



## Architecture exhibitions: chronology of a modern cultural phenomenon and some inquietude

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the history of architecture exhibitions (and exhibitions about architecture), which, having originated in the beginning of the twentieth century, accompany us to this day as physically-constituted statements or spatially-determined narratives on the creativity of modern architects, for it was in the Modern Age that such events developed. It argues that the exhibitions were, and still are, a stage for the experimentation and courage evidenced by avant-garde and consensually-consolidated styles architectural (and urbanistic) production, but which also respond to didactic purposes as well as propaganda for cultural, governmental and/or private institutions of all sorts. It also comments on the different forms that exhibitions assumed in the last 100 years, depending on the organizers' (artists or curators) will, to then question their intentions, or the intentions they should have, nowadays. The article also serves as introduction to the exhibition and curatorship theme, which *arq.urb* magazine defined as subject for issue 20, the last one of 2017.

**Keywords:** Curatorship. History of modern architecture. Art and architecture. Museums. Art Galleries.



Figure 1. The New Gallery Central Hall, London, 1888. Available at: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Gallery\\_\(London\)#/media/File:New\\_Gallery\\_London\\_Central\\_Hall\\_1888.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Gallery_(London)#/media/File:New_Gallery_London_Central_Hall_1888.jpg)>. Accessed: 19 Nov 2017. [Image from the “New Gallery Notes” catalogue, Summer, 1888.]

**A**rchitecture exhibitions are relatively modern. There were a few in the nineteenth century, notably in England, which produced the first world’s fair in 1851, whose main exhibition object was the very building where it took place, the Crystal Palace, by Joseph Paxton. However, to properly speak of exhibitions of architecture or where architecture was shown in some way, we must wait until the promotion and propagation of the Arts & Crafts movement, especially those connected to William Morris’s group, The Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society, which began in 1888, at the recently-inaugurated New Gallery (Figure 1). This cultural organization sought to promote the innovative art at the time (mainly Pre-Raphaelite) to expand the view and the influence of art on other fields, such as design, which started to flourish on the works of Morris and other movement members.

Precisely for being events who privileged and fostered contact among the arts, the exhibitions included architecture in a general manner, as one

more manifestation in the comprehensive proposal of Arts & Crafts. Thus, the view of architecture was attached to the craft and design work the members produced in a collaborative way. Albeit of much reduced proportions, the movement’s exhibitions had similar goals to those of the great fairs (international or universal) of the second half of the nineteenth century, with Europeans (especially French and British, but also Germans) showcasing the advances of science and art promoted by Western civilization and industrial capitalism.

To speak of architecture exhibitions *stricto sensu*, we must enter the twentieth century, who saw them rise. The first exhibitions truly dedicated to architecture (and the construction of the city) were promoted in Austria and in Germany. The Austrian case is devoted to the Vienna Secession, which, in 1897-88, under Joseph Maria Olbrich’s command, executed the exhibition “Die Sezession”. Then, architecture was present as the building (Figure 2), certainly emblematic, which hosted an

art exhibition, specially painting and sculpture. In this sense, it still closely follows the tradition of the British exhibitions of Arts & Crafts, but in this case the centrality of architecture, which allegorically “includes” the other arts, is evident.

The German case is different; not because it does not recognize or manifest the connection between the arts, especially painting, but because the centrality of architecture is evidenced in its predominance. The first striking exhibition certainly was “Deutscher Werkbund Ausstellung” (Exhibition of the German Building Association), which took

place in 1914, in Cologne, where the first works by Walter Gropius (Fagus Factory) and Bruno Taut (Glass Pavilion) were presented. However, focusing specifically on exhibitions of architecture (buildings, but also projects) in general, and not of some buildings, the first significant proposal could be “Ausstellung für unbekannte Architekten” (Exhibition of Unknown Architects), of 1919, product of the collaborative work of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Work Council for Art), directed by architect Bruno Taut and critic Adolf Behne, which resulted from the efforts of the members of Novembergruppe (November Group, of expressionist artists that included architects such as Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, for instance) and of Deutscher Werkbund (German Building Association, which congregated industrialists, builders, craftsmen, artists, and architects connected to construction). The exhibition followed the patterns of common plastic arts exhibitions, for the architects were entirely committed to the expressionist artists groups of the time. Thus, just as with painting exhibitions, this one presented utopian architecture and city projects (*Idealprojekte*), drawings, collages, and manipulated photographs, all of which emblematic works of the critical position of members and sympathizers of Die Gläserne Kette (The Glass Chain, group of expressionists connected to Bruno Taut), such as Max Taut, Johannes Molzahns, Hermann Finsterlin, and Wenzel Hablik. In the catalogue (Figure 3), critical texts by Walter Gropius, Adolf Behne, and Bruno Taut himself on the understanding of archi-

Figure 2. Drawing of the Secession building (Wiener Secessionsgebäude). Joseph Maria Olbrich, 1897. Available at: <<http://www.design-is-fine.org/post/44774107173/design-for-the-wiener-secessionsgeb%C3%A4ude-vienna>>. Accessed: 19 Nov 2017.

