

Architecture as Machine: Lobotomy of the Contemporary Urban Environment

Zilsalina June Mendieta

zmendieta@ufl.edu

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Advisor: John Maze

“In the deliberate discrepancy between container and contained New York’s makers discover an area of unprecedented freedom. They exploit and formalize it in the architectural equivalent of a lobotomy—the surgical severance of the connection between frontal lobes and the rest of the brain to relieve some mental disorders by disconnecting thought processes from emotions.”¹ The scientific, psychosurgical process of emancipating the mind from the control of any emotion and personality has always been a process equated and symbolized within many disciplines. Rem Koolhaas however, proposes a notion of architectural lobotomy—a physical, metaphysical, theoretical, and symbolic separation between the inner workings of an architectural building and the exterior dialogue with said building’s contextual surroundings. Koolhaas analyzes how this architectural lobotomy has influenced the vast concrete jungle of skyscrapers in Manhattan. This architectural lobotomy is also tied with his concept of automonumentality—how modern skyscrapers have become, in essence, monuments within the city fabric, ultimately perpetuating the dialectical relationship between automonumentality and architecture as lobotomy. In essence, the quintessential representation of architectural lobotomy, a skyscraper, perpetuates its monumentality within an urban fabric, ultimately stripping architecture of any symbolic, metaphysical, and theoretical semblance and detaching it from its context, both in terms of space and time, rendering the skyscraper a timeless relic with no ties to contextual cultures.

¹ Koolhaas, Rem, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1978), 82.

“Lobotomy: a surgical operation involving incision into the prefrontal lobe of the brain, formerly used to treat mental illness.”² In the early 1900s, this psychosurgical procedure for mental illness was considered common. It successfully reduced distress in the patient, but was often at the cost of blunting the subject’s emotions, personality, and volition. This disconnect of the frontal lobe from the rest of the brain resulted in far worse ramifications including: inability to recognize future consequences resulting from current actions, inability to choose between good and bad actions, inability to suppress unacceptable social responses, inability to determine differences and similarities between things or events, and inability to formulate long term memories, which are dependent upon a foundation of the emotional sort.

In terms of architectural lobotomy, a number of parallels can be drawn from the medical to the architectural and finally to the cultural. In its essence, lobotomy renders the human mind emotionless and detached from any future repercussions. This parallels that of Koolhaas’s theory of architectural lobotomy. In the world of architecture, the skyscraper has become a prototypical manifestation of this theory. According to Koolhaas, “architectural equivalent separates exterior and interior architecture,”³ eliminating any manifestation and connection of the interior to the exterior. Equating psychosurgical lobotomy to that of architectural lobotomy, the interior of the skyscraper can be equated with the mind of a human, so to speak. At the most fundamental level, the interior workings of a building gives the building its purpose and theoretical significance, leaving the façade as a public manifestation and interior containment, or the body. Lobotomizing such an architectural icon

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/lobotomy>, (accessed September 26, 2011).

³ Koolhaas, Rem, *Delirious New York*. 82.

can ultimately mean stripping it of any theoretical and metaphysical meaning to the exterior façade and to its sociocultural entity. As a lobotomy strips a human of any guilt or concern for the future, so does it strip the skyscraper of its sole purpose—having the interior be completely separated from the exterior façade creates an endless continuum of architectural use, thus forcing such an architecture to be considered timeless and detached from any historical, contextual, and theoretical foundation rooted in today's society.

A prime example of such a phenomenon is Rem Koolhaas's and OMA's projects of The Hague in Europe. It is a part of a "series of a more recent projects that indicate a new condition in Europe itself; a condition that has something to do with 1992, with a new energy, a new way of thinking, and a new confidence in Europe."⁴ It was during an age in which there was a massive, enormous explosion of scale, which was previously unthinkable in Europe. It proved difficult to plant this large scale within "a European context, where history is an important issue."⁵ With this city hall, making such a quantum leap in scale while also maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the historical and cultural context within the Hague proved to be a difficult task. In a building beyond a certain size, "the scale becomes so enormous that the distance between center and perimeter, or core and skin, becomes so vast that the exterior can no longer hope to make any precise disclosure as to what happens on the interior."⁶ In other words, this quantum leap of scale begins to affect the interwoven relationship of the interior and the exterior. The humanistic relationship between the interior and exterior, based upon an

⁴ Fitzpatrick, Lynn & Hofius, Doug, *Rem Koolhaas: Conversations with Students*, (Rice University, School of Architecture, 1991), 4.

