

Rem Koolhaas Speaks at Japan Society

by Ian Volner | Thursday, March 8, 2012



Rem Koolhaas; photo by George Hirose

To alter a popular formula, architectural history is the sincerest form of autobiography. When designers set out in search of design's past, the trail of markers they leave behind often leads directly to their own practices, ambitions, and life stories.

So it was Tuesday night with **Rem Koolhaas**, the preeminent Dutch architect, speaking to a packed crowd at the Japan Society in midtown Manhattan. The ostensible subject of the Koolhaas talk was the Japanese **Metabolist** movement—the daringly science-fictional architectural tendency that emerged in Japan during the early 1960's—though the lecture's true topic was, inevitably, Koolhaas himself.

Koolhaas and collaborator **Hans Ulrich Obrist** have partnered on a new book about the Metabolist phenomenon, *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks*, just out from publisher **Taschen**. The collection of essays and interviews with the surviving Metabolists was seven years in the making, and Koolhaas revealed to a rapt audience some of the more surprising revelations of his research.

"We had to look earlier... for the trigger moments of Metabolism," said the architect. As the researchers discovered, the roots of Metabolism, despite its forward-looking veneer, lay in Japan's past—more particularly, in its immediate, war-time past. Koolhaas and friends visited an aging **Kiyonori Kikutake**, only to discover that the architectural patriarch was a fairly unapologetic Imperial revanchist and avid America-hater. He described his involvement in Metabolism as his "revenge" against democracy and capitalism.

The designer went on to describe Kenzo Tange as the leader of an almost cult-like cell of incipient Metabolists who "lived together, worked together, and presumably slept together," emerging one by one as full-fledged architects as though from "a factory of wunderkinder." Koolhaas praised this unsung Metabolist talent machine, calling it "unusual." Yet that praise seemed rather to redound to the speaker: what could be more similar to Rem's own OMA, with its string of **Baby Rems** scattered the world over?

More tellingly still, the architect spoke at length about the kind of good-natured collaboration, the cultural potency, and the scope of practical action enjoyed by Japanese designers in those feel-good days of the 1960's. The subtext—not so sub—was Koolhaas' own longing for a time when architects enjoyed a greater degree of impunity than they do today, free from carping online commenters and the balkanized, hyper-competitive global marketplace. Rem's Metabolist dreams, it emerged, are the reveries of a closet architectural romantic, pining for the days of knights in **shining capsules**.

Image courtesy of Japan Society.