

# KOOL HOUSES AND MIESTAKES

Koolhaas and Van der Rohe fight for the American urban identity.

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After establishing himself in Chicago and being offered the head of the architecture school at IIT (Illinois Institute of Technology), Mies Van der Rohe was commissioned to design the new buildings for the campus. One of his most famous buildings there, the 1953 award-winning Commons Building, is now attached to Rem Koolhaas' McCormick Tribune. In 1997, the Institute launched a competition for a new Campus Center in attempt to reverse the school's decline in popularity. Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture were the ones selected to be in charge of this improvement.

In 1940, Mies was given the modern architect's dream: a blank space, free of contaminations of the past. The IIT campus was for Van der Rohe "the biggest decision I ever had to make." The university was determined to create a new image of nationally recognized modernity and Van der Rohe was up for the challenge, always willing to put his buildings on the biggest scene possible. According to Mies, Crown Hall and its adjacent buildings were the "clearest embodiment" of his belief that "structure is the essence of building." And Commons was no exception, a symmetric and pristine glass pavilion in his signature style. Forty years later, irony would catch up, and none other than Rem Koolhaas was about to give a turn to the idea of modern image for the IIT campus. Koolhaas' solution was more symbolic and expensive: much of the center's drama stems from the way he has packed an astounding variety of levels, ceiling heights, materials, and finishes into a single story.

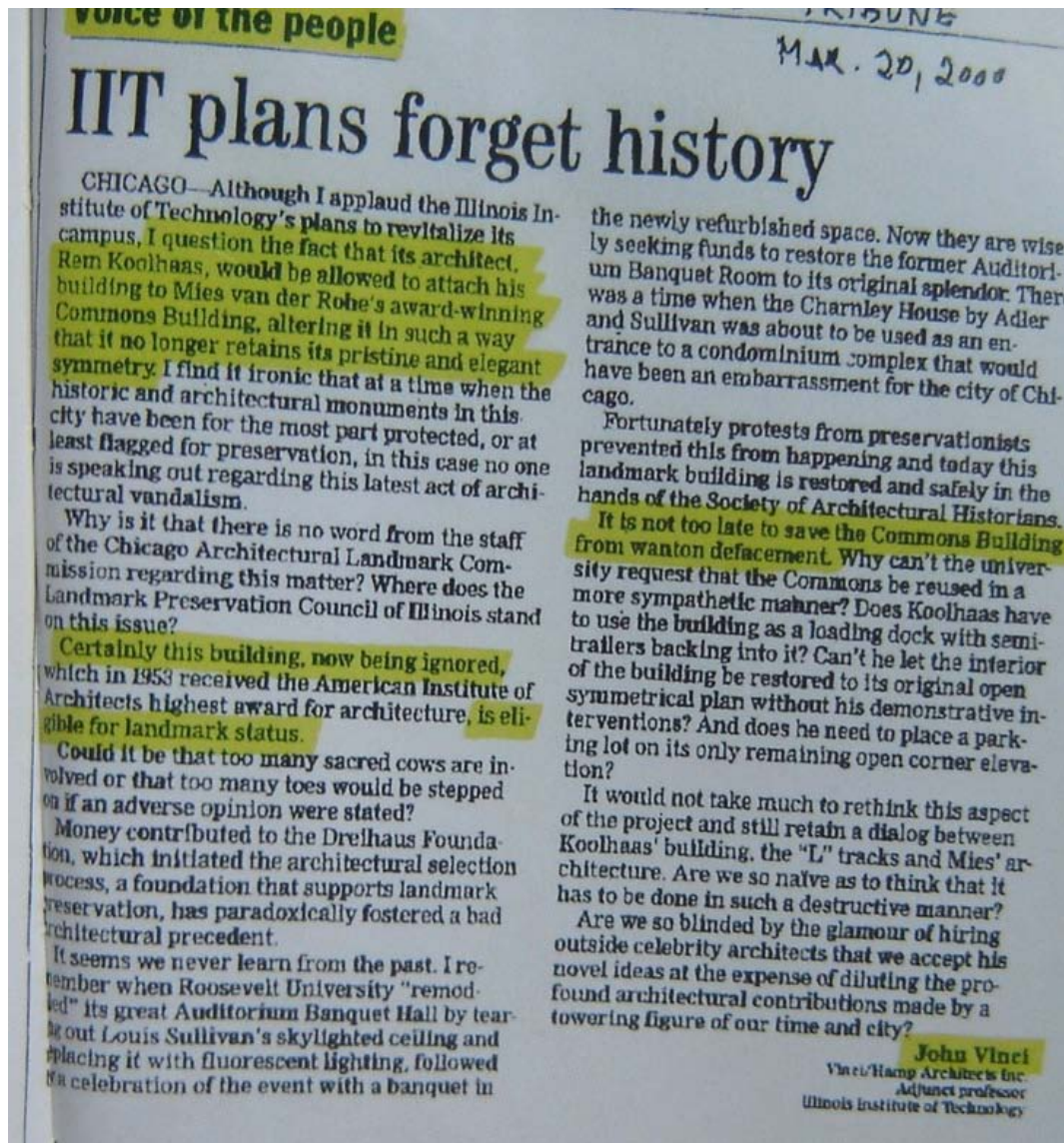
The original project budget for this renovation was \$25 million, but the ultimate cost of the project ended up being \$48 million. However, this price held less

