

'M I X I N G
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Tomas Koolhaas is working on a film about his father, Rem.

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What's in a name? Utter the word 'Koolhaas', and all within earshot inevitably think of Rem. But Tomas Koolhaas, the architect's son and the younger brother of photographer Charlie Koolhaas (whose pictures illustrate *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks*), appears to be reclaiming the association on his own terms. A graduate of The Los Angeles Film School, where he majored in cinematography, Tomas has been living in LA since 2001. He's shot numerous music videos, features and shorts; and he's directed short projects,

but never one quite like this. Tomas has been permeating architecture blogs, recently, with clips from his first feature film as a director, a documentary called *Rem*. No false advertising there: it is a film about his father, but so far *Rem* has emerged only as a peripheral character in the clips, a guy in sneakers and hard hat going up the construction lift with workers at the CCTV site in Beijing. The camera focuses, instead, on what are typically regarded as modern architecture's margin notes: those workers on their smoke break, or disregarded rubbish bags shot from a nearby vantage point. In a particularly 'Facebook liked' clip, the camera follows a homeless man through the Seattle Central Library as he articulates the impact this OMA-designed building has had on his life.

The director's point of view seems neither that of a critic nor a hagiographer. I would say the camera shows the beauty of realities typically swept under the rug, except that I find such summations extremely irritating and troublesome. Tomas's clips – which contribute to an increasingly evident not-Photoshopped shift in how architecture is represented and discussed – speak more to the power of ambivalence, even in the presence of quite remarkable feats of engineering and design. In a sunny Los Angeles café,

I meet Tomas to talk about his film. He says that by the time it's finished late next year (he hopes), the documentary will include unexpected footage from Maison à Bordeaux, Porto's Casa da Música, De Rotterdam complex and Rothschild Bank Headquarters in London, among others. Just don't expect any father-son therapy sessions on screen, he tells me. Okay, so, I guess my first question is: Why not?

Predictably, when blogs and papers mention your upcoming documentary, they use Nathaniel Kahn's *My Architect* as an example of another son discovering his father's architecture on film. Are they right to do so?

That was a well-made film, and I have nothing against it, but the concept *Rem* and I agreed on is its complete antithesis. First of all, that's a sentimental story of father and son, which is not at all the story I'm telling; and second, I'm not inserting myself as a character into my film. Honestly, I don't think people want to see a film about me; they want to see a film about Rem. So I try and stay as inconspicuous throughout as possible. I don't want to do a voice-over, I don't want to be on camera, and I certainly don't want to have some heart-to-heart with my father. I just want to act as eyes for the viewer. ▶





Homeless person in the Seattle Central Library.



Construction workers at the CCTV building.



Rem Koolhaas on the helipad of the CCTV building.

'ANYONE CAN RELATE TO A HOMELESS PERSON WHO SHELTERS IN THE SEATTLE LIBRARY'

◀ But isn't the viewer expecting some heart-to-heart?

The relationship between my father and me is present on film, simply because I'm the one filming. Of course, I'm going to get different footage and access than someone who barely knows him. Even though Rem's very good at giving interviews, he's not someone who enjoys being followed by a camera. He doesn't react well to the whole concept of fame, so being his son allows me to be less intrusive. When Rem feels comfortable, it helps me get at something more natural than a stranger could.

Did either of you hesitate before embarking on this project?

We both did. Mixing business and family is dangerous. We immediately agreed to avoid father-son therapy on screen, because neither of us finds that poignant in terms of exploring someone's work. Once that was taken out of the equation, it was easier for us to agree on the rest. I actually feel it was more difficult for me to get to make this film than, say, the directors of *A Kind of Architect*. Rem hates nepotism. He's not a person who'd let me follow him with a camera just because I'm his son. I had to really pitch this to him.

How did you pitch something that differed from the other documentaries about him?

