

## Cube Houses 2.0

OMA's Timmerhuis wants to disappear

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In 2007 and the spring of 2008, OMA surprised the world with a couple of plans for Dubai that opposed the Disneyfication of architecture. The firm designed a huge 'anti-icon' and advocated a more generic architecture. After the subsequent roar of publicity had died down, OMA apparently went on to do business as usual. Many spectacular designs and buildings followed.

But now the architects are building the Timmerhuis, a project in the heart of Rotterdam, right next to city hall. Completion is scheduled for September. The building will accommodate offices for municipal officials, an exhibition space and 84 apartments. It was designed in the summer of 2008, shortly after the widely publicized plans for Dubai. Its emphatic anti-iconic character is precisely what makes it iconic. It evokes a special effect featured in a whole generation of sci-fi films, beginning with *The Matrix*: the world is a digital illusion, and having figured that out, the audience sees entire cities disintegrate and buildings decompose into separate pixels.

The architects describe the Timmerhuis as a 'cloud'. On two sides, it hides behind existing buildings. The other two sides face narrow desolate streets. The public function intended for the ground floor – Rotterdam's main office of civil affairs – was axed halfway through the process for financial reasons, an absurd decision in view of the building's expensive steel frame, which was designed specifically to keep the entrance-level *stadswinkel* as column-free as possible. Fully glazed façades express OMA's desire to realize an intangible building. The play of lines on exterior walls, created by window frames and reflective silk-screen patterns, seems to escalate the visual disintegration of the building blocks that constitute the project. OMA partner Reinier de Graaf has been promoting the modular building on the grounds that it can be built quickly and dismantled as well.

Since 1984, Piet Blom's Cube Houses have been one of Rotterdam's main attractions. Designed as an 'urban roof' meant to make people feel secure, Blom's project evolved willy-nilly into an icon. The Timmerhuis, its stacked blocks rising in a formless heap, will undoubtedly share the same fate.

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