REM KOOLHAAS  Do we really need a discussion? I get bored with my own words. And every time I feel the burden of this project’s importance, I find it unbelievably embarrassing.

MARK WIGLEY  I know; but there are issues larger than the project itself that come out in its documentation, generic issues that are prompted by the specifics. I’m interested in the possibility that this project has its own life — a life that precedes Porto and maybe even that precedes the OMA office. As the architect, you may be the victim, rather than the master of the project. KOOLHAAS  I like that.

WIGLEY  So in this discussion, we can both speak about the Casa da Música from outside it, as if it is somehow as foreign to you as it is to me; as if being so close to it for so long has caused it to become stranger, rather than more familiar to you. Of course no one else could have produced that building; you are the architect; but that doesn’t mean you were in control of it in the way that people think architects are in control of their buildings. That’s what I want to talk about: the way a project might have a mind of its own, and the ways in which an office might let such a project lead it in unexpected directions.

KOOLHAAS  You are proposing something incredibly intricate. WIGLEY  This forensic discussion of the documents becomes another project then; a project about the project, but also about projects in general.
WIGLEY  Looking through the small mountain of documents on the Porto project, it would seem that the fax machine is the single most important design tool in your studio. Would you agree? KOOLOHAAS  As a connector? WIGLEY  Yes, but also as much more than that.

KOOLOHAAS  Completely. The fax has been a logistical godsend, but I also like it aesthetically. It forces everyone to adopt a single format. It’s an invisible discipline. WIGLEY  Yes — every drawing, every idea, every problem has to be formatted so that it can be sent as a fax. All thoughts must pass through that window.

KOOLOHAAS  How many faxes do you think are involved in the history of the project? WIGLEY  I didn’t count, but so many; in the hundreds even. What’s fascinating is that the fax exchange seems to have a relentless rhythm of its own. It’s a kind of liberating mechanism. KOOLOHAAS  It liberates one from meetings. That’s extremely useful for me.

WIGLEY  Do you remember your first encounter with a fax? KOOLOHAAS  I’d say 1981. WIGLEY  So the domestication of the technology in offices and the start of OMA are not so far apart. It would be interesting to think that OMA required the fax to come into being. KOOLOHAAS  With the fax, physical separation became an asset. It is the moment when being present was not a necessity, when travel could contribute to coherence.

WIGLEY  During the Casa da Música project, the fax stream obsessively tracks your movements, and certain repeated stops — London, New York, Cambridge, and Porto — become de facto outposts of the office. The dialog remains more or less continuous and the project literally takes shape within that stream, or even, I want to suggest, is just a condensation of the characteristics of the fax stream, a condensation of a relentless process dedicated to condensation. So, if we pursue this idea that the project has a mind of its own, it would first mean that you are the willing victim of the intelligent machine you set up. Every document in the archive indicates that
DON'T LIKE CURVED LINE HERE.

regular Facades AT all. Contradict the notion
of voids intersecting plane.
Faxes from Rem Koolhaas in New York annotating fax from Rotterdam, May 17, 1999.
an office extended by dispersed hotel rooms is a mechanism that can think in a very persistent yet agile way. If you were to take the fax out of the equation, the office might not be able to think. Because the fax enables a very particular kind of conversation that doesn't occur with physical proximity.

KOOLHAAS

Exactly, because it's about essences; it's a constant that implies its own kind of writing with its own kind of graphics. WIGLEY

Right, and you become a distant hand that draws with words and telegraphic lines on top of more formalized text that's coming from the office, which is producing another fax, which you also respond to, and so on... It takes hundreds of these faxes to incubate a project. And this fax hand feeding this looping palimpsest is not simply your surrogate while you are away; it's the very thing you bring to the office, even when you are present. The implication would be that if you were always in your office, nothing would get done. KOOLHAAS

I think that's very true!

WIGLEY

Actually, the Y2K House project begins with a fax to you. KOOLHAAS

From the client? WIGLEY

Yes. First there's a phone call to someone in your office, then the fax. Despite the physical proximity of the clients, all their key communications are by fax. In fact, these faxes usually try to undo what has happened during each of the meetings with you, and in the end, you will undo the whole project by fax, completing the circuit. Or simply rewiring it, reconnecting the same dialog to another program in another country, since the music hall competition had just been initiated by a fax from Porto.

KOOLHAAS

The fax also connects different time zones. WIGLEY

While taking advantage of a fragmentation of time; you send a fax, delay, fax comes back, delay, and so on. With this rhythm, your attention may be divided, but the office's attention is not. The office just keeps... KOOLHAAS ...

sending.... WIGLEY ...

Allowing ideas to be continuously reconstructed. KOOLHAAS

That continuity promotes linearity. And that linearity, along with the image quality of the fax, promotes essence.
Wigley This word essence keeps coming up. Essence is good? Koolhaas It’s good and convenient at certain moments. We’re not looking for essence as much as we’re looking at unvarnished truths and worst-case scenarios. There is no beauty or suggestiveness to the image in a fax; in that state, it’s only the hardcore. Wigley No varnish. So hard is good, varnish is bad. Right? Koolhaas Yes. The fax strips. It is even a type of detector. If you get a dirty fax, it means there’s redundancy.

Wigley I suppose that in the case of a blurry fax somebody could invent a new concept by misunderstanding the image. Koolhaas And sometimes what I thought were black smudges turn out to be beautiful images. But actually I would say that the real work still happens in the fax. There’s also the issue of the paper and the way in which it interacts with the red pen!

Wigley My interest is not in the personal fetish of the fax as such, but in the options the fetish makes possible, and particularly those it excludes. Porto is the very image of the hardcore act of exclusion. It’s defined by what has been taken away, as if internalizing the protocol that everybody has to organize their work so that it can be faxed. If it can’t be faxed it can’t contribute anything to the design. It’s as if things happen only at the moment that they become faxable. Koolhaas It’s a story of compression; yes. Wigley These sets of numbered faxed pages about the Porto project are like little booklets. And the office make lots of them — sometimes four a day. Koolhaas Yes, it’s a type of reporting.

