Koolhaas, Foster clash over ‘similar’ designs

18 May 2007 | By Will Hurst

No plagiarism but we were first, says Rem, as Foster’s deny any real likeness between schemes

Two of the world’s leading architects, Rem Koolhaas and Norman Foster, have clashed over claims of a “remarkable similarity” between two of their most ambitious projects.

In the week that Foster & Partners confirmed the sale of a stake in the firm to private equity group 3i, the practice was forced to defend its newly unveiled 6sq km “zero-carbon, zero-waste” city in Abu Dhabi (News May 11) because of its resemblance to neighbouring Emirates development Rak Gateway by Koolhaas’s Office for Metropolitan Architecture.

Koolhaas revealed his practice had sought an explanation from Foster’s because of perceived similarities, including scale, shape, sustainable aspects and the grid system both cities will employ.

Although the Dutch architect later stressed there was “no suspicion” of plagiarism, he was keen to point out that his scheme had come first. Foster & Partners responded by issuing a terse statement denying any real similarity between the schemes.

Rak Gateway, which has not been widely publicised, is a 4.5sq km project proposed in Ras Al Khaimah for the Rak Investment Authority. It will be outlined by Koolhaas at the International Design Forum in Dubai next week.

"We want to establish that we launched this project in November last year," Koolhaas told BD.

"It needed a conversation [with Foster & Partners] about how plausible it was that these similarities could happen."

Fellow OMA partner Reinier de Graaf said its scheme was the “most radical in the world” in terms of density and its mix of functions.

But a spokeswoman for Foster’s insisted that “apart from the square shape”, there were no similarities between the schemes. She said the firm had no prior knowledge of the OMA project, despite it being shown at Mipim in March.

“Our scheme for a low-rise, carbon-neutral university city for the Masdar Initiative … has drawn inspiration from traditional Arabic walled cities and the 16th century ultradense square cities of Yemen,” she added.
Readers' comments (13)

Jon Ignatowicz | 19 May 2007 12:03 pm

The only remarkable similarity between the two schemes (OMA/Foster zero carbon city) is the dreariness with which they have been designed. I don't know how either of these guys persuaded the Sheik's this was the way to go, but it reminded me of the menus in vegetarian restaurants back in the 70's.

Eleni Tracada | 19 May 2007 4:13 pm

It should be wiser for both practices to avoid copying of Romans' planning!

tom kwan | 21 May 2007 0:27 am

I am an architectural field publisher from China. It was nice to read more and more interesting stories and news at bdonline. I do hope to share the update news and event happened in China with you in the short future.

chris | 21 May 2007 2:09 pm

Oh dear! 2 big architectural practices both produce a megalomaniac grid layout shock horror! Did I miss someone copyrighting the grid concept? Maybe if they'd employed a planner they'd have come up with something more imaginative (and more suited to a hot, sunny low latitude environment). But of course for the likes of Foster and Koolhaas, and their sponsors, what it looks like in a prospectus is much more important than what it's like to live in.

most radical redundancy | 21 May 2007 4:41 pm

The Koolhaas scheme is outlined on its EU website, and it is frankly quite pedestrian looking, esp the extruded characterless towers and such. The death star and giant ipod are beautiful, but the square city concept is not so exciting, or radical. I wonder if either city plan includes a public space for the beheading of homosexuals? Will the noggins be recycled? Perhaps human rights nightmares can be turned into bloodthirsty sustainability.
use the join and akulturate with tradition in both of architech make different for the result of building, not a own principal.

I've also heard that Frank Gehry is suing... Frank Gehry since almost all of his projects of the last 15yrs were plagiarisms of Bilbao.

did any of the sour commentators above look carefully and analytically into the schemes (really, be honest) and the thoughts behind them before offering very useless comments that speak of their own personal misery only – really think about it. whats this impulse that some architects/designers have to shoot aimlessly at each other , and in the process bring the entire profession down?!? i can only think of one reason, your own misery – but get over it boys and girl

Having reviewed Koolhaas's Rak Gateway I do indeed feel there is a strong case to be argued for plagiarism – except it is probably George Lucas who should be calling OMA over the rather striking similarities between the Rak gateway’s conference centre and a certain planet destroying space station..

Made in China : the classical Chinese imperial city re-interpreted : Beijing, inside the 2nd ring road...complete with temple of heaven...watch out for future ring roads.