Can Rem Koolhaas Save Architecture From Preservation?

by Ben Davis

24/05/11 3:53 PM EDT

Rem Koolhaas's "Cronochaos" at the New Museum, held during the Festival of Ideas for the New City

In 1848, Marx and Engels famously prophesied that within capitalism, "all that is solid melts into air." Kicking off the New Museum's Festival of Ideas for the New City earlier this month, Rem Koolhaas offered what might be considered an audacious update of that analysis, which would read something like this: within capitalism, "some things that are solid melt into air — and some things turn to stone forever." He was speaking about the concept of "heritage," the hypnotic lure that the past exerts on us, and the way that it can come to choke off the vitality of the present.

"Embedded in huge waves of development, which seem to transform the planet at an ever-accelerating speed, there is another kind of transformation at work: the area of the world declared immutable through various regimes of preservation is growing exponentially," states a manifesto-like text accompanying an exhibition Koolhaas has put together on the

same themes for New Museum's newly annexed Bowery storefront space. "A huge section of our world (about 12%) is now off-limits, submitted to regimes we don't know, have not thought through, cannot influence."

The severe and stylish Koolhaas is something of a one-person festival of ideas himself, so there could be few people more appropriate to kick off the New Museum's symposium. He made his name as a penner of experimental urbanist manifestos ("Delirious New York," for instance, his 1978 "retrospective manifesto" for the Big Apple) long before he was a practicing architect. His keynote address was characteristically audacious, sarcastic, and slightly shapeless, as if struggling to hold more ideas than it could contain. Among other things, he breezed over such huge topics as a defense of the historical importance of socialist architecture, and a devastating critique of the ideology underlying Tate Modern's Turbine Hall exhibition program. (On the latter point, his main thrust is that huge spaces encourage huge art that then encourages huge spaces, ad absurdum.)

But the core of the talk was a concrete deconstruction of the opposition between "preservation" and "progress," which Koolhaas sees as flip sides of the same coin, the one bearing the contradictions of the other. The first preservationist initiatives coincide with the French Revolution (the Commission des Monuments, 1790) and then the Industrial Revolution in England (Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 1877). From there, preservation has more or less spread with the march of modernity, which is to say the onrush of capitalist development and the dislocation that goes along with it. This makes perfect sense: As nature is despoiled, you make parks; as history is profaned, you declare monuments.

Over time, Koolhaas argues, the kinds of things that have been considered preservable have broadened — originally just monuments, now expansive and maddeningly indistinct "current and past social expressions" — while the time necessary for something to warrant official status as heritage has shortened, from centuries to now just a few years. Koolhaas argues that this accelerating mania for the past is approaching an inflection point: "Eventually it will become prospective," he hypothetized in his address. "We will preserve things before they are even finished."

Within the visual arts there is a major parallel. MoMA was a radical institution when it was founded, because a "Museum of Modern Art" was considered a paradox — museums were for antique culture. Later, this idea was superceded by proliferating museums of "contemporary art," a shift in a relationship to time that the New Museum symbolizes in its

very name. And even more recently, much critical ink has been spilled over how the concept of postmodernism — a paradigm that at least tried to explain the present as some kind of historical epoch — has yielded to the vexing craze for "emerging art," a haphazard euphoria for the present without any theory of itself at all.

Yet the implications of this temporal compression are more pressing for architecture than for art, because architects are put up against the concrete problems of how to create living spaces for people, and so hit the limits of an overcrowded present more quickly. Koolhaas gives the example of his own 1998 Maison à Bordeaux house in France, which was almost immediately declared a landmark, thereby complicating the process of redesigning it for an actual living occupant. I remember being at a public hearing a few years ago about the Museum of Arts and Design's ultimately successful proposal to revamp Edward Durrell Stone's "Lollipop building" on Columbus Circle. After parades of impassioned pronouncements about the need to preserve the quirky structure (including several from Tom Wolfe in his ice-cream suit), the sole person to stand up in defense of the remodeling was a representative of the American Institute of Architects, who was booed.

To help sort out these disputes, Koolhaas proposed — at least semi-seriously — that UNESCO create a "Convention Concerning the Demolition of World Cultural Junk" to complement its "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and National Heritage." He also presented a preservationist scheme that he had dreamed up for Beijing, a kind of parody of Le Corbusier's infamous Plan Voisin that would have torn up Paris to put in a grid of utopian sky-scraper tower blocks. Koolhaas proposes zoning a regular grid of boxes onto the map of the city. Everything within their borders would be preserved, whereas everything outside of them would be fair game to destroy. The complete formal neutrality would guarantee that a cross-section of material was saved, without political arguments getting in the way, thereby freeing up the urban fabric for salutary change.

In a churlish New Yorker dispatch from Koolhaas's keynote, Paul Goldberger called the architect's concerns about the heritage industry "overstated," and essentially argued that worries about preservation have been around forever. This seems rather ungenerous, as the point here is not that these dilemmas are new or novel but that there is a trajectory to them that makes them ever-more insistent. The question I have is about the answers Koolhaas offers. He starts from the notion that the problematic and increasingly indiscriminate character of "preservation" is overdetermined by its relation to the madness of our underlying model of indiscriminate development — but then he implies that the problem is not this economic model itself, but the fact that we don't have an adequate theory of what

"preservation" means, or how it should work. Well, obviously we should think through the implications of declaring something part of our heritage, and the underlying agendas that this gesture involves. But left on its own, this line of argument is a little like trying to deal with the effects of a devastating downpour with an umbrella; by all means, let's get everyone umbrellas, but this won't stop the flooding.

Ultimately, if Koolhaas's proposed solutions sound dystopian or satirical, I think that this is because the very nature of the problem he is identifying makes it more and more difficult to resolve his two roles — as visionary theorist and as practical architect offering workable solutions — into one. The actual solution is not a better theory of preservation, but a more humane model of economic progress — a better, more harmonious way of living in general. In the absence of this, the contradictions are only bound to pile up, with or without a theory or clever plan. This, it seems to me, is the sobering underlying suggestion of Koolhaas's address, and it is a thought that is definitely worth preserving.

Interventions is a weekly column by ARTINFO deputy editor Ben Davis. He can be reached at bdavis@artinfo.com