Wigley What is the relationship between design and reporting? Koolhaas Both rely on endless recording and communication. In the case of architecture, we are documenting the story of a project.

Wigley So there is this key mechanism, the fax machine, at the heart of the recording/reporting/designing operation. It’s a clarification machine for an office that sees itself as a clarification machine. Koolhaas Exactly.
Y2K facade study.
One of the most intriguing aspects of the Casa da Música’s evolution is the continuity of the idea of the “big hole” over a period of six years or so. The object has continually altered its shape in order to maintain this hole. It’s as if the hole has survived terrible weather, changing clients, a fluctuating staff, technical demands, economic and political shifts, everything. This is one resilient hole.

That’s the beauty of concept over shape, of course. Concepts are more resilient than shapes or objects.

And the most resilient concept in this case is perforation. The history of OMA could be seen as a history of techniques of perforation. The elevator, escalator, and the ramp are understood as ways of perforating an object in space and time. Their defeat of the fixed solid becomes the main architectural event. The most obvious feature of the Porto scheme is that it’s a monumental perforation: a big hole in a big solid.

I’m interested in your thoughts about the relationships between that and the project for the Très Grand Bibliothèque, in Paris, where you have a large cubic volume acting like a solid, and carved out of it are voids whose eccentric shapes are determined by the programs they house. They could be big or small; they could be many or few. In Porto, it seems the reverse: the cubic void never changes, while the eccentric solid around it keeps evolving, depending on how you work out the program. So what is this thing you have with holes?

To discuss these more generic issues through the specific buildings, it might be interesting to look at the arguments for the library, because I think they also underlie Porto. There is one early drawing for the library that was triggered by the nausea of being obligated to do an icon, to create difference, to create representations, to find different identities.
This first drawing came from the idea that within a very standard project perhaps you could simply excavate the public spaces to create a void, rather than build a kind of pavilion. In Casa da Música the hole has become the representation itself. There was no hierarchy in the library, but in Porto, there is: the building therefore has this weird shape — a big hole intersected by smaller holes. The baby excavations meeting the mother excavation. Right. I think that the most exciting moments in the building are the moments where one void meets another, where if you stand in between you have an uncanny sensation of complete transparency through both.

Standing at the intersection of the two biggest holes, you can even see through to the other smaller holes. This was a really pure, pre-architectural concept. As we continued through the design process we became more sophisticated — or perhaps less adventurous — so we experimented with ideas and applications such as translucent glass and translucent concrete which could contribute to both solid and void.

It’s interesting that you embraced the void in Paris because you were nauseated by the obligation to produce an iconic object on a plinth, but let the void completely take over in Porto to produce a uniquely shaped object on a plaza, a hyper-icon. The question of the hole seems to generate extreme force either way, and Porto is clearly just part of a longer story. So maybe we have to do a personal history of the hole. Where was the first? What was it? It was in the north of Amsterdam; a generic building built in the sixties or late fifties. I’m not sure if it was a hospital or an old people’s home, but it became significant simply by virtue of

Rem Koolhaas, sketch timeline from building found near Amsterdam, to Paris library to Porto, made during discussion with Mark Wigley, London, Sept. 9, 2007.
its hole. I told Laurinda Speer about it, and a couple of years later it turned up in Miami; it turned into Architectonica! I thought that would be the end of the hole for me but later it was resurrected, as a void, in our project for the Très Grand Bibliothèque. **WIGLEY** So the hole did not really appear in your own work until after suitable therapeutic delay. **KOOLHAAS** Yes, but it’s not really a hole, as I keep trying to say. **WIGLEY** A void. **KOOLHAAS** Right. In Porto the void is used to create form, and in Paris it’s used to kill the obligation to form. And the first drawing of the library has nothing to do with penetration. It’s more about the envelope. This drawing remains the basis for the opposition to the icon.

**WIGLEY** Alternatively, we could concentrate on the solid rather than the void. The strongest images of the Paris Library for me are the reverse models showing the voids as solids. The solid mass of books is almost never represented as a solid, meaning the question of whether the outer skin is transparent or translucent remains open. ↑ When you get to Porto, it becomes almost polemically ambivalent. **KOOLHAAS** When it was the Y2K House we thought it would be transparent, and then even when we did the competition we thought it would be in glass. At some point it became a true solid. ↑ The client of the Y2K House really feared the exposure of mess. I was hoping that every part that was not a void would look like a compacted laundry bag, with a Manzoni-like compression of dirty linens and unmentionable things. **WIGLEY** The void would then become even more amazing, because this open volume would cut through the heart of this dirty laundry bag. **KOOLHAAS** But all the rooms would still be in place. In fact, for every family member, and for every event, a subtraction was made. The adjunct “things” were not ornamental; they really were important.

**WIGLEY** If the walls of a typical house function primarily to hide things, and if the Y2K House is self-identified as a house with no walls, then one lives inside the density of stuff that’s usually hidden. So it’s a perverse house, right?

**KOOLHAAS** Very perverse. And it was the client’s provocation that made it so perverse. We never represented the dirt aspect of the house, but it would have been nice.
I wonder how the perversity of the Y2K House might have contributed to the Porto project — how private feelings about dirt might have shaped a public project in which dirt couldn't ever have been a positive category.

KOOLHAAS In my memory that's something that actually happened in the office — in a flash. WIGLEY In the documents it wasn't so sudden; the designing of the Y2K House and the designing of Porto overlap during a period of radical doubt about whether the client would ever be interested. ¶ The official narrative is: this concept is not going to work with this client, so let's use it with Porto. But actually they overlap, and the overlap is an intriguing period during which the Porto scheme seems to try not to be too much like the house.