For one thing, I want to keep biographical information to a minimum. I don't think the events of his childhood in Rotterdam are as interesting as a behind-the-scenes look at his current work method and the effect his buildings have on people. I'm keeping the film real-time, so that the viewer experiences everything as if it's happening in the present. The film doesn't have a strictly chronological order to it, either. Projects are connected thematically. And instead of having talking heads and interviews with professors explaining why a building is the way it is, I'm trying to actually show it from a first-person perspective and to show how other people – including

construction workers – experience it. I'm not setting up lights and bounce cards. I'm just filming space as it already exists. Of course, I've seen all the other films. I like *Lagos/Koolhaas* by Bregtje van der Haak, because of its ground-level views of Lagos. I like that *Koolhaas Houselife* focuses on the life of the building rather than its 'idea', but the film is a bit one-dimensional in that it's a gimmick that only works for so long.

But maybe the biggest difference between my work and even the best architecture documentaries is that I want my audience to be everyone, not just other architects. I'm not an architect, but I've been involved with architects vicariously all my life. I know what a small group they make up, and ultimately I realize that few outside it are as well versed in architectural jargon and as interested in its hyper-intellectual, technical aspects. On the other hand, I think anyone can relate to a homeless person who shelters in the Seattle library. That's pretty universal. Right there is an experience that says a lot more about that building, its intentions and reality than any professor ever could.

What does it say about the architecture of the Seattle library?

The library wasn't designed specifically for homeless people, but it has a big effect on their community. It doesn't matter whether Rem intended it or not; that community is part of the building's life now. For the homeless man we ended up interviewing, that library is a lifeline. He has no cell phone, and you can't go to an internet café if you have no credit card and no address. So the library – where he can read books, go online and rent instruments to play in practice rooms – represents a place where he can communicate with the outside world, and it gives him hope for the future.

The day we filmed him, I had tried to speak to many homeless people, but it was difficult to have a worthwhile conversation. Many people we came across suffer from mental illness and only wanted to talk to us about conspiracy theories. We were about to leave for the day when this guy showed up and said he would love to talk about the library and what it means to him. He was really enthusiastic and extremely smart. He used to be an engineer, actually – had a master's degree, all that. He was doing extremely well; then his daughter died and his wife committed suicide all in the space of a week, and that was it. His life took a different turn, and he's ended up being in that library, basically, every day.

You mentioned connecting the buildings thematically. How does the story of the Seattle library connect, for example, with CCTV?

One thing I want to capture is the story of the guys building CCTV. Whenever I tried to set up a shot, they would scurry out of the frame, because they're so used to people

wanting to get rid of them. In that way, there are similarities and echoes between my footage of the workers from CCTV and my interview with the homeless man at the Seattle library. I want to show everything that happens on site, even if it's workers taking a break and drinking tea. Many of these workmen are from the countryside; they've never really lived in a city, and most have a very basic education. I want to show that they're part of the narrative of this extremely advanced, modern structure.

So what is the tone of your film? Does it celebrate Rem's buildings, or is it more critical?

I don't think the tone is glorifying or defensive, but it isn't antagonistic either. It's not really my intention to shut up Rem's critics.

But you do address them?

Part of the film does address the idea of building in China and both sides of the debate that go along with it. Both Rem and I think the debate is an interesting and valid one to discuss. But I do want to clear up something that's been misinterpreted in other articles about me: I've never said that Rem is working in China in order to change it, and the film isn't a discussion about working for 'authoritarian regimes'. Yes, we'll discuss the controversy around CCTV, but I don't think Rem needs to defend his choice to work in China. I find it weird, the sort of hatred and vitriol with which people have spoken out against him, when the American and European governments do business there, and everyone buys products made in China. Personally, I think a lot of the criticism Rem's received has been crass, simplistic and hypocritical – I mean, someone online compared him to Albert Speer for working for the Chinese, which I find extremely offensive and misguided. But as much as possible I'm trying to avoid any sort of agenda with my film. The idea is really to show human stories. ◀

vimeo.com/user5134018

'BOTH REM AND I THINK THE DEBATE ABOUT BUILDING IN CHINA IS A VALID ONE TO DISCUSS'