

GOODBYE TO HOLLYWOOD

After some complex foreplay, Edgar Bronfman Jr. asked us on December 15 1995, to design a new headquarters for Universal Studios Hollywood, a company he had recently acquired.

Edgar was the grandson of Samuel, the founder of the "Seagram Company" who had in '54 asked Mies Van de Rohe to design his Headquarters on Park Avenue, reputedly at the urging of his daughter Phyllis Lambert, an architect herself.

To position the building in the right location on the Universal City site - a hybrid of Film Studio and Theme Park - Bronfman also asked OMA to look at the huge property as a whole.... A large team spent six weeks in an office on

John Jerde's City Walk - a mixture of purgatory and fascination. It soon became apparent that the commission was less straightforward than it seemed. Where in '54 Seagram was a single entity with a clear identity that would be relatively stable during the five year minimum that any architectural enterprise takes from beginning to end, that was no longer the case: by the mid-nineties, the substance and nature of any corporation was in constant flux, if not turmoil.

Where in '54 a building could be a "portrait" of a known entity, forty years later it needed to be a *device*

that was able to create a degree of wholeness from a permanently changing cluster of ingredients and latencies. A building was no longer an issue of architecture, but of a strategy.

That insight triggered the birth of AMO - OMA's mirror image - a new organization that proposed, given a situation where built architecture was simply too slow to capture mutating organizations, to explore the possibility of applying architectural thinking in its pure form - liberated from the need for realization.

If we could not build a building for an organization that was in an absolute state of flux - from the share value to

the permanent buying and selling of its components and the constant imminence of mergers and acquisitions, we could at least imagine a conceptual model of a "structure" that could, if not anticipate, at least accommodate almost any eventuality and actually exploit the given instability to define a new territory for architecture....

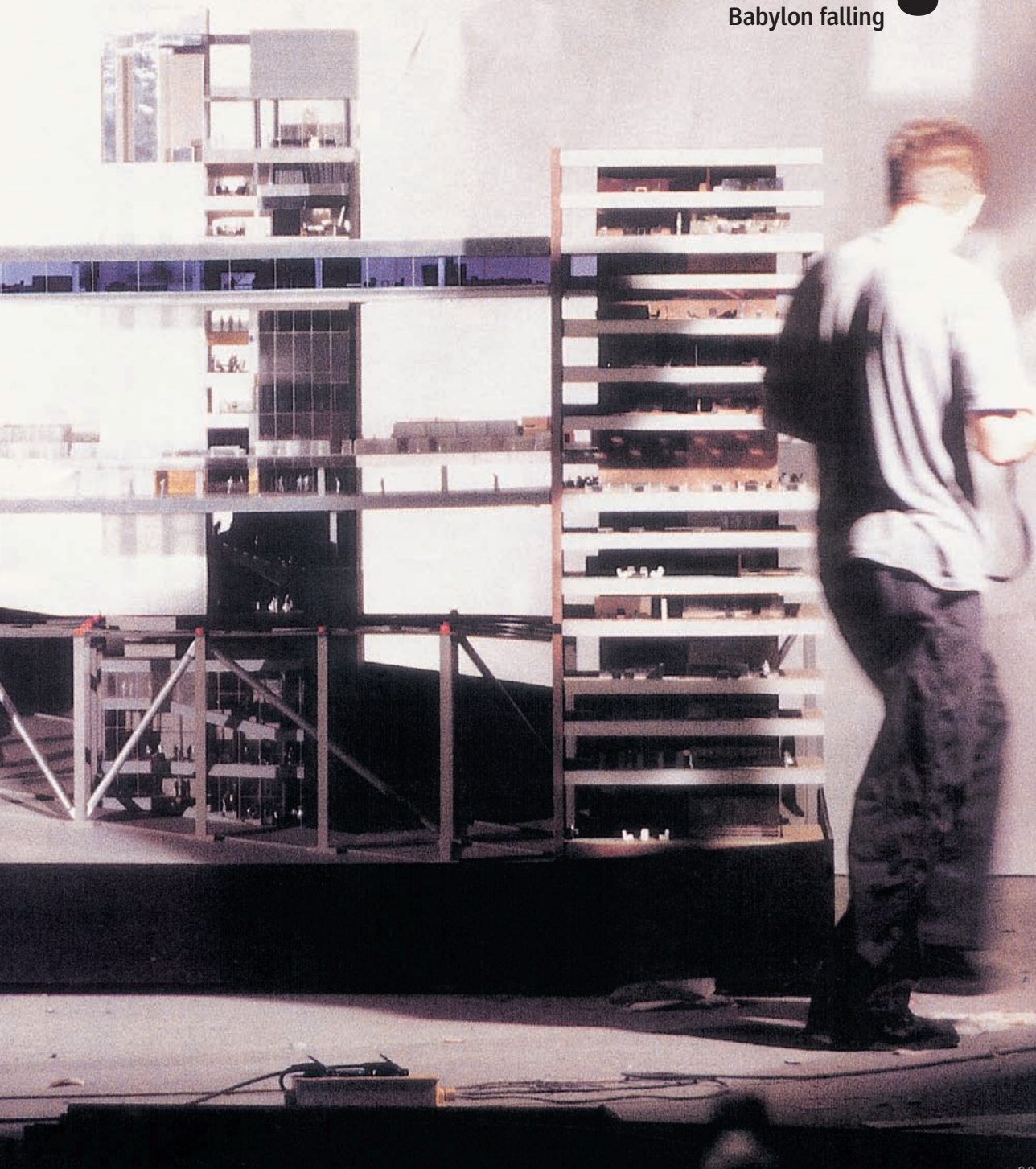
The trajectory was a sobering confrontation with architecture's most inconvenient demands - time and money - and a first glimpse of a distant, seductive hint of its return as a purely conceptual medium.