KOOLHAAS We were creating an artificial difference.

WIGLEY My theory would be that even if you say to the office, I think the house will work as the concert hall they... KOOLHAAS ...wouldn't dare do it literally. WIGLEY Right. They resist the idea in order to be different. ¶ But then there is a series of faxes in which you suggest to Fernando Romero, project leader of the Casa da Música competition team, that things are not going in the right direction. You suggest, for example that the top floor become a labyrinth like the one in Y2K. So in a way, I see you through the faxes, saying.... KOOLHAAS ...trust Y2K. WIGLEY Right. Y2K seems to work. So basically the whole thing goes... KOOLHAAS ...reluctantly in that direction. WIGLEY Yes. And that's why I favor the “survival of the void” theory. No matter what the office did, the original concept of that damn house was going to live on. ¶ Again there is this odd sense of the office as the victim of a great project. The hole was its own kind of experiment that needed to be finished, and was finished in a way, although perhaps another OMA building will continue it sometime. Your faxes continually say that the concept is getting less clear, and that the original house concept seems to work better, so it is even more interesting that there was this unconscious attempt by the office to be different, to resist the concept.

KOOLHAAS There were other concept drawings. There was another effort to create this thing that was totally unrelated to the house.
In terms of the evolution, or polemical non-evolution, of the concept, what is your sense of these moments of the Porto project in which the solid could be the void and the void could be the solid? If the house is this laundry bag with a protected living zone right in the middle of the bag, what happens with the music hall?

KOOLHAAS There was no analogy in Porto. That’s what killed the trajectory of the laundry bag. The house was more pure, because although it was made of glass, the dirtiness of the content would have made it ok. We experimented with a model for Porto made of etched glass, with steel floors that would have created beautiful shadows, but I wasn’t confident that it would have been interesting.

WIGLEY Was that still an open question with the house? Because there you also produced translucent models, glass models, and solid models. KOOLHAAS No, it was not an open question in the end. It was the glass that revealed the laundry. WIGLEY So had the project continued it would have ended up a translucent laundry bag. I wonder what the project thinks about that!

KOOLHAAS Do you think the project is also solid? WIGLEY I’m wondering. We don’t know whether the house would have remained glass if you had tried to tame it for another six months. As in Porto, it might have gone back to solidity when you had the chance to really test it. KOOLHAAS It might have, but I had a stronger fantasy of what it would be like in glass — also because of the scale. And I’m always interested in dirt.

WIGLEY So this was a great client! He wanted you to deal with the issue of dirt, but in Porto you couldn’t. KOOLHAAS That is the difference between public and private buildings. In Porto we were dealing with the public. WIGLEY Yet there’s a certain private aspect to Porto. The excavated smaller spaces are all very … KOOLHAAS … domestically scaled? WIGLEY Yes, and the furniture is domestic. Even the title, Casa da Música, the House of Music, suggests a certain domesticity. KOOLHAAS That’s for you to say.

WIGLEY The reverse is also true: there is a very public dimension to the Y2K House. KOOLHAAS Inevitably,
because the client of the Y2K House wanted private cells for the different family members, and then one public element where they would come together. The building articulates the problem of the family.

WIGLEY The main tunnel is so big that everyone can see you from the street. It is, in the most literal sense, public. I don’t know what the proportion of the void is in relation to the rest of the house. It seems bigger, or at least it may be fifty-fifty. KOOHLAAS I would say one third is void, at the most.

WIGLEY I am being dominated by the void then. I see it as bigger than it is. KOOHLAAS But it’s smaller. WIGLEY Yet big enough to force a transformation of the public-private relationship because of this radical gap inserted into the plan and section. The client asked for a super-public space inside a private house, and I think this is one of the reasons that it was so easy to move the concept to Porto. KOOHLAAS Yes. WIGLEY Because it’s already a public machine. So even if you can’t take the dirt with you, and even if you can’t present Porto as a laundry bag, it would be interesting for a public building to appear to gather together a city’s mess. KOOHLAAS You could do that only with certain programs. And that is exactly what we did with the library — with the book representing a density of forms; but you can’t do that with music, because music is ethereal.

WIGLEY Yet so much of the story about the house is beautifully engineered for the Porto scheme, in retrospect, even if it had to become absolutely different in order to survive. The resilience of the concept is impressive.

KOOHLAAS There may also have been an opportunistic hesitation because we wanted to do both projects; therefore we had to avoid too great a similarity. I remember that we had to have a very serious discussion about whether we should mention the house at the competition presentation to the jury. WIGLEY And the verdict? KOOHLAAS I decided to present it. Because I thought that otherwise there would have been a sense of dishonesty or a seemingly dishonest situation.

WIGLEY The beauty of the project is to prove that a house designed for one family with extremely specific demands, on a particular site, for a particular budget, can with unparalleled efficiency be the right approach for a different
client, in a different situation, for a different program. It challenges the basic idea that the architect has to listen to the client, to the program, to the site, to the budget — that those are the factors that generate architecture.

KOOLHAAS The whole endeavor is a polemic against a vast array of assumptions about architecture, and ultimately, a total short-circuit of our own assumptions, because it prompted the question: "What does it mean that we are ‘interested in program?’"

WIGLEY There’s a beautiful moment in your “Transformations” lecture when you say something like, “we tried to do our usual thing with the program but in the end that didn't make any sense.” That’s why I’m persisting with the “project-knows-best” theory — meaning the concept of the project undermines not only what every other architect does, but also the office doing it. KOOLHAAS That is very true, and it felt radical. WIGLEY The office works against itself. KOOLHAAS Usually the office is not interested enough in challenging its own most holy assumptions. This is also perhaps where the autobiographical fact that I had just recovered from a near-death experience is very important. I realized that I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life with the drab narrative that the office was only about program. I’ve had two, or maybe three moments of real aggression vis-a-vis assumptions of the office. The first was the making of S, M, L, XL, which produced a near financial death! But that near death then inspired a new phase with AMO as a challenge to the architectural emphasis.

