ROYAL FESTIVAL HALL

Though also possessing an incredible auditorium that provided me with the most powerful symphony experience of my life, what I actually found most engaging about the Royal Festival Hall was its circulation. Never with a building so large and complex was I able to so quickly orient myself and know exactly where I was at any given time. The building works with a system of folds that allows for the occupant to clearly understand their sequence linearly no matter where they are in the building.
LONDON EYE

What can I say? It's a giant ferris wheel in the heart of London. How theatrical is that? Beyond an excellent wayfinder due to its height, and quite distinct appearance, this device allows for the most spectacular views in all of London for anyone willing to pay the thirty pound fee. First proposed in the 1970s by architect Cedric Price, it was just built at the turn of the millennium. Oh, and it has almost complete functional transparency, which I like.
CASE STUDY

ACT V: ALEX COULOMBE’S TRAVELS IN HYPERREALITY

PANOPTICONS AND POTENTIALS
Scene 1

Lights up on Arnhem Koepel Prison. It is a grim place, built in 1869 on Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon principle. It consists of an open, domed space surrounded by jail cells with a well but in the center, previously a looming tower. The building has been condemned since 1986. ALEX NOGLIDAS enter.

ALEX NOGLIDAS

[grumbling under his breath]

Ugh. Another totalitarian, hypermonumental, space-wasting, failed ideal. What could possibly be done to make this useful as anything beyond a historic artifact?

(AXEL slides down the rail of a nearby spiral staircase.)

ALEX

Why not push it to its extreme and then re-examine its potential uses?

ALEX NOGLIDAS

You mean make it even more isolated and inhuman than it already--hey! How did you get past security?...

ALEX

Never mind that. Anyway.

(Beat. ALEX NOGLIDAS pace, not making eye contact with ALEX.)

ALIEN

Don’t mind me. I’m just watching you think.

ALEX NOGLIDAS

Don’t.

ALEX

Let’s just talk about it. How would you approach this design problem?

ALEX NOGLIDAS

(shrugs)

Can I have a question a little less pedestrian?

ALEX

Hm. You’re grumpy. What goals might you set for a project like this?

ALEX NOGLIDAS

Certainly to improve the living condition of prisoners and—
Isn't that just the current 'ideal'?

ALIX

Do you want to hear me speak or not?

ALIX

Sorry.

KEN KOOLHAAS

(gruffly)
If we accept that all ideals, especially prison ideals, are destined to fall eventually, or even that today's new ideal is obsolete before it can be built, then we can give a raison d'être with the process of revision.

ALIX

You mean renovation?

KEN KOOLHAAS

No, revision. Re-vision from where there was once vision.

ALIX

Ohhh...

KEN KOOLHAAS

But we must preserve memory. Destroying a structure is destroying a memory.

ALIX

I don't get it.

KEN KOOLHAAS

See the image in the right.

ALIX

Oh. Now I get it.

KEN KOOLHAAS

(leave the main structure for the outside)
Then, rather than these parasitic sheds, created only to serve the programmatic needs of today's humane prison cell in the most mediocre of ways, we instead build program-specific buildings to cater to every activity, from exercise, to reading. All of this is constructed under the current ground level, thereby disturbing the existing structure as little as possible and maintaining iconography.
(going back inside, REM reluctantly following)

Um, alright. That’s a lot to break down. But simple question first: what exactly is wrong with the prison as is? It’s an enormous, intimidating, rather sublime space, don’t you think? Just saying. If I was a prisoner here, I’d do what I was told.

REM NOULASAS
(irked)
That’s not the point. The point is that current trends view that surveillance culture as simply barbaric, rendering prisoners as unable to return to society. It’s structured entirely on the fear of being watched. It’s completely isolationist.

ALEX
But we know that it doesn’t work?

REM NOULASAS
(wondering why he is here)
Look what happened here! They tore down the tower! Now it’s just a little room for the guards to sip coffee in full view of all the prisoners! If anything, the surveillance culture has reversed. It’s now completely decentralized, and all of this space, this margin that was meant to serve as an intimidating gap is used regularly.

ALEX
So you’re saying that the building doesn’t really need an intervention.

REM NOULASAS
“Changes in regime and ideology are more powerful than the most radical architecture,” yes.

ALEX
Indeed.

REM NOULASAS
But architecture can embrace those spontaneously developed cultures... decentralized surveillance, humane treatment of prisoners, exterior circulation... all of it, and designing elements that more specifically meet those needs.

