

S, M, X, XL - Letters to an Icon

(File it under who cares!)

Dear Mr Koolhaas

I know this isn't the usual way to prepare a paper for the *Journal of Architectural Education* but surely, we'd be forgiven for attempting a little unsolicited hop skip and jump along all those compound walls that Tom Wolfe scripted in his entertaining romp, *From Bauhaus to our House*. The problem is most of us have never had a house like 'our house', let alone designed their own Bauhaus for Uncle Tom or Aunt Maggie.

Is it alright for you if we stick to standard English and forego the macaronic? Is it acceptable if we try and include some original scholarship on what is now considered the 'field'? You see you and to some extent the Big Book have become -in scholarship terms - the field. Of course, we will need to develop a well-organized argument on this, but we are looking for you to help us on this, and also - if you'll allow - we need some poetic license to review some of the relevant literature that has not yet appeared but is about to emerge on you.

When we get onto the big things, and the Big Book, we'd be better considering what the big man from the Bronx said about all this reflexive speaking that still just about smothers architects with that word that we all know really means that the letter S slips away and our mothers tale over. "When an architect is thinking," Big John said, "he's thinking architecture, and his work is always architecture, no matter what form it appears in."

I met Big John a few times; he always reminded me of that big tree, Nick Cave; that doomed beautiful figure coming into our view with trepidation and clarity. What does it matter if we attribute it to Bill Gibson, the future may have already arrived, and you must have had something to do with it? You might also have something to do with that fact that it's not eventually distributed. But between you and David Harvey, I would leave that to seminars at UCL or UCLA. You see it's the awakening of intelligence that we cannot get away from.

I always thought of you as the Hunter Thompson of contemporary architecture. I had no scholarly research to back this up, still don't have, but not sure if we actually need it. You see what exactly in design scholarship would put across my point, when you constantly re-make that point each day.

I know we have to talk about the Big Book. But the *gonzo* in you is nowhere better seen than in S, M, X, XL. From this point forwards shall we just accept that we can refer to it as the exacerbated volume, the Big Book?

Ever

James

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Dear Mr Koolhaas

The Big Book has never been friendly in an accessible way but then who would carry a telephone directory around with them? Over-weighty in more ways than one it was of course an instant presence; it was a master stroke and along with Mr Mau's contribution (which was not slight clearly), the silver made it look like an Audi TT convertible, squashed and reduced as they are by the guys at Volkswagen and the Audi factory. I often thought of taking the laser cutter and shaping the book as I did once with my own large book when I turned my own volume of *Writing Architecture* into one of those vases by Alvar Aalto that he considered resembled the undergarments of the northern indigenous tribe.

It was a gesture, a big one too, I have to give you that. Even when you showed me the first draft in Hotel Colon in the early 1990s! You know the ones we use for doorstoppers or piano legs when a caster has fallen off (perfect actually for the Steinway) or a leg under a collapsed bed. Admittedly a rather mundane function for something of such value. In fact, let's not mince words or scholarship, it just left all the other books behind.

Only recently after owning it for so long did I go from page to page. This was as far from Mr Jabes as you can get; this was not a foreigner carrying under the crook of his arm a tiny volume. There was no tiny volume here - *un extranjero con, bajo el brazo, un libro de pequeno format* - no there was no S in the sequence, this was the *cabron* of all architectural books.

Though of course before we are condemned for unwise brashness, some projects were of course S, some were M, some were X and a lot were going to be XL. (Confessional question: did I ever read the texts?) Recently I took the volume from under the piano and I sat down. I thought of the sand in the dunes off West Wales. It was like turning over a page of sand. I read some of the text. I scanned others. Then I turned slowly, then quickly. What I saw as a gratuitous graphic appeared to dislodge a serious one, or so it seemed. There was something going on here, but I was no nearer understanding it as I was on the day I bought it.

But then I was travelling on a train going the same direction. But mine was a train that suddenly is buffeted and shaken so violently, as the passing superior super nova, inter city express hurtles past on the other track. It's all a matter of sound and sand, over in a matter of seconds. But it was the direction we were all going, give or take careful measures of denial. It's only the speed that is – as yet if you don't read them – not up to speed. You'll forgive this untidy pun, but some of us are 'still' getting there

Ever

Jamie

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Dear Mister K

I was walking home and the image of Kurt Vonnegut came across me. I know he has more hair than you and can or could do the short buzz cut up the sides and let the octopus sit on top of his head. You can never be accused of that, of letting the octopus sit on top of your head. All this probably emerged because I had recently seen the new packaging of KV's books; brash graphics, bright colours, wonky design, something stirring in their Newyork lifelessness.

