Preface: Architecture and Disciplinary Crises

In the past two decades, the public perception of architecture has gone through significant changes. In the early twenty-first century, several urgencies were already on the table, such as rapid urbanization and concerns for climate change and sustainability. Even as the realization grew that the building industry was responsible for a large share of existing and unsustainable (Western) habits, there was still a sense of optimism that the industry would evolve and that many issues would resolve themselves over time. Moreover, there was still a conviction (certainly in the Netherlands, but equally in its neighbouring Northern European countries) that architecture had quite a bit to contribute to the wellbeing of its users.

The global financial crisis of May 2008 (coincidentally the 40th anniversary of the Parisian student revolts) upended many certainties about growth, capitalism and financial stability. Although building projects already underway were often completed, in 2011 Reinier de Graaf of OMA/AMO curated an exhibition in Rome aptly called 'On Hold', showing more than ten projects worldwide that had been postponed indefinitely due to the uncertain financial future of their clients, or in some cases simply their shifting priorities in the wake of the banking crisis.[1] The exhibition itself garnered relatively little attention, but in hindsight it may have been a harbinger of more to come. More than anything, it demonstrated once again how intimately the forces of capital and the profession of architecture are intertwined.

While architecture has variously been positioned as a profession of building, an engineering-based discipline, an art or even a service industry, it continues to question itself. Rightfully so, no doubt, as it is dependent on multiple actors and contexts for its value and legitimacy: on its patrons, its users, its contractors and producers. In this perspective, it even seems odd that architects are so strongly educated in the myth of the singular genius at work in his office. Yet this myth has had a longstanding function, particularly

in times when the architect was the primary interlocutor of the building process, with all its complexities.

The central question of this book revolves around repositioning the architect – not as a redeemer of, but as a contributor to society, helping to give material form to the values it wishes to uphold. In this repositioning, Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas have played key instrumental roles in questioning the values of architecture in relation to its societal context, both in their writings and their projects. In the transitions that have taken place since the 1960s, the manner in which Ungers and Koolhaas address the autonomous features of the discipline of architecture in relation to its social context is situated primarily in the city as the formative condition for architecture. While they have both contributed significantly to urban thinking, their ideas are also manifest in their houses, as the intimate environment of the house provides a relatively small and simple program that can be entirely and individually designed to the last detail. Both of these lines of thinking, the urban and the domestic project, are addressed separately, in Chapters 2 and 3. Throughout the different projects and ideas examined here, a belief in the relevance (if not necessarily power) of architecture to do 'something' – even if it is not precisely as expected, or if it transforms over time – is apparent in their negotiation of disciplinary autonomy and societal context, which is discussed in Chapter 1. Finally, their teaching and writing shows how they navigate the material and intellectual aspects of the discipline, which is addressed in Chapter 4.

The primary distinction between the positions of Ungers and of Koolhaas seems to be one that might also be situated along a timeline. Where the writings and work of Ungers still fit a more traditional category of authority based on the classical *uomo universalis*, the work of Koolhaas aspires to a more editorial and observational position, akin to the 'curator' as part of the architect's identity.[2] Both are manners of addressing the changing conditions of the discipline and its role in society, and also as a response to shifting networks of actors within the discipline. In so doing, they both address the relation between the social and the formal as a modern, emancipatory position. Here, I suggest that the idea of a 'plausible' architecture reconstitutes this relation between the social and the formal, offering a form of humbleness in the realization that architecture's agency may not be as straightforward as originally posited in modernist architecture.

There is a vast amount of information available on OMA, which makes a book like this somewhat daunting.[3] What could possibly still be said after the

thousands of articles and the books about one of the most prominent architecture firms of the last four decades? Not to mention the self-presentations of the office, which hold some middle ground between position statement, architectural provocations and office portfolio, currently driven mainly by AMO, the thinktank founded in 1999 as research department alongside and independently of OMA. The approach of OMA, and later AMO, to writing and building centres on the work of Rem Koolhaas, but has also transformed over the past decades through the work of many partners, research directors, colleagues and clients, not to mention the students, interns, modelmakers, and other less visible contributors to the design process.

Nevertheless, in this book I am going back to the roots of much of this work, as it is the intellectual inheritance of an approach that continues to inform a particular perception of the discipline. As Koolhaas seems to delight in thoughtful statements followed by mysterious provocations that have kept many critics busy interpreting, he also set the bar for a particular understanding of the starchitect. His love for manifestoes has been visible throughout his career, from *Delirious New York* (1978) to *Generic City* (1994) and 'Bigness' (1994) to *Content* (2004).[4] At the same time, even as he wistfully refers to the former authority of architects, he constantly situates his practice in relation to the changing conditions of the world around him.[5] From text to architecture and back, his intellectual flexibility and shifting provocations have kept the architecture debate moving. Refusing to be pinned down to one definite identity, he thrives on the contradictions that architecture operates within, and he uses them to continually test preconceptions.

