

## Un paradis artificiel

A house by OMA in Floirac

Arthur Wortmann

In 1988, Rem Koolhaas was approached by the owner-director of the French regional newspaper *Sud Ouest*. The man knew what he wanted: a new house in Bordeaux. He had done all his homework and had drawn up a list of potential architects including Koolhaas, Ito and Gehry.

Having made the acquaintance of the candidates, the man no longer knew what he wanted: he was so impressed by all the work that he was quite unable to choose. He asked each of the architects to make a draft design. That request marked the end of a promising enterprise. Koolhaas and the others had better things to do than to expend effort on a limited competition for a private house – a project that would in any case be a loss-maker for their respective firms. The architects declined the honour and the client departed the scene.

Then, several years later, the man approached Koolhaas again. He had made his decision. OMA was to have the privilege of designing the house for himself and his family. In the meantime, however, there had been some changes in his life. His back was broken in a serious car accident and he was almost totally paralysed. All he had was a little movement in his right hand. Physically, he would never be able to manage without assistance again and he was condemned to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. His spirit was however unbroken. Later he would even resume his activities for the newspaper, but for the meanwhile his attention was focused wholly on his new house. The design and building process was a mental outlet for him.

The new circumstances in any case made a change of house necessary. The man owned an eighteenth-century house in the centre of Bordeaux, but there was no prospect of adapting it for wheelchair access even with major alterations. The brief for the architect also had to be rewritten. A few years earlier the idea had been to build a simple new house, but now the client wanted something large and complex, because, he explained to the architect, 'the house will define my world'.

Tragic though the background was, it was a commission in thousands: the architect being asked literally to design a 'world' – the ultimate creative act, a redesign of the Garden of Eden, the establishment of an architectural biotope. The client chose a location, and what a location! He bought an enormous piece of land at the top of a hill in Floirac on the right bank of the Gironde, with a view of Bordeaux spread out on the other side of the river. From this hilltop, this magic mountain, one can gaze down on that other world below. Not a neighbour in sight.

The hilly terrain presented the first paradox: what was a wheelchair user to do on a piece of land without a flat spot anywhere? Koolhaas added a second paradox by coming up

with a design on three storeys. The stacking of the programme components produced complexity; it caused congestion, one might say, on the huge site. The inhabited world of this paradisiacal hilltop apparently needed a focus. Three archetypal inhabitants struggle for priority in this paradise: the hunter, the nomad and the farmer; for we could regard the house in Floirac as a cave, a tent and a (tree) hut piled one on top of the other. They are joined by a lift which metropolitanizes the archaic dwelling types. The house is both a summary and an update of architectural history. This is a well-known Koolhaas approach. His other private residences are also combinations of existing or new types. The Linthorst House in Rotterdam is a collage of a Dutch dyke cottage, a modern patio house and a conventional private house with garden. The Mystery House, at a secret location somewhere in the Netherlands, combines a glasshouse, a 'spare' house and a 'house within a house'.<sup>1</sup>

### Cave, tent, hut

Owing to the complexity of the house, it took over three years to build. Eventually the family occupied their new home several months before completion – entering paradise as it were before the apple trees were in blossom. The ground floor, the 'cave', is half sunken into the hilltop. It contains the wine cellar, the pantry, the kitchen, the TV room and the entrance. Entry to the cave is not something one does unnoticed. To reach the front door of the house one must first execute a remarkable manoeuvre. Having reached the house via a 400-metre long driveway, you are faced with a patio wall which surrounds the house. You pass under this wall to enter an enclosed garden. Entrance to the house itself holds out the prospect of a similar experience, in which going inside entails in the first instance staying outside. After going through the front door, you pass through a second door to the stairs. Now you are outside again, although covered, in a cave-like space. The stairs lead to yet another front door, through which you finally enter the house proper.

The middle floor, the 'tent', is an immaterial storey. It is a large, vacant space, half living room and half terrace, and is designated for holding receptions, among other things. The constructional material that bears the weight of the top floor (the wall of the spiral staircase and a sturdy beam that goes right across the living room) is minimized. Service conduits that might otherwise sully the image are diverted and incorporated into the constructional elements. The glass wall on the south-west side is a huge French window which can be slid to one side, indeed almost like a tent flap. The curtains can similarly be pushed aside along a system of rails. The curtain rails lead to the cylinder of the spiral staircase (which links the TV room downstairs to the children's bedrooms upstairs) around which the curtains wrap when slid away.

The top floor is suspended above the ground like a tree hut. This extremely closed volume is divided in two, invisibly to the outside. One half contains the bedrooms of the client and his wife, and the other half the bedrooms of the three children. Here too Koolhaas is on familiar territory: the third floor of the Villa Dall'Ava in Paris is similarly split into two 'apartments' which are accessed via separate routes from the living-room level. In the Parisian villa, the two parts were separated by a swimming pool; here they are separated by a void.