I wondered: are you the Vonnegut of architecture? You must admit not a bad thought to have to accompany you home in a city that has no name, in a country that struggles to identify itself, in a world stumbling towards being occupied by the neo-liberals that have taken over countries and successfully stored vast sums of money to ensure the interest will pay for any further discrepancies and budget inaccuracies.

But I have a confession to make – there will be many in these letters – that whenever I read about you in various books, essays, articles, academic texts I too oscillate between the bleak negativity of Koolhaas Noir and the delusional optimism of Bigness. This is where I cannot help becoming the exacerbated self. But what strikes me is that I don't read with any depth. I just don't want to. It is not that I am indifferent, far from it. I just don't want to entertain the seriousness of this immediacy that you ushered in. This was the world that is only now emerging, a world exacerbated by rhetoric and language games, diagrams of the impoverished soul that bites into the apple. Any apple.

I have heard that volumes are already underway on your work which have a strange, uncanny even, resemblance to volumes that have been written before. For example, a few that have been advertised recently are as follows: *The Success and Failure of Rem Koolhaas*; *Rem Koolhaas and the Tragic View of Architecture*; *King Rem and the Continual Revolution in Architecture*. Some of these promise to do more than just re-script the last century and that inimitable constructivist vision of Suprematist blandness and blindness.

Some of these volumes may just allow us to re-read what was really at stake when the Big Book emerged. Others slated for publication in the coming year (is this a boom? have you ever not been in a boom period?): *Rem Koolhaas and OMA: Redrawn*; *OMA – an exacerbated acronym*; and that other volume that is essential for any living legend or icon to reach the inner corridors of language and ambiguity *An OMA/AMO Dictionary of Architecture and Narrative*.

Personally, if I was asked by a publisher, I'd suggest writing *Mr Koolhaas: The Prejudice Project*. But it's unlikely that I will get that request before I retreat to the villa on the banks of where the Namkhan and Mekong rivers join.

This was going to be a shorter letter. The S in the title.

So it goes,

James, the Headwearing Octopus

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Dear Mister K

I had just bought the maddest, coolest, un-hip chunky zip-up sweater with a Mondrian pattern. I was teaching architecture again and wondering why, after 2 years as a recluse, I was going round in circles with one foot nailed to the floor. Disaster and doom were in the air again, the war on terror was imploding as it had threatened to do for years now, more cities were being occupied and bombed, and I was waiting to get back to Peshawar on the Afghan border. M

However, there is sadness at the school of architecture. It is beginning not to matter which. Students, keen, indifferent, confused are all being hung out to dry in a way Mister K, you know all about. In these days where is no such thing as authentic architecture (was there ever?), the struggle is on their faces. They care, of course, they care but something else begins to dislodge the moment. And it goes straight into the heart. The external panic in the market isn't giving them much confidence either, nor are the repackaged books of a subversive like Vonnegut or your own books on the 'fundamental' packaged as another piano leg.

Resorting to known solutions like the grand but empty poetic gesture of immediacy, or the delights of known thrill and conscientious visions can hold off the barbarians for a while. But only for a while! The tornadoes and the hurricanes anthropomorphically rip out communities without as much as pause. Without planning, nothing will survive. Well, we used to think that no?

Some students speak of a book of illusions or a book of pessimism. I suggest another 'book of disquiet', but they stare through me as if the grand gesture of the failed rebel is finished. *Pessoa* is a software program today not a poet with multiple identities who happened to live in Lisbon and wear those glasses and suit that could be silhouetted into an icon. The students are hunkering down; in their minds, in their homes, in their offices, in their marriages.

The Big Book is nowhere to be seen. Asked if they are positive, they nod, sadly, from side to side, not up and down. It is this tristesse that is dripping from the walls of these institutes, these schools of architecture. But you've raced ahead once again, turned the tables on anyone tempted to take the seriousness another stage. We have long passed into debates which are mostly categorized by lack of debate. There is little exchange, and what exchange there is, consists of agreed outrage at the loss of serious history and the lack of anything that resembles any deep understanding.

You'd be laughing here. This has left students so de-radicalized for years now as to think a passive, modest architecture of careful agony and such tiny complacent thrill is the answer to the indulgent excesses of what was once known as 'star architecture'. If you were a film director, you too would have used a U2 song as your soundtrack or then Nick Cave.

But – and I didn't meant to get into the bleakness too early - this has broken down into such a fake battle that the conferences now hold fake skirmishes in an attempt to re-align education and design scholarship to ensure students either have a skill to enter the office or remain in education and get one of those rapid doctorates that ensure students will be taught by those forever young. Both it seems are already tamed with an ethical position that keeps architecture the privileged and favoured circle it always was.

