The Hybrid Practitioner

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Each of the four essays in Part 4 is involved in some way with the processes of generating and representing architectural culture through published media, including analogue books and magazines, digital blogs, and dissemination through social media. As each reveals the underlying intellectual motivations for their work and its processes, the implications for their own practice are exposed. Cathelijne Nuijsink takes a step back to interrogate Rem Koolhaas’s use of writing as a design tool and the wider historical implications of this on recent architecture. This reflection on the relationships between the creative and the formal, and the intellectual and the conceptual, is brought into tangible focus through an investigation of Koolhaas’s role and intentions in judging the 1992 Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition. This detachment is continued in the essay by Joseph Bedford, who proposed the notion of a postliterate age. Through analysis of literature around recent changes in media technology, he defines a position in relation to the proliferation of images and the implications on engagement with written architectural theory that he uses to analyse the presence of a selection of architectural practices on social media. In Chapter 18, Patrick Lynch describes and analyses his role as editor of an academic journal – Civic Architecture – and as an architectural publisher through his company, Canalside Press, outlining how the intellectual frameworks that he has developed for these have a reciprocal relationship with his theoretical and philosophical approaches to architectural practice. Returning to his own hybrid practice as architect by training and member of an editorial collective, Carlo Menon draws from deep academic research into the role of small magazines in the field of architectural culture. He uses the concept of “ecology of practices” to develop a theoretical approach to the formative and critical that these publications play in both crossing disciplinary boundaries and forging new connections between architectural practice and theory. Their small but dispersed readerships make them an important tool for teaching, experimentation, provocation, and community formation.
If one thing became clear at the 1990 symposium How Modern is Dutch Architecture, it was architect Rem Koolhaas’s unease with the issue of style.\(^1\) Flustered by the fact that, for generations, Dutch architects had been using functionalism as a starting point for their own designs, Koolhaas stated that using the same reference for over seventy-five years was an act of despair and “a spasmodic relapse into a past heroic moment.”\(^2\) A couple of years later, his dissatisfaction with the issue of style reappeared in his book *S, M, L, X* (1995). Comparing the constant fluctuation of styles in art with those in architecture, Koolhaas asserts that this principle to facilitate comparison across time and space might work for artists to depict personal evolution. Yet, for architects that are expected to constantly respond to a changing social fabric, styles are a less fruitful tool. After the first dictionary entry in *S, M, L, X* came a second, which simply proclaimed that “the ‘styles’ are a lie.”\(^3\) In 1992, Koolhaas revived the two-centuries-old discussion on style within the space of the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition. In his role as single judge – a unique feature of this yearly housing ideas competition from Japan – Koolhaas could freely set the competition theme “House with NO Style” (fig. 16.1) and select multiple winners. Since the competition’s launch in 1965, many well-known architects serving as judges have crafted an independent position for themselves in existing architectural debates with the help of this competition. Koolhaas equally used the competition as a platform to put forward his crucial observations about contemporary developments and encouraged his fellow architects to stop making references to “style.”
Writing in Architecture

Thinking and theorising about architecture, independent from real building activities, has been at the core of the practice of the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) since its foundation in 1975. In his role as a journalist and scriptwriter, Koolhaas did a lot of writing before he began practising architecture, and he continued to do so even in the making of architecture. For Koolhaas, writing was a deliberate choice to position himself as another kind of architect. In his words, writing allowed him “to construct a terrain where I could eventually work as an architect.”

In fact, OMA owes much of its early success to Koolhaas’s book Delirious New York (1977), a five-year research project that launched his career as a “particular kind of architect.” Even when projects for real building started coming in the 1980s, words remained crucial to the practice of OMA. As he explained in an interview with Beatriz Colomina, each design ideally starts with a “textlike formulation of the problem,” which suggests an entire architectural programme. To define a design project first in literary terms is OMA’s way to “unleash the design.” To cover the “expansive habits of thinking and presenting,” OMA needed a special foundation dedicated

Fig. 16.1  With the provocative competition theme “House with No Style,” Rem Koolhaas stirred a lively cross-cultural discussion on style in the pages of The Japan Architect and Shinkenchiku magazines. Competition announcement of the 1992 Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition. The Japan Architect 1992-III: 2–3 © Shinkenchiku-Sha Co Ltd.
to raising money for publications, exhibitions, and research. Spurred by former partner Donald van Dansik, the Groszstadt Foundation, founded in 1988, allowed the practice to oscillate between generating intelligence and producing actual buildings.