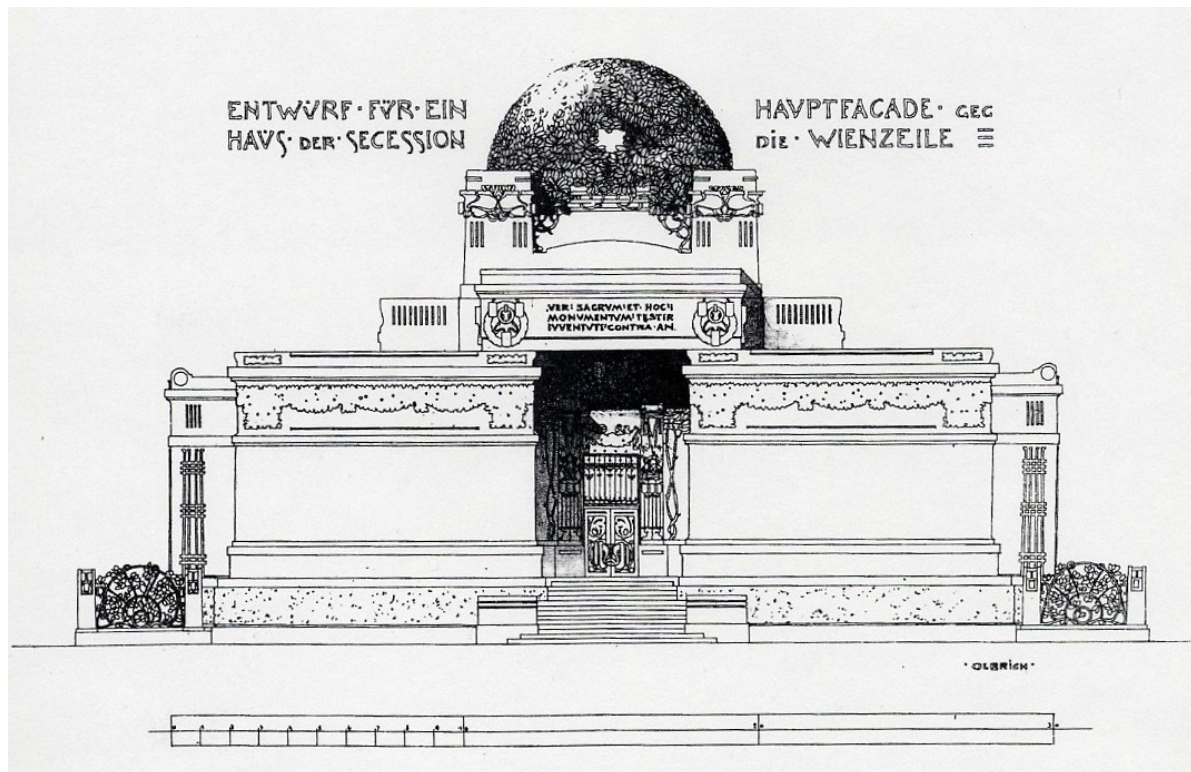






Figure 3. “Ausstellung für unbekannte Architekten” catalogue, 1919. Available at: <<https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/item/L4UWWZIAAJ6NJFNSOSEEUZGMWSRNIC53>>. Accessed: 19 Nov 2017.

ecture and city. The exhibition reached its greatest political vocation in 1920, when Arbeitsrat für Kunst took it to the workers boroughs of Berlin, “dedicating it to the proletarians”.

Although imbued with the principle of unity of the arts – so much so it is appropriate to mention the presence of members of Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter (Bridge and The Blue Rider, both associations of expressionist painters, more naturalist the first and more abstract the second, which had as members Ludwig Kirchner and Erich Heckel, as well as Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, respectively) and the influence of magazines such as *Sturm and Die Aktion* (*The Storm and The Action*) – the work of these architects and critics proclaiming the independence of architecture before the other arts. It attributes centrality to architecture and, mostly, argues it is the only art in which the others may meet and operate a synthesis which takes to the conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total work of art”), so coveted in the beginning of the twentieth century.