WIGLEY Your near-death experience was around the time of your travels to Africa. KOOLHAAS Yes. But when I went to Africa, I was so impressed by the African form of intelligence and directness, I realized that we could be much more intuitive and instinctive, instead of laboring over every decision. WIGLEY So at that moment the office allows itself to go against its own nature, as you said, its most holy law, its brand even. KOOLHAAS And that was at the time that there was still a certain mystery about OMA, before the current star architect nausea had engulfed us. Maybe that’s an interesting trajectory to erase.
I’m always impressed by Le Corbusier’s strategy of firing his entire office every now and then. They would come to the front door and there would be a sign saying the office was closed. This was the way he self-consciously cleansed the office of its habits, thereby trying to avoid his own tendency to reproduce himself by kicking out his disciples. He killed the people who loved him most — or released them, depending on how you see it. Even those who were allowed to remain had to operate with an approach that challenged the old laws of the house. At that moment, people in the office had just started to write in magazines about how we work. That was the worst point. There are some well-intentioned but hilarious texts.

So you had to challenge the internal code, and therefore the external code. I think the default assumption of your colleagues in the field was that the radical intelligence of OMA, its polemical impatience with compromise, would prevent it from realizing major public works. As if there is a law dictating that the size of projects must remain inversely proportional to their intellectual content. I think, to this day there is still a “how is that possible?” reaction. So in going against its holy writ, or at least multiplying the writs, the office seemed to rapidly shift up a gear or two. Suddenly and quite literally, what would have been a private experiment was flaunted as one of the most public and celebrated buildings on the planet. Porto violated the perceived limits between private and public, between small scale and large scale, between a research lab and a professional practice, and so on. It violated the rules of both the office and the field, neither of which was given a chance to wave a protest flag.

It’s about burden of proof or not.

To collapse the argument about program without programmatic compromise in the building was a devastating attack on your own office, right? Exactly. But clearly a productive one. The lightly irritated “how is that possible?” is an unwitting but deep compliment.
Fax from Fernando Romero to Rem Koolhaas, experimenting with different degrees of solidity for Y2K, March 4, 1999.
Working with the “white model” at OMA, September 22, 2000.
WIGLEY  The “Transformations” lecture is an important document in the history of the Casa da Música. It came at a key moment, right after you won the scheme, and gives a genealogy of the design from the private house to the house of music. Why did you do that lecture?

KOOLHAAS  It is because of two people, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Barbara van der Linden. They were organizing an exhibition in Antwerp called Laboratorium, which suggested that architecture was also a laboratory. ¶ At that point I wanted to show that architecture was more than a creative process — that it had the dimension of experiment and of alchemy.

WIGLEY  It’s surprising to have such a detailed description of the inner workings of the process, ever, from an architect, but especially right after you win the competition. This is your most vulnerable moment. What if it turns out to be a stupid leap of scale? What if it turns out that the house concept simply will not work as a theater? KOOLHAAS  I’ve always been interested in failure as an option. That’s why the laboratory was exciting. WIGLEY  So the space of that lecture was good for allowing stuff to happen. KOOLHAAS  Exactly. I did it deliberately. It had the aesthetics of a chemistry lesson: there was a classroom; there was a table; and on the table was the whole experiment. That was even the name — “table-top experiments.” It was Bruno Latour’s premise.

WIGLEY  In the video of the science class, you pick up the different models and your hands do a lot of the talking, as presumably they did when first presenting the argument to the clients of y2k and Porto. Hands have been polemically presented to us again and again. What is the role of the architect’s body?

KOOLHAAS  You are asking an important question. I’m sure that the architect’s body has a huge influence on architecture. There are architectures I could simply never convey because of my physical limitations. WIGLEY  And the reverse? You may have physical advantages that… KOOLHAAS  …
enable certain projects to work out. **Wigley** From the documents it seems that the hands were crucial in enabling this concept to be accepted. **Koolhaas** To be credible. **Wigley** The whole concept of the void is explained with these hands. **Koolhaas** The hands are the ideal transition between diagram and representation. You might not understand an idea as a diagram, but as a physical demonstration it makes sense. **Wigley** In this case, the demonstration insists that the project has the irresistible force of a single diagram. It says, “look I’ve got a solid here and I’m simply taking a piece out. But the result is something complex. A lot seems to leap out of a little.”

**Koolhaas** I once wrote a movie script about a magician, but you never saw the magician himself, only the assistant and all the supportive props. In a way we’re talking about the magician’s trick, where you are not supposed to look at the hands. * People always seem to think I’m more complex — and more Machiavellian — than I am. If I’m totally sincere they think there are so many other layers. That is probably also true of the hands. It’s the most simplistic demonstration, but... **Wigley**...you have to construct the idea that it’s that simple. **Koolhaas** Exactly. **Wigley** Simplicity is always a complicated effect. **Koolhaas** At some point I thought that my whole drive was about extreme simplicity.

**Wigley** One of the drawings of Y2K has a beautiful label. It says, of the solid: “unexplainable mass.” It is like an uninformative lump from which an articulate order could be magically extracted.  

