New Orleans' Dutch treat; Experts opine about city repair

*The Washington Times*
April 29, 2006
By Deborah K. Dietsch

What better way to meet the Dutch than with a lecture by the Netherlands' most famous architect, Rem Koolhaas? Mr. Koolhaas kicked off Meet the Dutch, an annual week of activities sponsored since 2002 by the Royal Netherlands Embassy to promote contemporary Dutch culture, with a talk Monday evening at the National Building Museum's Great Hall, packed with about 1,500 persons, mostly young Washington designers. A polemicist as well-known for his books as his buildings, Mr. Koolhaas lamented the decline of architecture's civic conscience.

After being introduced as the "the world's starchitect" by Dutch ambassador Boudewijn J. van Eenennaam, the Rotterdam architect quickly repudiated the diplomat's characterization.

"He doesn't know how profoundly obscene that term has become to me," Mr. Koolhaas said before launching into an attack on the "spectacular" designs of Frank Gehry and others. "Architects articulated what public values are ... [but] are now playthings and servants of the private sector."

No matter that the Dutch architect has designed trendy stores for fashion icon Prada or advised furniture giant Ikea on building urban outlets. He wants architecture to play a more civic role and has started his own think tank to help corporations and organizations devise future development.

Among current projects is a master plan for the dilapidated Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg that would buck the current trend in museum design by showing art in the small, worn galleries of existing buildings rather than in "vast territories of sterility."

Mr. Koolhaas, who seemed slightly rattled by his huge audience, glossed over his sculptural, irreverent designs for the Seattle Public Library, the Dutch embassy in Berlin and China Central Television Headquarters, under construction in Beijing. He was prouder of a circus tent created to house an exhibit on the European Union. "It is a huge pleasure for us to escape the limitations of architecture and enter a domain where architecture is not normally invited," he said.

The striped tent grew from the architect's design of a multicolored bar code. "It has become a center for political demonstrations," noted the Dutchman, who went on to opine about globalization and a possible coalition between Europe and Asia as if preparing to run for office himself.

On display upstairs in the National Building Museum's galleries are visionary designs by three Dutch firms and three American ones that suggest ways of fixing up New Orleans after its devastation by Hurricane Katrina last year. As if in illustration of Mr. Koolhaas'
claim that architecture has become irrelevant when it comes to civic engagement, the proposals are largely fanciful and lack consensus about a strategy for moving forward.

"Newer Orleans," organized by the Netherlands Architecture Institute, the Tulane University School of Architecture and Artforum magazine, argues for contemporary-style rebuilding in the Crescent City, as if to rebuke the neotraditional villages being planned along Mississippi's Gulf Coast. For the most part, though, the designs in the small exhibit don't make a convincing case for the cutting edge.

Most disappointing are the ideas from the Netherlands, a low-lying country that is world-renowned for its water management. In fact, two of the Dutch proposals are downright silly. They call for burying an elementary school within an earth mound and building a ziggurat-shaped "mediatheque" and community center.

Another Dutch scheme, from a Rotterdam landscape architecture firm called West 8, aims to resuscitate a flooded city park on the banks of Lake Pontchartrain with a "miniature delta" of new streams, canals and lily ponds. Temporary settlements of trailers, cabins and mobile homes eventually would be turned into golf courses and nature preserves. This incremental vision is among the few to address the city's immediate housing needs.

More interesting are proposals from two American firms that reflect opposing sides of the current debate over reviving New Orleans. Hargreaves Associates, landscape architects who helped design the Clinton presidential library in Little Rock, suggest renewing the city's "beautiful machine" of canals, levees and walls through a public works project akin to the dams built by the Tennessee Valley Authority. The existing system would be strengthened and added to, and new greenways would connect neighborhoods.

Preserving and expanding the infrastructure, the Hargreaves team insists, would encourage relocated homeowners to return to the city. As for the cost, the firm argues through bar charts that the $32 billion required of such an ambitious project is merely a drop in the federal government's budget compared to the $1.8 trillion cost of President Bush's tax cuts over the next decade.

Last year's Pritzker Architecture Prize winner, Thom Mayne, and his team from the Los Angeles firm Morphosis make a stronger case for "radical subtraction." Based on predictions that New Orleans' population will be half of what it was before Katrina, the architects consider reinvestment in costly infrastructure unrealistic. They suggest rebuilding only key areas of New Orleans, maintaining that "a shrinking city is in fact a denser, richer, more intense city."

The devastated 9th Ward could be turned into a wetland and damaged buildings on higher ground restored. New structures and parks would rise on reinforced foundations in specially designated development zones. Of course, the Morphosis team, made up of
architects, presents a specific design proposal: a new civic district comprising museum and courthouse buildings between City Hall and the Superdome.

Drawings suggest a cluster of modern towers that appear banal compared to Mr. Koolhaas' work and the offbeat Dutch designs shown earlier in the week. But the idea of a smaller, more vibrant New Orleans is one of the more appealing in this disappointing exhibit, which comes off as a design competition among firms hoping for a piece of the action as the wrecked city rebuilds.

+++++

WHAT: "Newer Orleans - A Shared Space"

WHERE: National Building Museum, 401 F St. NW

WHEN: Through July 30; Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

ADMISSION: Free

PHONE: 202/272-2448

WEB SITE: www.nbm.org