As such, he has grown larger than life – a mythical figure in an ever-expanding debate. His celebrity status has led to varying receptions, from hero worship to immediate antipathy. As the only architect to ever grace the cover of *Time* magazine, as editor for a special issue of *Wired*, having been listed in the 'Time 100', as creator of a new flag for the European Union, with the branding of Prada and his presence on CNN, he is perhaps one of the most broadly visible architects of the late twentieth century. With his most recent Guggenheim exhibition on the countryside (received ambivalently as, on the one hand, the 'indulgence of a starchitect', and on the other as an agenda-setting exhibition), he proves that even at 76, he is still capable of commanding the spotlight.[6] His work has been studied by French philosopher Bruno Latour – as a possible demonstration of a 'new' form of knowledge that moves from a former stasis in thinking that runs throughout modernism and postmodernism, to a fluid form of thinking more suitable to the twenty-first

century.[7] He made the 'Time 100' in 2008, with particular reference to the fact that he does not see architecture as something that can change the world, but rather that 'he has looked at the messy facts on the ground to see how designers and planners can submit themselves most usefully to the realities all around them'.[8]

Nevertheless, there are a few details that have not all been gathered, which are of significance in understanding a number of changes in architecture debates between 1968 and 1978, when *Delirious New York* was published and caused a stir in architecture circles. As I will argue in this book, this period is also crucial to the formation of how the role of the architect is seen today. As such, this book focuses primarily on Koolhaas's early years, prior to and just after the Office for Metropolitan Architecture was founded in 1975, reflecting on seminal ideas of this period through issues facing the discipline today. In particular, it examines the intellectual legacy of his collaboration and close contacts with his erstwhile mentor Oswald Mathias Ungers, the other protagonist of the book. While Ungers presents a similar problem to any author, with countless articles and books already devoted to his work, there is the slight advantage of many of these publications being in German, leaving him a little less well-known in the English-speaking world.[9] Nevertheless, his presence at Team 10 meetings (and as organizer of the 1965 Team 10 meeting in Berlin and a seminar at Cornell in 1971-1972) as well as the Charlottesville meetings organized by Peter Eisenman, testifies to his wide-ranging influence and his transatlantic significance.[10]

The collaboration between the two has been studied somewhat, but this book presents aspects of their intellectual relationship that are fundamental to how we understand the profession of architecture and its broader cultural assumptions. It presents the entanglement of ideas and their material form in relation to social context as central to current debates on architecture. The main developments presented here were engendered between 1968 and 1978, when many conditions around architecture shifted radically, both in response to the legacy of the 1960s, and as a result of the changing global context. In order to understand the effects of this period, the work is bookended by two crucial concepts, *Grossform* (1966), in which Ungers explicitly situated architecture as a discipline of shaping the city; and 'Bigness' (1989), through which Koolhaas brought urban conditions directly into the architecture project.[11] In between, the work and writings of these two architects set the stage for a rapidly changing profession. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, *Grossform* begins the trajectory into what will eventually encompass

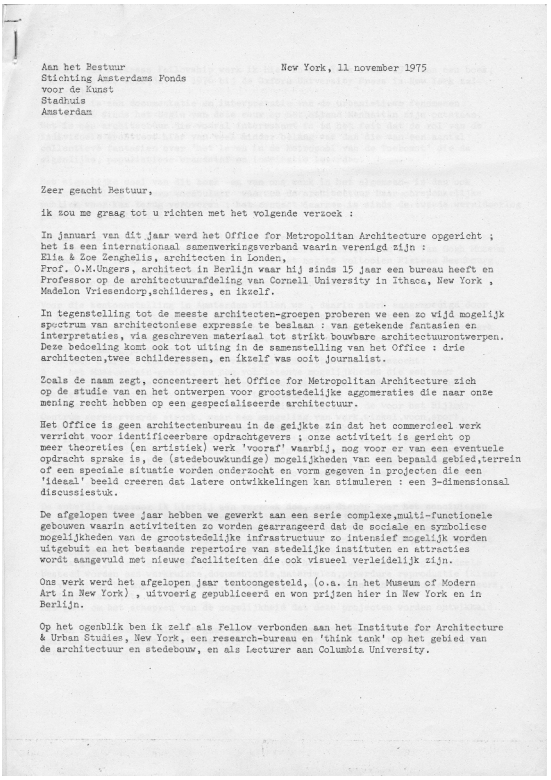
Fig. 0.1: O.M. Ungers and R. Koolhaas at Charlottesville conference, 1982

photo by Dan Grogan, in Jasper Cepl, *Oswald Mathias Ungers*

urban diversity in the notion of the City within the City (1977), and which arguably finds a temporary completion in 'Bigness'. As such, it is a precursor to a number of ideas that become central in the work of Koolhaas and OMA. Notable here is its primarily architectural character, which offers a formal and disciplinary perspective on urban transformation rather than a sociopolitical or economic perspective.

There are numerous interesting details to be found in the early years of Koolhaas's venture into architecture (after film school and journalism), particularly in the manner he shaped his studies and early career, and Ungers is a substantial presence in these years. At the founding of OMA in 1975, O.M. Ungers was listed as one of the founding members. While initially this might seem pure opportunism, simply making use of the authority of a professor at Cornell, the close ties between Koolhaas and Ungers are visible in early correspondence. Ungers may have been more of a mentor than an associate, but for institutions and potential clients he did provide some authority alongside the younger founding members of OMA. His position as professor at Cornell was explicitly named, and the work done by Koolhaas for Ungers was given a prominent position on his CV.[12] His status as some kind of associate was occasionally visible in correspondence and publications

Fig. 0.2: Letter accompanying Funding application, Amsterdams Fonds Beeldende Kunst.



Aan het Bestuur
Stichting Amsterdams Fonds
voor de Kunst
Stadhuis
Amsterdam

New York, 11 november 1975

Zeer geacht Bestuur,

ik zou me graag tot u richten met het volgende verzoek :

In januari van dit jaar werd het Office for Metropolitan Architecture opgericht ; het is een internationaal samenwerkingsverband waarin verenigd zijn :
Elia & Zoe Zenghelis, architecten in Londen,
Prof. O.M.Ungers, architect in Berlijn waar hij sinds 15 jaar een bureau heeft en Professor op de architectuurafdeling van Cornell University in Ithaca, New York ,
Madelon Vriesendorp,schilderes, en ikzelf.

In tegenstelling tot de meeste architecten-groepen proberen we een zo wijd mogelijk spectrum van architectoniese expressie te beslaan : van getekende fantasien en interpretaties, via geschreven materiaal tot strikt bouwbare architectuurontwerpen. Deze bedoeling komt ook tot uiting in de samenstelling van het Office : drie architecten,twee schilderessen, en ikzelf was ooit journalist.

Zoals de naam zegt, concentreert het Office for Metropolitan Architecture zich op de studie van en het ontwerpen voor grootstedelijke aggomeraties die naar onze mening recht hebben op een gespecialiseerde architectuur.

Het Office is geen architectenbureau in de gejkte zin dat het commercieel werk verricht voor identificeerbare opdrachtgevers ; onze activiteit is gericht op meer theoreties (en artistiek) werk 'vooraf' waarbij, nog voor er van een eventuele opdracht sprake is, de (stedebouwkundige) mogelijkheden van een bepaald gebied,terrein of een speciale situatie worden onderzocht en vorm gegeven in projecten die een 'ideaal' beeld creeren dat latere ontwikkelingen kan stimuleren : een 3-dimensionaal discussiestuk.

De afgelopen twee jaar hebben we gewerkt aan een serie complexe,multi-functionele gebouwen waarin activiteiten zo worden gearrangeerd dat de sociale en symbolise mogelijkheden van de grootstedelijke infrastructuur zo intensief mogelijk worden uitgebuit en het bestaande repertoire van stedelijke instituten en attracties wordt aangevuld met nieuwe faciliteiten die ook visueel verleidelijk zijn.

Ons werk werd het afgelopen jaar tentoongesteld, (o.a. in het Museum of Modern Art in New York) , uitvoerig gepubliceerd en won prijzen hier in New York en in Berlijn.

Op het ogenblik ben ik zelf als Fellow verbonden aan het Institute for Architecture & Urban Studies, New York, een research-bureau en 'think tank' op het gebied van de architectuur en stedebouw, en als Lecturer aan Columbia University.