The privatisation of the market in the 1990s required yet another model of operating architecturally that could help OMA freely operate both as architects and intellectuals. In 1995, Koolhaas was invited as a professor at Harvard University to lead the research programme Harvard Project on the City and investigate the changing urban conditions around the world. This opened doors for a new kind of collaborative research practice. Focusing on the largely ignored territories of Lagos, Shenzhen, Singapore, and the Arab world, this academic position allowed Koolhaas to tackle a different subject each year with his students. When Universal Studios asked OMA to design their new headquarters in Los Angeles (1996), Prada contacted OMA to rethink their brand (1999), and the Schiphol Group commissioned OMA to design a Schiphol airport on the sea (1998), but two of the three commissions never led anywhere, the dialectic between cultural production and professional practice swelled to a maximum. In response, the independent think tank Architecture Media Office (AMO) was launched as a “critical arm” of OMA in 1999. AMO was the new intellectual apparatus that aimed to produce a fruitful dialogue between “thinking” and “doing” and helped the architectural office get the desired recognition for their knowledge production. It was established to provide strategic input to expand architecture into the realms of the virtual.

Acknowledging that OMA is a global office working all over the world “of which it knows fundamentally little,” AMO developed an intrinsic motivation to understand how the world in which they were working worked.

The Competition Forging a “Space of Ideas”

The history of the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition goes back to 1965, when Japanese publishing house Shinkenchiku decided to rejuvenate its long-running architecture magazine Shinkenchiku (New Architecture, 1925–) with an international housing ideas competition. From the outset, the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition (hereafter Shinkenchiku Competition) was envisioned as set of avant-garde pages inserted in what was otherwise a relatively conservative architectural magazine. What made this competition different from other contests was its international and bilingual character. Both the competition announcement as well as the winning entries were published in Japanese in Shinkenchiku and in English in its sister magazine The Japan Architect, which finally provided foreign architects an opportunity to participate in the Japanese housing debate. Besides being an exceptionally long-running competition (the competition has seen forty-nine
editions since 1965), what sets this tournament of ideas apart from other such competitions is that it operates with a single-judge system. Along with Rem Koolhaas, many well-known architects have served as judges in this contest, ranging from Richard Meier (1976), Peter Cook (1977), Charles Moore (1978), Bernard Tschumi (1989), Jacques Herzog (1997), and Winny Maas (2001) to some of Japan's most respected designers – Kiyoshi Seike (1965), Kenzo Tange (1966), Kazuo Shinohara (1972), Arata Isozaki (1975), Tadao Ando (1985, 1991), Toyo Ito (1988, 2000), Kengo Kuma (2006), and Kazuyo Sejima (1996). Unlike the “mediated” briefs that result when a team of organisers or jury members must decide on one theme, the Shinkenchiku Competition allows the single judge to freely decide on a competition theme, thereby consciously and even provocatively stirring international architectural debate. When Koolhaas accepted the invitation to judge, he used the competition to prompt a new collaborative research project. Much like Harvard Project on the City, which the urban studies OMA has conducted since 1995 in collaboration with students from the Harvard Graduate School of Design, or the rebranding of Prada, the Shinkenchiku Competition operated as a fruitful intellectual experiment, and not only to the benefit of Koolhaas.

When invited to judge the 1992 Shinkenchiku Competition, Koolhaas was not new to Japan. In 1988, the Japanese journal Architecture and Urbanism (A + U) had already devoted an entire issue to OMA's paper architecture and the first realised the works of OMA. One year later, Japanese architect Arata Isozaki invited Koolhaas to participate in the innovative social housing project Nexus World in Fukuoka, which provided Koolhaas the opportunity to visit Japan on a regular basis until its completion in 1991. Koolhaas's geographical obsession with Japan stemmed from the work of the Metabolists, a mixed group of avant-garde designers from Japan who presented themselves at the 1960 World Design Conference in Tokyo. At this first international design conference held in Japan after the Second World War, and amid an international audience, the Metabolists made a profound statement about the status of modern architecture in Japan using the ninety-page document Metabolism 1960: The Proposals for New Urbanism as their manifesto. With large-scale visionary urban plans, the Metabolists celebrated Japan's economic recovery and growing prosperity in the 1960s. Koolhaas recognised in Japan “the first non-Western country with an architectural avant-garde.” This “peripheral” development of the Metabolists elucidated the shortcomings of the Euro-American canon and demonstrated that new architectural knowledge could equally be produced in other parts of the world. Koolhaas long-lasting fascination with Japan would eventually result in a written history of Metabolism, a 720-page-thick documentation-cum-oral history, produced in collaboration with a team of researchers.
This paper sets out to demonstrate that, in the Shinkenchiku Competition, the judge and contestants collectively produce architecture knowledge. To justify this claim, it is necessary to highlight the intrinsic logic of the contest. This logic consists of a judge setting a competition theme against the backdrop of ongoing international debates. This is followed by the submission of different competition entries that can be viewed as various cultural responses to the judge’s call, illustrating diverse translations of the common design problem. These, in turn, contribute to the judge’s final remarks, which offer a more nuanced understanding of the original theme. Finally, the publication of these final remarks is disseminated in different directions. In all the steps of this competition logic, local and foreign ideas regarding “house with no style” inform and mutually inspire each other.