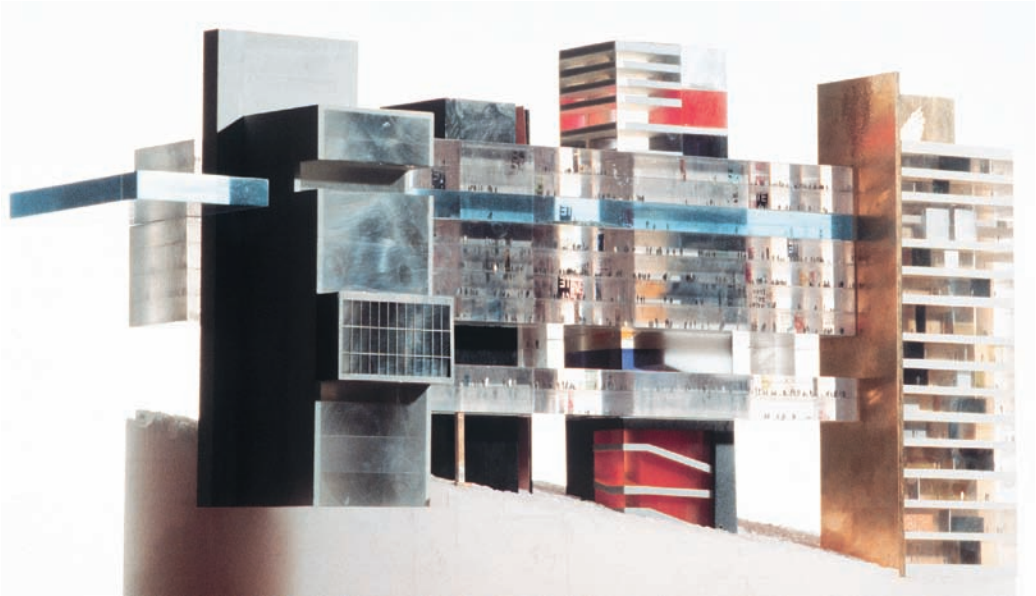
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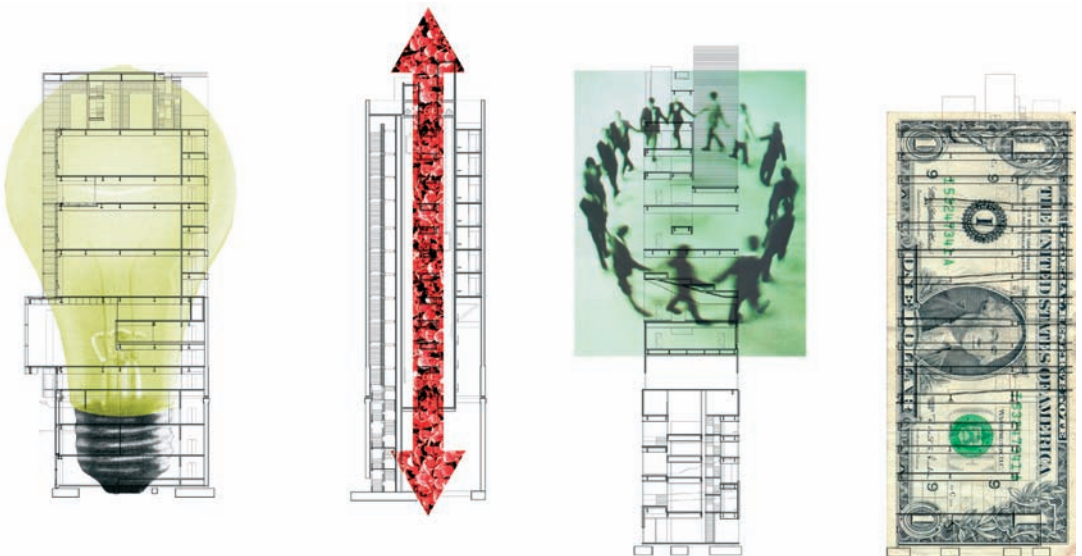
Universal HQ