† Of course when I look at the “hands” photographs of Y2K and Porto, immediately I think of Le Corbusier’s disembodied hand pointing down to the virtues of the Plan Voisin or triumphantly holding up the glass skyscraper. But the image that seems even more relevant is the one where he pulls the whole apartment out from the Unité d’Habitation, just as you pull the void out from the solid. **Koolhaas** In Delirious New York, I wrote about that glass skyscraper image as a Cartesian rabbit that he pulled out of the hat of the Hugh Ferris void. **Wigley** Magic again. **Koolhaas** Yes... **Wigley** The architect as a magic person. **Koolhaas** We’re using an analogy to magic as an additional layer to the most straightforward.
Your magic trick was even projected onto the Porto site during the evening celebration of the demolition of the existing buildings: a huge image of a hand extracting a void from the model. It is an amazing scene with a crowd looking up at the glowing image which then appears in the local newspaper the following day with the headline “Uma coisa extraterrestre.”

So that’s where the extraterrestrial reference comes from. I never connected the project to the extraterrestrial, or to a meteorite. I hate that metaphor. Why do you hate it? Because it suggests alienness and impact but the project is about relationships and delicacy.

One could be a delicate alien. But a meteorite is a kind of assault; it can’t connect with an existing situation. Paradoxically, the local about the project is more interesting for me than the foreign.

And yet there is a palpable sense of an unprecedented arrival. Those hands float over the site like a billboard anticipating what will come, but instead of simply advertising the shape of the building, the image suggests that the glowing hand itself is doing the construction by otherworldly means. The illusion is complete when the concrete mass that arises on the site uncannily has the same abstract quality of the model in the hand. Even with years of construction, there is a surprising short circuit between concept and building.

In certain photographs, the half-finished building is not so different from the model that the hands play with. This is clearly magic. How can it be possible to drop a concept onto the site without compromise? How can it be possible that the client will accept it, pay for it, and that it even turns out to be beautiful in the end? This is just unbearable! That’s what your colleagues are thinking.

I haven’t noticed much hostility toward it from other architects. I would say more confusion than hostility, because it upset the rules of the game. If the most conceptual architect also produces very large, beautiful public buildings, it’s disorienting.
Strangely, we worked on Porto at the same time as the Seattle Central Library, which is in every sense its opposite. The Casa da Música is the kind of work that you can only do for a competition. Seattle, on the other hand, is the outcome of a very long negotiation process. Though there may be similarities in terms of form or shape or “extravagance,” Porto is the result of an irrational process, while Seattle evolved through a totally rational, linear process. Everything that the rational Seattle team did with incredible dedication and precision, and which led to mock-ups and studies and fantastic journeys with wheelchairs through prototypes, the Porto team was able to do apparently without burden of proof.

Reason gives way to magic. Turning against the holy writ of the office is complicated because there’s another part of the office…. KOOLHAAS …still actually practicing the opposite “method” and succeeding.

And both objects are strong. But I think other architects can more easily accept the strength of Seattle because of all this rational argument about program. They have more trouble accepting the Portuguese or Iberian Peninsula quality — the precisely crafted sensory experience in Porto. The level of sensual refinement at such a scale intensifies the confusingly sudden and total collapse of the argument about program. It intensifies the attack on your own office. It is such a ruthless attack, right? KOOLHAAS Exactly. WIGLEY It could have or should have been fatal.
Fragments of canonic houses to be recombined in early versions of the Y2K house.
In the “Transformations” lecture you describe the experimental evolution of the project from the Y2K House to the concert hall. You call this the “morphogenesis” of the form — a term that reinforces the idea of the project having its own internal life, surviving the office through successive mutations. Within the mountain of faxes and documents in the project archive are repeated attempts to diagram the evolution of the concept at each stage. There are even some early sequential drawings labeled “first ideas for the house.”

These are kind of synthetic drawings. They offer a particular reading of the archive — a diagrammatic history of the design. They suggest that there are many possible variations at each phase but an overall tendency in one direction. What is fascinating is not the trajectory, but the endless… iterations. Right. Box after box of drawings explore all directions, but in the midst of it all, there’s a relentless pruning, testing, and retesting; an aggressive shaping; or one building assuming countless positions until it settles on the right one.

It’s a design process, but no longer developed through crude models. Right. It’s as if there is a cleaned-up micro-history written of each stage. As if even the editing process itself has to be edited. Drawings of the current state of a project are accompanied by diagrammatic developmental drawings of the evolution from previous states, with the strands of biological species serving as the de facto model, including versions in which all signs of a house are seemingly erased in a kind of extinction of the house.

Whenever we had a strong intuition or a strong sketch, we would immediately start to rationalize it. In some cases, rationalization was a productive step, but often, rationalization was a regression or even ruined the concept. Many projects start with two sterile weeks of desperate struggle to create a breakthrough, during which it is clear
that the wrong issue is being addressed, it is never going to happen, and the only way to move forward is to revert to the initial intuition with all its stupidity and mysterious rightness. There are many moments where the initial sketches or ideas have an artistic authority that is not reinforced by reason.

**Wigley** In the early variations of the house, the excavated tunnel idea already exists, but it hasn't been theorized as such. In the beginning there was simply a sustained attempt to be radical with the public/private division. All of these schemes explore ways to radicalize the line between public and private by locating the division inside the object, rather than at the border between the object and the outside. **Koolhaas** Those schemes resemble a project we did for a theater in Zurich. We strictly organized all the parts, and then pulled them apart, so that the gap between them became both an area under the pressure of two plates, but also the representation of the public. So the absence of the public became the public.

**Wigley** Again that relates to the question of the void; the gap becomes the critical element. In all of these synthetic drawings that claim to show the first ideas, there is this gap at the heart of each version of the house. A void with a square section quickly becomes the constant while the shape and material around it keeps changing. The void is certain and the solid is uncertain.

**Koolhaas** The transparent model of Y2K was the beginning of an attempt to represent the mess. We thought it would be all storage. There is a moment at Villa dall’Ava in Paris that comes close. In the bathroom, where we had all kinds of ducts and no storage place, we basically surrounded the duct not in metal but in glass, with a door, and created shelves that occupy all the space that is not occupied by ducts. This was an early prototype for more radical ideas about storage.