From these expressionist shows, others began to develop, in a considerable varied manner, but always in Germany. Some more complex and huge, such as Weissenhofsiedlung’s, where the show “Die Wohnung” (“The Dwelling”) took place, in Stuttgart, 1927, following the model of borough construction which had been inaugurated with “Mathildenhöhe” (Darmstadt, 1901), by Joseph Maria Olbrich, or as “Deutsche Bauausstellung

Berlin” (“Berlin Construction Exhibition”), where the show “Die Wohnung Unserer Zeit” (“The dwelling of our time”) was located, in 1931. An important event, where projects (architectural and urban, which were not rare at the time) and innovations of the vigorous German construction industry and even natural-scale models of modern buildings were presented, such as one of Mies van der Rohe’s famous houses. (Figure 4) All these shows wagered on experimental proposals, attesting that the architectural thinking was advanced in relation to the physical architecture production of the time.



Figure 4. Inside of “Deutsche Bauausstellung Berlin”, 1931. To the lower right, Mies van der Rohe’s experimental house. Available at: <[http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0717-69962013000100011](http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0717-69962013000100011)>. Accessed: 19 Nov 2017.

On the other hand, there were the exhibitions of *avant-garde* quality, also experimental, but which sought to give and see critical (and spiritual) advancement of modern architecture in the cultural sphere, more than its relation to industrial production. These exhibitions were less institutional and, thus, more challenging, usually connected to art galleries. Artists of the caliber of El Lissitzky (Lazar Markovich Lissitzky) or Theo Van Doesburg (Christian Emil Marie Küpper) were core figures in the formulation of proposals both innovative and of great impact on the consolidation of architectural and urbanistic thinking of the time. In 1922, El Lissitzky organized the constructivist session (“Erste Russische Kunstausstellung”) of Van Die-men Gallery, in Berlin, showcasing for the first time the *avant-garde* Russian production that resulted from the Revolution of October 1917 and from the consolidation of cubist, constructivist, and suprematist groups. El Lissitzky defined two types of exhibition: passive and active. The former presented what had already been done. In this sense, they were historiographic and educational, traditional exhibitions, including those of the plastic arts, such as the ones exhibited since the nineteenth century until the 1920s. The active ones were thought more as installations, even though the term would only appear five decades later. They were supposed to be spaces dedicated to experimentation and to the construction of the new in art, whether plastic, graphic or architectural. The exhibition itself would be an open work of art, popular and communicative: pure reflective propaganda.

The exhibition “De Stijl” (Figure 5), which Van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren held at Léonce Rosenberg’s Galerie l’Effort Moderne, in 1923 Paris, may be considered one of the greatest exponents of such conceptual modality, having elevated architecture to a superior level of idealization and formalization hitherto unexplored and which appeared in the exhibition’s production. The impact of the work presented by the organizers was enormous, especially due to the representation systems, imposing axonometry as an emblematic communication form of the new architectural conception. Predominantly in the drawings presented by the duo for the projects of their experimental houses (La Maison Particulière, or The Private House, La Maison d’Artiste, or Artist’s House, and L’Hôtel Particulière, or The Private Residence), axonometry was adopted as normative representation by the architects connected to De Stijl, by modern masters, as in the case of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, and by other Bauhaus students and teachers. It became the representation most used by the modern during the 1920-30s and even vigorously returned in experimental works of the 1960-70s, by architects such as Peter Eisenman, for example.

The European effort to build an architectural and urbanistic thinking by means of exhibitions would continue until the early 1930s. Gradually, they became a way of disseminating modern thinking and its architecture and city conceptualization, which ended up structuring an institutional propaganda



Figure 5. Interior of “De Stijl” exhibition, Paris, Galerie l’Effort Moderne, 1923. In the front, the model of the Private Residence, Theo Van Doesburg and Cor van Eesteren. Available at: <<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/ca/6e/16/ca6e16edbf376dcb1cb61a228ff9c9e.jpg>>. Accessed: 19 Nov 2017.



Figure 6. Interior of “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition”, New York, MoMA, 1932. At the center, the model of Ville Savoye, Le Corbusier, 1929. Available at: <<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/ca/6e/16/ca6e16edbf376dcb1cb61a228ff9c9e.jpg>>. Accessed: 19 Nov 2017.

whose apex may be the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM), a combination of work meeting and commented exhibition of the works produced by the protagonists of the modern movement in architecture.