⁵ Fitzpatrick & Hofius, 5.

⁶ Fitzpatrick & Hofius, 6.

expectation that the exterior will always disclose certain aspects of the interior, is inadvertently broken. The once cohesive system of interior and exterior become completely autonomous, “separate projects, to be pursued independently, without any apparent connection.”⁷ Another indication of this autonomous division and increase in scale is that with distances within the buildings becoming so vast, programmatic entities become independent spatial elements; this separation further lobotomizes the interior “mind” of the building from its exterior “body.”

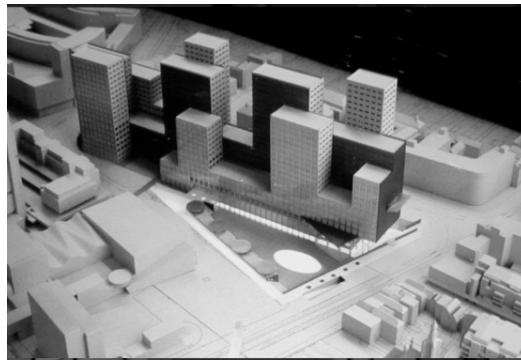


Fig. 1: City Hall at the Hague, Netherlands—New city hall situated between historical center and 1970’s redevelopment

More specifically among these projects at the Hague was the National Dance Theatre. This theatre was created as a well-executed architectural paragon of Koolhaas’s theory of the lobotomy of architecture. The original design intention included a “functional box decorated with flamboyant exterior elements in harmony with the vernacular,” but instead became an “Institutional center of The Hague, a banal façade which revealed little of the interior.”⁸ This became a precedent to OMA’s “Universal Modernization Patent: Disconnect” and then was initially implicated to the Cardiff Bay Opera House in Cardiff, Wales. This was a “method of

⁷ Fitzpatrick & Hofius, 7.

⁸ Lucan, Jacques, *OMA-Rem Koolhaas: Architecture 1970-1990*, (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1991), 48.

defining a theatre by strict separation of its components.”⁹ The two parts of a theater that are usually combined into a single whole (stage and auditorium encompassed by public space) are then “separated to enable both to perform their designated tasks as efficiently as possible.”¹⁰ The stage then becomes a utilitarian-factory entity, surrounded by an endless factory belt of consumption and public space transforming from balcony, to foyer, to hallways, to stalls, finally ending at the stage, which then opens up onto the audience in the form of the ceiling ending as a balcony. This example begins to explore the idea of lobotomy as a mean to maximize consumption and efficiency. The interior is primarily divorced from the exterior façade, and then separated even more in its utilitarian terms of function ultimately leading to fully autonomous spatial constructions working independently of one another, creating a reductionistic architecture stripped of any human expression, spiritual significance, and metaphysical value once present in the works of architecture and thus severing its connection to the contextual foundation of today’s fast-paced and quick-changing society.

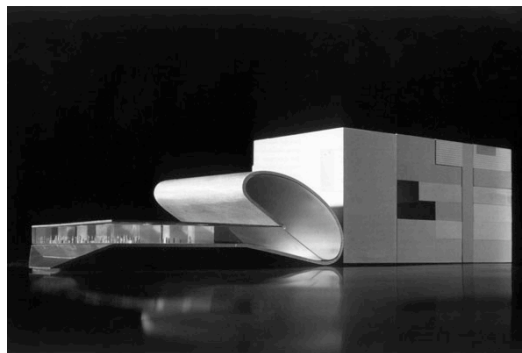


Fig. 2: Cardiff Bay Opera House in Cardiff, Wales—Utilitarian maximization of efficiency caused by lobotomy

⁹ OMA-AMO, Koolhaas, Rem, *Content*, (TASCHEN GmbH, Hohnzollernring, Germany, 2004), 80.