Situating the Shinkenchiku Competition as a multidirectional portal between Koolhaas’s early conceptual paper projects and individual research projects such as Delirious New York in the 1970s and the launch of the AMO think tank in 1999, this paper elucidates how the competition anticipated the emergence of a collaborative research practice paramount to the OMA practice even today. The contest, with all its steps of the competition logic, functions much like a research project on the key question Koolhaas posed in the competition brief: “Is it utopian to imagine a ‘designer-free’ zone?”
provocative competition brief of House with No Style effectively aligned with Koolhaas’s habit of undermining architectural conventions and his concept of anti-architecture, which refuses to behave the way architecture is expected to. With provocative designs shaking up established conventions, Koolhaas is known for being a controversial figure in the architecture world. His own “style” is unconcerned with conventional ideas of beauty and defies categorisation. With the same provocative stance, Koolhaas, in the 1992 Shinkenchiku Competition, also approached the contestants. In what was one of the shortest competition briefs, Koolhaas called on fellow architects to come up with methods on shedding style and stopping the automatism of simple form-making for the sake of it. A “house with no style,” Koolhaas disclosed in the brief, should be a house that avoids recent clichés and nostalgia, contain a programme “purged of the frivolous and the decorative,” and fit a “designer-free’ zone.”

The Shinkenchiku Competition as a Collaborative Research Practice

After reviewing 732 competition entries (306 from Japan and 426 from thirty other countries), Koolhaas selected sixteen winning schemes: one first prize, one second prize, one third prize, and thirteen honourable mentions. The selection of multiple winners is emblematic of this competition, demonstrating that the competition was set up from the start as a platform of discussion rather than a search for a single right answer. In his comments (fig 16.2), Koolhaas commented on the “stupendous quantities of work, representing an enormous investment of energy, ingenuity and money.”12 The majority of the entries “represented a disease,” with too many references to form, style, and aesthetics.13 Within this massive quantity of waste production, however, Koolhaas discovered exceptionally good entries that revealed serious research on “how to shed style, how to interrupt the narcissistic automatism of form-making, and how to inject an exhausted profession with new content.”14

The third prize went to an anonymous entry reporting from the Bosnian War (fig. 16.3). In a situation of war and destruction, the author argued that it is no longer relevant to talk about houses as the embodiment of a stylish dream. Instead, it is a matter of survival in anonymous styleless shelters built on top of the ruins. Without mentioning the quality of the project itself, its authorlessness was enough to win the third prize, as, according to the juror, it effectively demonstrated a critique of the whole system of architectural competitions.

Interested in taking a critical position in the architectural debate rather than merely accommodating popular taste as most practising architects did, Mitsugo Okagawa, with his student Yutaka Kinjo, participated in the Koolhaas edition to explore another kind of modern architecture (fig. 16.4). “Through a re-reading of Mies van der Rohe’s architecture, I tried to bend Mies van der Rohe’s ‘universal space’ into a ‘house with no style’ for AIDS patients living
Fig. 16.3  The authorlessness of the competition entry was, for judge Rem Koolhaas, enough to win third place. *The Japan Architect* 1993-I Annual: 14–15 © Shinkenchiku-sha Ltd.

Fig. 16.4  Mitsugu Okagawa and Yutaka Kinjo received second place with an entry that criticised the unblemished character of the architectural profession. *The Japan Architect* 1993-I Annual: 12–13 © Mitsugu Okagawa and Yutaka Kinjo.
in a delirious Tokyo,” Okagawa explained. Koolhaas lauded the courageous move of the second prize winners to introduce a disease, AIDS, into an otherwise spotless profession. “To mix architecture with AIDS forces people to think about the destiny of human beings,” stated Koolhaas. The first prize winner Yosuke Fujiki responded with a house catalogue containing a hundred defected houses “that help us make original lifestyles” (fig. 16.5) He believed that the challenges of a house without gas pipes or waterworks or a roof would help get rid of fixed ideas about housing. Fujiki’s entry exceeded all Koolhaas’s expectations from the competition, indicating that the author had an even better understanding of the theme of “no style” than Koolhaas himself. Koolhaas’s judge comment on him read, “A systematic suppression of elements triggers uselessness, recharges ‘what we have’ and, at the same time, ‘destabilizes the notion of a house in an absolute anti-aesthetic way.’”