This reminds me of the type of short essay you might have written, quickly and seductively. The administrators and instructors assembled in committee after committee ask for a social responsibility in students that most educators now no longer have. In the meantime, students idle out their time, put off graduating and the schools ride out the confusion whilst adding to this impasse. Then the Big book is occasionally brought out like a French accordion player and the music goes on. The signs are not good; the search for a method is vacant, the bubble diagrams for authentic action and real architecture are becoming a waste of time.

That was then. That was when I arrived in Houston to introduce a panel of the famed and the damned at a conference held by the American Associate Schools and Colleges of Architecture in Doubletree Hotel, Downtown Houston. Having failed to be considered for the head of a school of architecture, I first thought it would be good to be a bystander, take the seat in the auditorium and listen to the illuminati put right what seems to have gone wrong with past, present and future architecture. A few of your friends were there.

Professor Sennett was to kick it all off at Rice University and it was, I was told, worth getting one of those high seats, like the pitchers in an academic baseball game. There I would learn the art of being able to speak slowly, deliberately on a subject that one has just spent a year or two writing about. I was not 18 floors up looking down and becoming the identity demanded of me from this upper purchase; Professor James Vertigo.

That was then Mister K, this is now
Vertigo

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Dear Mister K

In discussions and dialogues with myself I often return eventually to the mind not the work, though of course, the work is always a result of the mind. How to capture the skill and understand the organisational effectiveness necessary in architecture today, necessary for the students to be able to influence and shape the architecture of the future? Many architects demonstrated this today but few strayed into the schools to support this wider vision.

It isn't an easy task of course as we seek to understand the organisational effectiveness necessary in practice today often through words which can never quite sustain architecture's intent or import. Aiming to help students negotiate and take on the expanded fields in architecture whilst attempting to contribute toward a public understanding of contemporary architecture takes on an urgency and serious critical dimension. In fact, to ask of students a re-awakened social responsibility and ethical position is to battle against today's critical pretence and frivolity.

If we pause here for a moment to consider organizational behaviour and Charles Handy's factors (*Understanding Organisations* 1976/1993 p15) affecting organization effectiveness we might be nearer what it is that makes being an architect interesting today and in the future and the diagnostic skills students may have to begin learning to take part on more than the tame professionally obedient schemes already mapped out for them in the firms outside.

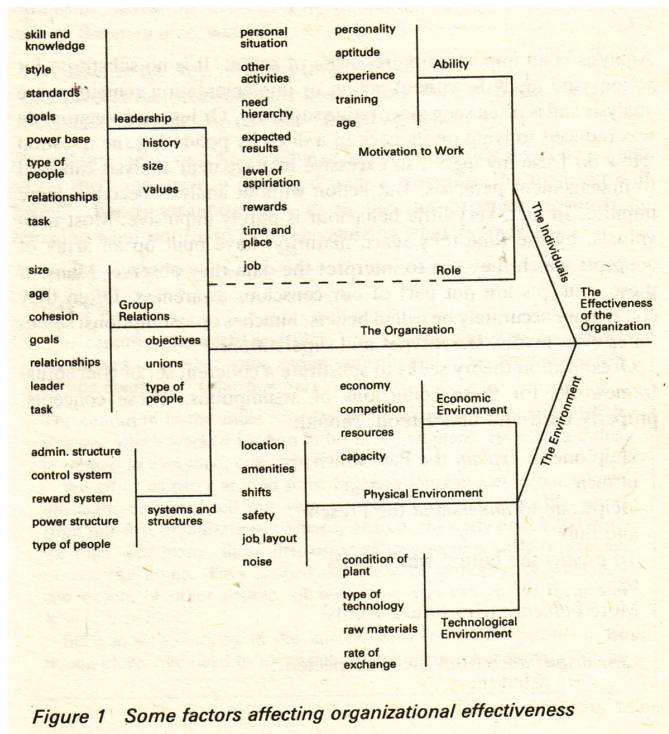


Figure 1 Some factors affecting organizational effectiveness

The students had to learn how to be relational when their instructors often ignored this or even did not understand this as a dynamic for architecture as much as social alliances. This means a pedagogy that students recognise, a process in constant upset, situations re-scripting themselves, students re-imagining architecture through an expanded process. It is a pedagogy not merely a re-thinking which is in movement itself.

Much contemporary architecture tied to the repertoire of a known history of forms and the allowed spectacle attempts this and accepts it as some sort of progress in response to the trade-fair architecture that is re-shaping new and old cities alike in Uzbekistan, Beijing, Nanjing, or Almaty. But to be relational here is not an architecture of resistance turning back to known thrill and crafted mastery, nor is it the inventive but relative mutations of the type seen in photoshop or rhino-architecture. Neither is it an appropriation of refined but known solutions.