**Wigley** So again the house is evolving from an earlier house. And these evolutionary drawings keep reappearing. It’s as if there’s a default setting to monitor the development at regular intervals in order to produce a history in real time. Designing and producing a history of design occur simultaneously. So when you told the clients in Porto about the Y2K project, you were giving them a history of their own scheme.
The client is always being reminded of where this thing is going and where it came from. Koolhaas. The simple reason for that is that there is a ridiculously fragile moment in the design process where you have only instinct and no evidence. So either you make it as brutal as you can, or you try to manipulate it as an irrevocable sequence by creating fake inevitability.

Wigley. And the fake process anyway ends up affecting the real process by generating new options. There’s one fax where someone does a variation that is awkward, yet promising, so you write “try it with words instead.”

Koolhaas. Words are often better. Wigley. This gets us back to the fax logic of the telegraphic black and white statement overlaid with your red surgical cuts. As everything is being stripped down to its hardest form, the house itself literally hardens. It becomes a kind of fax statement, a single point about solid and void, the ultimate fax even.

Koolhaas. There’s also the latency of the Bordeaux house to discuss. Initially, particularly if you have done something supposedly good, there is fear. Wigley. An echo of Bordeaux concludes one of the early evolutionary sequences of the Y2K House, as if it gets reinvented, or simply returns to consciousness, after being repressed for a while. If we still pursue this odd thought that the project has designed itself in spite of the office, these latencies are not so strange, since the whole process began much earlier than Bordeaux, at least as early as that first building with a hole that you saw in Amsterdam. But the Bordeaux house has a more literal presence in the evolution: in one of the very first experiments, plans of houses are cut up and fed to the new project like genetic material. Xeroxed pieces of the Bordeaux house and Villa dall’Ava, along with the plans of other canonic houses, are collaged into different variations of the Y2K house, with the programmatic spaces gathered around a large open court.

Koolhaas. It provided a sense of scale. Wigley. Yet it’s already the same basic concept as the final house, because the central void is constant. What changes is the stuff attached on the outside, which will ultimately be compacted into a single solid, a perfect object. Finally there is this hard-core result. The house, like the design process, edits out
the superfluous, holds it back from the public. Likewise, so much of the clutter, the dirt in the process of getting to that result, has also been removed from the public narrative. Some of these early versions could have been unbelievable houses. They are so brutal in cutting and pasting genetic material from existing houses.

Koolhaas This relates to one of the biggest challenges, particularly in houses, but also in buildings in general: a sense of scale and a sense of smallness. Wigley With this scaling technique, Y2K House starts out as a Frankenstein; but produced with incredibly good genes. Koolhaas Yes, it begins by swallowing a prehistory of strong houses of the last century by Le Corbusier, Aalto, Barragan; even Gehry’s own house is cut up and included in one of the plans. Wigley And the void-solid concept demonstrates its strength by swallowing all of these amazing houses, or at least showing that those houses could be productively reorganized by it. Koolhaas It’s nice. I had completely forgotten these images. Wigley But the sections never have the charm of the plan, maybe because the sections are not done through collage. We don’t get sections through the great houses of history collaged onto the central void. So the test was not finished.

Koolhaas But in its way, this plan is also a section. At a certain point we started to treat the two as interchangeable issues. Wigley Right. All the different phases of the project share this desire for the plan and section to be the same.

Koolhaas …or at least be based on the same principle. Wigley In that sense, the whole process is again very systematic. It seems that if you want to launch an assault on assumptions about scale, program, up and down, left/right, public/private, his/hers, etc. then this concept of the void… Koolhaas …is a very efficient machine for doing it.
Detailed evolutionary drawings of the different versions of the Y2K House.
The big advantage of this shape is that the acoustics can be very well controlled. Strong point is the balance between the aesthetic expression of the hall and the acoustics of it. The high acoustic pledge is expressed to the outside. The dimensions of the hall approach those of the Grosser Musikvereinssaal in Vienna.
Wigley I imagine you wrestling with this void and its endless theatrics, having to tame or edit a single solid that ensures the void’s survival. Is that the point that the structural engineers are allowed to work on it?

Koolhaas They work on it from the start. When doing a competition, we sit with Arup before any idea is even conceived. It’s not really sequential. Wigley So Arup was there at the beginning of the Porto phase. Koolhaas Cecil Balmond was very involved in the whole competition for Porto, but we never would have shown him the phases of the Y2K House.

Wigley But there is no material investigation until after you win. In this book for the jury there is polemically no color, no texture, no softness. There’s only a really bad red curtain that is defended as necessary for acoustic rather than aesthetic reasons. Its softness is explained as purely technical. After you win, and start to develop the design, color arrives. So this object, which has been refined down to its conceptually tough state — hard, colorless, literally black and white — starts to receive this lurid polychrome and polymorphous treatment. The very thing that’s been kept at bay is finally released. Then, through the work of Petra Blaisse and her Inside Outside office, this soft lining uncannily emerges inside the hard. Koolhaas Lining. You called it a lining? Wigley Lining in the sense of inner upholstery, like the patterned fabric on the inside of a sturdy jacket. It turns the solid into a prop for its performance, an effect you only experience if you enter the garment.

Koolhaas Color is in the cutouts of the volume. It’s only the interiors of the voids that are lined. So the original colorlessness is also maintained. Wigley Yet lined in such a way that it reads not as added lining but as the very stuff of the solid. It’s like a solid with a secret inner life, a monolith with a hidden promiscuity.

Koolhaas That’s of course the beauty of a void – it always seems also to be a section. If you cut and excavate, you get the walls that represent a section.
Wigley: So, a more precise reading is that instead of going from the hard black and white to the soft color, it remains constantly hard? Koolhaas: Yes.

