.M.A. Each and every five-hundred-fifty of them have made the contribution that now turns out to be critical. I thank the Harvard Design School for supporting my double life as a futurist. And I thank my clients who triggered our work by burdening us with their needs.

After my thank you's I have written three little anecdotes, or three little episodes that for me indicate both the recent past of architecture, the current situation of architecture and the perhaps imminent, future of architecture. And, I want to discuss some of the potential evolutions that I—if I'm not careful it will blow away the evolution that may happen in the imminent future. I want to start in 1950—fifty years ago.

Fifty years ago, the architectural scene was not about a unique individual, the genius, but about the group, the movement. There was no scene. There was an architectural world. Architecture was not about the largest possible difference, but about the subtleties that could be developed within a narrow range of similarities within the generic. Architecture was a continuum that ended with urbanism. A house was seen as a small city. The city was seen as a huge house. This kind of architecture saw itself as ideological. Its politics stretched all the way from socialism to communism and all the points in between. Great themes were adopted from beyond architecture, not from the imagination of the individual architect's brain. Architects were secure in their alignment with what was then called society, something that was imagined and could be fabricated. It is now 2000, fifty years after the idyllic caricature that I just described for you. We have Pritzkers, there is a fair amount here sitting on the first row—therefore we have unique and singular identities, signatures even. We respect each other, but we do not form a community. We have no project together. Our client is no longer the state or its derivations, but the private individuals often embarked on daring ambitions and expensive trajectories, which we architects support whole heartedly.

The system is final: the market economy. We work in a post- ideological era and for lack of support we have abandoned the city or any more general issues. The themes we invent and sustain are our private mythologies, our specialization's. We have no discourse about territorial organization, no discourse about settlement or human co-existence. At best our work brilliantly explores and exploits a series of unique conditions. The fact that this site's archeological aspect is emphasized above its political charge, shows the political innocence is an important part of the contemporary architect's equipment.

Rem Koolhaas, 2000 Laureate (continued)

I am grateful that the jury's text for the 2000 prize, casts me as defining new kinds of relationships, both theoretical and practical, between architecture and the cultural situation. That is indeed a sense of what I'm trying to do. Although I am very bad at predicting the future, too preoccupied by the present, let us speculate for a moment about the next fifty years interval—architecture as it will be practiced in two thousand fifty, or if we are lucky, a little bit sooner.

One development is certain. In the past three years, brick and mortar have evolved to click and mortar. Retail has become e-tail and we cannot exaggerate the importance of those things enough. Compared to the occasional brilliance of architecture now, the domain of the virtual has asserted itself with a wild and messy abandon and is proliferating at a speed that we can only dream of. For the first time in decades, and maybe in millennia, we architects have a very strong and fundamental competition. The communities we cannot imagine in the real world will flourish in virtual space. The territories and demarcations that we maintain on the ground are merged and morphed beyond recognition in a much more immediate, glamorous and flexible domain—that of the electronic.

After four thousand years of failure, Photoshop and the computer create utopias instantly. At this ceremony in this location, architecture is still fundamentally committed to mortar, as if only the proximity to one of the largest piles assembled in the history of mankind reassures us about another two thousand years of lease on our particular niche, and our future credibility. But the rest of the world has already liberated architecture for us. Architecture has become a dominant metaphor, a controlling agent for everything that needs concept, structure, organization, entity, form. Only we architects don't benefit from this redefinition marooned in our own Dead Sea of mortar.

Unless we break our dependency on the real and recognized architecture as a way of thinking about all issues, from the most political to the most practical, liberate ourselves from eternity to speculate about compelling and immediate new issues, such as poverty, the disappearance of nature, architecture will maybe not make the year two-thousand-fifty. Thank you.

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