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RETURN WEEK

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(This issue of
Conditions is
fully devoted to
gossip from and
within the world
of architecture)

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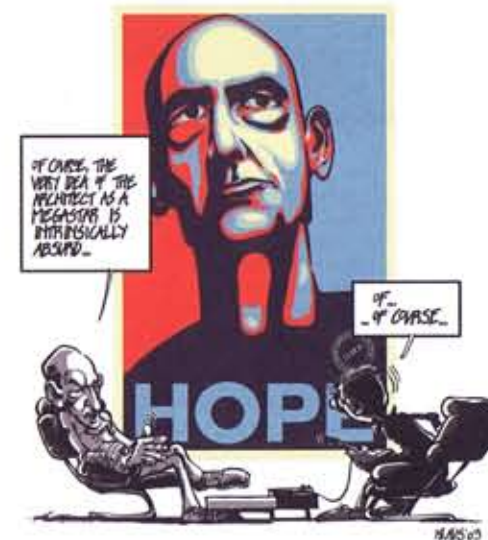
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Poster for the exhibition "Klaus.Toon. From New York to Portimao", Portimao, November 26 - December 26, 2010. The cartoon was originally published in The New City Reader: A Newspaper of Public Space n. 2: Editorial, October 2010.

Tell me more!

Gossiping, cartooning, and the nourishing of the Starchitecture status quo



Cartoon "On Starchitecture", Klaustoon's Blog, May 2009.



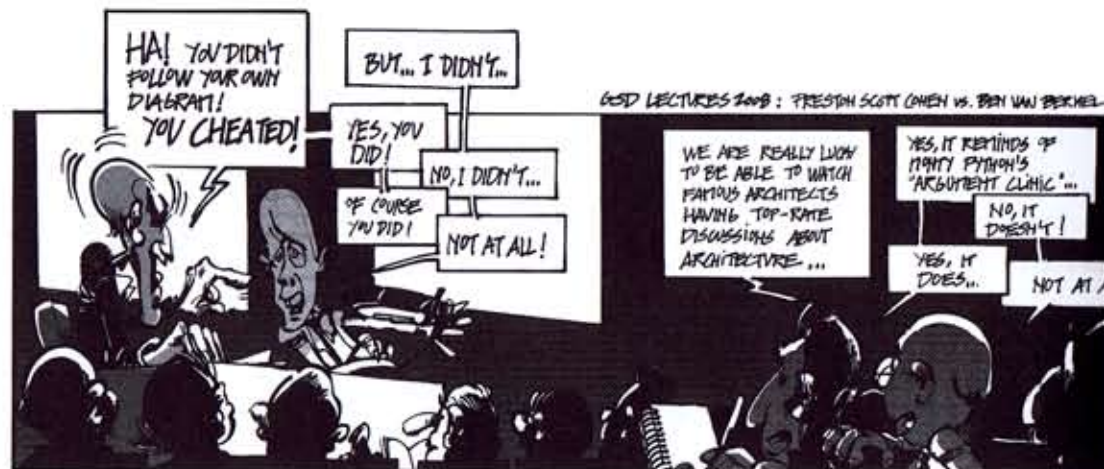
"On Starchitecture", printed by an anonymous worker and hanging on the wall of OMA's canteen in Rotterdam. Photograph by Jame's McBenett, May 2009.

When, little more than a year ago, the Algarve Society of Architects offered to organize an exhibition on my cartooning work, it came as a both pleasant and bewildering surprise. And another funny surprise came when I had a look at the poster they had prepared for the exhibition. There, on top of a cartoon designed for Kazys Varnelis & Joseph Grima's New City Reader, a short piece of copy informed the viewer that the event, "Klaus.Toon: From NY to Portimao" was to show "cartooning architecture and gossip (sic) around famous

and celebrities." However, the cartoons I've been producing in the last 3+ years don't deal with architectural gossip, but rather honor the long-lived tradition of Men's Magazines and Hearst's editorial Cartoons! Or do they? After all, Klaustoon's blog (previously "Klaus on the GSD" [apologies for the unabashed self-promotion, I just need it to introduce my point]) was born as a tongue-in-cheek satire on the domestic issues of the GSD, a place where the illustrious members of the architectural jet-set are shown

in metaphorical pajamas: where we – architects, scholars, architecture students – can peep into the lighter side of our envied idols. So, what's with architecture and gossiping? Digging into the dirty laundry of the architectural star-system is, in any case, neither a recent phenomenon nor a curiosity exclusively circumscribed to today's divas. The mouth-to-ear airing of our architectural heroes' private sins has been an inevitable aside of their rise as idols. Small talk on the lower passions of the masters of the past has

accompanied the writing of the big lines of the History of modern architecture, and along with our worshiping of their oeuvre comes the delight to learn about their quaintest interiorities: Mies van der Rohe's infamous (non) affairs with Ms. Farnsworth, Alvar Aalto's alcoholism – a recurring topic for Finnish cartoonists¹ – or Le Corbusier's pathological Messianic obsessions are personal details that have transcended the boundaries of scientific biographies to become precious pieces of information we love, adding



