



The curatorship of architectural exhibitions

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Abstract

The article presents in a conceptual and poetic way the most sensitive issues that can be determinant to face the challenge of the design and execution of an exhibition in general, and of architecture, in particular. The political issue presents itself as the main theme, but this does not leave aside other significant aspects, such as the theme, the meaning of what is exposed and how it is exposed. The plastic issues and the technical problems are also assumed as essentials for an exhibition to reach the audience for which it is intended.

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I would like to start reflecting on the subject of this article precisely because of the questions already raised by the proponents as a provocation: why do we expose? Who do we expose? Do we exhibit for the theme or for us, to us? Is the selection of material (including the theme) an interpretation (free) or the result of an analysis (restricted, rational)?

These are very good questions that should command every impulse in building an exhibition. Moreover, I always recommend to my colleagues and collaborators in the architecture studio to reflect on the reason for each project in the agenda right at the beginning of the work. “Foundational” questions always help us not to get lost in the winding path of an architectural project. The project, although free, has enormous commitments to reality: social and economic commitments, ethical, and aesthetic.

Designing or building an exhibition is a strongly political act. What matters is the audience we

want to reach, the “message” that we want to convey, either informative or inquiring. It is also important the little stone that we are putting in this gigantic construction of a nation that we want just, free and happy (why not say?). An exhibition should always be a libel against mediocrity.

—In my point of view, this whole preamble is important because, without being politically situated (in the richest and deepest sense of the term political as an exercise of public life), we will fail to present exhibition that add nothing to people’s lives. