



Architecture Exhibitions in Brazil, a brief history

Agnaldo Farias*

Translation: Escritório de Tradução (USJT)

*Professor at FAUUSP. He is currently curator of the Oscar Niemeyer Museum in Curitiba. Was General Curator of the Tomie Ohtake Institute (2000/2012) and today is Curatorial Counselor of the same institution. Was also curator of MAMRJ (1998/2000) and curator of Temporary Exhibitions at MACUSP (1990/1992). Was Curator of the Brazilian Pavilion of 54 a. Venice Biennale (2011), General Curator of the 29th. Bienal de São Paulo (2010), of the Brazilian Representation of the 25th. (1992) and Deputy of the 23rd. (1996).

Abstract

The history of architectural exhibitions in Brazil is permeated by erratic movements, generally divergent initiatives, most of them endowed with initial originality and vigor, but which rapidly decline. Few survive, and when this happens, they are characterized by non-linearity, both with regard to the irregular periodicity of exposures and the oscillation of the results obtained. An unstable picture, you see, to some extent in tune with what also happens with art exhibitions, even though these are much more consolidated. The following text gives a concise account of the recent history of these exhibitions, beginning with a description of the failed project of an architecture curator at the “Museu de Arte de São Paulo” (São Paulo Art Museum) in the early 1990s. He goes on to mention an exceptional initiative that took place in Rio de Janeiro in the second half of the same decade, until arriving at the Tomie Ohtake Institute and Museu da Casa Brasileira, both São Paulo institutions responsible for two consistent programs, although sensitive to the circumstances of a fragile system. There is also an edition of the São Paulo Architecture Biennial, whose success contrasts and reinforces a history marked by outrages.

Keywords: Exhibitions. Mounts. Museografia.

In 1992, Fábio Magalhães, curator at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) and former Art History professor at the Mackenzie University, wanted to expand the exhibition program of the institution which was designed by Lina Bo Bardi. He invited Anne Marie Sumner, architect and professor, to design an architecture exhibition program in the best art museum in Brazil, that like other museums in São Paulo and other capitals, did not have architectural shows. It was about time for that to happen since architectural exhibitions have the undeniable merit of introducing emerging propositions, reviewing historical productions through varied re-readings and, in Brazil, fertilizing the interventions in a dramatically vast country both in its history and geography.

Sumner, a meticulous researcher and professor, ran an active office and was the author of an intriguing research about Minimalism and Architecture relations. She thought the most impactful way would be to display Peter Eisenman's artwork.

Eisenman's exhibition was quite daring for a country where modern thought had a great influence and "postmodern" was generically seen as bad. This is how Robert Venturi, Ricardo Bofill, Richard Meier and Zaha Hadid were seen, Eisenman's paradigm contrasted with a corbusieran matrix, and his work is still popular nowadays.

Anne Marie Sumner traveled to New York to meet Eisenman and she said he reacted to the invitation skeptically. Yet, she was motivated by her fellow curator and her fearless willingness to work on a project of highest standards, and also because there was nothing to lose but the time dedicated to design the exhibition. So, she accepted the challenge. Sumner was dedicated to arrange with the museum the necessary conditions to carry out the project and in the strikingly impeccable exhibition "Malhas, Escalas, Rastros e Dobras na Obra de Peter Eisenman / Griddings, Scalings, Tracings and Foldings in the work of Peter Eisenman", opened in 1993 (Figure 1), with exquisite