The contrast with the immaterial middle storey is strongly marked. The massive block of brown concrete seems to float in mid air. Constructionally, it is an act of tempting the gods. Fair enough, though, for in this project the architect is playing the roles of both Prometheus and the Creator. The two long walls function as girders supporting the floors. The two girders rest at the parent's bedroom end on the beam that goes across the living room. At the children's bedroom end, the two girders are suspended from a beam which balances on the spiral staircase and is steadied by a counterweight hanging over the patio. Only small openings could be made in these girders. These are the portholes that perforate the bedroom walls. In theory these are positioned so that they offer a specific view from strategic positions (e.g. lying in bed or on entry to a room). The question of whether they allow sufficient daylight to enter the rooms – particularly in the children's section – is open to discussion. Fortunately a rooflight, two small patios and the void provide for additional daylight entry.

Besides being linked by several staircases, the three floors are joined by a lift. The lift makes it possible for the wheelchair user to navigate all three floors. Lift is perhaps not the right word for this structure, however. It is a mobile platform measuring over 10 m<sup>2</sup> in area. If we conceive of the house as a combination of a cave, a tent and a hut, then this is a fourth, more modern dwelling type, a kind of mobile home or home office. It is equipped with operating panes and connections for the telephone and computer. It is a machine, an engine room and a control tower all in one. This hydraulically propelled room is the client's private domain. He takes his room along with him as he moves through the house. The lift, which can be halted at any desired height, also gives access to the world of the imagination contained in the 60 metres of books owned by the client. On one side the platform passes up and down an immensely tall bookcase that stretches from floor to roof. The floors change as the platform is repositioned. The basement wine cellar, for example, can only be reached via the lift; when the platform is not in position, a hole gapes in the floor in front of the cellar. And when the lift is in its top position, signifying that the client has withdrawn to his bedroom, a bit of life disappears from the house: the tall space leading to the skylight above the lift shaft is blocked off. The lift is a powerful plaything which to some extent has the house in its grip. The motion of the lift expands the client's sphere of influence to well beyond his physical presence.

## Essayism

Something that Koollhaas has done ever since his 1972 graduation project, 'Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture', is to create a new reality within the design task, an artificial world that is more interesting and more inspiring than the world outside. It was this in particular that fascinated him in the skyscrapers of *Delirious New York*: each constitutes a world in its own right, an artificial community with its own laws and regulations and its own design style. This approach applies to his writings too. His texts, as he emphasizes time and time again in interviews, are manifestos or interpretations. They are mental exercises, intellectual narratives. Remarkably more and more people have, since the publication of *S,M,L,XL*, started taking Koolhaas at face value, reading his interpretations as arguments for a worthy ideal, and concluding that they ought to take

action accordingly. His essays on urban subjects are particularly prone to this reaction. An earlier issue of *Archis* contained an article that originates from this misunderstanding, or, if you prefer, this methodological distrust: Lieven De Cauter warns us that Koolhaas' 'Generic City' is a scenario of doom, and that it is totally absurd to elevate the new generic cities to a standard for the old, specific cities. De Cauter is so shocked that he makes a pathetic appeal to humanity to put a stop to that dangerous Mr. Koolhaas: 'The third millennium must not become an experiment in soullessness. Humanity must do all it can to avoid this invisible catastrophe.'<sup>2</sup>

Anyone who gives the impression of wishing to redo the work of the Creator at an urban planning level clearly soon runs into the boundaries of moral tolerance. Koolhaas can, on the other hand, do as he pleases on the small scale of private house projects. The private houses are, in a certain sense, his best designs, for it is here that the artificial worlds actually take shape. Their limited size accentuates their architectural intensity. Nothing escapes attention. In larger projects such as the Grand Palais or the Educatorium, intervals develop between the heady atmospheres of the different spaces. Not everything is thematized in these projects; specific points receive the designer's concentrated attention while others are left to pragmatism (reminiscent of the slogan 'no money, no details').

In the film about the house in Bordeaux by Richard Copans, first shown at the opening of the 'Living' exhibition in *arc en rêve*<sup>3</sup>, 12 February, Koolhaas reveals that he in fact only feels expert as an architect when he is designing houses. For other design tasks, he has to ask about how the building is meant to function. But the architect knows all there is to know when it comes to dwellings, and he can rely entirely on his own insights. It is indeed true that Koolhaas is at his best in the private houses, as long as he is allowed to design everything down to the last detail so that a total architectural experience is staged. He has been able to do so in Floirac. Koolhaas' unfortunate client asked him to create him a new world to live in, and that is what the client got: *un paradis artificiel*, the best medicine for disaster and woe.

1. See 'Mystery House. A villa by OMA', *Archis* no. 11, 1994, pp. 33-40.

2. Lieven De Cauter, 'The forward flight of Rem Koolhaas. On the "generic city"', *Archis* no. 4, 1998, pp. 28-34.

3. The 'Living' exhibition, which presents four houses by OMA and the apartment complex in Fukuoka, was on show in Bordeaux from February to May. Richard Copans' film is entitled 'Maison à Bordeaux' and was brought out by Les films d'ici.

In: *Archis* no.11, 1998, pp. 46-53.