

Reading of Koolhaas' CCTV New Headquarters

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The new headquarters of China Central Television (CCTV) in Beijing, PR of China, is an example of postmodern architecture. It was designed by the firm of Rem Koolhaas and the final product provoked both admiration and detestation. Is this architectural marvel an example of postmodern architecture? That is the focus of this essay. The author provides the rationale behind this cultural space. The CCTV headquarters is both a reflection of the past and a statement about the future. When the postmodern present is embedded in the cultural past of Beijing, it is influenced by those social and cultural forces. Hence, the complex spatial arrangement of the new headquarters rival that of the Forbidden City. The blurring of the distinction between the inside and the outside is reminiscent of the Ming Tombs. The architectural edifices of the present are embedded in the cultural spaces of the past.

The new CCTV headquarters were designed by the famous Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and his firm, Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). When judging the design, the jury commented that "...the planned new CCTV building can not only represent the new image of Beijing, but also express, in the language of architecture, the importance and cultural nature of the TV industry. The novelty and feasibility of the structural design will surely push forward the innovation of structural systems and theories of China's high-rise buildings." Such was the proclamation of the General Office of CCTV New Site Construction & Development Program.

The new CCTV headquarters are composed of the main building, the Television Cultural Centre (TVCC) and the Energy Service Centre. It is located in Beijing's Central Business District (CBD). The entire process of TV programme making—news, broadcasting, studios, and programme production—are all housed in the CCTV main building.

The main building has an area of 115,000 square meters and includes a hotel, a visitor's centre, a large public theatre, and exhibition spaces. It is a highly visible edifice that can be seen from the main intersection of the Central Business District. The TVCC building frames the main building which is situated within the "window" of the TVCC building.

A Media Park can be found beneath the open spaces of the TVCC and forms a landscape of public entertainment, outdoor filming areas, and production studios as an extension of the central green axis of the CBD.

Many architectural firms competed for the prize of building the CCTV complex. The unusual and controversial leaning-tower design by the firm of Rem Koolhaas aroused much excitement and the firm won the competition. It was extolled by some as an architectural triumph and decried by others as a shameful smear on the landscape. Many complained about the extravagant project cost and bad influence on the already heavily congested traffic in the area.

CCTV's new headquarters will be one of the modern high-rise leaning buildings in the world. Some famous leaning towers are Puerta de Europa (Gateway of Europe) in Madrid—the first modern leaning buildings—and the Barcelona Communication Tower. The New Headquarters are complete postmodern architectural constructions with some traits of Chinese

traditional thought of architectural design. This paper aims to look at this architecture from a postmodern view, analyzing the building's form and content. Its adoption of Chinese architectural tradition will also be discussed.

Is This a Postmodern Triumph?

Before interpreting the new construction of the CCTV site from a postmodern view, it is important to review some of the theoretical claims associated with the theory of postmodern architecture. First, how does one define postmodern architecture? The definition of postmodern architecture is quite controversial. Some agreed that it is characterized by eclecticism and multiplicity. Jencks (1991) describes *radical eclecticism* in the following way: "We can point to three basic justifications for choosing a style, or mixing styles, as the case may be: the context the building fits into, the character of the particular functions which must be enhanced by style and the taste-culture of the inhabitants." Klotz (1988) provides a similar view. He remarks that postmodern architecture takes into account the history of architecture and refers to the given factors of the whole culture setting.

According to Harvey (1994), postmodernists see space as something independent, autonomous, to be shaped according to aesthetic aim and principles: "Fiction, fragmentation, collage and eclecticism all suffused with a sense of ephemerality and chaos are the themes that dominate in today's practices of architecture and urban design" (Harvey, 1994).

Another characteristic of postmodern architecture has to do with Deconstructivism, or Deconstruction. This is an approach to building design which attempts to view architecture in bits and pieces. The basic elements of architecture are dismantled. Deconstructivist buildings may seem to have no visual logic: They may appear to be made up of unrelated, disharmonious abstract forms. Deconstructivist ideas are borrowed from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida explains that *collage* is the primary form of postmodern discourse. Both producers and consumers of the "texts" participate in the production of significations and meanings. Cultural producers merely create raw materials (fragments and elements), leaving it open to consumers to recombine those elements in any way they wish.

Jameson's concept of postmodern architecture is fully demonstrated in his description of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. The reflective glass skin "achieves a peculiar and placeless dissociation of the Bonaventure from its neighborhood" (Jameson, 1991, p. 42), representing "a certain 'aggressivity' toward and power over the Other." The interior is designed to be a mini-city—an equivalent or replacement of the city. The entryways, "curiously unmarked" or "backdoor affairs" (p. 39), are a bit hidden, indicating some kind of closure governing the inner space.