Wigley: It seems to me that the fax mentality of the office, of which the Casa de Música diagram could be the ultimate outcome or paradigmatic expression, absolutely insists on the hard and the black and white. Even if the pixilation, the roughness of the fax image, might soften what you see, it doesn’t allow a soft concept. But this almost compulsory hardness of the office, which makes all forms of perforation in the projects dramatic or polemical, is eventually eroded in most projects, or counter-posed, by a surprising softness. Could you ever imagine the reverse? That you would start with a soft scheme and harden it up at the end? What would happen if, for example, you were to work with Petra at the beginning, then force your office to enter the softness, then call in Cecil to toughen it up, and finally finish the hardening yourself?

Koolhaas: Some of the Prada stores or catwalk shows might fall into that category. But can you identify anything that follows this reverse mode — that goes from soft to hard?

Wigley: I like Gottfried Semper’s argument from the middle of the 19th century that we actually live in the softness of clothing and the only purpose of the hard is to keep the soft in place. Adolf Loos embraced that view and Porto is such a Loosian project. Did you ever think of that?

Koolhaas: Not when I was doing it, but I felt as if I was absolutely engaging a kind of 19th century scenario. Wigley: And you bring in Vienna with your use of the famous concert hall as the paradigm of the virtues of the shoebox theater. On the cover of the project book for Porto you have the interior of the Viennese theater with the end wall removed to show the view over Porto. Your building is of course Loosian in the sense that the exterior is more or less white, smooth, and unmarked while the inside is richly detailed in patterns, textures, and colors. The exterior is abstract and uninformative while the inside is intense, richly veined, and hyper-sexualized.

Koolhaas: There is an element of softening in some of our projects that are based on pixels. Like the project we did for Tokyo. None of the individual pieces of
the tower are soft, they are from the land of fax. **WIGLEY** But the effect… **Koolhaas** …is getting soft. **WIGLEY** Right. Softness achieved through a continuous cascade of hard corners. Hard and soft in an intimate lock, as in Porto.

When and how did the sensuous material investigation begin? The documents present this steady trajectory from super hard to super soft. Your competition entry is distinguished by its lack of material elaboration in polemical contrast to your Vienna shoebox image, but ultimately you’re going to put much more into your project than there is in the Vienna box. It’s a radical transformation. The jury gives it a prize without ever imagining… **Koolhaas** …that any of these “soft” developments would actually happen! **WIGLEY** Because this is not very Alvaro Siza. **Koolhaas** But it is very Portuguese and very Catholic… **WIGLEY** …which paradoxically suggests that Siza might not be, because his work is white on the outside and white on the inside. **Koolhaas** Well, there are some Siza villas that have very pink marble staircases.

**WIGLEY** So he has his moments of Loosian intensity too, but not to the degree that starts accumulating once the big Casa da Música model has the wood grain pattern added to the interior of the main void. There are all these one-to-one gold leaf experiments with the grain at different sizes, which again are about pixilation. So it becomes ambiguous as to whether what you are looking at is abstract or ornate.

**Koolhaas** We simply took a pixel of the gold leaf and the old ornate material became modern. It was suddenly possible to read it in a different way. **WIGLEY** So these two materials, wood and gold, both symbolic of authenticity, get charged with modernity. Having brutally abstained from sensuality, the office starts heading down that path via pixilated patterns, a trajectory that will be enriched with the work of
Petra’s Inside/Outside office, culminating in her remarkable curtains. I imagine that it would have been the same with the Y2K House. Around half way through the process you sent a fax to Petra explaining your concept of excavating a solid to make tunnels and so on. That was the before the first of two unsuccessful presentations of the project to the clients. Surely, if that project had gone forward, she would have participated; hard would have again been enriched and transformed by soft. From beginning to end, the Porto project follows a very classical trajectory from a brutally efficient abstract concept to soft sensuous material play. The hardening continues relentlessly before the radical softening begins, which raises the key question of time. It could be an interesting test to reverse the time sequence, to swim upstream or play the movie backwards, from soft to hard.
Petra Blaise, knotted curtain design for main hall.
OMA study photograph of Porto tiling patterns.
With very little time for design, you were required to submit three panels and a report for the jury presentation, but you actually turned up with extra panels and a 72-page narrative booklet. We were in a desperate rush. The presentation was a mess. It was unbelievable that we won.

The short report required for the competition and the longer special booklet you prepared with the whole narrative laid out seem very well-constructed in comparison to the panels. They didn’t work. It was totally embarrassing. Yet you more than survived the impossibility of the schedule and embarrassment is such a good engine. I’m interested in time, as a general theme, and its relation to experimentation. After this mad rush, and the few months for developing the design so it could go to tender, there was a series of interruptions for political reasons…. that totally worked to the building’s benefit. The delays were useful?

Yes. Our office has this great ability to improvise enough to use every change as a windfall. So, the interruptions were incredibly productive; they gave us more time to see. This was also true of the house in Bordeaux, and the house in Paris, because those were really couture projects. In a certain way time equals couture.

More time allows for more refinement, a custom fit.

The time periods get longer and longer as the Porto project proceeds; it literally expands. You have about a month to do one phase, then you have two months to do the next phase, then you have four months. By the time Inside Outside formally arrives you are given a huge length of time during which unbelievable explorations can happen, and countless samples are produced and edited. Is it also the case that the lack of time at the beginning is an advantage?
Absolutely. Particularly in the dialectic between my office and myself. In this respect I learned a lot from my time in Lagos. We found number of masterpieces of modern architecture and modern infrastructure, the vast majority of which were produced by communist architects. Tito was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement and an active delegate. So on his coattails there were architecture and engineering offices that built conference centers, hotels, and parliaments in his wake. There was basically a big bang in Africa in 1960 when I think 17 countries became independent in one year. That means 17 parliaments in one year. Can you imagine that now in architecture? And all those parliaments were beautifully done by Communists. They had offices of 5,000 people working with these modular systems so they could design one day and build the next. Turnkey was an important part of their method. Once the agreement was there, nobody could ever break it or change their minds. So where we always resist compressed time frames out of fear, they embraced them as the sine qua non of that kind of coherence. In that sense, for Porto, I was bound by draconian measures. In the beginning, Cecil and I had to go for a meeting with the chairman of the board who was in an almost intimidating way very explicit in underlining the importance of time and budget. We were led along a deeply torturous path. But shortness can be very good simply because of its inevitability and the pressure it puts on design. So the brutality of the deadline became a kind of methodology.