Relational in terms of the pedagogical refers more to the displaced intellect and whether – even in architecture – it plays up to reveal the emptiness of our past in a structure or system (in this case psychic, cognitive, performative), and effects shifts in other parts of that system. Be this part of a building process, technology, research and development, the client's process, the brief, the political and financial dimension, or the enlarged but achingly framed social reality.

Why would current educators and instructors be so afraid of this menu of sliding intellect and alertness for an architecture that must respond to an expanded consciousness, when all events outside this illusion are being controlled by factors outside architecture but controlling the architecture of the system itself? I began to think students needed to be part of the conditions within which today's engagement and practice is based. Students would need to insinuate themselves within the economic constraints, they would have to navigate perceptual prejudice, and ideological re-framing.

All of these are the table-top, desk-top and daily issues which are often ignored when buildings reach the picture-point stage. And if philosophy, weak thinking and logic in architecture has become an alibi for the future, a meditation on language only, then teaching would also need to expose the unobtainable and unthinkable truths in architecture that of course would never be revealed. But if the illusion is alive and kicking and represented in the new cities popping up in deserts, oil fields and wastelands then here is the conundrum.

If we apply the notions of distrust and scandal to all architecture, how can we extract those architects attempting to work differently and teach students to do this too. And how many of those contemporary architects implied in the name-games of fame, supping with autocratic devils and accepting the bullet-proof chauffeur driven limos will also wish to assert this difference? Architecture and illusions go together; architecture may no longer be about (was it ever?) what it pretends to be about, and what a small circle of commentators and critics ensure it is about, despite the carnivals, lords and doctors.

Most students already worked in these illusions. The enigma of form, the software gigolo work supported by watercolour, frame diagram, cartoon or YouTube clip does not necessarily imply any radical agenda. Nor does it necessarily serve the green, sustainable, buzz-word responsibility of the moment – these are merely the alibis of displaced luxury and inequality that serve to offer the civic eye sublime but forbidden jewellery. Buildings *to be seen and not read!* Our mentor then in today's confused spectacle would be Giacomo Leopardi: (*Thoughts*, London 2002, transl. Note 104, p.72)

“The interest of general tranquillity, domestic and public, are opposed to the pleasures and enterprises of young people. And so even a good education, or what is called such, consists in great part of deceiving pupils into subordinating their own advantage to that of others. But even without this, old people naturally tend to destroy the young, as far as in them lies, and to obliterate them from human life, since they abhor the sight of them.

In all times old age has conspired against youth, because in all times it has been natural for men basely to condemn and persecute in others those blessings which they would rather keep for themselves. Nevertheless, it is still noteworthy that, among educators, who, if they are people of the world, profess to want their neighbours' good, there are so many who try to deprive their pupils of the greatest blessing in life, which is youth. It is even more noteworthy that fathers and mothers, not to mention other tutors, never feel pangs of conscience for giving their children an education based on such a malign principle. This would be even more surprising if for a long time, for other reasons, trying to abolish youth has not been regarded as a meritorious work

“The result of such a pernicious culture, intent on benefiting the cultivator with the ruin of the plant, is either that the pupils, having lived like old people in the first bloom of their lives, make themselves ridiculous and unhappy when they are old, by trying to live like young people, or rather, as happens more often, Nature wins, and young people, living as young people despite their education, rebel against the educators, who, if they had encouraged the use and enjoyment of youthful faculties, would have been able to regulate them, through the confidence their pupils would have had in their teachers, which they would never have lost.”

The serious question posed to most students today was how, as young people living, they could rebel against their educators who have become able only to regulate them.

Octopus head-wearing greetings

James

After Note

(i)

‘The economic wisdom of this century can be measured by what happens with the so-called ‘compact’ editions, where there is little consumption of paper, and endless wear and tear on the eyesight. However, in defence of saving paper on books one might mention that it is the custom in this century to print much and read nothing. To this custom belongs also the abandonment of those round letters which were used generally in Europe in past centuries, and the substitution for them of long letters, to which we might add the gloss on the paper. These are things which are the more beautiful to look at the more harmful they are to the readers eyes. But all this is very reasonable at a time when books are printed to be seen and not to be read. (Thoughts, Leopardi p.7)

(ii)

The Journal of Architectural Education:

The submission must meet the required word and image counts:

- i. For scholarly manuscripts: 7,000 words, 12 images
- ii. For design manuscripts: 1500 words, 20 images

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