Another fact that plays a role in the interpretation of the CCTV New Site has to do with the architect himself. It is important to understand the main designer, Rem Koolhaas, and some of his previous architectural designs. He founded the Office for Metropolitan Architecture in 1975 together with Elia and Zoe Zenghelis and Madelon Vriesendorp. Having worked as a journalist and script writer before becoming an architect, Koolhaas graduated from the Architectural Association in London. In 1978, he published *Delirious New York* in which he analyzed New York as a "culture of congestion" and promised to do all he could to fuel its growth. It is a book about the relationship between the culture of modernization and architecture. In 1995, his book *S,M,L,XL* summarized the work of OMA, especially buildings

of “bigness” and “tabula rasa” for the “generic” cities and landscapes of the future, now most typically seen in Asia; the book also established connections between contemporary society and architecture.

Rem Koolhaas is also a professor at Harvard University, where he conducts the Project on the City, a research program investigating changing urban conditions around the world. The projects include a study on China’s Pearl River Delta published as *Great Leap Forward*, an analysis of the role of retail and consumption in the contemporary society, *The Harvard Guide to Shopping*, and studies on Rome, Lagos, Moscow, and Beijing.

Recently, the architectural firm of Rem Koolhaas (OMA) has completed the Netherlands Embassy in Berlin, a campus center at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, the Prada Epicenter in Los Angeles, and the Public Library in Seattle. The Seattle Library was chosen by TIME Magazine as The Best Architecture for 2004. As an architectural thinker, his cool analytical approach to design, sprinkled with a healthy skepticism, has informed the profession that his fingerprints can be found on the work of almost any young architect today. He is one of the most exciting architects and urban theorists in the world today, approaching near cult status in some circles.

Koolhaas is fascinated by the dynamism of China. “Statistically,” he writes in his new book *Content* (2004), “the Chinese architect is already the most important in the world; (s)he will build the most. Asia is modernizing at three times the speed of its predecessors – urbanization doubling every 20-30 years, but Europe and America are no longer thinking – not for themselves, not for others.” In *Great Leap Forward*, he saw the unbelievable amount of tabula rasa that is taking place there and comments that the Pearl River Delta is the fastest growing economic region in the world.

Methodology

Contextual analysis is used for the research: taking the architecture as a text, observing how various parts of it are formed and analyzing the style of the architecture using postmodern architecture theory. Architecture, in whatever form it takes, is an expression of people’s relationship with their environment and their relationship with themselves.

Text Analysis

When people first look at the New Site, they must be amazed by its height, its grandiose appearance, and all-around “bigness”: standing 230 meters tall and boasting a massive floor space of 405,000 square meters (that’s over 4 million square feet), the new CCTV headquarters is now one of the largest buildings in the world. The grand impression it gives people simulates the design idea of the Imperial Palace (Ole Scheeren, co-designer, when interviewed by Duan Wu). Koolhaas also thinks the beauty of the Imperial Palace lies in its complexity and systematicity and that it is a symbol of old China. Contemporary China needs a similar symbol such as the Imperial Palace and only “big” architecture can realize this.

The tower is not designed as a traditional skyscraper pointing directly to the sky, but as a continuous loop of horizontal and vertical sections that establishes an urban site. “The towers press their overhanging heads together, as if each were wearied by the effort to remain upright,” writes contributor William B. Millard. The irregular grid on the building’s facades is

an expression of the forces traveling throughout its structure. The idea of a loop for a building isn't exactly new. Although never realised, Eisenman Architects designed one for Berlin in the early 90s on the site of Max Reinhardt Haus that was similar in shape although more crumpled. In designing the skyscraper as a loop, Eisenman said, cynically, that all the skyscrapers erect vertically to demonstrate the power of phallus, adding that he was against phallocentricity; so his skyscraper was designed as neutral and it bent on the top and then turned down to fix into the building itself to grow and rebirth without ending. Koolhaas designed the CCTV tower based on the similar thought as he explained that they put all the departments and sections of TV production into a continuous loop to make them operate continuously within itself (Tao, 2003). All of Koolhaas's buildings—the IIT Student Center is a good example—are about creating environments that encourage interaction, and the continuous loop of the CCTV building includes a circulation system that is horizontal as well as vertical, encouraging workers from all disciplines to interact with each other, and with the public.