priority than the Institute's needs to create an architecturally significant image to add to its gamma of buildings designed by Mies Van der Rohe. The new building meets the old one so that one can walk from Koolhaas into Mies and vice-versa. The Commons Building did not change structurally, but now it's subordinated to Koolhaas' vision of "more is more, and a whole lot more is better still."

The new Koolhaas building has been the target of many protests from the architectural community. Local preservationists ("Miesians") claim he is using his celebrity status to vandalize a historical piece, while Koolhaas sees his new addition as a final context to Van der Rohe's "swimming in space" building, a solution for "using" not for "visiting."

While this discussion is centered in the idea of the building as a historical landmark and its defense as so, there is always a bigger issue. On one hand, what both sides are overlooking is the very point of Collage City, in which cities are built as disconnected compositions (and oppositions) of cultural landmarks. In this case, the Commons Building works as context for McCormick and vice-versa; it is this confrontation that the American institution was looking for when hiring Koolhaas for the job. Also, the teaming of those two buildings is not only represented in the cityscape, but in a public discussion that places IIT on the popular culture map again. Facing these two celebrities (Koolhaas vs. Van der Rohe) in *The Chicago Tribune* is no different from facing two actresses in celebrity magazines in order to promote their upcoming films. Taking the academic debate out to the public (see image) works better for IIT than having a

rational use of space that respects tradition but symbolizes modernism at the same time (if this task is even possible). Confrontation, in this case, exaggerates the dramatic gesture of the city-collage into a noticeable event visible to the contemporary eye.



While modernism raises the question of what it means to be American, postmodernism responds with celebrity-design showdown. What is more American than providing the audience with entertainment, controversy, and

spectacle? Especially when this “clash of titans” is taking place in the very American city, before our very own eyes: Gehry vs. Lloyd Wright in New York, Van der Rohe facing Gehry in Chicago. This mega-structural war not only re-creates the dream of robotic giants fighting against each other over the control of our cities, it takes the architectural discussion out of the classrooms and into the newspapers, magazines, and popular culture in general; and that is the real spirit of America: Celebrity confrontations in and out of the TV, colossal symbols of freedom that at the same time are welcoming the most spectacular attacks, advanced capitalism turned into urbanistic ego, and the ever-need for entertainment. The question here was never over architectural functionality (physical or symbolical) but over urban landmarking and explosive city marketing. Architecture is subordinated and America wins again.

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