Babylon falling

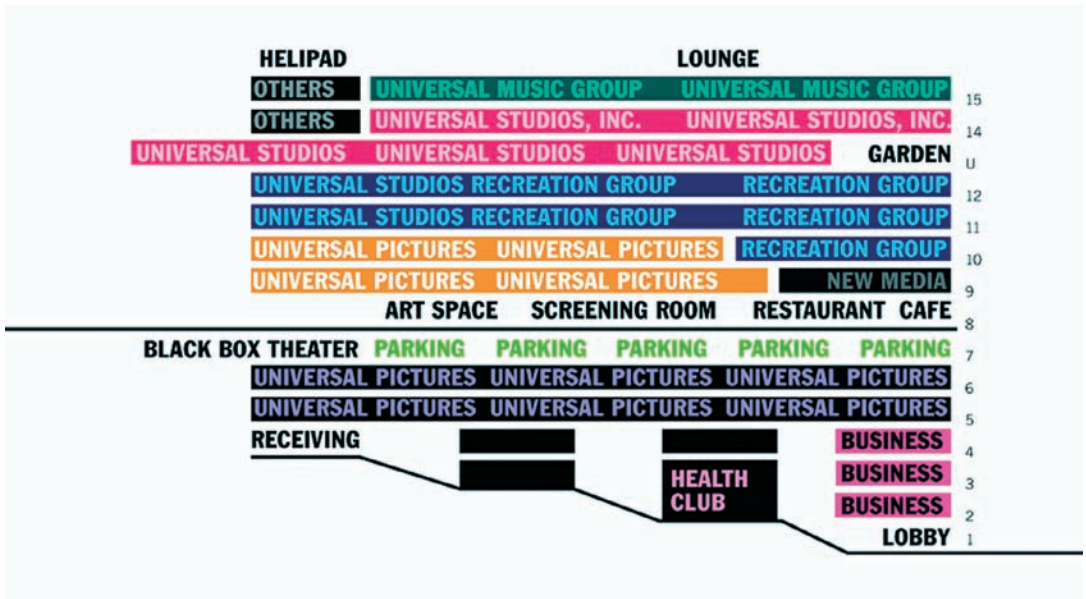




Universal HQ: the architects' "vision"



A tower of laboratory ("thinking"), an elevator core ("circulation"), a stack of meeting rooms ("community"), a tower of accountants ("money")



Universal HQ: an unstable assembly of different groups that appear and disappear



The “real” issue: can architecture represent the intended amalgamation of a liquor company with a movie studio, a music giant, and an internet company?