ALEX
But you recognize that this current ‘ideal’ is destined to be seen as outdated even, well, today?
Certainly. That is why we create additional margin for the creation of future ideals. The design itself is guided by the idea of the prison culture as a "system of continuously revised paradigms".

ALEX

But you'll still insist that the iconography of this one remain intact along with the two other failed ideals?

REN KOOIHAS

Yes.

ALEX

Doesn't that become absurd after five of six? Like some weird museum exhibit or Vegas luxor kinda thing?

REN KOOIHAS

(fumbling in his back pocket)

Hoho. I don't see that many revisions taking place.

ALEX

(checking his watch)

Maybe you're right.

REN KOOIHAS

(showing ALEX some drawings)

Flexibility is the creation of margin.

ALEX

Ah, so flexibility exists in the span of multiple renovations, not in the potential reconfigurations of one?

REN KOOIHAS

Yes.

ALEX

Well I'm all for that. I mean, we definitely see eye to eye on this idea of revision and unexpected adaptability.

REN KOOIHAS

Ah, yes, you're referencing my definition of margin, that I call "excess capacity that enables different and even opposite interpretations and uses."
ALEX:
Are those quotation marks because that’s something you’ve actually said and—

REM Koolhaas:
—not words you’re just putting in my mouth? That is correct.

ALEX:

(looking from the drawings to the space)
Wait. But how does your design take advantage of the fact that you still have prisoners for a significant amount of time staring into this central space?

REM Koolhaas:
It doesn’t need to be taken advantage of. It’s an outdated principle and completely inc

ALEX:
yes, inhumane, I know, you’ve said that.

REM Koolhaas:
You might say that I’m putting “new layers of civilization on old layers of supervision.”

ALEX:
Or you might say that.

REM Koolhaas:
Right. The point is, that this way, for the first time in prison ideals, we’re not claiming to have the be all, end all solution. We recognize that something is bound to come after this that is thought of as better, and we make room for it, but we are adding our own modern layer nevertheless.

ALEX:
Yeah, but I still think that your design doesn’t take into account the fact that even though you’re embracing the spontaneous culture that has developed, you’re ignoring the fact that you’re still left with cells all facing into everything going on in the middle. Why can’t you explore that?

REM Koolhaas:
It doesn’t need to be explore—

ALEX:
Why do you have to label this typology so bluntly as an obsolete poison on society?

REM Koolhaas:
It no longer meets—
That's Foucault talking, not you.

(beat.)

Koolhaas
(taken aback)
You don't even know him, or me.

I'm not saying to assume. But I'm worried you're accepting his position of 'panopticon = bad' without question.

Koolhaas
Well, no, that approach is just--

Alex
You're exploiting a natural social culture for your design, which, believe me, is great, but you're not taking advantage of any of the opportunities already set up by the architecture in place. The crux of your design relies on building in the open space--

Koolhaas
Yes, the margin--

Alex
And finding the best way to escape from what's here. Why not embrace it? Why not see what happens when you really push it to its limits?

Koolhaas
I'm losing patience. What are you getting at?

Alex
I'm working with a design principle of 'revision' that begins by pushing the original intent of a design completely to its extreme, completely uninhibited, then examining the result. From there, the result is most likely completely unsuited for its current program, so I then consider what it might be suited for, make any necessary, minor distortions, and voila!

Koolhaas
Hmm. I don't think you know the first thing about my design.

Alex
Sure I do. I made a model of it. Check out the right hand page!
SPECTACLE _ magnificent display on a grand scale

GOOD SPECTACLE _ inspires and connects us.
Alright Mr. so-sure student. How would you approach a project like this?

Alex
(reaching into his pocket)
Me? You're asking me? Little ol' me? Why, oh, I don't know, I couldn't possibly think up something on the spot—
(He hands the Nooshius drawings)
--but if you insist.

(REN. NOUSHHAAS looks at them for a moment, his expression unreadable.)

Alex
So I begin by thinking: what are the driving intentions behind the Panopticon principle? Reform. Intimidation. Isolation.

REN. NOUSHHAAS
Surveillance.

Alex
Ah, I would say that's a means to an end, not the end itself.

REN. NOUSHHAAS
(flipping to the next drawing)
Alright. What the heck is this?