¹⁰ OMA-AMO, Koolhaas, 80.

The lobotomy of architecture can extend beyond physical manifestations of the disconnection between interior and exterior. Architectural lobotomy can begin to reach into the metaphysical and ideological significance of the built environment—separating the project from its creator. In *Bigness*, Rem Koolhaas discusses the incredible size of the skyscraper and the implications and ramifications caused by such a large architectural creation. Koolhaas goes on to exclaim how “it seems incredible that the *size* of a building alone embodies an ideological program, independent of the will of its architects,” furthering a separation between the metaphysical, ideological creation of architecture and its construction.¹¹ Koolhaas holds the “conceptual breakthroughs and their supporting technologies” along with new inventions culpable for this ideological shift, which created a set of regulations and infrastructure as a defined boundary for the urban city.¹² These technological advances have created a rift between creator and creation, physical and metaphysical, body and mind. With the creation of architecture divided among multiple professions, e.g. draftsmen, engineers, architects, and craftsmen, disconnect occurs between the object and its spiritual, experiential entity. Ultimately, this disconnect between construction and theory results in lobotomizing tendencies of the architectural whole.

The Theory of *Bigness*, which is composed of 5 theorems, begins to define the results of this disconnection between interior and exterior. It places sheer size at the heart of automonumentality, architectural lobotomy, and context-less skyscrapers. “Beyond a certain size or height, a building reaches a status of bigness; beyond this threshold such a mass can no

¹¹ Koolhaas, Rem. 1995. “Bigness or the Problem of Large,” from *S, M, L, XL*. The Monacelli Press. 496.

¹² Koolhaas “Bigness or the Problem of Large,” from *S, M, L, XL*. 499.

longer be controlled by a single architectural gesture,” attributing ownership to multiple architects and eventually creating a meaningless whole composed of autonomous fragmentations.¹³

In addition to the enormity of the skyscraper, the invention of the elevator was a crucial, pivotal moment in architectural history. Purely created for mechanical purposes, the elevator stripped the architecture of any classical and metaphorical inherent implications it once had on culture and society. Architecture began to become defined by rational numbers, predefined building codes, safety requirements, and building specifications that were initially believed to facilitate successful architectural works, but emerged as a secular entity that stripped architecture of human influence. “The ‘art’ of architecture is useless in Bigness.”¹⁴

With such an enormous distance in contemporary skyscrapers between core and envelope, the façade is forced to disconnect from its core. The façade is caught in an ideological rift between revealing its interior, programmatic function and interacting with its context; “the humanist expectation of ‘honesty’ is doomed, the interior and exterior architectures become separate projects.”¹⁵ In the modern obsession of literal transparency, skyscrapers suffer from the exploitation of its interior workings by the outside world. The literal transparent nature of glass was used as a way to expose the inner workings of buildings, more specifically government buildings. This “transparency would eradicate the domain of myth, suspicion, and tyranny” within the government buildings while mimicking symbolically the

¹³ Koolhaas. “Bigness or the Problem of Large,” from *S, M, L, XL*. 500.

¹⁴ Koolhaas. “Bigness or the Problem of Large,” from *S, M, L, XL*. 500.

¹⁵ Koolhaas. “Bigness or the Problem of Large,” from *S, M, L, XL*. 501.

political shift towards a free, utopian civilization, and also promoting human and civil rights.¹⁶ Ironically, this symbolic meaning of transparency was rendered ineffectual by its literal and physical properties. “It is notoriously difficult to attain; it quickly turns into obscurity and reflectivity.”¹⁷ Reflectivity of the glass created a concealed barrier between context (its people) and the interior function of a building. This ambiguity of function creates a detached interior from its transparent façade. In other words, “space, that is, has operated as an instrument of monumental dissolution” along with the enormity of the skyscraper.¹⁸

Architectural lobotomy can be most apparent phenomenologically and literally within the modern culture’s obsession with glass and its physical properties. In the modern age of architecture, cultures around the globe are adopting methods of construction, which showcase the transparent abilities of glass. Countries are competing in a global showcase of buildings that can be the most see-through and transparent, ultimately participating in public monumentality. The recent advancements in manipulation and construction of glass as an architectural medium has revolutionized the manner in which modern architects create and design architecture. This global, architectural competition becomes an instigator for automonumentality with glass as its accomplice. According to Anthony Vidler, “the present passion for see-through buildings is indubitably linked to the attempt to construct a state identity of technological modernity against a city identity.”¹⁹ France, along with many other countries in Europe, can be considered a prime example of this internal contemporary struggle.

¹⁶ Vidler, Anthony. 1992. From “The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely.” In *Architecture Theory Since 1968*.ed. K.M. Hays. 747.

¹⁷ Vidler. 753.

¹⁸ Vidler. 750.

¹⁹ Vidler. 754.

Europe, more specifically France, is enriched and laden with thousands of years of historical context. Architects of the late have been burdened with the dichotomy created within France between nostalgia for their rich historical context and a yearning for technological modernity.

Modern architects then begin to attempt to create an identity with monumental buildings representing materials, procedures, thoughts, and methods of the modern age. As architects attempt to propel each society into a technological utopia, the current spatial conditions of the city fabric enter a state of ambiguity. The literal transparency manipulated with modern techniques attempts to provide a façade that easily magnifies and renders the interior legible. The programmatic interior intends to be easily accessible and understood by the occupant; in actuality, programmatic function becomes ambiguous and unresponsive to the contextual fabric. Because the city's urban fabric is in constant fluctuation between modern and historical, each architectural project, more specifically the skyscraper, has neither contextual evidence nor a basis to respond to; this architecture is thus a creation with no cultural significance, no historical ties, and ultimately no identity. With this dilemma of an indistinct identity within the urban fabric, modern architects and designers are forced to enter this context-less realm of the architectural world and generate autonomous monuments, which “[do] not represent an abstract ideal, an institution of exceptional importance, a three-dimensional, readable articulation of a social hierarchy, a memorial; it merely *is* itself and through sheer volume can not avoid being a symbol—an empty one, available for meaning as a

billboard is for advertisement.”²⁰ Each city, state, and nation is then suspended in a web of constant struggle amidst a search for a definitive identity.

Rem Koolhaas coined the term lobotomy in the architectural sense and applied its once strictly medical implications into the architectural realm and the modern invention of the urban skyscraper. Koolhaas pinpointed the root cause of monumentality on “bigness.” He exclaims that after reaching beyond a certain critical mass, the building is considered a “big building.” These types of buildings can no longer be expressed with a singular architectural gesture. The buildings are then forced into an autonomous system of fragmentation where each element that encompasses each individual building can no longer be considered holistically. The autonomy of its parts become committed to the entire building but remain just as detailed fragments attempting to create a cohesive whole, but are deterred by the sheer enormity of the building.

This quantum leap in size can begin to have severe repercussions on the skyscraper itself. As the skyscraper grows larger with each technological advancement, the dialogue between the interior and the exterior becomes ambiguous and lost. The exterior façade grows at a two-dimensional rate the interior programmatic spaces simultaneously grow three-dimensionally. Mathematically, this system is destined to fail. There is a point in which the exterior façade can no longer reveal the internal systems, which define itself as a monument and the social and cultural infrastructure present within an urban fabric. With a façade not being able to manifest its programmatic interior to its context, a disconnection emerges

²⁰ Koolhaas, Rem, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1978), 81-82.

between the contextual fabric and the skyscraper itself. This detachment from the context is what creates a monument. Automonumentality, architecturally speaking, was introduced by Koolhaas as the outcome of architectural lobotomy. Disconnection between the interior function and the exterior portrayal of the skyscraper is then manifested as a disconnection from the context, thus making the skyscraper itself its own context-less entity with no ties to physical, social, historical, or cultural context.

The modern choice of materials highly influences the lobotomy of the skyscraper and its detachment from its context. The obsession with literal transparency to reveal the inner workings of a building only leads to a spatial ambiguity within the building itself and the building within its urban fabric. The struggle between a city's need to prove its technological modernity and reverence for the past is what suspends these monuments called skyscrapers into a global display of its undefined spatial characteristics and systems.

A specific case study and example that is caught in a struggle of identity is that of the architectural development of China. As China rapidly continues to urbanize, it is struggling to maintain a sense of balance and equilibrium between hundreds of years of history and culture and the insatiable necessity to Westernize and sustain itself. In order to sustain itself, China began adopting urbanization strategies and opening its doors to Western influences. Traditional architectural styles have been somewhat abandoned making way for the absorption of Western elements.

As China rapidly urbanized, traditional Chinese architectural design had been abandoned in order to persevere itself and pull itself out of economic depression. "However,

the traditional skills of Chinese architecture are still applied to the construction of local architecture in the vast rural area of China” along with bamboo scaffolding in the more urban areas.²¹ The memory of the traditional, ancient culture is then reanalyzed, reinterpreted, and represented within the modern culture, never destroyed or lost but instead transcending time.

Examples of this can be uncovered throughout all aspects of expression. Ancient forms of art are consistently being reinterpreted into more modern forms. Calligraphy has been modernized along with painting, sculpture, and architecture. The art of manipulating space, architecture, has also been reinterpreted and redefined within this culture. Manipulating ornamentation, methods of construction, methods of interpretation, mass vs. void, and materials all are forms of which maintain the traditional Chinese culture subtly embedded within the modern culture as society shifts and matures. In essence, the core of what comprises the traditional becomes reevaluated, stripped of the superfluous, and consolidated into a more modern interpretation of the culture; an essence of a people transcendent of time and space.

During the East Asia 2011 Study Abroad program, the studio project focused primarily on redeveloping the ancient district of Shiba Ti in ChongQing, China. The project focused on creating a transition and symbiotic relationship between the historical district and nearby modern commercial and business district. The metaphorical and symbolic significance of a traditional Chinese tea house was the driving force behind the conceptual influences of the Shiba Ti redevelopment landscape. Chinese tea houses have been around for centuries, acting

²¹ "Brief Introduction to Chinese Architecture." 2008. <http://www.chinatraveldepot.com/C187-Chinese-Architecture> (accessed April 10, 2012).

as communal areas of relaxation, interaction, and contemplation for all. As tea houses developed, they became areas of solace from the mundane, everyday life. People from all walks of life, rich and poor, could settle here and share the joys of teas, relinquishing any disputes and disagreements. ChongQing is said to be the first global port for the exchange of tea and herbal medicines. This landscape redevelopment begins to urbanize the significance of the tea house and reinterprets the essence of tea and the significance it has within China. With historical influences at its core, a metaphorical significance can be attributed and reinterpreted into a modern architecture that satisfies a reverence for history and a yearning for technological advancements.

The studio project required an urbanization and redevelopment of the historic Shiba Ti District. The traditional Chinese tea house was then further developed and reinterpreted into four main aspects of the urban fabric: tower, podium, urban pocket, and cultural plaza. Different representations of the tea house were embodied within these moments and contributed to increasing the spatial interaction between inhabitant and architecture. This interaction ideally bridged the gap between old and young, poor and rich, rural and urban, and circulation artery within the historic district. With this, the tower and podium relationship along this road was chosen for further development and was seen as a paragon example of the dynamic dichotomy that occurred within the area and within all of China. The interlocking relationship between the tower and the podium was further investigated and proved to be an essential relationship needed to dispel the growing use of architectural lobotomy. A theoretical and ideological shift of what a skyscraper can be perceived as will propel this profession into creating a context in which is involved in a symbiotic relationship with each of its monuments,

thus evolving into an urban fabric that can positively influence social and cultural structures within the human built environment and create a place that satisfies all of the human's phenomenological needs as well.

Below are excerpts of the Architecture in East Asia Study Abroad 2011 *Individual Studio Project*

Works by: Zilsalina Mendieta

