# CCTV and the Politics of Mediaspace

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This paper examines the Chinese State Television network (CCTV) tower in Beijing by OMA as a case study for Rem Koolhaas's understanding of power. The CCTV building conflates media, the market and power in one statement embodying the values and aspirations of one of the most centralized governments in the world that is intent on modernization despite all its pitfalls.

Koolhaas's work, spanning from the delirium of Manhattan's commodified version of modern architecture to later work in SMLXL, Project on the City and Content, might be seen to mark a particular confluence of media, power and place. Within this tension, projects such as the libraries (Jussieux, TGB, Seattle) and ZKM reconcile differing, ever-expanding publics through media and its representation, affirming the power of knowledge and information in the hands of enlightened institutions to resist the tranquillized rites of mediatized consumerism and foster a "new" culture. The Dutch Embassy, European Union Headquarters and Universal Studios are further case studies.

A point of reference for historicizing the experiences of perception, power and space in the 20th century is the writing of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin focused on how the commodification of goods, development of new communication and building techniques brought on by the first "mechanical war" led to changing social relations and effected the mind and body. Technology was the catalyst, actively transforming perception and participation in an urban realm comprised of panorama and arcades. His strand of modernist subjectivity is linked to the delirium of Manhattan's commodified version of modern architecture. For Benja-

min, writing in the 1920s ands 30s, Paris was "the center of [the] world of things... [and] the most dreamed-of of their objects.[1] Manhattan, for Koolhaas, working on Delirious New York in the 1970s, Manhattan was a city of "two dimensional discipline and three-dimensional anarchy;" "a practical Luna Park" of technological infrastructures of building types like the skyscraper (Cass Gilbert's Woolworth building, Hugh Ferris' The City of Tomorrow) and places like Coney Island, Rockefeller Center and Radio City. This was "a universe parallel to sober and abstract European modernism--to imagine life in the metropolis as a deeply irrational experience that uses sparkling-new technologies to exacerbate desire."[2] Today, New York is "delirious no more" (according to Koolhaas) and public space is weakened by technological developments at the same time that buildings are more and more becoming media infrastructures. Within this confluence of media and building, and as a lens for viewing CCTV, what has emerged since Benjamin's attempt to positively use mass culture and technology in the era of liberal capitalism, in our own time designated as late, or disorganized capitalism and flexible accumulation, is the reconfiguration of market and place through the media industry. Not only through buildings that use media materials and technologies but also by the cultural power of the media corporation, private or public, that is reconfiguring the city both locally and globally. Koolhaas, meanwhile, acts out Benjamin's prediction for capitalist society: culture's need to compensate for the lost aura of art and artist with 'phony spell' of the commodity and star. Taking on the role of pragmatist, he continues to inhabit the extremes and contradictions of the profession, his work becoming part of

the dream world of urban space and images that colonize the everyday.

## VOLUNTARY PRISONERS

In the early 70s, Koolhaas problematized the power of architecture in his thesis project at the Architectural Association entitled "The Berlin Wall as Architecture." He wanted to demonstrate how the aesthetic and material qualities of an architectural object were secondary to the production of architectural meaning. His project was subsequently reworked and submitted with Elia Zenghelis, Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis as an ironic response to the 1972 Casabella competition "The City as Meaningful Environment." The Berlin Wall, at the time a tool of exclusion, become an instrument of collectivity when displaced to the city of London. The project was renamed Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture, the title referring to the second book of the Bible which recounts the departure of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, their journey across the Red Sea and through the wilderness, and Moses' giving of the Ten Commandments. The parable is a model for prophesying architecture's power to cure the urban condition and the potential of building to affect the life and death of the prisoners.

Formally, Exodus was a blend of the iconic models developed by Leonidov in the thirties and the Surrealist monumentality of Superstudio's Continuous Monument. It can be seen as both the culmination and a last gasp of the visionary architecture of the 1960s. Exodus was a giant strip that divided the city of London in two, a linear zone that enclosed a series of square blocks for specific activities. The enclave was accessible only from one door. Inside, one was conscious of being kept in captivity in an artificial metropolitan universe. Each quadrant was a place for contradictory behaviors activated by institutional settings including baths, a hospital, a park, a museum. Londoners would be so enticed to experience true metropolitan life that they would flee from the outskirts of the city and escape to the new enclave at the city center, which becomes repopulated. They would beg to become inmates, voluntary prisoners of the strip.