8 AM

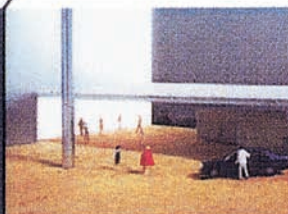
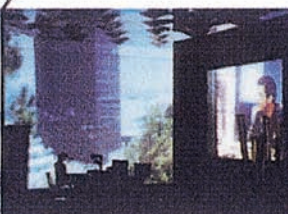
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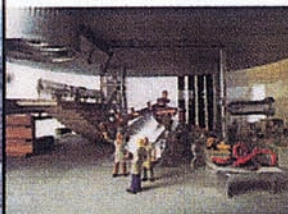
FILM



NEW MEDIA



RECREATION

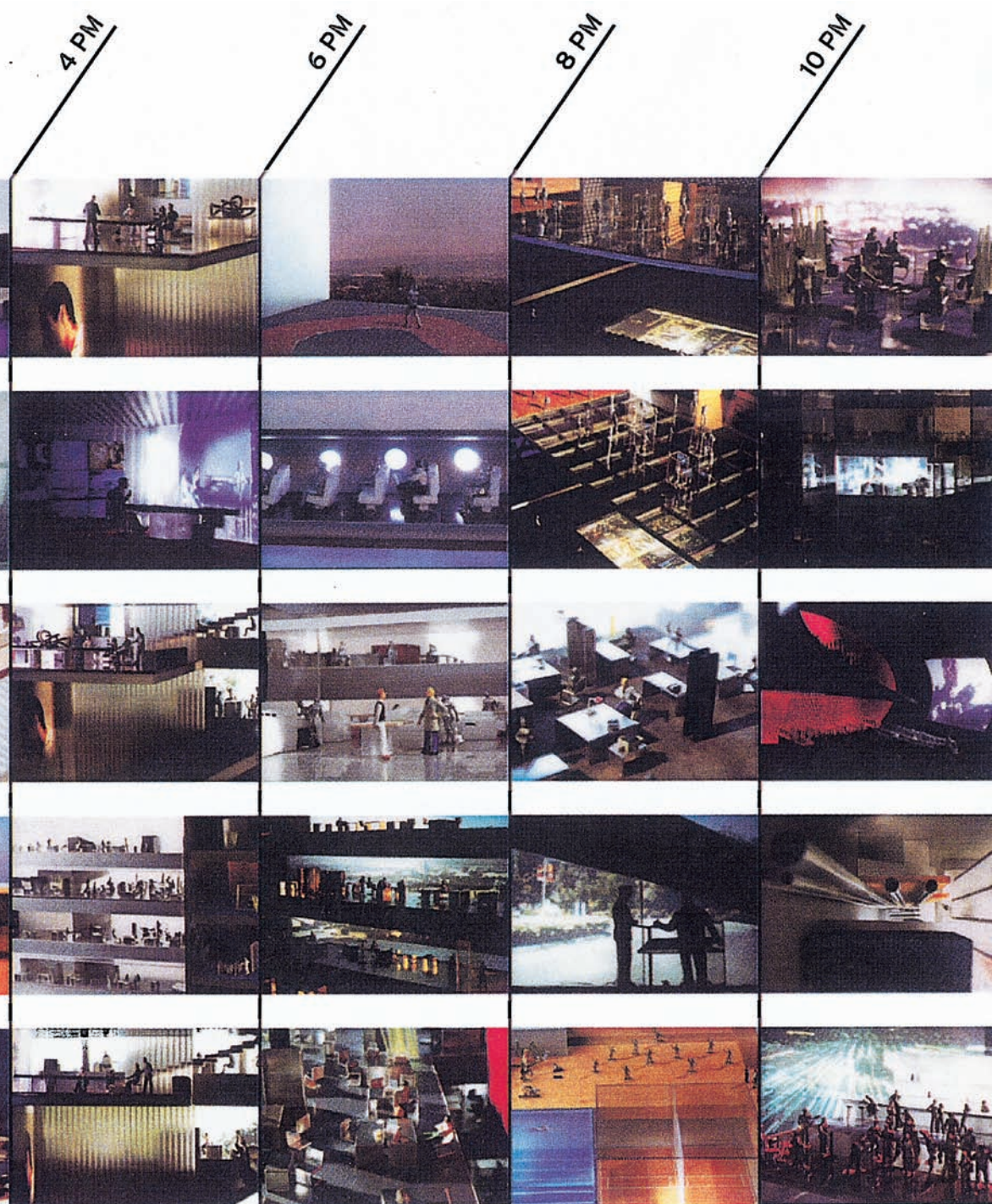


FACILITIES



MUSIC





Almost Famous

The story of Universal HQ and all that could've been

BY DAN WOOD

BEGINNINGS

In June 1995, Seagram's Edgar Bronfman, Jr. - known throughout the company as EBJ - bought 80% of MCA, Inc. from Matsushita Electric. MCA was a multi-media company containing MCA music, Geffen Records, Universal Studios, Putnam publishing, Spencer Gifts, Universal Television, and Universal Recreation, which runs "Universal Studios Hollywood" theme parks in Los Angeles, California and Orlando, Florida.

In December 1995, OMA got word that they had received the commission for a new headquarters building in Universal City, Los Angeles. Rem Koolhaas and a group of collaborators were invited to Universal City to choose a site, write a program, and advise on any other improvements that OMA thought necessary in the reinvention of Seagram and MCA.

UNIVERSAL CITY

Universal City is a 400-acre piece of property on the border of Burbank, at the edge of the Valley and on the "wrong" side of the Hollywood hills. It is divided between the Top of the Hill, an amusement park that draws more than 5 million people per year, and the Lower Lot, combining an impressive grid of enormous studios, the back lot of outdoor sets representing specific locales ("western town," "little Europe," "New York," "suburbia"), and a group of SOM-designed Miesian office buildings.

REVOLUTIONARY

Through several stages of plans, presentations, and documents to coordinate OMA's work with an MCA Recreation Department Master Plan, a site choice emerged (an "unbuildable" steep slope between the Lower Lot and the Top of the Hill), and the Headquarters began to take shape. EBJ had requested a building that could capitalize on

potential synergies between the different departments of Universal, which heretofore had been run as individual fiefdoms in strict competition with each other. OMA's concept was to take the most creative and productive elements of each of the five main departments and house them together in a single structure. The building would mirror its siting by being accessible to all disparate elements of the company, but itself firmly rooted in no one particular element.

INVESTIGATION