Across the Atlantic, architecture exhibitions were less important and much rarer. Concerning architecture, European effervescence had no precedent anywhere else in the world during the interwar years. Nevertheless, North Americans developed another type of exhibition, of a didactic quality (not only for architecture, but for the plastic arts in general). Interested in the education of a wealthier but less sensitive to the attitude of avant-garde art bourgeoisie, important cultural institutions were invested in the task of presenting and explaining these manifestations that developed in the old continent.

The most important effort in this direction came from the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), which presented, in 1932, “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” (Figure 6). According to the museum’s director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., the event was “the best way of presenting effectively to the public every aspect of the new movement”. Under the curatorship of Henry-Russell Hitchcock Jr. and Philip Johnson, varied representations (from drawings to models, photographs and detailed explanatory commentary) of the best of modern architecture from the period were efficiently and richly exhibited, centering the

proposal on the works of the movement’s “founders”: Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and J. J. P. Oud, as well as Frank Lloyd Wright. Many other followers from over 15 countries complemented the show, from Spain to Russia and Japan, from Italy to Czechoslovakia and England, displaying how the phenomenon had already disseminated throughout the world, reaching the USA, which also appeared in the showing with works by Raymond Hood and the Bowman Brothers office. In the catalogue, critical texts by Alfred H. Barr Jr., Henry-Russell Hitchcock Jr., Philip Johnson, and Lewis Mumford.

This didactic form was developed in exhibitions in the USA for over 30 years, at least until World War II. They were exhibitions such as “Modern Housing Exhibition” (1934), “Modern Exposition Architecture” (1936), and “Houses and Housing: Industrial Art” (1939), but mainly the series of itinerant exhibitions (Circulating Exhibitions – CE Program), catalogues, books, articles, and slide talks on the subject *What is modern?*, developed by the museum from 1938 to 1969. The question from MoMA is an intellectual, operative, and simplifying effort to influence the general North American public’s perception on modern art, architecture and modern design; it also ended up rousing an internal discussion that for three decades mobilized the debate on modernity. Within this proposal, “What is Modern Architecture?”, organized by art curator John McAndrew and his assistant Elizabeth Mock, may be considered the



Figure 7. Interior of “Novo mundo do espaço de Le Corbusier” exhibition, São Paulo, MASP, 1950. Source: Habitat, n. 1, 1950, p. 39.

apex of this educational modality on (modern) architecture in the USA. It circulated in two formats, visiting over 80 places between 1938 and 1945, and it even originated a catalogue-book published in 1942, with a print run of 10,000 copies, and a revised edition in 1946. Between 1962 and 1970, Arthur Drexler revisited the proposal, visiting 45 places and originating the exhibition and the book *Transformation in Modern Architecture*, from 1979, which already included late moderns such as Louis Kahn, brutalists such as Paul Rudolph, and post-moderns such as Robert Venturi or Richard Meier. Even though only the 1979 one was presented at MoMA, which saved itself for the most sophisticated exhibits, its curators’ intention is evident, of amplifying the cultural base (number of people sensitive to the movement) and general understanding on modernity through didactic exhibitions, which facilitated appreciation of the “new style” (*The International Style*, which the museum had already presented in 1932, and even its variations after the 1960s).

With changes due to World War II, the exhibitions were diversified, and other forms of presentation were created; not only the artists and architects, but also critics and even historians started to promote architecture exhibitions. In general, they took place in museums, which, with framework prepared for developing art exhibitions, could perfectly do it with the architecture theme – always through images and models. Therefore, exhibitions on architecture from countries (“Brazil Builds” or “Built in

USA: The Post-War Architecture”), on movements (“The Bauhaus: How It Worked”), or on architecture by renowned architects (Mies van der Rohe at MoMA in 1947, 1960, 1966, 1969, 1975, 1977, 1986, 1993, 1998, and 2001) started to integrate everyday life in large cities.

In Brazil, these exhibitions started through the efforts of Museu de Arte de São Paulo-MASP (São Paulo Art Museum) and Bienal Internacional de Arte de São Paulo (São Paulo International Art Biennial). Founded in 1948, MASP hosted, in 1950, still in the Sete de Setembro street headquarters, the exhibition “Novo mundo do espaço de Le Corbusier” (New world of Le Corbusier’s space) (Figure 7), where not only the architectural production by the French-Swiss master was presented, but also his plastic opus, paintings, watercolors and gouache, as well as drawings and travel croquis.

