

## First Person

**Rem Koolhaas**, 65, is one of the most important architects of our time. In China, the Dutch master is most famous for his CCTV Headquarters in Beijing. He recently opened an office in Hong Kong, to work on a bid for the West Kowloon Cultural District project. He tells Winnie Yeung why he resents being called a star architect.



Curiosity is what drives me to do most things in life.

**I was born** in 1944 in Rotterdam, right before World War II ended. Our family moved to Indonesia for three years when I was eight. It's my first experience of Asia, which led to my interest in Asia in my later life.

**I became a journalist** in Holland at 17 although I'd had no training. I was also writing screenplays.

**Journalism is** the most underestimated and underrated profession. You need to be incredibly intelligent for it; generous for letting people speak their minds; and genuinely interested in people.

**I interviewed Federico Fellini** when I was 21—it pretty much tells you how easy it was to do anything back then.

**Fellini's interview was odd** because he was incredibly human. He offered me a role as an apostle because I had a very severe face.

**Journalism is a** lot more similar to architecture than most people think—they both demand a great deal of curiosity. Curiosity is what drives me to do most things in life.

**I asked myself**, "What would be interesting to do when I was 70?" Did I want to be a screenwriter for the rest of my life?

**I was introduced** to the Russian avant-garde movement. For the first time I realized architecture is not just about accommodation, but also bringing forward other development.

**Up until the 1980s**, architects were convinced they were offering something to society with their designs.

**However, in all** the market-driven craziness these days, this belief has been lost.

**I've been very uncomfortable** with the direction that architecture is taking. Back then architects mainly worked for governments—that's why they thought they were creating things for the greater good. Today most architects work for individuals and the market is pressuring them to make exceptional things.

**Dubai is the** extreme example. People call it excessive, vulgar—however to the Arabs, Dubai is a free land. It's an interesting and important experiment combining modernity and Islam.

**I don't trust** myself to work on the West Kowloon project all the way in Rotterdam, so I set up an office in Hong Kong. We really need to be here to avoid the kind of "expat" situation. I'm now in Hong Kong for a week every month. My hotel room has a view of the West Kowloon site.

**What strikes me** the most is that the Hong Kong government and the population are fixed in a suspicious relationship.

**I hope we** can help melt that suspicion with our vision of the project. Hopefully then the public will recognize the project is in fact a fairly generous offer from the government.

**I hate being** called a star architect. The concept of stars comes with presumption—ego, ruthlessness. The word "star" is also used with resentment. I hope they can drop me from the star category.

**CCTV Headquarters in Beijing** is small, modest and tentative. It fits incredibly well in its context.

**I really reject** the notion that it is larger than life. I have no obsession for large things. Some of our best works are private houses. We make sure the enormity of a project is not translated directly into the actual scale.

**China has the** lowest ratio of architects among its population, but it also has the most number of projects. Chinese architects will soon become the most important architects. They know they'll never run out of jobs so they can make mistakes and be outrageous. It's the best time to be an architect in China.

**I was astonished** to find out two percent of the earth's surface has been declared as world heritage. Two percent of the world will never change. That's the size of a country.

**Heritage conservation should** be more than preserving it. Heritage should evolve.

**The change in** Hong Kong's sentiment regarding heritage amazes me. I think Hong Kong people used to identify with change but not so much anymore.

**I still write today** because being an architect is frustrating sometimes—any project is teamwork, not your own.

THE  
PERRY  
BIBLE  
FELLOWSHIP  
CLASSICS  
Nicholas  
Gurewitch