In August 1996 Koolhaas and eight OMA staff members forwent their summer vacations and moved to Los Angeles - specifically, to City Walk, an outdoor mall with urbanism as its theme (pseudo-urban retail, street performers, piped-in music, the world's largest collection of "historic neon") and designed to empty tourists' wallets both before and after a day at the theme park. With a Rotterdam-style late-night work ethic and eight individual rental cars for a two-minute Los Angeles-style commute, OMA spent a month studying and photographing the interiors and exteriors of Universal City, real and imagined.

The elements of the project fell into place surprisingly quickly, without anyone's exact knowledge how: a generic horizontal block of office space, articulated on the south façade with crenellations or "fingers" bringing light deep into the office floors (and providing corner offices for some 400 vice presidents), and penetrated vertically by four towers, each with a distinct identity and name. The Virtual Tower of double-height laboratory-like spaces would be the building's "loft district" where creative departments would develop new projects; the Circulation Tower's concentrated core functions including the main elevator bank; the Collective Tower

acted as a vertical boulevard and social space for meetings, screenings, conferences, and amenities, bringing together people from different departments for productive chance interactions; the Executive Tower gathered more traditional isolated office spaces for each floor's management. A column-free Universal Floor, entirely supported by the four towers, extended the original Corporate Beam idea into a very large, highly visible canopy over the building's entrance court, with EBJ's office, the board room, and other important spaces cantilevered above the lobby. The façades would include a specially glazed transmitting/reflecting south face, changing appearance through the day with the sun, and a completely operable north face that could open in its entirety - essentially disappear - providing respite from hermetically sealed office air for an estimated 52% of the year.

TIMELESS

EBJ was always very direct in his comments on the work OMA had completed. Others would fawn or nervously express their concern about small details, but Edgar would wait until the end and present a precise reading of the project, his appreciation for the work, and his concerns. In February, he delivered the ultimate challenge to any architect: he wanted the building to be "timeless." His concern was that some of the preliminary material choices OMA presented were too contemporary and would become dated with time. "Timelessness" became the yardstick against which all material decisions were measured as the project developed. OMA was determined to combine seriousness of purpose, function, and material with a building in the most superficial of American cities, on a site facing directly on to Jurassic Park.

