

REM KOOLHAAS: I DO NOT CONSTRUCT TRICK BUILDINGS. I CONSTRUCT EXPERIMENT BUILDINGS

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Коммерсантъ[®]

Dutch Architect Delivers Lecture in Moscow

REM KOOLHAAS, famous Dutch architect, has visited Moscow at the invitation of the Contemporary Architecture Center in partnership with Hunter Douglas and with participation of Russian Avantgarde Foundation. The Pritzker Prize winner delivered his lecture in Burevestnik Club in Sokolniki, one of the Konstantin Melnikov's masterpieces acquired by the Foundation, and next day he replied to questions by ALEXEI TARKHANOV, a Kommersant reporter.

Rem Koolhaas was born in 1944 in Rotterdam, he studied cinematography, dabbled in journalism. In 1975 he founded OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture) design bureau. Among his most famous buildings are the Art Center in Rotterdam, the University Campus in Utrecht, Prada shops in New York, Hermitage-Guggenheim Museum in Las Vegas, the Embassy of the Netherlands in Berlin.

In 2000 he won the main architectural award in the world – Pritzker Prize. But somehow in Russia three of his fine works have been received without any enthusiasm. First Rem Koolhaas participated in the contest for designing a new Hermitage building. Under a formalistic pretext the design by a Russian bureau has been preferred over his.

His idea of modernizing apartment blocks in the Moscow community of Mnevniki has got no development either. In the contest for the Gazprom-city skyscraper in St.Petersburg Rem Koolhaas' design praised by critics as the most interesting has not been noted by the jury.

– Yesterday you demonstrated your design of a skyscraper for the Chinese TV resembling Mobius band. When looking at it, it seems that with your clients' money you laugh at them and at us, critics, as well.

– What is so funny there?

– Well, when you look at it, you think that it cannot stand upright, it will collapse any minute now. What a trick that architect has contrived?

– My clients may have had the same worries but after we checked everything jointly with Chinese engineers, they were delighted. I think that a part of the architect's work is to convince his client that the risk, both constrictive and esthetic, is justified. So, I do not agree with you that I construct trick buildings. Rather, they are experiment buildings. I think that this is the way we are able to advance construction techniques. And it is the Chinese, my clients, who will utilize it.

– But when you look at the section and the structure, it even seems somehow disappointing: such a fantastic building with such a routine structure after all. In your lecture you have quoted an architecture crit-



ic who wrote about your designs and those of your colleagues for the Arab world, the one who said that it was a result of cooperation between Walt Disney and Albert Speer in the middle of an Arabian desert.

– Yes, but it's true, the buildings are now so strange, out of this world, and one would like to see equally strange technical solutions. Otherwise, what is the news?

Now there is a most important piece of news in the construction that you fail to take into account. That is the computer. Now everything can be digitized, such things can be computed than no human would have ever had time for. For instance, in the Chinese building we have computed the stress analysis and seen what is happening to it under excessive loads.

We have seen how the structure moves, bends, how it ruptures or straightens back. It is almost a pornographic sight. So now each unusual building is supported by unusual computations.

– It's OK when there are computations. What about intrigues? I am talking about the Gazprom-city contest in St.Petersburg. How have you taken the invitation to the contest and its results? Could you ever have imagined that one day you would be invited to build a 300 meter-high tower opposite the Smolny Monastery?

– You know, those figures, 300 meters in height and 200 thousand square meters in area, have become some common unit of measurement. Buildings of such scale, of such proportions are built everywhere.

So, St.Petersburg was no exception.

– Everybody says that a building so tall should not be constructed in the center of the historic city. What do you think about it?

– Well, first of all, let me remind you what that area is, Okhta, it is not quite in the center, it is rather far away. Besides, a contest is a contest. It is quite different from a direct order. With an order you determine the size, height and so on by yourself with your client. There are no other considerations there. In a contest everything is different because there are other considerations presented right nearby and the client just makes its choice.

For them it is the need to choose but for you it is the need to be chosen of to withdraw from the field. By the way, how are things going there?

– Architects and monument preservationists launch their campaigns and shout that the enemy would not pass, that no construction is possible, and behind the scenes they just shrug their shoulders and say, well, they have already decided, they will build it anyway.

Even with Okhta not being downtown, is it not the same as building a skyscraper on Lido opposite Venice?

– No, I don't think it's the same. We have thought about such building having a right to emerge in St.Petersburg. This depends on the perception of the city. Venice now does not pretend to be a living city. It is a dead city, a perfect and dead one, and its rest cannot be disturbed. At the same time, in my opinion, the contest itself was an attempt to



make something so as St.Petersburg would not be threatened with the destiny of Venice. But if everyone is against it, how can it be built?

– Do you believe in the conspiracy theory?

– No, of course I do not believe in it.

– Neither do I, but when we are governed by the people who believe in the conspiracy theory, it can happen to come true. Do you have any orders now in Russia?

– No, I have nothing.

– Do you still believe that a Western star can do something in Russia?

– I hate the “star” term itself. I hate this star system that invades a national culture. This is in fact a key issue in the contemporary architecture. This is the matter of its survival. In this sense I would not be talking about stars, I am not some star for you. 🇷🇺

