

Exhibiting Architecture: A Polemic

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In this essay, I question the premise of exhibiting architecture. As an architect, exhibition designer and researcher, I have been watching, designing and assisting in the curation of exhibitions that attempt this task and still I wonder if any truly fulfill the charge of exhibiting architecture. Parsing the history and multivalent influences of the architectural exhibition, I write this essay in an attempt to answer the question of what it means to exhibit architecture.

This question leads to many others. What tools do we use to communicate architecture? Who is excluded in the use of a disciplinary lexicon? Is the space of the architectural exhibition meant to engage a general public? If not, how can we reach that public? What does it mean to represent architecture? Or *present* architecture? These questions have been percolating in the discipline for a century and yet remain unresolved. Drawing from a history of exhibitions, the wealth of architectural theorizing on the subject and writings on spatial experience, this essay asks the reader to reconsider the place, purpose and potential of the architectural exhibition.

The Architectural Exhibition

The architectural exhibition had a soft beginning, starting in the loggias of churches and cathedrals before the eighteenth century, developing formal spaces in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with l'École des Beaux Arts and the fairs and expositions of 'industry' and finally taking on a more public face in the early twentieth century. The Deutscher Werkbund, Bauhaus Weimer, Futurist architects, Vkhutemas ASNOVA and other groups employed the exhibition space to bring the subject of architecture to a broader audience.¹ Most came with a manifesto and a marketing bent. But this moment – and what a modern moment it was – laid the foundation for the architectural exhibition as it now exists throughout the world.

Soon after, in 1932, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) opened an Architecture and Design department under the direction of Phillip Johnson. The Shchusev State Museum of Architecture followed in 1934 and, years later, in 1956, the Museum of Finnish Architecture opened its doors. The further proliferation of architecture departments and museums across the globe slowed for many years, with new growth surging again only in the aftermath of 1968. That year's unrest exposed deep tensions between civil society (ahem, institutions) and the citizens.² These institutions were suddenly forced to reexamine their role and representations, generating a period of development and change in the 1970s and 80s.

In 1973, the organizers of the Venice Biennale proposed the inclusion of architecture, with thematic sections beginning in 1976, eventually becoming its own biennale in 1980. During this period of germination, the architectural exhibitions at the biennale were bold and engaging. In 1979, Phyllis Lambert established the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). The DAM (Deutsche Architektur-Museum) in Frankfurt launched in 1977; the ICAM (International Confederation of Architectural Museums) was founded in 1979.³

In the United States, the 1980s were ripe with growth. In 1980, New York's Municipal Arts Society began holding architectural exhibitions; in 1981, the Art Institute of Chicago founded its architecture department, as did the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1983; and, in 1985, the Getty Research Institute established its robust archive of visual arts and architecture. In 1990, the Carnegie Museum of Art founded the Heinz Architectural Center. Finally, in 2000, MoMA PS1 introduced their Young Architects Program, though earlier versions existed in 1998 and 1999.⁴ The proliferation of architecture institutions marked a renewed interest in the discipline and its *public* presence in the exhibition.

The 'post-'68' moment brought with it the idealism of collective action, happenings and performative environments. During this time, Fluxus, land art, Viennese Actionism, Arte Povera, installation art and other such movements were bubbling up through the art world. Yet, by the time these architecture institutions finally opened their doors, the memory of exhibitions as interventions had been all but forgotten.⁵ What actually took hold was the presentation of representation. It was the safe route – these drawings, models and photographs were beautiful, works of art in themselves, and easily translatable from the archives of existing museum departments.

The Representation of Architecture

Drawings, computer models, physical models, mock-ups, sketches and photographs are modes and methods of architectural representation – and design. They are an integral part of the process of architectural design.⁶ The wealth of theorization on the subject of representation brings to mind both Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Goethe. For Goethe, the uniqueness of architecture is its presence and embodiment.⁷ For Pérez-Gómez, representations of architecture are laden with authorial intent and are therefore not



Installation view *Giacometti*, June 8-September 12, 2018, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Exhibition design by Aviva Rubin. Photograph: David Heald

neutral stand-ins. Both remind us that representations of architecture are *mediating artifacts* and, I would argue, incomplete stand-ins.⁸

Plans, elevations, sections and details, which constitute the basis of two-dimensional representation, originated in the Renaissance period. Architectural intent is presented in a scalable drawing, with dimensional information to be shared with the builder. Physical models and mock-ups have a more ancient history, but likewise provide measurable content, conveying proportions, formal relationships and connections. To be understood, these artifacts require knowledge of a specific lexicon. They must be interpreted, perceived and entered.

