

## FEATURE

# An Avant-garde Architect Reinvents Seattle's New Library

Editor's Note: China Central TV's new headquarters was planned by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, who designed the Seattle Public Library, the Prada Store in New York and the Casa da Música Concert Hall in Porto, Portugal

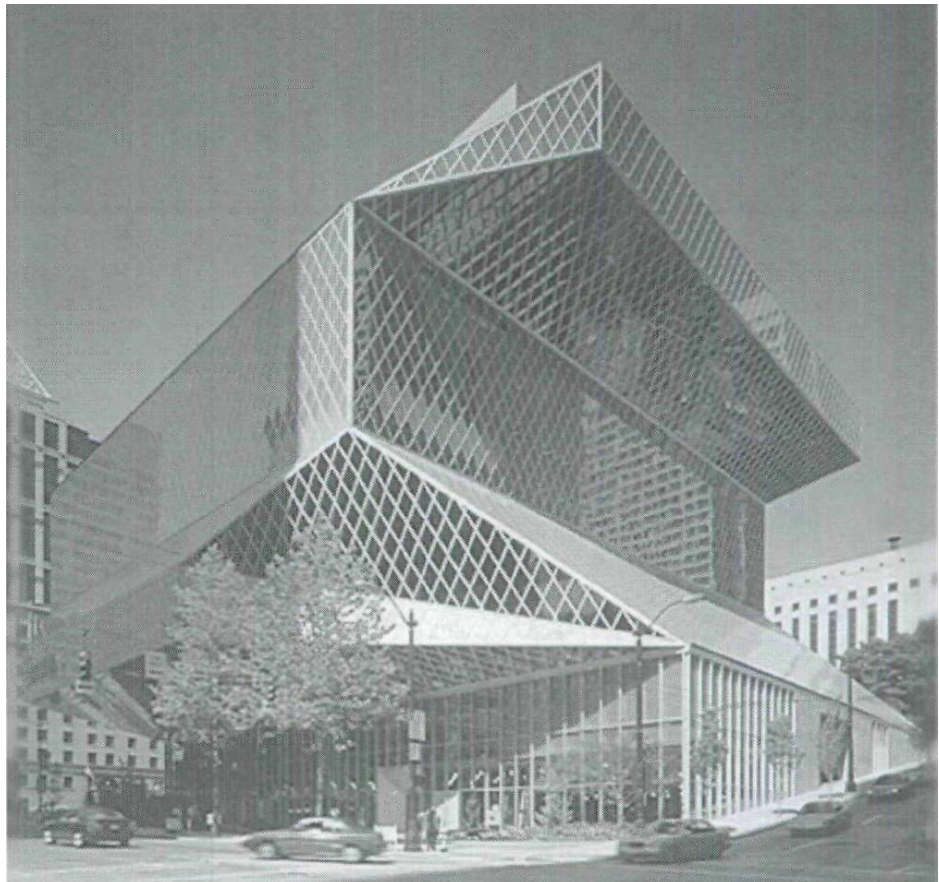
By Rosemarie  
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Several years ago, a group of architecture graduate students had dinner with Frank Gehry. Famous for the seemingly floating metal forms of Seattle's Experience Music Project, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and his breakthrough work, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain, Gehry has become the "must have" architect for cities and institutions looking to redefine themselves.