CCTV as a Postmodern Edifice

In Jameson's view of postmodern architecture, flatness and lack of depth are characteristics of postmodern architecture. The top of the CCTV New Headquarters takes a horizontal shape and it is flat. It shows no sign of history. It is also depthless. Critics have argued that Koolhaas ignores all consideration for beauty and taste and his designs are "the result of architecture that wants to be different, only different" (<http://architecture.about.com>). Koolhaas himself said in his dialogue with Masao Miyoshi that the east was willing to wipe out their tradition and history and Asia always embodied its whole values less in buildings than Western societies did. Indeed, Koolhaas had put this philosophy of building postmodern architecture into his designing of China's New CCTV Headquarters.

The main tower is comprised of two symmetrical L-shaped high-rise towers linked at the top and the bottom at an angle and this disorients the viewer. It also looks like two Zs joined together, which has been described as a 'Z' criss-cross. They reflect and signify each other. In designing this shape, Koolhaas wanted to express his idea of "adjust during development and develop during adjustment" (Duan, 2003, p. 54). As the two Ls are of the same height, same size, and same material, they reflect another characteristic of postmodern architecture: as Jameson put it, reproduction.. They are the reproduction of the same design.

Some people compare the main tower, as it is a gate shape and empty inside, to Chinese *Yin* and the next tower, TVCC, to *Yang* (Phallus) ironically. The gate is used to separate outside and inside. The gate of the CCTV tower is without any doors and is transparent. Thus we can say the demarcation of the inside and the outside is blurred. Koolhaas himself said that he designed it as gate-shaped to indicate China's openness to the world. Not only will CCTV film the Olympics in 2008, but also people can look back into the building from the perspective of the Third Ring Road within the Olympic complex.

The outside glass wall of the tower reflects the other building, its immediate environment, and the light from the sky, which makes it different. It gives the impression of a kind of "dissociation from its neighborhood" (Jameson, 1991, p. 42). Furthermore, these indicate the tower's power over the surroundings which corresponds to the power of CCTV. The top Z-shaped connection part is designed to face open the Third Ring Road to imply it

speaks to the whole city and has conquering power over the society. It is expected to “command” all the other high-rises in the business district by defining the spirit and capturing the soul of the bustling district because of its height and unique design.

The main building is connected to the TVCC by an underground tunnel. Passing through the underground tunnel, people enter a large hotel with public ballrooms, a visitor’s center, a large public theatre and exhibition spaces. This consumer space makes the whole site become a mini-city itself that integrates finance, commerce, trade, and information; it is possible to directly feel the vigorous pulse of the Capital and even the entire economy of China, and embody them in its most accurate and quickest reports, thus blurring the inside and outside, just like Jameson described the Bonaventure as “not wishing to be a part of the city but rather its equivalent and replacement or substitute” (Jameson, 1991, p. 40). As Koolhaas hopes, it will become its own city, its own community, where around 10,000 workers will eat, drink, and attempt to produce kung fu movies to rival those of any Hong Kong studios. This reflects another characteristic of postmodern architecture—mini-city and postmodern consumerism culture.

Filming areas and production studios which should be inside the main building are built in a Media Park as an extension of the central green axis of the CBD. This further blurs the distinction between inside and outside.

The idea of using an underground tunnel to connect different parts of a building has long existed in traditional Chinese architecture—for instance, in the Ming Tombs. The underground entrance is a pastiche of the idea of traditional Chinese architecture. This makes the entrance to the building invisible and at the same time it does not give access to the entire building to all visitors.

Conclusion

Reproduction, reflection, flatness, depthlessness, invisible entrance, disorientation, mini-city, consumption, blurring of inside and outside, all form the main characteristics of CCTV’s New Headquarters as an example of postmodern architecture. The leaning tower idea may be a pastiche of the Piza leaning tower in Italy, Puerta de Europa (Gateway of Europe) in Madrid, and the Barcelona Communication Tower. The idea of the gate shape and grandiose appearance comes from traditional Chinese architecture—the Imperial Palace. In conclusion, the CCTV New Headquarters combines modern, postmodern and traditional ideas in one design. As it will be put into use for the 2008 Beijing Olympics as home of the national TV broadcasting center, many people from around the world will be able to judge for themselves whether this new site enables CCTV to deliver its historical mission and act as the window of an opening China and an internationally recognized modern symbol associated with Beijing.

*As the CCTV New Headquarters are still in construction, the analysis was only based on the internet resources; the research was not able to cover all the content and form of the architecture, such as different entrances to the tower and its inside structures.

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