In this most elaborated allusion to imprisonment an historically significant form is re-invested with meaning and given psychological dimension. It is

at the same time "heartbreakingly beautiful" and a "guilty instrument of despair": this ambivalence is "architecture's true nature." Exodus exhibits both idealism and pragmatism based in the urban flight to demonstrate the potential of architecture to be both ideal and real. Koolhaas recent critique of the project as exclusionary, is simultaneously a rejection of faith in architecture as an instrument of social change: "Were not division, enclosure and exclusion-- which defined the wall's performance and explained its efficiency--the essential stratagems of any architecture? In comparison, the 1960s dream of architecture's liberating potential--in which I had been marinating for years as a student--seemed feeble rhetorical play."[3]

Exodus is Koolhaas's first "big" project. Bigness was a concept that rectified the disappearance of community values in the contemporary city, that allowed Koolhaas "to explore new definitions of collectivity after the demise of the public realm-- public man--eroded by the onslaught of the media, pressures of the virtual, multiple privatizations, the end of the street, the plaza, etc."[4] Descriptions of CCTV invariably list its impressive size: The site covers four blocks in the new financial centre of Beijing with a total area of 180,000 square meters. The 553,000 m2 headquarters will be among the first of 300 towers constructed in Beijing's new central business district. The project involves 400 designers and engineers on 3 continents working 24/7 for 5 years. It is ostensibly the second-largest building in the world next to the Pentagon.[5] CCTV attempts to create urban space rather than displace it, its intention to create a sculptural spatial effect in the tradition of urban ensembles like Rockefeller Center. The building's central cavity, or 'window' opening, frames the adjacent cultural center, also part of the project along with a surrounding media park. Koolhaas had acknowledged the authoritarian overtones of scale in SMLXL, in "Palace of the Soviets," a fictional account of the competition held in the 1930s.

## IS SPACE POLITICAL?

> ...the concealment of Communist, red ideals... to save Utopia at a moment when it was being contested on all sides, when the world kept accumulating proofs of its ravages and miseries . . . infrared©, the ideology of reform, is a campaign to preempt the demise of Utopia, a project to conceal 19th century ideals within the realities of the 21st century. --Project on the City, Vol. 1 (2002)

OMA was awarded the CCTV commission in 2002, the building's exterior envelope will be finished for the Olympics in 2008 with move-in scheduled for 2010. Thirty years ago, Delirious New York depicted the New York Athletic Club as the quintessential skyscraper. This building type, juxtaposing dissimilar activities such as apartment, golf course and restaurant, is the essence of the 20th century and such contained the garden of paradise, where Adam and Eve and temptation (the apple, mark of knowledge and loss) have been usurped by two boxers eating oysters at an institution dedicated to the body. The idea of the skyscraper has since informed a number of OMA projects. The Beijing tower however is OMA's first skyscraper commission.

CCTV may be the part of the most Chinese endeavors, the revisioning of the urban landscape, given the question of identity and search for a mode of development inherent to the state of that country. China has historically been driven by absolute forms of power, its urban and architectural development occurring in three historical patterns: large-scale destruction and replacement of urban fabrics to inaugurate changes of emperors or dynasties; massive relocations of populations; and highly planned urban configurations enabled by centralized and unchallenged forms of authority. Concentrated authority gave shape to cities such as traditional Beijing. It also wiped them clean, accommodating a new society with luxury apartment complexes, office towers and shopping centers. "Power today may not exist in the singular form of an Emperor or a Chairman, but it is managed and exercised with enough strength to channel the possibilities for urban experience, and to choose which urban traditions to preserve."[6] One additional factor today is the presence of not only many foreign firms but also Chinese architects who worked and studied abroad in the 1990s and who have since returned to the mainland to start their mostly independent architectural practices, bringing with them an infusion of western architectural critical thought to fill the "brain drain" left by Communism.