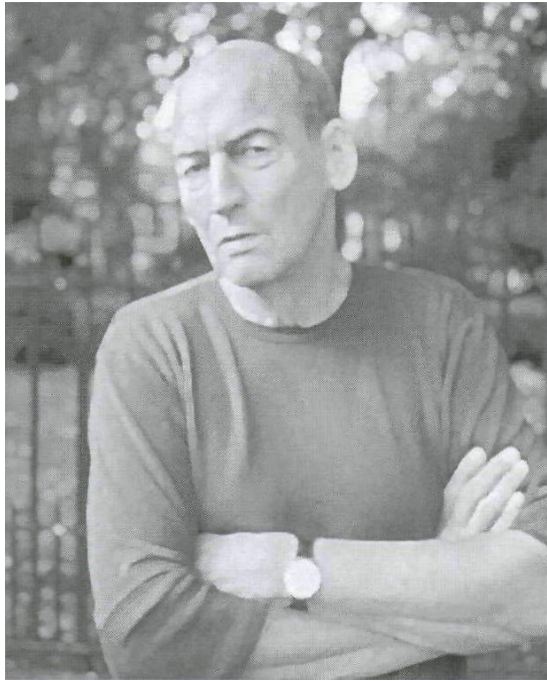
The subject of Rem Koolhaas came up, bringing a surprising response from the most popular avant-garde architect in the world today: "Koolhaas is something," Gehry said. "His ideas. He's beyond what I'm doing. He's really something"

Yes, Koolhaas, the architect of Seattle's new Central Library, is something — something of an enigma. With a lanky 6-foot-4-inch frame, sharp cheekbones and a shaved head, the Dutch architect looks monastic. If Gehry is known for his outlandish shapes, Koolhaas is known for, as Gehry says, his ideas.



During his packed, provocative lectures, he might calmly present blizzards of research on topics such as the absurd pace of urban growth in China or the allure of shopping. He'll hit his audience with unsentimental ideas about how global trends are making architects irrelevant. He constantly reuses his favorite words — contaminate, exploit, instigate, exacerbate — to cajole architects to make themselves matter again.

Instead of being insulted, the architecture world has embraced him, made him its chief guru, despite the fact that his commissions to design



In 2000, Rem Koolhaas won the Pritzker Architecture Prize. In their Citation, the Pritzker Prize Jury described Rem Koolhaas as a visionary and a philosopher. Critics have argued that Koolhaas ignores all consideration for beauty and taste.

The Pritzker Architecture Prize is awarded annually to honor "a living architect whose built work demonstrates a combination of those qualities of talent, vision and commitment, which has produced consistent and significant contributions to humanity and the built environment through the art of architecture."

Created in 1979 by Jay A Pritzker and run by the Pritzker family, it is one of the world's premier architecture prizes. The prize is awarded "irrespective of nationality, race, creed, or ideology."

actual buildings had been relatively rare until recently.

Now he has been given the chance to bring his concepts to full fruition in Seattle's new library, and his agenda is nothing less than revamping our notions of what a library is.

### Breaking with convention

Perhaps no other architect today is so deft at analyzing and attacking sacred cows. Take his criticisms of the modern skyscraper: The floors of skyscrapers separate people by company, by function. The strange or the banal can all occur on one floor without having any effect at all on another. It's a giant shell containing thousands of people, yet the only thing that can possibly connect any of them is the elevator. In Koolhaas' buildings, users can watch and be watched by other users, almost like being on a stage. In other buildings, escalators, stairways and ramps are typically camouflaged or tucked away; Koolhaas brings them out front and center and uses them to force people to interconnect.

Once a journalist and screenwriter, Koolhaas' best-known work until now is not a building, but a book. *S, M, L, XL* published in 1995, was a 1,344-page, six-pound collection of built and unbuilt projects, sketches and essays, some of which have almost nothing to do with building. Collectively, the book amounted to a provocative joy ride of a critique of contemporary society — and not incidentally, a brilliant marketing tool for his services.

With increasing pace, his Rotterdam, Netherlands-based architectural firm, Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) has gotten more work, after two decades of doing not much more than architectural-competition entries, supremely clever but unrealized studies and the occasional built project.

In 1995, Koolhaas became a Harvard professor. In 2000, he won the Pritzker Prize, architecture's equivalent of the Pulitzer. In the past eight years he has built in Europe, Asia, New York, Chicago, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and here.

OMA's drawing board includes a theater in Dallas and a new headquarters for China Cable Television in Beijing.