For architectural exhibitions, curators rely on these forms of media to translate the experience of the built environment to the audience. The drawing, model, computer rendering or mock-up necessitates the ability to read what is a door, a wall or a window. More importantly, the audience must be able to interpret what it feels like to be inside, as well as the relationships between the inside and the outside, warmth and isolation, security and collectivity, and so on.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea that “the history of architecture is the history of the sense of space” has persisted within the discipline.⁹ Modernism rooted itself in the dialectic of shaping form and space. Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos and Mies van der Rohe all sculpted the built environment with theories of volume and surface, *raum* understood as both room and space and a spatial dialogue between architecture and its environment. Yet, in this spatial turn, modernism embedded a critique in its disciplinary representation. This ‘sense of space’ must be extracted from these representational forms.

Ironically, the Modern Movement also advocated for the architectural exhibition. So where is this ‘sense of space’ in these representations? When not outfitted with the semiotics of architectural language, how can this spatiality be translated? Modernism was not a particularly vocal moment in terms of the discipline’s public accessibility, but by the time the architectural exhibition began to take institutional form, public engagement was at the forefront of the conversation. Where, then, is the public in these exhibitions of representations?

Exhibitions of Representations

With the inauguration of the Museum of Modern Art, neutral, pale interiors were introduced to gallery spaces. This modernist interior showcased the work of art being absorbed into “the aestheticizing and transformational ‘power’” of the exhibition.¹⁰ The white box of the exhibition space provided a decontextualized view of the works of art. Artworks were remade into art objects, dislocated from their context and encased in glass.

The architectural exhibition followed suit. With the late ‘70s and early ‘80s boom in architectural exhibitions in both institutions and galleries, representations of architecture were placed on pedestals and made into fetishized objects. “Architectural drawings...have become, for all intents and purposes, art objects,” said Paul Goldberger in the *New York Times* in 1977.¹¹

The price of architectural drawings spiked soon afterwards, reaching a peak in the late 1980s. 2D and 3D simulacra took the place of architectural form, putting mediation on display.

Much around this same time, civil society and its institutions were getting a makeover. Jürgen Habermas's analysis of the 'public sphere' was all the rage, giving a much-needed lens through which to critique the social, political and cultural issues of the time. The public, he argued, is an imagined construct of commonalities, which can take form as a discursive space, a unified body, a common action or socially accepted opinions.¹² Embedded in the idea of the public is both inclusivity and assembly.

Returning to the question of public engagement with architectural exhibitions, we can perhaps reformulate the question. How can the many publics that enter an exhibition come to understand architecture and space? Or – more broadly, perhaps – what is the purpose of an architectural exhibition?

As Mirko Zardini, the former director of the CCA, has said, “an exhibition is a form of representation, a reading of the world through architecture that oscillates between the poles of *pretending* to show the object or the document and recognizing that placing it in a new context will inevitably contaminate it with a new discourse.”¹³ In this thought, we can find some clues as to how to renegotiate our predicament. The exhibition, as a representation in and of itself, can perhaps be a place of architecture. Instead of the exhibition of representations posing as architecture, perhaps the exhibition can *be* the architecture?

Architectural Exhibitions for Publics

At their best, the museum space and the exhibitions hosted within offer an environment of both knowledge production and a plurality of individuated experiences. The architectural curator Carson Chan has pushed this further: “Giving space to a particular realm between the private institution and the public sphere, exhibitions allow for cultural values to be inscribed collectively, while the way they are experienced forms a subjective position within each visitor.”¹⁴ Memorable exhibitions toggle between the public and the private, the object and the subject, the collective and the individual and knowledge and sensation. These exhibitions provoke confusion, curiosity and, perhaps most importantly, engagement.

Rancière agrees: “One important condition of the emancipation of the spectator is precisely the creation of places where works of art or performances of art are no longer restrained to a specific audience or a specific function... For a long time, [the museum] was a place of confusion.”¹⁵ Confusion leads to engagement, which encourages learning and subjectivity in turn. Instead of documenting architectural edifices, can we reclaim the exhibition space as a place of spatial experience? How can the exhibition's visitors be brought into the conversation and engaged as actors, viewers and producers to help them understand their dialogue with the built environment? What is it we exhibit, then? Here, I shall turn to some precedents, including museums, specific exhibitions and entire biennales.

First, a classic: Sir John Soane's Museum presents a glimpse into the architect's psyche. Functioning as a sort of cabinet of curiosities, the museum offers a spatial experience full of drawings, models and historical artifacts collected during his travels, along with the building itself, Soane's former home and his lifelong architectural project.¹⁶ By dint of its history, the museum creates a spatial experience akin to that of architecture itself.