Ben van Berkel and Preston Scott Cohen entering the realm of Monty Python's "Argument Clinic" sketch in a surrealist childlike discussion on the BMW building. Discussions in Architecture: Ben van Berkel with Preston Scott Cohen, Harvard GSD Public Lecture, 2008.11.19. First published in "Klaus on the GSD", Trags Online Journal, January 2009.

to our common knowledge of them.⁴ We need both heroes and villains: the former to inspire us, the latter to offer us some moral relief at the sight of a worse human being than ourselves. But even more, we'd rather have our heroes be our villains too. Some will argue that these minor flaws humanize our icons, making them flesh and blood human beings we can better relate to, and certainly this "fleshing out," this approximation helps build our interest on them. But this humanization is also an excuse that sugarcoats a very straight-forward preservation mechanism, devised to protect our self-esteem at that point where admiration meets sheer envy. There's nothing we love more than a rags to riches story – except for a riches to rags story, of course.

A most interesting reversion of this turns up, however, when these minutiae actually become an integral part of the mythos, to the point of being vital contributors to its very construction. Again, the careful creation of its own legend was an inherent feature of architecture's entrance into modernity, often created as a fiction before it really happened. To a great extent, Alvar Aalto, as we know him, was invented by Sigfried Giedion, who labeled him as a "Northern Sorcerer"

whose architectural alchemy brought together irrationality and standardization (whatever that means), creating a title the architect spent his life trying to live up to. Also, Le Corbusier's longest running project was Le Corbusier himself, a lifetime-long design of the self-legend portrayed for instance in his continuous refashioning of his own history through the different (literally) successive editions of his *oeuvre complète*. And José Antonio Coderch's famous asseveration in *Domus* "it is not geniuses what we need now" reads for contemporary scholars less as a humble claim for pragmatism in architecture than as a skillful move to establish himself in the collective unconscious as the last of those. But times have changed. Today's continuous, hypertrophied and accelerated flux of information does not permit such a tight control. In a scenario of exponential inflation, of communicational exchanges, an inevitable devaluation of the quality of information occurs. Internet has ended with restrictions on publishing, and this has fostered a proliferation of commentary and opinion, of niche interests that have been investigated and publicized, and, of course, of gossip. The fascinating point here is how this emergence of gossiping

contributes to the creation of the starchitect. In the case of contemporary icons such as Rem Koolhaas, it's the unofficial flux of information surrounding the figure that ultimately elevates him into a legendary status.

Of course, in the case of Koolhaas, the shaping of this aura is also engineered through conventional means; Koolhaas is a sharp thinker and an eloquent writer and spokesman who has shaken the architectural scene of the last decades with acute reflections of deliberate and controlled ambiguity. But even more than through his words, the Koolhaas mediatic persona has been constructed through a parallel dissemination of details about his behind-the-scenes: stories that tell us of a man who lives in airplanes, sending by mail corrections for a document he was given in a meeting a few hours before, of a Renaissance man who swims every time he lands, or wins a competition with a single, cunning speech.⁵ All these mouth-to-ear stories, propagated through the netsphere, contribute to endowing his figure with a halo of epic mystery that propels him into an almost superhuman category. Koolhaas is the über-example of the starchitect, where the personality comes first and the work second. And that's the bottom line: Koolhaas

can produce starchitecture because he is, first and foremost, a star. Le Corbusier's delightfully maudit portrait of him painting nude in Saint Tropez has been replaced by a cover of *L'Uomo Vogue*.

But public notoriety is as easy to gather in the age of software as it is difficult to retain. The internet era is also the age of the twitterization of knowledge, a time where information both reigns and deflates, where news is as ubiquitous as thoroughly made-to-forget, immediately replaced by new installments. The same could be said about some of the architecture produced by this idiosyncrasy. Made to glow for a moment and quickly disappear, it is an architecture of futile monumentality and inevitable ephemerality, designed within a discipline obsessed with creating the building of the century... of the week. In this new paradigm, the (st) architect has to become a public figure, an entertainer, a performer, or even, if needed, a celebrity of the Kardashian kind. The World Wide Web and the rapid production allowed by digital tools have multiplied the presence of architecture in everyday life, and have worked together to create a new type of architect, sustained above all by his

communication skills. The internet, blog culture, Twitter, have leveled the capability of everyone to achieve their share of Warholian fame, but in turn, their allotted fifteen minutes have been drastically reduced to (maybe) fifteen seconds. The attention of the audience, brought up on a solid diet of continuous novelty, is volatile, and the architecture of today has to keep nourishing its audience at a steady pace, or risk disappearing from the picture right away.

