A World-Famous Architect Goes Home to Cornell

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One of the striking attributes of contemporary architectural practice is that a star like Rem Koolhaas might one day be toiling on a design for an enormous television headquarters in Beijing and, the next moment, unveil plans for an understated university building in Ithaca, N.Y.

“It’s definitely an exercise in modest, discreet intervention,” Mr. Koolhaas said, speaking of his design for Cornell University’s College of Architecture, Art and Planning, which he is to present today to students and faculty in Ithaca.

Measuring 43,000 square feet, with a budget of $40 million — as opposed to more than 5 million square feet and a budget of more than $600 million for his soaring CCTV tower in Beijing — the building, known as Milstein Hall, will anchor Cornell’s central campus. It will add classroom and studio space for the architecture college and create a public space along Fall Creek Gorge on the north side of the school’s so-called arts quad. Total project costs are estimated at $40 million.

For Mr. Koolhaas, 61, whose firm, Office for Metropolitan Architecture, is based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, the project is a homecoming of sorts. He studied at Cornell in 1972 and 1973, and served as a guest lecturer in April 2005.

“I knew its issues, the cold winters,” he said in an interview in downtown Manhattan on Sunday.

One of the big challenges was to establish a natural gathering place for architecture students that would also unite the disparate elements around it, from the 19th-century rustic style of Sibley Hall to the early-20th-century industrial style of Rand Hall. Rather than create a showy building thrusting upward or sprawling outward, Mr. Koolhaas said, he transformed a parking lot into what is essentially a flat plate, with one level above and one below.

An underground mound connects the lower and upper levels, creating the height necessary for an auditorium, as well as open space. “It was the least amount of effort for the most amount of different conditions,” Mr. Koolhaas said, referring to the range of activities the building will accommodate. “We didn’t want to have a massive presence, but nevertheless a strong presence.”

The building will be a low and luminous form, a contemporary flourish in an otherwise traditional context. “We didn’t want to do a literal masterpiece, but an almost mysterious...
single beam of modernity,” said Shohei Shigematsu, the firm’s senior associate on the project.

Mr. Koolhaas said: “The box is always an isolated thing. But here, we use the box as a connector. You could say it’s a postmodern use of the box.”

He said he had entered the “apparent warfare between blob and box” in contemporary architecture, and that he was “trying to short-circuit that dialectic.”

In describing its needs, the college told Mr. Koolhaas’s firm that it sought to unite areas of study on campus and to foster collaboration. “We wanted a building that was for the whole college and had the capacity to bring the departments together,” said Mohsen Mostafavi, dean of the College of Architecture, Art and Planning. “The departments are operating in different buildings, with little possibility of interaction.”

In response, the architects replaced traditional room-lined corridors with open work space like studios, a library, presentation and exhibition areas, a lobby and an auditorium.

“This gives a totally different experience,” Mr. Koolhaas said. “You see so many activities happening around you.”

The building has been in the works since 1999, when Paul Milstein, the New York City developer and philanthropist, committed $10 million in aid for the project. Steven Holl was the first architect enlisted, but his proposal to demolish the historic Rand Hall studio building and replace it with a vertical structure was ultimately abandoned. Then Barkow Leibinger Architects, a Berlin firm, designed a linear building that was also spurned. “Neither was correct,” Mr. Mostafavi said.

Mr. Koolhaas was hired in January. Not only did he understand how the college functioned from personal experience, Mr. Mostafavi said, but his firm also has a track record of analyzing how space functions on an everyday basis.

“They’re not just going from a list of programs,” Mr. Mostafavi said. “They really think about how our conceptions of function can be challenged.”

Founded in 1871, the College of Architecture, Art and Planning is the smallest college at Cornell, offering a professional degree to undergraduates. Its city and regional planning department includes a historic preservation planning program in addition to urban and regional studies. Among its graduates are the architects Peter Eisenman and Arthur Gensler, the artists Susan Rothenberg and Louise Lawler, and the urban planner Edmund Bacon.

The university must now submit the project to the City of Ithaca for approval. Groundbreaking is expected in 2007, with a target for completion in 2009.

Tomorrow Mr. Koolhaas will unveil the design to a broader public at a reception in Manhattan.