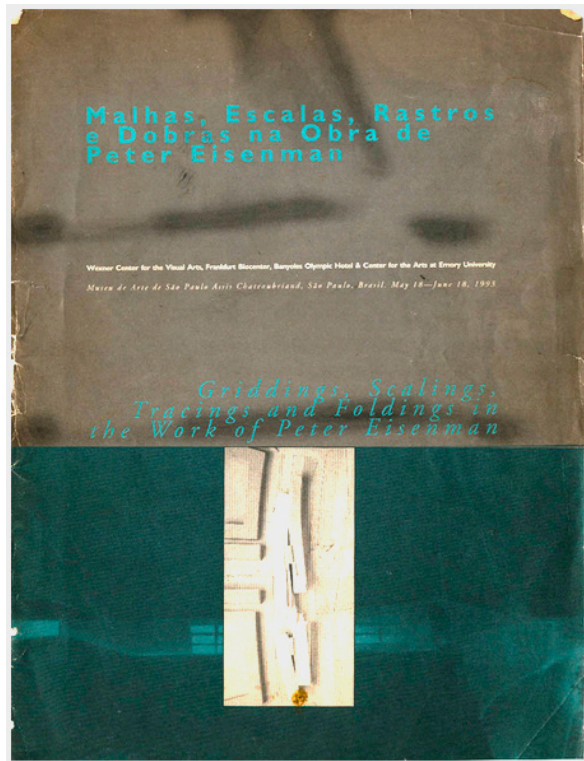


Figure 1. Exhibition catalog (cover): “Malhas, Escalas, Rastros e Dobras na Obra de Peter Eisenman / Griddings, Scalings, Tracings and Foldings in the work of Peter Eisenman”. Source: Sumner (1993).

scale models, photos and urban sheets. There was a catalog with the same title containing the exhibited material as well as critical texts by Otilia Arantes and Sophia Silva Telles, a profound interview with the historian Nicolau Sevcenko, and the article “The End of Classicism: The End of the Beginning, The End of the End” by Eisenman.

The exhibition had a great impact on the architectural scene, which was not used to this kind of architecture exhibitions in general, especially with such quality. Eisenman’s presence was well-celebrated and his lecture had a large attendance, therefore, MASP’s exhibition was off to a great start. But, when Sumner was talking to Eisenman, to her surprise, he confessed that the exhibition had surpassed all his expectations and that he had never seen an exhibition of such quality (i.e. so complete and expensive). A complete irony, since the system of the Brazilian museums are in a permanent instability. Architecture is far from being important to the artistic production because it is preferably addressed to a professional category. So how could a program of architecture exhibitions of such magnitude like Sumner’s be implemented? It would not be possible, and it still is not.

But the result of this story could not be more ironic: the “Malhas, Escalas...” exhibition was the first and last architecture program at MASP.

The peculiarity of the failure of what would have been the first architecture exhibition program of a

great Brazilian museum is going to be used to introduce the complexity of our panorama. In order to do so, it is necessary to reflect on some of its causes, starting from the lack of debates on the emerging national and international architectural production and what was taught in schools, in general the uncritical transfer of modern notions. Curiously, this was the side effect of our successful modernity: Niemeyer in the front: the catatonic reverence of masters such as Sérgio Bernardes, Oscar Niemeyer, Affonso Reidy, Vilanova Artigas, Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Lina Bo Bardi, João Filgueiras, among others. We tried to honor these great contributions, when actually we were scattering it. In this provincial context, for the most established architects and the institutions that were associated with them, international architecture shows (with examples of recent production) were almost needless, besides they were expensive and far from attracting the attention and resources of arts sponsors.

Anne Marie Sumner graduated in the late 1970s. Like her peers, she was marked by the importance architecture had in culture, especially after the postmodernism outbreak, a plethoric notion for good and evil. Her generation witnessed the creation of the Venice Biennale and architecture museums, copious publications everywhere, urban interventions in Paris, London, Buenos Aires, etc. Not to mention the booming editorial field. In fact, it should be noted that in 1960 “The Architecture of the City” by Rossi and “Complex-

ity and Contradiction in Architecture” by Venturi were published in 1995.

The young architects struggled against the lack of progress in the architectural environment but without much success. And in the eagerness to engage in this debate, it was predictable that the result of situations such as the one described, typical of a confused environment, where the conjuncture, the objective conditions, the goals to be achieved, and the strategies were not properly evaluated. In case of MASP’s exhibition, the curator can also hold responsibility.