And it is in this context where gossip, criticism and satire, emerge as tools for the maintenance of public presence. The internet has also revived the long-loved tradition of the fast gag, the sketchy commentary, and the cartoon, which offer the necessary escape route for the asfixiating ubiquity and self-indulgence of architectural discourse. As any endogamic discipline, architecture has a record of taking itself too seriously, and of alternating between victimization and self-deprecation, with tremendous arrogance and a myopic lack of perspective (ironic as it is), on the relevance of its own obsessions. The reemergence of satire appears as a natural counterbalance for this. It offers us a way to mock our love-hated idols in a way that's

apparently naive, inoffensive (but with the potential to become really offensive), and allows us to sublimate our frustration through ironic laughter, instead of bitter full-frontal (yes) criticism, while at the same time reinforcing the (composition) of the starchitectural who's who. As Oscar Wilde, via some of our infamous celebrities, would point out, the ultimate goal is to be talked about, even if just to be thrashed. And architects, with their fragile yet unrestrained egos, become the ideal victim/beneficiary of this revival. Today, gossip refashions itself as a form of viral advertising. The motto is "keep them talking."

And of course, we will. ☺

Klaus (<http://klaustoon.wordpress.com/>) is a frustrated cartoonist that lives in an old castle in Europe. In his other life he is also a frustrated architect and scholar who has spent the last years developing a research on the role of comics in the construction of the image of the city of the future. His work and writings have been featured in different exhibits, as well as published in magazines as *Aequus*, *eVolo*, *(In)forma*, *Clag*, *(Dis)Course*, *Flow*, *Harvard Design Magazine*, *Harvard satirical Press*, *MAS Context*, *Menhir*, *Lars*, *URBES*, *Platform*, and books such as *Seeking the City: Visionaries on the Margins* (2008), *View on the GSD* (2008), or *Ecological Urbanism* (2010).

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Feels good to kick someone out my symbolic threshold, twenty facades and counting.
#StradaNovissimo #PoMolsBorn

When he thinks noone's looking he likes looking at himself in the mirror and put on funny faces.

- The concept of the exhibition Klaus.Toon, Form New York to Portimao (in referring to here, was designed by the staff of Casa Granturismo: Ricardo Camacho (principal and also principal instigator of the project), Filipa Cabrita and Tiago Antao. The exhibition itself was put together by a larger team I can't remember in its entirety, but I would like to thank the members of the direction board of the Delegação do Algarve da Ordem dos Arquitectos: Vítor Lourenço, Osvaldo Sousa and Rui Vargas, for their involvement.
- The first installments of Klaus.Toon were previously published on the Trags online journal in the section "Klaus on the GSD", thanks to the input of Guillem Riano, principal at DSGN AGNC Design Agency
- Mies's problems with Edith Farnsworth, who, according to him, thought "the architect was included in the price of the house" were conveniently summarized in Jean Luis Cohen's *Mies van der Rohe* (Paris: Hazan, 1994, if memory serves). A cartoon of a drunken Balto, drawn to comment of his much-contested Enso-Gutzeit Building in Helsinki (popularly known as "the sugar cube") was included in *Datatop 20: The Use and Abuse of Paper - Essays on Alvar Aalto* (Kari Jermakka, Jacqueline Gargas, Douglas Graf, Tampere: Tampere University of Technology, 1998)
- Le Corbusier's identification with Jesus was commented by Anthony Eardley in his essay for the catalogue of the exhibition "Le Corbusier's Firming Church"; "Paul Turner, in his invaluable study of *The Education of Le Corbusier* observes that in his reading of Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus*... the young Charles-Edouard Jeanneret marked passages which "reveal the rather startling fact that Jeanneret actually identified himself with the figure of Jesus and was seeking parallels between Jesus' career and that which he himself was embarking upon... Indeed, Jeanneret seems to have been reading Nietzsche (Zarathustra) at the same time as Renan, seeking out in both books the traits of the archetypal revolutionary prophet and reformer - and then relating these to his image of his own similar destiny." Eardley, Anthony: *Le Corbusier's Firming Church* (Catalogue New York: Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies; Rizzoli International Publications Inc., December 1982, p. 23 footnote 25. Eardley is quoting Paul Venable Turner's *The Education of Le Corbusier* (New York: Garland Pub., 1977, pp. 62, 64). I think I lifted this information several years ago from a then-unpublished essay by Jeff Kipnis.
- Bismour has it that in the presentations for the "Palacio del Sur" Congress Center competition in Córdoba (Spain), Rem Koolhaas asked to speak last. After hearing the rest of the presentations, he intervened exposing the flaws of all the other proposals and showing how OMA's project solved all of them, mesmerizing the jury and subsequently winning the competition.