So the start of the project — the mania of the first competition phase — is characterized by this ethos of radical editing, this total impatience with redundancy. At the end, during the material explorations, it’s the opposite: a luxurious, exploratory phase during which you do so many variations of everything. It’s even quantifiable: two or three options in the early phase; twenty or thirty options in the late phase. Telegraphic, then cinematic, then operatic. As time expands, the experiments flourish. It becomes endless. But finally it’s just as brutal; hard choices are made about the soft.
It was an incredible sum of work. It is a side of our office that is rarely credited. The formula would be: no time equals intense, brutal, black and white, clarity, solids... and then real exploration. As a lot of time equals luxurious, refined, couture. Yes, and this project had an ideal combination of the two.

As the phases get longer, and go deeper and deeper into color and softness, the solid doesn't change. Quite literally at a certain point it has already been built; it’s actually sitting there on site. And you're here in Rotterdam doing these polymorphous explorations. We had people in the solid also. In the solid? Yes, we had an office there in the solid. Actually inside it? Inside it, in the basement. There was a model there, in order to explain how to build it. Some of this material was produced by people in the solid, and some in the Rotterdam office.

There was a remarkable moment when they gave a concert in the undecorated solid, this huge raw space of the void, at the very time that you were starting to imagine it in richly sensuous terms.

That's when I had an incredible scare that what we were imagining was really lousy compared to the beauty of this raw space, as it was. That's a nightmarish moment, when you begin to think “maybe I shouldn't finish it; maybe it's much more beautiful unfinished.” The sculpture was so unbelievably beautiful that we were afraid of ruining it. There's also the afterlife of a building to consider. In relation to the urban fabric, the Casa da Música is actually a soft and contextual building. On the outside, it has no color; all the color is provided by the context. This is a very fragile position, it needs these other buildings around it. At some point it was clear that if we didn’t argue for the preservation of this material, the building would in no time be surrounded by more Siza, at best, or at worst, more flatness or mirror-glass.
Eventually, the perimeter of the project was extended to include those surrounding elements. So the time of our design work had to expand again.

**Wigley** It’s a beautifully selfish concept of preservation; you need to preserve the other in order to be yourself. **Koolhaas** Exactly.

**Wigley** And since it’s all about preserving color and detail, it continues the relentless march from a singular, hard, un-detailed object towards the multiplication of color, with each phase of exploration getting steadily longer. But the design of the original Y2K House, actually took longer than the first phase of Porto.

**Koolhaas** Really? **Wigley** Yes, and if you look at the whole timeline, there’s an extended period of what you call “foreplay” for Y2K, a much shorter period of design, and then an even shorter period for doing the competition entry before each successive phase gets longer. ¶ There’s a kind of zooming in towards the intense time constraints of the competition phase, and then a zooming back out. This expansion in time corresponds with an expansion in the number of options being considered, but still does not quite reach the extended length of the original foreplay. ¶ It’s remarkable that you already said to the clients just before the Y2K commission that they had given every sign of not really wanting you to do the house during the extended seduction phase. So you predicted beautifully what would indeed go wrong. **Koolhaas** I remember that.

**Wigley** Maybe, perversely, the commission is only offered because you had made that negative prediction. It comes at the end of almost a year of discussion during which the talk had increasingly turned to questions of time, money, and size. And there are similar phases in the middle of Porto where money becomes a major threatening issue. Is there any positive aspect to money in architecture?

**Koolhaas** Money? What could be positive? **Wigley** I don’t know. You tell me. **Koolhaas** Too little money could provide the same challenge as a deadline in
focusing your mind, but for us it doesn’t work like that. I’m oblivious to money; my obliviousness has enabled us to do things that are totally irresponsible financially. But in this case we were in a joint venture; that meant that there was constant negotiation about money, which prevented us from becoming victims of that mentality.

**Wigley** It seems clear that architecture is not valued in the most obvious sense, that people pay architects with considerable difficulty, I just wondered if there was any advantage to this. Or is the only advantage to be oblivious. **Koolhaas** The only model is to be oblivious. Apparently there are a few architects who are able to really write their hours. No artist here can ever afford that. **Wigley** But very early on, money became a design issue, and a large amount of time was devoted to discussing it. Basically you had to cut up the houses that you’ve already built to show how much it would cost to make a new house of the same quality but of a different size. Like slicing meat; as if one could buy $X$ kilos of high quality architecture. **Koolhaas** If we had charged commercial tariffs for the Bordeaux House and the Villa dall’Ava, the amount spent on work would have exceeded the cost of the house itself.

**Wigley** Which raises the last issue here, the client. The Y2K client never accepted the scheme you proposed, except during presentations, where you were at your seductive best, using the magic. **Wigley** Basically from day one, it was not going to end well. They were right, you didn’t do what they asked for. Of course the architect never should do exactly what they ask for, otherwise there’s no reason for you to be there. The role of the architect is to invent desires, not simply to satisfy existing ones. The Y2K client was impressively unmoved, but ultimately, the project super-satisfied a very different client, with a very different program, in a very different place. **Wigley** So, my last question is simply the question of the client. To what extent is the client the victim of the architect, and to what extent is the architect the victim of the client? **Koolhaas** Let’s talk about that later…