CHAPTER ELEVEN

FROM BAUHAUS TO OUR HOUSE TO Koolhaas:
THE OFFICE FOR METROPOLITAN ARCHITECTURE
(OMA) AND MODERN AMERICAN CULTURE

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Mies had to ‘become’ an American to realize his European self. Without the combined intelligence of the two cultures, the Seagram Building could not have been.¹

Preface

Nearly thirty years ago in Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan (1978) an unknown Dutchman, to quote Paul Goldberger, “rejoiced that the ‘hyperbolic’ architecture of New York was irrational—that fantasy was more important to the designers of New York’s great early skyscrapers than any sort of principles of structural honesty or form following function.”² At the centre of Rem Koolhaas’s thesis was a form/function versus capital/commercial opposition. As one of a handful of contemporary international ‘star-chitects,’ Koolhaas’s recent work in the United States builds on this uniquely Dutch viewpoint.³

According to Koolhaas’s late Seventies manifesto, the ‘hysterical narcissism’ of early twentieth-century New York—wrapped up in the

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‘architectural mutations,’ ‘utopian fragments,’ and ‘irrational phenomena’ of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, Downtown Athletic Club, and Rockefeller Center—succumbed in the 1950s to the forces of rationalism reflected in the mimetic nature of American architecture in the second half of the twentieth century. Given that context, Koolhaas turned to the Modern European émigré architects in the United States, in particular three ‘messiahs of the Bauhaus’—Walter Gropius (1883–1969), Marcel Breuer (1902–1981), and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969)—to fill the vacant antihero role. By proclaiming the difference of Mies’s architecture in his controversial essay “Miestakes” (2000), what he terms its “essence of formlessness, amorphousness, nothingness, perversion, and anxiety,” and citing the ‘rebellious attitude’ of Breuer’s ‘isolated’ Whitney Museum of American Art, Koolhaas rewrites the narrative of Modern American architectural history around colonialism’s ‘Otherness’ for a second time. The first time, in Delirious New York, it was as an unknown novelist. The second time, in “Miestakes,” it was as a celebrated architect with a fistful of American commissions to fill. Koolhaas portrays his émigré predecessors as hedonists not antagonists in the canon of American architectural Modernism. This is the foundation for his recent work in the United States and gets us to the view, borrowing from Harry Harootunian’s incisive summary of the French traveller, author, and naval doctor Victor Segalen’s (1878–1919) thesis, “that exoticism is the candidate best suited to protect contemporary life from the relentless banality wrought by the transformation of capitalism into mass-society imperialism and colonialism.” Exoticism is the touchstone of Koolhaas’s persona and practice. It is never more effective than when practiced in the United States.

Rem Koolhaas, as Luis Fernández-Galiano writes, “has long been considered the best representative of ‘Americanism,’ the fascination of the European avant-garde for the carefree audacity of American construction, of which the skyscraper is the paradigm.” This essay focuses on a particular aspect of Koolhaas’s production, namely his American/Dutch-ness and the context of his formal innovation. It