Alex
But the architectural realities of the space are still highly considered. Oh, right. So again, completely uninhibited. I imagine that what this space really wants to be. The floor was never meant to be occupied anyway, so I say take that out completely. Make it a bottomless pit. Maybe snakes are at the bottom, I don't know. Also, there's a certain security in being enclosed in a space. A certain level of safety. Therefore I say take the bars out, and the balcony.

REN. NOUSHHAAS
What, so a prisoner can fall over the edge into your endless abyss?

Alex
I'd call that pretty intimidating.

REN. NOUSHHAAS
(turning to the next drawing)
But how do the prisoners receive food? Water? What about punishment? What kind of egress is there?
Well I wasn't thinking of those things in my 'uninhibited' stage, but now that you mention it, that's what this bridge is for.

FRED ROGERS

Bridge?

ALEX

(missing the experience)

Of sorts. See whenever a single prisoner needs that extra bit of special attention, they'd walk, draw-bridge kind of thing can be lowered to any one of the cells and the guards can go deal with the prisoner personally. How frightening would that be, knowing that if you mistake, you're not just listening for the footsteps of the guards coming from the side, but you see their direct approach path to you?

FRED ROGERS

Okay. But that's completely unrealistic--

ALEX

As a prison model. Yes I know. So then I take a step back and think, what COULD this be, if not a prison? How could these seemingly negative qualities actually become positive? Hmm, what about a rock concert venue?

FRED ROGERS

(snorting with laughter)

You're kidding.

ALEX

Not at all. Rock stars are already held up as gods of sorts by many fans. Why not add to that image by making them virtually unteachable across an endless abyss, separating the world of mortal and immortals? There's the audience, all contained within the different cells, there's the performers, in the center on what could be a rotating, height-shifting stage. And can you imagine the light show that could take place in a space like this?

FRED ROGERS

And that bridge?

ALEX

(gesturing wildly in the space)

A way to reward fans who are showing the most enthusiasm. Who's rocking out their cell the most? Ah, Block 250C! Lower the bridge, let them on stage to
dance with the band. Or better yet, maybe the band approaches them for a song and leaves the center. I saw Aerosmith do something like that once, they were lowered into--

REM KOOLHAAS

Anything else?

ALEX

Sure. Back in the real world, slightly more practical architectural concerns would need to be addressed, so minor distortions, modifications, interventions would be made, Railings to stop people from falling into the abyss, the back walls of the cells knocked out with a complete circulation system on the outside would make sense for entering and exiting the show. If I were to study this with further iterations, other concerns certainly would need to be addressed, but as a starting point...

REM KOOLHAAS

Is that it?

ALEX (having expected a stronger reaction)

Yeah. For now.

REM KOOLHAAS

Okay. But it's a prison.

ALEX

And it could be... a rock concert!

REM KOOLHAAS

Alright... but we were asked to make this prison functional for another 50 years.

ALEX

Yeah. Why not functional... as a rock concert?? FanARCHiticon!!!

REM KOOLHAAS (air guitars.)

ALEX (offended)

Right.

REM KOOLHAAS

I mean it could have been an interesting direction to come from at least.

ALEX

(taking his drawings back)

Sure.

ALEX

There's just a lot of missed opportunities in a loaded space like this. REM KOOLHAAS begins to walk away. Beat.

REM KOOLHAAS

This was a long time ago. I would do it quite differently today. Quite differently.
REM VOICED: Slams the central hut door in ALEX'S face, leaving his time-space coordinates in question.

ALEX: I'm sure you would, Rem. I'm sure you would.

WHICH CELLS HAVE BETTER VIEWS?
My first design instinct was to design the whole darn building. I figured that would at least give me a rough idea of the issues I was going to need to confront in more detail at a later date. My first design pass focused on designing for a specific plotline instead of a performer/audience relationship. Multiple stages, each specifically designed for a plot event, would then progress the play and mobile audience through the stages of Joseph Campbell’s Monomyth. The results of this study can be seen on the next page.

What came out of this was an understanding that Governor’s Island and Fort Jay already had a number of latent theatrical opportunities and I should focus on exploiting those instead of designing for a tabula rasa. Studying Koolhaas led me to my ‘amplify, distort’ methodology and the results can be seen on subsequent pages of that first pass of taking the natural qualities of the fort and pushing it to an extreme, then using the result for theater instead of the military.
HYPERFANTASY_ a world created among a branding that transparently provides a fantasy world while intentionally exposing how that world does not and cannot exist.

GOOD HYPERFANTASY_ is even more intriguing than the fantasy.