São Paulo Biennial, whose first edition took place in 1951, kept ever since an architecture session (“Exposições Internacionais de Arquitetura”, or “International Architecture Exhibitions”), with projects by 150 Brazilian and foreign architects and, as early as the II Biennial, 1953, already had the presence of relevant world modern architecture figures such as Mies van der Rohe (who had a special room at the V Biennial), Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Marcel Breuer, Alvar Aalto, and Charles Eames. With the collaboration of MoMA, it was also able to present part of the “Built in USA” exhibition (called in Brazil





Figure 8. Interior of “This is Tomorrow” exhibition, London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1956. Group 6 stand: Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi, Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson. Available at: <<http://grupak.tumblr.com/post/18921446230/this-is-tomorrow-group-6-nigel-henderson>>. Accessed: 19 Nov 2017.

“Estados Unidos: Arquitetura do Após Guerra”), which congregated works by Eero Saarinen, Frank Lloyd Wright, Philip Johnson, and Richard Neutra, amongst others. Sigfried Giedion, Junzo Sakakura, Mario Pani and Walter Gropius, Alvar Aalto and Ernesto Rogers, participated in the juries of the I and II editions, respectively.

In 1973, Fundação Bienal (Biennial Foundation) and Instituto de Arquitetos do Brasil-IAB (Brazil Architects Institute) organized the “I Bienal de Arquitetura de São Paulo” (I São Paulo Architecture Biennial), abandoning the relationship of over 20 years with the plastic arts and relating itself to the tradition of biennials and triennials that already happened in Europe in those years. The first exhibition on architectural drawings (“Os desenhos da arquitetura”, or “The drawings of architecture”) would only take place in 1995, under the curatorship of Carlos Alberto Martins, Renato Anelli, and Fernando G. Vázquez Ramos, at the São Paulo gallery AS Studio. The most recent story on this topic (from the 1990s to the present) is narrated by Agnaldo Farias and Renato Anelli, in their excellent texts published in this issue.

Going back to Europe, it is in the English panorama that we find a dynamism and immense creativity in the immediate postwar period, with the formation of groups of artists who rethought the most important issues of the modern debate from the interwar period, from a point of view both critical and propositional. The Institute of Con-

temporary Art (ICA), founded by Roland Penrose, Herbert Read and E. L. T. Mesens, represented the apex of this movement of consolidation of modern principles, on whose surroundings artists and movements who transformed the British and, by extension, Western cultural panorama gravitated. One of them was the Independent Group, fundamental for the reformulation of post-war architectural issues. The exhibition, which gave the group great visibility, also made way for the consecration of a new form of architectural expression, Brutalism. It took place in 1956, at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, under the title “This is Tomorrow”, and had the unconditional support of Reyner Banham. It is considered the cradle of pop art (with Richard Hamilton’s work) and also the starting point for the challenging work of Alison and Peter Smithson (Figure 8), which united conceptual and formal forces with various other artists, painters, sculptors, and photographers, among whom we should emphasize the figures of Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi, who, along with the Smithsons, had executed another important exhibition, “Parallel of Life and Art”, in 1953, reformulating modern life conditions linked to design, in particular, and to mass art in general.

In the 1970s, the exhibitions were centered at the great international fairs, following the pavilion tradition, which had already had excellent architectural results since the dawn of the twentieth century: the steel industry pavilion, by Bruno Taut and Franz Hoffmann (Construction Fair,



Leipzig, 1913); the Glass Pavilion, by Bruno Taut (Deutsche Werkbund Exhibition, Cologne, 1914); the Makhorka pavilion, by Konstantin Melnikov (All-Russian Agriculture and Industrial Exhibition, Moscow, 1923); by the same architect, the Soviet Union pavilion at the Paris Exhibition of Decorative Arts, 1925, where Le Corbusier's *L'Esprit Nouveau* pavilion was also built; the German pavilion at the Barcelona International Exposition, 1929, by Mies van der Rohe; *Les Temps Modernes* pavilion, by Le Corbusier, at the Paris International Exposition, 1937, which also had pavilions from the Spanish Republic, by Josep Lluís Sert and Luis Lacasa, and from Finland, by Alvar and Aino Aalto; the Brazilian pavilion, by Oscar Niemeyer, Lúcio Costa, and Roberto Burle Marx (International Exposition, New York, 1939); the Breda pavilion, by Luciano Baldessari (Milan International Fair, 1952); and the Philips pavilion, *Le Poème Électronique*, by Le Corbusier (Universal Exposition, Brussels, 1958).