There have been a number of exhibitions that similarly evoke the *gesamtkunstwerk* of the Soane Museum. Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, El Lissitzky's *Proun Room and the Rothko Chapel*, among many others. Instead, I'd like to take a look at an interventionist exhibition during the period of the growth of architecture within the Venice Biennale. In the exhibition *Europa-America* at the 1976 Biennale, Lucien Kroll presented a built project of his by displaying plans and photographs within a scale model. As an inhabitable set or playground, children and adults alike were welcome to enter and play in the exhibition space.¹⁷

One final example takes us back to the Venice Biennale of Architecture. This time, in 2014, Rem Koolhaas and his OMA/AMO army produced a typological study of the fundamentals of architecture. In this obsessive cataloguing of architectural elements throughout history to the present day, the biennale entitled *Fundamentals* offered an endless shaping of architecture. Each visitor's engagement with the spaces of the biennale – from the Giardini to the Arsenale to the city beyond – formed one of many interpretations and readings of architecture. An architectural *affect* emerged, in the confluence of *vague essences*, as Gilles Deleuze defined the term, sparking education and wonder. Taken as a whole, the 2014 biennale expressed a multitude of architectural experiences within its exhibition walls.

Conclusion

The architectural exhibition seems to be, at its core, an oxymoron. When the art objects and the exhibition space are of the same scale, what can be presented? The discipline has answered this, both historically as well as today, with a heavy dose of representations, in the form of drawings, models, photography and other documentary media. But what has been lost is the *experience* – as well as the study, learning and exploration – of architectural space and, with them, the possibility of public engagement.

This essay puts forth more questions than it answers in an attempt to provoke reflections within the discipline. What can the architectural exhibition *do*? What is its agency? If architecture is everywhere and for everybody, how can an audience beyond the confines of our discipline engage with it?¹⁸ There are many directions this can be taken in: Perhaps the architectural exhibition becomes a space for the sensorial, somatic, affective or tactile. Perhaps it takes a purely educational, collaborative or interactive turn. Or perhaps it is the large-scale, formal and spatial intervention of architecture itself. Whichever direction one takes, the unthought spaces and places of the visitor's consciousness get untangled as they deepen their engagement with the built environment. In this reclaimed space of the architectural exhibition, visitors gain a new power.

Notes

1. The futurist architects in Milan (1914), the Werkbund (1914), the expressionists in Berlin (1919), the constructivists in Moscow (1921) and the Bauhaus Weimar (1923) all produced architectural exhibitions. Jean-Louis Cohen, “Mirror of Dreams,” *Log 20 Curating Architecture* (2010), 52.
2. Joseph Giovannini, “Museums Make Room for the Art of Architecture,” *New York Times* (May 20, 1984), 33.
3. This is hardly exhaustive and much more can be culled from the archives of the ICAM (International Confederation of Architectural Museums) at icam-web.org.
4. Coincidentally, Philip Johnson was the architect for the 1999 iteration.
5. Post-1968, there seem to have been more daring exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale mentioned above. Another example is Paolo Portoghesi and Lara-Vinca Masini's 1970 exhibition and conference “Interventions in the City and the Landscape,” which invited artists and architects to intervene in the city and engage with its people, spaces and socioeconomic issues. See Marina Tanga, *Arte Ambientale, Urban Space, and Participatory Art* (London: Routledge, 2019).
6. Some architects, among them Bernard Tschumi and Daniel Libeskind, assert that representations are one and the same as the built form itself. I am not taking that position here.
7. Dorothea E. von Mücke, “Beyond the Paradigm of Representation: Goethe on Architecture,” *Grey Room* 35 (Spring 2009): 6-27, doi:10.1162/grey.2009.1.35.6.
8. Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000).
9. August Schmarsow, “The Essence of Architectural Creation,” in Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, trans. and eds, *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893* (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 296.
10. Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 64.
11. Paul Goldberger, “Architectural Drawings Raised to an Art,” *New York Times* (December 12, 1977), 50.
12. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989).
13. Mirko Zardini, “Exhibiting and Collecting Ideas: A Montreal Perspective,” *Log 20 Curating Architecture* (2010), 80.
14. Carson Chan, “Measures of an Exhibition: Space, not Art, Is the Curator's Primary Material,” *Filip* 13 (Spring 2011), 8.
15. Gavin Arnall, Laura Gandolfi and Enea Zaramella, “Aesthetics and Politics Revisited: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,” *Critical Inquiry* 38-2 (Winter 2012), 293, doi: 10.1086/662743.
16. The cabinet of curiosities, or *wunderkammer*, laid the foundations for the contemporary museum. Collections of objects were displayed in rooms from floor to ceiling, stirring a sense of “wonder” at the amassed collection. As such, Soane was constantly adding and reorganizing his collection and its presentation. See Tim Knox, *Sir John Soane's Museum, London* (London: Merrell, 2009).
17. Lea-Catherine Szacka, “Debates on Display at the 1976 Venice Biennale,” in Thordis Arrhenius, ed., *Place and Displacement: Exhibiting Architecture* (Zürich: Lars Müller, 2014), 100.
18. See Patrick Bouchain, *Construire Autrement: Comment Faire?* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2006), for a very hopeful rethinking of architecture.

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