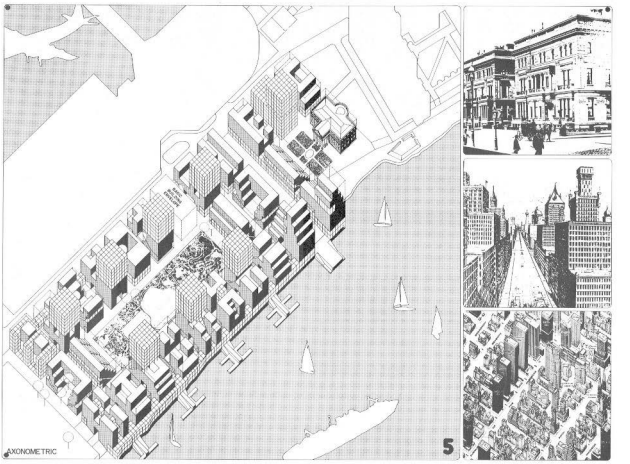
Het Nieuwe Instituut Rotterdam, OMA archive

until 1976, when the Roosevelt Island housing competition entries were published.[13] The submissions to this competition by Ungers on the one hand, and Koolhaas and Zenghelis on the other, were listed as two submissions by OMA.

Much of this prehistory to the success story of OMA has faded away over time, but Koolhaas has rarely seemed to let an opportunity pass to recall the qualities of Ungers in interviews and conversations.[14] Of all the architects and thinkers Koolhaas has chosen to refer to over time, it is Ungers who seems to have commanded the greatest respect – enough that it is worthwhile

to explore the mutual influence of Koolhaas and Ungers, and position them within the late-twentieth-century architecture debate. I argue here that this early history of OMA in relation to OMU (the abbreviation often used to refer to Ungers) stands as a symbol for our time and the radical shifts that have taken place in the role and position of the architect in Europe and North America since the 1970s. These two architects hold strong convictions on the value of architecture, and express these convictions variously in their writings, projects, teaching and buildings. The work they developed in the 1970s and 1980s, both separately and in collaboration, contributed to a renewed sense of professional responsibility and responded to changing conditions in the urban context.

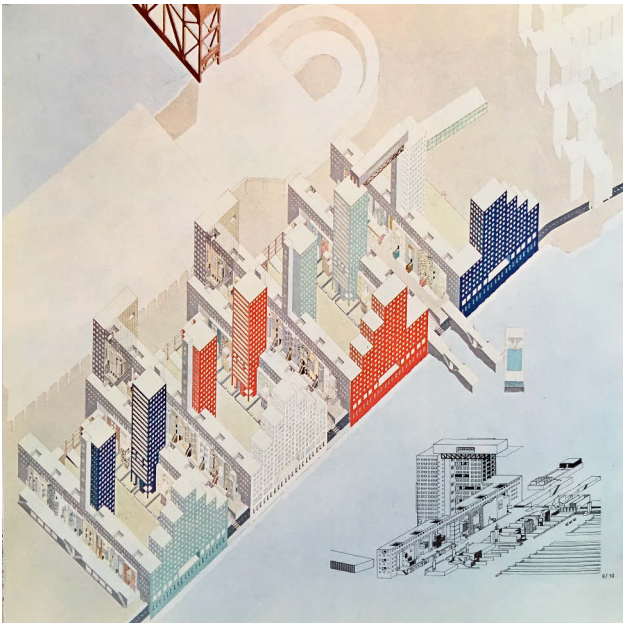
Fig. 0.3: OMA, Roosevelt Island housing competition, 1975, entry by O.M. Ungers



Lotus International 11 (1976)

Throughout their respective oeuvres, it is the oscillation between the social and the formal that circumscribes the agency of architecture, which is addressed both explicitly and implicitly. Over the years, Koolhaas has provided many variations on his statement that architecture is a mix of impotence and omnipotence. In a 1996 lecture at Rice University, he notes that 'the architect almost invariably harbors megalomaniacal dreams that depend

Fig. 0.4: OMA, Roosevelt Island housing competition, 1975, entry by R. Koolhaas, E. and Z. Zenghelis



Lotus International 11 (1976)

upon others, and upon circumstances, to impose and to realize those fantasies and dreams'.[15] Architecture is a profession that sits between disciplinary autonomy, which is articulated in artistic, spatial and technical developments, and a service to society, which is constrained by external conditions and cultural needs. The discourse of modernism and the ideas of post-war architecture maintained a belief in the fundamentally emancipatory drive of architecture. At the same time, this social calling needs to find material form, whether innovative, traditional, subtle, recognizable or challenging. This question is addressed in many historical manifestoes and is visible in many areas of the built environment. From the perspective of today, the values materialized in projects throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have shaped the issues currently facing the profession of architecture. The work of the two main protagonists in this book conveys the particularly tricky

conditions under which architecture comes to fruition in the late twentieth century. This tension and complexity lead to what Koolhaas refers to as a 'plausible' relation between the formal and the social in architecture, which in turn shapes the prominent position of form in the architecture discourse of the late twentieth century.