The thirteen honourable mentions further enriched the discussion on what could be a designer-free house. Paulo Sanguinetti Rivas and Bane Gaiser proposed a seven-storey tower house where each floor is dedicated to one essential dwelling function. Through removing the boundaries between rooms and creating vertical relations instead, Rivas and Gaiser introduced a designer-free zone in which the occupants themselves – using moveable furniture items – decide

Fig. 16.5  With a diagram of one hundred “defective” houses in which residents design lifestyles themselves, Yosuke Fujiki won first prize in the 1992 Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition. The Japan Architect 1993-I Annual: 8–9 © Yosuke Fujiki.
the way they want to live. Akira Imafuki’s designed a house for a blind person in which 1.15-metre-wide corridors provide the inhabitant freedom of movement, rather than limiting the restrictions in living. Being able to touch the walls on two sides while moving through this house, the inhabitant will feel free and comfortable. Satoshi Ohashi’s House with No Style is a simple squared ‘Pandora’s box’ situated in the landscape. The house operates as a “boxed infrastructure” in which functions can be switched on and off, and which is responsive and adaptive to its surrounding conditions. Kevin Woods and Charlotte Sheridan, to name yet other contributors to the discussion on No Style, argued that to come up with a house with no style, the architect’s mind first must be freed from any historical references or preconceptions. They reduced the design process to a mathematical formula, which resulted in a pattern of living freed from conscious and unconscious influences of style. Joanne Mackenzie and Garth Davies focused on the innate responses of individuals to a personally chosen object. With a collage of bodies – from which emotionless faces are cut off the picture – holding an object, the authors evoked a universal response beyond style. What the diversity of responses from these and other honourable mentions, let alone the non-winning submissions – made clear was that there exists no single correct answer to the brief, but the competition was set up as a platform for discussion to propel the discussion on style further.

Although Koolhaas, by 1992, already had access to international architectural debates, the Shinkenchiku Competition served him well as a theoretical moment at a time he was readily involved in actual building projects. The competition brief asked for alternative approaches to design, ones not focused on style, and turned, under the moderation of Koolhaas, into a lively discussion that provided clues on what could replace the formal aspect of style in the design process. The diversity of responses that were selected by Koolhaas as “winning entries” alluded that the “style” problem was much a problem of architects themselves. One possible direction that came out of this contest related to the idea of “silent authorship.” The first prize, nameless entry suggested “silent authorship” as the removal of the architect as “author” of a project. Yet others explained “silent authorship” as the elimination of the architect as actor in the design process and instead giving agency to the clients to elements in the house according to their own desires or design for themselves all together. Another clue to solve architects’ continuous adherence to “style” was the problem of the architect’s mentality. Proposals suggested the “purification” of architects’ mind from historical references or preconceptions that hindered the development of new ideas, as well as a deliberate tarnishing of architects’ immaculate position. Besides instigating this cross-cultural discussion on how to shed style, the competition served Koolhaas another goal. The Shinkenchiku Competition anticipated a mode of collaborative practice that OMA continued to implement in AMO’s research projects as well as in its overall office structure through removing the single architect as the heroic genius of the company and instead
foreground its partners. Besides acknowledging that a collaborative practice is much more efficient in terms of gathering knowledge, it also much better reflects today’s realities of global architecture practice. By now, the architectural profession has become a complex multidisciplinary practice involving countless disciplines and stakeholders, which necessitates a mode of collaborative working. The 1992 Shinkenchiku Competition sits as a hinge in Koolhaas’s decades-long career, acknowledging the benefits of a collaborative research while at the same time anticipating a mode of speculative thinking that lies at the base of think tank AMO.
Notes

11. “the first non-Western country with an architectural avant-garde” turned into a slogan re-appears in promotional materials of the book, as well as in many interviews related to the book. Rem Koolhaas et al., *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks* (Cologne: TASCHEN, 2011).
15. Interview between author and Mitsugo Okagawa (20 June 2019).
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Interview between author and Mitsugo Okagawa. 20 June 2020.

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