According to the OMA website, "The project proposes an iconographic constellation of two high-rise structures that actively engage the city space: CCTV and TVCC. CCTV combines administration and offices, news and broadcasting, program pro-

duction and services, the entire process of TV-making - in a loop of interconnected activities. Two structures rise from a common production platform that is partly underground. Each has a different character: one is dedicated to broadcasting, the second to services, research and education; they join at the top to create a cantilevered penthouse for the management. A new icon is formed, not the predictable 2-dimensional tower 'soaring' skyward, but a truly, 3-dimensional experience, a canopy that symbolically embraces the entire population... The consolidation of the TV program in a single building allows each worker to be permanently aware of the nature of the work of his coworkers - a chain of interdependence that promotes solidarity rather than isolation, collaboration instead of opposition. The building itself contributes to the coherence of the organization. While CCTV is a secured building for staff and technology, public visitors will be admitted to the 'loop', a dedicated path circulating through the building and connecting to all elements of the program and offering spectacular views across the multiple facades towards the CBD, Beijing, and the Forbidden City. The Television Cultural Center (TVCC) is an open, inviting structure. It accommodates visitors and guests, and will be freely accessible to the public. On the ground floor, a continuous lobby provides access to the 1500-seat theatre, a large ballroom, digital cinemas, recording studios and exhibition facilities. The building hosts the international broadcasting centre for the 2008 Olympic Games. The tower accommodates a five-star hotel; guests enter at a dedicated drop-off from the east of the building and ascend to the fifth floor housing the check-in as well as restaurants, lounges, and conference rooms. The hotel rooms are occupying both sides of the tower, forming a spectacular atrium above the landscape of public facilities. On the block in the south-east, the Media Park is conceived as an extension of the proposed green axis of the CBD. It is open to the public for events and entertainment, and can be used for outdoor filming."

The CCTV building, a locus of media production, has itself become a media construct. The project has spawned web pages and blogs, as well as the publication of Volume, co-founded in 2005 by Koolhaas, Mark Wigley and Ole Bouman, new Director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam, as a "global idea platform...dedi-

cated to experimentation and the production of new forms of architectural discourse." Despite an opaque design and building process with regard to the government and the local architecture firm ECADI (East China Architecture & Design Institute Shanghai), with the many questions being posed by the Chinese and architecture community, the (unfinished) building has itself become an event. The building construction was itself an event, as the two sloping steel structures were connected at dawn. (The legs have different solar heat gain because of their positions and will be closest to the same temperature after cooling off overnight.)

Many questions are being asked in the Chinese and architecture community. As a landmark is the CCTV building meaningful to Chinese society? Is its structural complexity and cost irresponsible? CCTV is also part of a larger, more general discussion on the exploitation and future of migrant workers, and the destruction and displacement of the old city structures and its inhabitants. (For other projects in China, Koolhaas expresses a preoccupation with issues of preservation when he presented the office's proposal for the competition for the extension to China's National Museum in Tiananmen Square. As with the project for the extension to the Hermitage, the National Museum project addresses locality and site specificity in the context of the contemporary city.) Debates are being played out on global vs. local, eastern vs. western interests. "Despite the design, the one thing CCTV lacks is freedom of expression. Daring new architecture, yes. Radical internalplanning, sure. Sixteen channels broadcast by whizzy new digital technology, check. Yet, for all this, CCTV remains a sub-ministry of the government of the People's Republic of China, its news programs controlled by the Propaganda Department."[7]

## THE ANXIETY OF POWER

> "To renew the architectural profession and to maintain a critical spirit, it is important to be aware, to observe the emergent conditions and to theorize them, not to oppose two situations—the European and the Asian, the eastern and the western—but to establish parallels so that conclusions can be drawn." -- Koolhaas, Mutations

How does the design for CCTV purport to establish a spatial logic radically different from the ones around it and to what extent it can put itself at a distance from its context? OMA's ambition was to

work with the organization of the program to turn the building and the broadcasting company into a media machine that is not structured hierarchically but rather sets up direct interaction between public and media. It addresses the media effect, the contradiction between place and virtual media in which people don't need to share space because they are all connected digitally, to produce a virtual audio-visual product. The role of the individual in the production process is changing as design staff, creative directors and accountants all sit in front of a computer. OMA associate and project architect Ole Scheeren emphasizes the intention to give visitors and occupants the impression of being involved in the development of a new reality. This is manifest in the two circulation loops, one for production, which is private, and another for emission (consumption), which is public. The loop is literal, like an electrical circuit; symbolic and conceptual, because there is no hierarchy; and structural, based on a system diagonal bracing. The loop is the genetics and the genesis of the building concept, like a DNA helix. The use of program to engage the body in framing public space can be contrasted to the Seattle Library's reformulation of program. (In both cases program reinforces the division of labor.)

