ZKM (Center for Art and Media Technology) was conceived to be the 20th Century link to a classical town, Karlsruhe, Germany. Pushed up against the edge of the city, along the railway embankment, it strives to "generate density, exploit proximity, provoke tension, maximize friction, organize in-betweens, promote filtering, sponsor identity and stimulate blurring." (S.M.L.XL) As a result, the design becomes a response to a series of opposing relationships between the city, the site, and the program; and these relationships are identified as: center-periphery, classical-futuristic, and artist-public. The expression of these relationships are achieved through the X, Y, and Z axes (respectively).

The X-axis (center-periphery) organizes a system of entrances which orients and re- orients the individual toward and away from the center of the city to the edge of the city, allowing one to understand the relationship between the center of the city (deemed to be a "relic" of the past) and the future of the city (represented by ZKM). The Y-axis (artist-public) becomes a representation of the relationship between production and demonstration. Finally, the Z-axis (classical-futuristic) dictates the vertical "pancaking" of the program; beginning with a theater and progressing to a naturally ill museum at the top, the "machine becomes a building."

The program of the building contains a museum of media art; a museum of contemporary art; research and production facilities for music, video, and virtual reality; a theater for media; lecture hall; and a media library. Koolhaas saw ZKM as being a "laboratory open to the public...to investigate the elusive connection between art and technology."

Unfortunately for Koolhaas (and perhaps for the people of Karlsruhe), ZKM was never realized due to the town’s conservative views. Instead of a realization of futuristic view of art and technology, the eventual design utilized a refurbished armory to contain the mediateque.
Section of the building as seen from the east
Building seen from the Northwestern corner
Eastern facade of the building
Above: South Elevation
Below: North Elevation
Section of the building as seen from the north
ZKM’s “electronic billboard” (left) and the circulation (right)
"Robotic" southern facade; contains a void to store various equipments for the facilities.
Entry to the mediateque, featuring its huge escalator from the nearby trainstation
Above: lecture hall
Below: view from the museum of contemporary art
Above: public walkway around the “core”
Below: view from the museum of contemporary art
Center-Periphery (at urban scale)

ZKM’s place in the town of Karlsruhe is such that it sits at the edge of the town, away from its historical center. It doesn’t try to become a subtle part of the town; rather, with its huge scale, it becomes a modern focal point and symbolically looks ahead into the new age of information where the relationship between art and technology (as well as the past and the future) becomes more critical.

Center-Periphery (at scale of building)

The core of ZKM, unlike many of the buildings of this size, the core of the building actually contains the program while the periphery of the building are the service elements. This method of organization becomes a method to further emphasize the idea of the ZKM being a center for art and media as well as addressing the idea of center and periphery expressed at an urban level.
Container and Contained

ZKM can be simplified as a series of spaces within one another. The “containers” of ZKM become its skin and the “ring” of service elements which wrap around the programmatic core ("the contained"). This organization allows for a maximum amount of space in the center to be utilized for the purpose of the mediatheque. And as a result, the spatial sequence becomes vertical rather than horizontal, allowing disparate events to occur simultaneously without disrupting each other—similar to a high rise building.

The sequence of architectural elements become reminiscent of other things we’re quite familiar with...as seen on the left. In many ways the container and the contained in this project become separate elements and the container merely becomes an element which (as its name suggests) contains the disparate programmatic “chaos” within. And although it gives very slight glimpses of what is going on inside, the building’s truth cannot be completely revealed to its observers and the old modernist ideal of “honesty” is, to a certain degree, compromised.
Daylighting (or lackthereof)

ZKM is an institution that is focused on the media arts. Therefore, a lot of the spaces within are dark (and hence receives small amount of sunlight) to accommodate theaters and video displays. The exception of this can be seen on the top level of the core with the presence of a gallery and with some of the offices on the western side of the building, where the lighting is controlled to the requirement of the spaces.

Facades

All four sides of the ZKM are different and creates a certain degree of relationships with its surroundings as well as the content within.

Eastern facade faces the ramp entering ZKM and becomes the "face" of the building. Constructed of metal mesh, it was planned to have information projected on to it and become an electronic billboard, informing people in a variety of ways.

The southern facade, constructed of "corrugated polyester," concealed a series of support spaces which would face the Autobahn.

The Western facade of the building was constructed of glazed bricks becomes an austere face of the building, only opening up to the exterior through small windows.

Finally the Northern facade features a glazed atrium space facing the city. It contains a series of ramps, escalators, stairs and balconies which becomes the building’s visual connection point to the historical city and an escape from all the technology in the building.
Served and Servant

In many high rises, cores become elements which hold the service elements, while the spaces between the floors expand to accommodate various pipes, electrical lines which weave in and out of the programmatic spaces. ZKM, however, takes another approach by pushing out the service elements to the edges of the “core” (which is now used for program). By doing this, every floor gets its own service space which would then supply the floor with whatever it needs. This allows for the least amount of space to be wasted on service elements and more space to be allotted for program.

Structure

In order to free up the space in the core, a different approach was taken. Instead using a forest of pilots and having them intrude upon spaces like a theater (where a presence of them would be a hindrance), Koolhaas uses two massive concrete walls and a set of vierendeel trusses that span between the walls. Because of this, there is a possibility for spaces in a high-rise building where the floor is devoid of any large structural elements (ie between the trusses). Typical floor-to-ceiling height is 18’ and a theater can go up to 50’. The result is an alternation of spaces completely free of structure to spaces nestled within the trusses which gives a new life to the Corbusian “freeplan.”
Scale

Being in a relatively small town, a building such as ZKM becomes a spectacle. As one can see from the images, if built, it would have easily overshadowed its adjacent buildings and quickly become the iconic landmark of the town. And this design strictly follows one of Koolhaas’s ideas that big buildings (or “bigness” as he referred to it in his books) is no longer part of any urban tissue—“it exists; at most it coexists”—and in many aspects it is merely coexisting with the town of Karlsruhe. Certainly it works with the town, responding to the various relationships previously mentioned but at the same time, the enormous scale isolates the building from the rest of the city (hence the building no longer being a “part of any urban tissue”).

To its users, the spaces within become more of independent elements because of its size as well as the vertical stacking of the program. One’s awareness of being a part of something bigger occurs when he/she traverses between these spaces and visually observe and absorb the immensity of the design. Through such articulation of the project, the disparate elements of the building remain disparate but made whole only through its skin (which are actually all different from each other as well), an element which literally contain the oppositions within. As a result, the different programs stand as independent elements, competing and affecting each other in what Koolhaas calls a “Darwinian Arena.”

The implications of the design point to an attitude that perhaps the idea of art and technology coexisting together is a rather tenuous one. A situation, in Koolhaas’s mind, that can be solved in projects of such enormous scale where the opposing elements stay opposed to each other and keep their unique characteristics; which becomes important especially in a world where globalization has all but erased a certain degree of identity in all aspects of our life.
ZKM as a filmstrip

ZKM is a place where media and art come together to interact with each other. The spatial organization of the building is such that each space is separate from the others and the transitions from one space to another is rather abrupt. But put together as a whole picture, the building stands as a complete urban element. Similarly, a strip of film, once deconstructed to its parts, individual frames of pictures stand as smaller elements of a bigger picture. And when viewed at a slower pace, the individual pictures stand as separate elements which are bound by the fact that it's a part of a movie. Spaces of ZKM reflect such characteristics of a film strip and thus a conceptual connection between the building and its intended use is created.
Above: ZKM abstracted as a cartesian that organizes the various oppositions of the site on different axes.

Below: The cartesian 'expanded' to create spaces reflecting the relative spaces in the ZKM.