Despite the failure of Eisenman’s show, the Center for Architecture, Urbanism, and Infrastructure (CAUI) was inaugurated in the late 1990s. Luiz Paulo Conde was the only mayor architect ever elected in the city Rio and he was responsible for the CAUI foundation. Under Jorge Czajkowski’s command, a consistent program of exhibitions, publications and debates was set up, along with expectations from architect community. By this time, things were more refined and observant, and at the same time with relative capacity to attract the laymen who were beginning to understand the importance of architecture and urbanism in their lives. CAUI opened in 1997 and operated until 2000, after that it worked only for public institutions whose main objective was not have an objective at all.

In São Paulo, the largest city in Brazil and the second largest in Latin America, the panorama is

still outdated, even after upgrading the Brazilian House Museum (MCB) and the opening of Instituto Tomie Ohtake (ITO), both in 2000. During this period, it is also important to highlight Vitruvius website and magazine in the editorial industry, due to the effort of Abilio Guerra critic and curator, and the publishers Martins Fontes and Cosac & Naify (due to the financial crisis in Brazil, Cosac & Naify shut down in 2016). The X Architecture Biennale in São Paulo was held in 2013 and curated by Guilherme Wisnik. Since this event is a topical action and does not have a plan to be implemented throughout the years, it should be analyzed separately.

MCB and ITO could implement a reasonable program of architecture exhibitions within rational budgets that were distributed moderately by the marketing directors of sponsoring companies, especially ITO, that unlike the state-owned MCB, is a private non-profit institution. The sponsors – as marketing directors – are skeptical about architecture shows because they are not as attractive as the arts. The tiring negotiations between curators and people responsible for the company’s budget transformed Brazilian museums and cultural centers into a great struggle. Now, a vast majority are open counters that offer exhibitions of all kinds, not only architecture or more or less interesting exhibitions, but exhibitions that are already paid. With that, what is shown is not necessarily what it wants to show but what it has to show. The “how to show” is even less discussed, because the exhi-

hibition is often accompanied by someone responsible for the production guidelines.

The better, the more equipped and the more prestigious the institution, the greater the chance of receiving a quality proposal, and in line with its own program. In view of this passive situation, it should be asked what is the role of museums as a center of the production of knowledge? Moreover, what is the curator's job?

As a curator at the Instituto Tomie Ohtake (ITO), an institution dedicated to the exhibition of contemporary art and its modern references, during its first ten years, and now as a curatorial counselor, I have experienced – together with the architect Ricardo Ohtake – the hardship to implement an architectural program consistent with the scope of the institution that was not only focused on receiving externally produced shows. With a lot of effort, we held exhibitions by Vilanova Artigas, Oscar Niemeyer, Alvaro Siza, SANAA, Steven Holl, and others nearly once a year. In 2014, we also offered an annual architecture award, the AkzoNobel Architecture Award.

Currently, the main objective of the institution is to display exhibitions dedicated to Brazilian architecture. The first show curated by Abilio Guerra used significant Brazilian modernist works. Through photos, he evaluated varied boards and models, the history of the adaptations operated by the Brazilian architecture in the European ar-

chitectural paradigm, and the way it considered our climate, geography and history. The second show was curated by Julio Katinsky, who was interested in working on our living spaces. So he approached the Guinle Park and the Pedregulho Housing Complex, both in Rio de Janeiro, and the the Conjunto Nacional in São Paulo, and other fundamental productions. The third show, by André Corrêa do Lago, was about the relation between architecture and photography, something that was seen differently by another curator, Nelson Brissac Peixoto, who invited three other major photographers to show “what the city hides”.

The number of photographs on both Corrêa do Lago and Brissac Peixoto exhibitions should be understood as an intelligent way of getting around the lack of resources by articulating relevant issues with cheap media. We are in 2017 and we are still facing the task of building and establishing basic aspects of the architectural environment, including the production of exhibitions.

São Paulo, 2017.

References:

SUMNER, Anne Marie (org.). **Malhas, Escalas, Rastros e Dobras na Obra de Peter Eisenman / Griddings, Scalings, Tracings and Foldings in the work of Peter Eisenman.** São Paulo: MASP, 1993. Catálogo de exposição. ■