CCTV was conceived as a continuous tube, with concrete floor plates, columns and edge beams held by a diagrid exoskeleton, a system of patterned diagonal bracing is the principal supporting element that resists gravity and lateral forces. Initially, the volume was materialized with a uniform diagonal grid wrapped about its surface. The grid was then analyzed using an iterative computer-based method to establish zones of stress for the diagonal members, from lowest to highest. In areas of greatest stress, the density of the triangulated members was increased and/or members were deformed to respond more precisely to the lateral and dead loads. In the areas where the uniform triangulation was providing more support than was required, redundant members were removed or deformed to allow for greater stresses elsewhere. The result is an efficient structure for resisting earthquakes as well. The cantilever overhang requires additional support in the form of a two-story-deep truss at the lower level of the overhang, which transfers its load to the perimeter tube and to the foundation level. Formally, the building has precedents in buildings such as Peter

Eisenman's Max Reinhardt Haus in Berlin and Otto Spreckelson's Grande Arche in Paris-La Defense. A contrast to the European enlightened model can be seen in the ideologically dissimilar project for a concert hall for Denmark national public broadcasting by Atelier Jean Nouvel. (www.dr.dk/ and www.jeannouvel.fr). Nouvel uses screen technology in the facade to embody the "new multimedia house" akin to OMA's project for the ZKM.

The building's skin, made of glass and steel attached to the surface of the diagonal bracing, is both transparent and opaque, metaphorically and literally. According to the office, the goal was to have the skin reflect the structure of the building. However, the horizontal and verticals are not expressed in the surface and only the diagonal bracing is read in a single plane of steel and glass. The surface is literally a glass skin like Semper's tablecloth separate from the structure, unlike the Seattle Library, whose skin stabilizes the building structurally. That the building's glazed skin will be embedded with images representing a kind of international sign language of the media age, a handshake, a computer, and other iconic images and text, only further reinforces the surface effect of the skin and contradicts the intention to make the skin a reflection of the structure.

That architectural surfaces have a lure and a meaning of their own is not new. Even if we have been taught to mistrust appearances, that "may be one of the reasons we pay them so much attention. We are always asked to look for the substance of things and not be distracted by superficial matters." In architecture today, the facade is often used to "spell out the nature of a building that is fundamentally a mere container, but superficially registers an indices of its contents."[8] At CCTV, the surface registers the uneven stresses at work in the irregular form. If we understand the complex to be, according to OMA, an "iconographic constellation" then CCTV is not a building constructed from images but a building that is an image of stress anxiety. The concern with power relations is voiced by Scheeren. The architect describes a seamless process--while the project's complexity initially exceeded the capability of the OMA office, there have been no alterations and changes made to the design during construction-- at the same time acknowledging that working with the Communist government and local architecture

firm ECADI (East China Architecture & Design Institute Shanghai) entailed strategic maneuvering significant for the conception and execution of the building.

Part of the importance of CCTV lies in the actual process of its happening at this moment in time. In the face of writing that is confined in large part to description that follows the party line, lacking any real disclosure (a stance affirmed by the architects), we are left to read the building itself as the embodiment of its process. (It is like the Forbidden City, another ungraspable, yet ever-present, depthless void at the center of the metropolis.) The notable lack of irony in this project in contrast to Exodus suggests movement away from an oppositional stance but rather criticism from within. In a similar way that SMLXL is a portrait of the work and the architect as well as a literal and metaphorical theory of the city, we can look at the media complex as a sort of allegorical memory theater.

## ENDNOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism, Last Snapshot of the Intelligentsia."

2. Rem Koolhaas, "Delirious No More."

3. Mark Leonard, The Financial Times, March 6, 2004.

4. Rem Koolhaas, "Bigness, or the Problem of Large," SMLXL.

5. Ole Scheeren, in an interview with the author.

6. Sze Tsung Leong, History Images (Steidl Verlag, 2007).

7. http://arts.guardian.co.uk/art/architecture/story/0,,2156966,00.html

8. Kurt W. Forster, "Surface Tension in Modern Architecture," 2005.