1970, where the Brazilian pavilion stood out, work of Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Flávio Motta, Júlio Katinsky, Ruy Ohtake, and Jorge Caron, and that had the collaboration of artists Marcello Nitsche and Carmela Gross.

In the 1980s, attention turns yet again to the subject's autonomous issues; the concern is not so much building, but thinking about architecture: not so much on the accomplishments, but on the projects. It turns to drawing, to the utopian or fantastic proposals; it goes into the whale's womb and reviews the interior of architecture, trying to expose its essence – in this case, an essence which reclaims history. The starting sign of such cultural upheaval is also an exhibition, the Venice Biennial exhibit (1980), the “Strada Novissima” (Figure 10), under the direction of Paolo Portoghesi, whose theme was *La Presenza del Passato* (The Presence of the Past). This exhibition launched the post-modernism issue into the global debate and put on the agenda the works of architects such as Robert A. M. Stern, Michael Graves, Oswald Mathias Ungers, Thomas Gordon Smith, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, Stanley Tigerman, Franco Purini and Laura Thermes, Massimo Scolari, Arata Isozaki, and Frank O. Gehry. It was a gigantic show, which had yet the participation of critics of the caliber of Vincent Scully, Christian Norberg-Schulz, and Charles Jencks (curiously, Kenneth Frampton, who was invited to participate, withdrew for disagreeing with the postmodern approach). Similar exhibi-



Figure 9. Assembling of Habitat'67, Montreal, 1967. Available at: <<https://www.archdaily.com/404803/ad-classics-habitat-67-moshe-safdie/51e85669e8e44e33c300001d-ad-classics-habitat-67-moshe-safdie-image>>. Accessed: 19 Nov 2017.

In 1967, the Montreal “World Exhibitions”, known as “Expo’67”, stands out; it gathered from the USA pavilion, with its enormous geodesic, work of Buckminster Fuller and S. Sadao, to Habitat’67 (Figure 9), a housing complex designed by Moshe Safdie, which became the symbol for architectural change in the modernity experimental ambit and for the abandonment of functionalist precepts that had dominated architecture until World War II. The summit of this tradition of buildings in fairs was the Universal Exposition of Osaka,

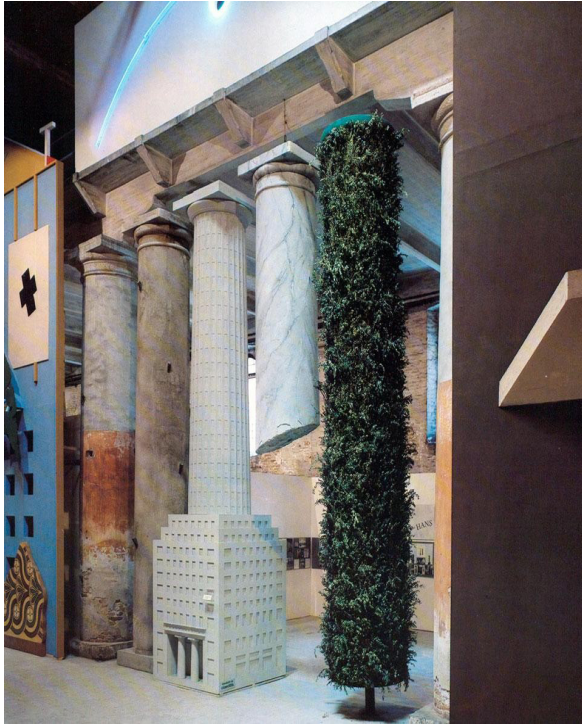


Figura 10. Interior da exposição “Strada Novissima”, Veneza, 1980. Detalhe da revista Domus, n. 605. Fachada de Hans Hollein. Disponível em: <<https://www.domusweb.it/en/from-the-archive/2012/08/25/-em-la-strada-novissima-em--the-1980-venice-biennale.html>>. Acesso em: 19 nov. 2017.

tions became fairly common, even if none of them would repeat this one’s impact.