ENTERTAINMENT

Over the course of the next year, the concept was refined through a series of models, books, and presentations. The final schematic design presentation was

in December 1997 in an empty movie studio on the Lower Lot. OMA had decided that entertainment executives needed to be entertained, and the rule for presentations was that each needed to be bigger than the last. Industrial designer Vincent De Rijk and OMA had created an illuminated 1:100 model designed to come apart, showing each tower, a generic floor, the Universal floor, the lobby, and the landscape. The Universal scenery department rigged a section of curtain, giving the executives their first glimpse of the building, fully lit and glowing, in complete darkness.

At the last minute, Koolhaas decided the slide room needed to be more intimate, and an OMA architect was asked to find an oriental rug for the space - ten minutes before the presentation was supposed to start. The props department

Seagram had unloaded to buy MCA was now worth more than ten times what they had sold it for three years before. The project went "on hold" until the company regained its financial footing.

At OMA, the models and drawings were packed away, and the team moved on to other projects.

REVIEW

We all realized that Universal's problem was not technical, but political. Over three years of work with Universal, OMA had noticed that the goal of seamless integration remained out of the company's reach; the more they saw, the more convinced they became that this building could actually help the company perform better. After almost a year's hiatus, OMA was contacted to work on the next phase - design development. Over ten months, the project was

company. He stated that the building had the potential to correct many of these problems, and he pledged his dedication to the project. In a replay of the Schematic Design presentation, however, he also said that Universal was not in a secure enough position to be able to build the project right away.

FUTURE

In early 1999, Rem Koolhaas and Dan Wood decided to found AMO to specifically address the larger questions of identity, culture, and organization that had emerged over the course of the Universal project. The gradual shift of OMA's focus, from strictly architectural issues to the status of Universal as a company, triggered the realization that this kind of thinking was, in the end, at least - if not more - important than the work done on the building itself. They became convinced that those issues that had informed the eventual design of the building could, freed from the pressure to generate an architectural solution, perhaps find more effective solutions in other, faster or more flexible, media; in the virtual age, architectural thinking was a resource that could be more generally applied in numerous situations, from pure research to website conception, independent of any investment in the physical.

THE END

At the end of 1999, the announcement of the America Online-Time Warner merger threw the entire entertainment industry into a state of shock. EBJ called Rem to say that the corporate landscape had - once again - changed; while Universal's acquisition of Polygram in early 1999 had created what at the time seemed like a media giant, in the current situation Universal was now too *small* to compete. EBJ had to find a partner and could not politically or financially afford to build the headquarters in the meantime. The Universal project would be put on hold, indefinitely - final confirmation, it seemed, of architecture's incapacity to respond to the new pressures of organization and instability. ■

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had an entire sub-department of carpets, divided by size and rolled up. A carpet the right size was pulled down from the shelves and loaded onto OMA's golf cart, with the gaffer running behind to hold up the end off the street. With four minutes to spare, the chairs were cleared and three people unrolled the carpet into place. In the center of the exquisite Persian rug was an enormous painted swastika. Apparently the rug had last been used in a World War II movie - perhaps a little too much entertainment.

OMA quickly rolled it back up and held the presentation without intimacy. Regardless, the presentation was an unqualified success. The Universal executives seemed to really begin to understand the project and what the building could mean for the company. Edgar, however, was unsure about the timing. Universal's stock was at an all-time low. The press was continuously reminding people that the DuPont stock

developed by the architects, engineers, cost estimators, and contractors to the point where construction could start within three months of giving the word to go. The final product of the DD phase was conceived as a portrait of Universal as it existed and how OMA imagined it could exist in the future. This final design development presentation included a 1:50 model of the building, as tall as a person and 14' (4.3 meters) long.

The nearly three-hour presentation oscillated between an architectural review of the vast amounts of work and detail that had gone into the project and OMA's criticisms and observations of Universal as a company. Following a tour of the studio and a review of the book, EBJ gave a succinct criticism of some of the material choices, expressed his deep gratitude for the work performed, and gave his reading of Universal's current situation. He said that many of the questions OMA raised in the final book, and in earlier observations, mirrored his own thinking about the direction of the