A generation ago, recently minted architects sort out the firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill for a year or two of buffing; today, architecture-school graduates would give their left arm to become an acolyte to Koolhaas.

### The library of the future

When the Seattle Library Board of Trustees picked Koolhaas to design the building in 1999, they cited his "intellectual approach to the library of the nature." The realization of that approach looks like this: Most of the 11-story space of the new library feels like one continuous volume, subdivided into interconnected platforms that freely flow from one to the other.

Moving around it is not unlike playing the classic video game *Super Mario Brothers* jumping from one level to the next. Your path can be straightforward or labyrinthine, depending upon your route. The nonfiction collection's "book spiral" winds through the building on a continuous series of ramps, allowing the disabled and able-bodied to cruise the stacks.

"There is a kind of sadness about the (traditional) multistoried library," Koolhaas said. "It is simply divided into floors and each floor is more or less a random grouping of subjects, like humanities, whatever... (We wanted to) have a single, continuous experience, making individual floors almost mute, and that's why we came up with a spiral."

The new library also questions assumptions about materials. Rip-stop nylon, a parachute-like material, lines one of its ceilings. The metal "fishnet" pattern on the exterior, engineered by the structural firm Arup Partners, actually supports the building against lateral forces (such as those caused by earthquakes). That's in contrast to most large buildings, which internalize most of their support in central cores.

Also out are terms like "reference desk." Here it's called the "mixing chamber," a one-stop

shop for both in-depth and reference information that's also the gateway to the book spiral.

"We were just interested to reinvent the vocabulary, so it would not be conveying this kind of endless tradition that was running to its conclusion," Koolhaas said. "If you mention in one sentence 'reference desk' and 'mixing chamber,' the one sounds uninspiring, and the other one sounds as if something is about to happen."

Koolhaas used similar ideas to unify once-scattered campus functions and revitalize the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) with his McCormick Tribune Campus Center, completed earlier this year.

The center's one-story building envelops a square block and swallows an existing campus building — one designed by modernist icon Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, also the former head of the IIT architecture school.

Koolhaas turned that entire building into a cafeteria, typically thumbing his nose at notions of high art, low art and function. Diagonal pathways cut through the center and extend outside, disrupting the abstract, neat grids that Mies designed the campus around in 1938.

### A 'traditional' building?

Koolhaas' theories might imply that, like IIT, his ambitions for the library extend beyond its walls.

Look at the essay, "Bigness, or the problem of Large," from "*S, M, L, XL*" Written to defend another, unbuilt library project five times the size of Seattle's, "Bigness" defines a building so large that it breaks "with scale, with architectural composition, with tradition, with transparency, with ethics. Bigness is no longer part of any urban tissue. Its subtext is (expletive deleted) context."

In other words, the building becomes so large and difficult to grasp that the city has to adapt to it, not the other way around.

So is Rem Koolhaas coming to Seattle and saying we need to adapt to him and his Bigness? Koolhaas says emphatically, no.

"Seattle's library is not that size and is really a traditional building. (It) takes into account two kinds of context: One, the fact that it's in an American city, which means largely abstract-looking and largely featureless buildings, and, second, within its precise position, it is trying to exploit the maximum natural givens of the site."

That's how far-out Koolhaas is: He thinks one of the most radical civic buildings ever erected in this country is "traditional."

Ironically, the world's leading architectural theorist is reluctant to explain his new work in too much detail. Some things simply beg for explanation, like the giant bulge that holds over a stairwell on the library's bright red, so-called "colon" or meeting-room floor.

"The architect, in terms of telling you why tiling? are, has its own limitations," Koolhaas said.

Maybe by retaining some mystery Koolhaas forestalls the day when his work becomes too easily understood and commodified. Unlike Gehry, who some say is already down that path, there isn't yet a well-known Koolhaas "look." For now; Koolhaas cultivates a sharp edge.

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