The 1980s were prodigal in architectural drawings exhibitions, which became greatly popular. So much so the expression “paper architectures” was coined to designate the work of utopian quality, imaginative or innovative, unattached to the construction practices architecture had always developed. Often compared to the works of revolutionary architects (such as Étienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux), the works displayed an enormous vitality of ideas and of critique (ideological, political, social, cultural etc.). In Europe, in the USA, or in Japan, galleries developed exhibitions of different sizes and impact to showcase the works of these architects. Groups who raised a furor in the 1960-70s stood out, such as Superstudio or Archigram, but also architects who used drawing as an instrument of critique, such as Peter Eisenman, Aldo Rossi, or John Hejduk, amongst many. It is curious that this type of exhibition is kept alive to this day. (To indicate only a few of Aldo Rossi’s drawings exhibitions, which keep happening nowadays, we may mention: “Aldo Rossi. Architectural Drawings 1980-1996”, Antonia Jannone Gallery, 2012; “Aldo Rossi, Italian Architect”, Salomon Arts Gallery, 2013; and “Aldo Rossi and the City”, Pratt Institute, 2017, amongst others).

But, following the trail of tendency formation inaugurated in 1922 by the work of Henry-Russell

Hitchcock Jr. and Philip Johnson, *The International Style*, expression that became a brand for a generation that included architects such as Mies van der Rohe and Richard Neutra, other exhibitions did the same in the second half of the twentieth century. One of the most known cases, by the impact on the subject discussions in the last 20 years of the century, was the “Deconstructivist Architecture” (Figure 11), at MoMA, in 1988, under curatorship of Mark Wigley and Philip Johnson. Surpassing the post-modernism view, eight years after “Strada Novissima”, MoMA launches a new crop of architects: Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelblau, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, and Bernard Tschumi, whose works recover those of Russian constructivists and Van Doesburg’s axonometry and deflagrate a fragmented and non-historical approach of architecture.



Figure 11. Access to the “Deconstructivist Architecture” exhibition, Nova York, MoMA, 1988. Available at: <<https://aho.no/en/news/impact-deconstructivist-architecture>>. Accessed: 19 Nov 2017.

All these exhibitions were thought out by curators, who at times were the artists themselves,

as in “De Stijl”, by Van Doesburg (Paris, 1923), sometimes professional curators, like at MoMA, sometimes art historians, critics or specialists of all sorts, as in the case of Paolo Portoghesi and Philip Johnson (with every nuance, for Johnson was many things besides a specialist). Regardless of the type of curator, the task is always the same: select works by one or several artists (in our case, architects, landscape artists, urban planners, designers) and showcase them to a varied public, composed, however, of a significant number of laymen. Yet, it matters whether the exhibition is done by an important museum institution, such as MoMA or Pompidou, for instance, or by an art gallery, as important as it may be. Normally, institutions have specific collections they may use (the case of Mies van der Rohe at MoMA, who keeps his archive, or even RIBA or Bauhaus, who also have material about the architect). In these cases, exhibitions usually have a comprehensive museum quality and present panoramic and educational views on the artist or movement they address. Exhibitions at galleries or small art centers are almost always of much modest dimensions and address specific issues; they may be educational (although it is not common), but they generally intend to raise some specific issue or theme. This always depends on the curator’s standpoint. When exhibitions were organized by the artists themselves, this aspect was more evident: there is no doubt on Van Doesburg’s intentions in “De Stijl” exhibition, for example, or the Independent Group’s, in the attempt of situating “This is To-

morrow” as an inflexion point on the perception and the making of the works of art. But when we must answer to and understand the curator’s intention, this situation is more obscure.

Some issues that arise in this case pertain to these professionals’ standpoint, and it is important to understand them, for, as previously seen, architecture exhibitions may have a great impact on subject formation, on how we see and comprehend architecture and, by extension, city and society. Exhibitions so close in time and of such different approaches, such as “Transformation in Modern Architecture” (MoMA, 1979) and “Strada Novissima” (Venice, 1980) showcase, at the same time, the vitality and the multiplicity of standpoints they may present. Consequence of intelligent and very well-informed curators, these exhibitions perceived (and presented) the world (of architecture) in completely opposite manners, providing totalizing views of reality, consume as such by their visitors, but that do not necessarily constitute reality itself. The responsibility for the selection of reality is the curator, as well as the presented world view. The visitor easily accepts this institutionalized proposal.

For this reason, it is important to know how the definition of an exhibition theme came to be. In the old exhibitions, of the 1920-30s, the needs were propagandist. As well as manifests, which were the conceptual (or dogmatic) pieces used by *avant-garde* architects (and artists) to gain ad-



hesion to the new ways of comprehending and assimilating art, exhibitions were formal and operative manifestations of presentation and persuasion. They were *pièce de résistance*. Ideological propagation and political positioning always accompanied these forms of artistic work display. The decision became didactic when great cultural institutions took on the showcasing initiative and pure official propaganda replaced theme definition when the states promoted universal expositions and fairs. But the world today is extremely diversified; the last great international event may have been Sevilla'92, or Hannover'2000, but the exhibitions do appear in the world cultural spectrum, and transparency on the reasons that make an institution carry out an architecture exhibition are very relevant. What is the interest in supporting or hosting an exhibition with a theme devoted to the field of architecture?

Once this aspect is defined, the issue arises on how a "concept" to be developed at an architecture exhibition was chosen, which is a more personal than institutional trait. Although it is evident that an institution invites a curator to organize an exhibition considering that their characteristics (all of them, from political to aesthetic, from professional to personal) match those of the institution, there is an enormous leeway that may affect this development, especially because, in the course of time, the curators acquired great power and weight on the decisions that affect the final result of an exhibition, some

of them transformed into great media spectacles due to these professionals' intentions and work. Institutions also profit from this type of situation, for events of a strong personal nature tend to attract considerable public.

But what do they intend this public to see in an architecture exhibition? When we talk about built work, which, as seen before, were many since the beginning of the exhibitions, in the first years of the twentieth century, and that remain important, judging, for instance, by the success of the Serpentine Galleries pavilions, the experience seems evident and immediate. But what happens when the public must deal with architectural representations? Do they recognize in drawings, photographs, collages, montages, physical models and nowadays digital representations and videos, the determining characteristics of what is, or what should be, architecture or do they only see pictures and drawings? Except for didactic exhibitions, such as those promoted by MoMA with the Circulating Exhibitions, how to conjugate the laymen's and the specialist's understanding, the common architect's and the critic's or historian's? Who is the real target of an architecture exhibition?

These questions – why do we exhibit? what for? to whom do we exhibit? – confront the curator with the world, since he [curator] is responsible for what is shown and for the way it is done. Do we exhibit because the theme is important or

because the curator is important? What is important: what is exhibited or what the curator thinks about the theme? The exhibition speaks of the curator or of its theme? When the material is selected, an interpretative option is evidenced (Drexler v. Portoghesi): there is a curator who is building a work – the exhibition – whose clear theme may be very important, but a segmented theme is a political and aesthetic option that identifies whom? The curator, the promoting institution or the object of the exhibition?

Each on the exhibitions mentioned here adopted a precise standpoint, because each one was historically built, as the world of exhibitions was constructed. The first ones were indeed natural continuity of the artist's production; the institutional ones were done as ideological constructions which supported the formation of a society's cultural understanding, or at least part of a society – commonly, the part who had access to culture. The ones who responded to specific interests were almost always intended to use, in a more or less commercial manner, a plastic subproduct, notably drawings and similar representations, whose purpose was more financial than cultural.

What are, then, the challenges faced by the curators? What type of material was researched, what was chosen, and what was showcased at the exhibition? A curator is or may be considered a spe-

cialist on the exhibited theme? Their selections of the material forming the documental base for the exhibition theme is pertinent because they know everything about the theme or because they have a special sensibility that leads them to find determinant pieces for the narrative production they are assembling?

Are we, the public, conscious of all this conceptual and political, educational and propagandist, individual and public plot, when we are at an architecture exhibition? Evidently not. We are mere consumers of a cultural product which, historically determined, has followed us for over 100 years and to which we are resiliently accustomed, adapting ourselves without thinking much about what is presented to us. We see a Peter Eisenman exhibition and think we are seeing Peter Eisenman, but we forget the curator's mediation. On the other hand, we see a scenographically exhibition assembled by Bia Lessa, and what is being presented is almost indifferent. Exhibitions (of architecture or of anything else) are orchestrated and precisely thought-out actions, professional in almost every case, intended to produce very specific effects. We cannot think of them as mere naïve cultural events. They force us – or should force us – to take sides, because they have sides, always historically positioned.

Today, before an irrational conservative fury (yet politically directed, which is not irrational at all),

our focus on exhibitions should go back to being self-conscious, i.e., we should pay attention to what they propose, what they induce, teach or provoke. Conservative anger sheds light on a crucial cultural experience of modern society. Exhibitions were born with this society, they are consubstantial part of the patterns and needs of modern society, they are libertarian or educational aspects, commercial or promotional, enriching or depleting, which accompany us in cultural formation. Being conscious of their historical, political and cultural dimensions fulfills us as citizens.

For these reasons and aware of the great importance of architecture exhibitions and all they entail (artists, curators, institutions, and public) for the knowledge and the perception of architecture, we invited an important group of curators to expose what they think about the subject on this special issue of *arq.urb.*

