

Rem Koolhaas talks of the changing face of architecture

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Architecture used to reflect the values of society but now it reflects the individual, internationally-acclaimed architect Rem Koolhaas told an overspill audience at the American University of Beirut on May 17, highlighting the changes that have taken place in architecture during modern times.

“An architect,” Koolhaas said, “[used to be] the one who expresses the value of the public sector.”



Not anymore. An architect nowadays, said Koolhaas, “doesn’t express values but aspirations.”

Award-winning architect and Harvard Professor Rem Koolhaas, who is one of the co-founders of the Rotterdam-based Office for Metropolitan Architecture and the Architectuur Metropolitane Officie was on a visit to Beirut at the invitation of the Areen Architecture Series at the Department of Architecture and Design at AUB. Held in Issam Fares Hall on May 17, Koolhaas's lecture was the first in the series of lectures that will take place approximately bi-annually, bringing top architects from around the world to AUB students.

Highlighting the changing trends in architecture, Koolhaas said a new breed of architects has emerged: the “Starchitect,” a term denoting celebrities in the field of architecture. This new breed of architects could potentially have a negative effect on architecture by encouraging overly flamboyant work, according to Koolhaas.

No longer confined to one theme, buildings now may contain what he referred to as many different “bubbles,” a concept that Koolhaas says he uses in his own designs, as is the case of the two libraries in the Jussieu University Campus in Paris in 1992.

Koolhaas showed the audience a number of images depicting trends and features that mostly impacted architecture over the years. Notably, he said, the elevator has greatly impacted both the exterior and interior design of buildings.

One of Koolhaas's and the OMA's most famous projects is the China Central Television Headquarters building, a job he took instead of reconstructing the World Trade Center—a controversial choice. In keeping with his concept of public versus private in architectural motivation he saw the CCTV building as a project which provided the Chinese, for the first time, with a media building that they can visit. Again a building of bubbles, it contains many separate areas within one edifice. These “bubbles” house news, film, creative ideas and other media outlets. Koolhaas described it as “a political statement which is not excessively big but unique in its ability” and a “part of the symbolism of new China.”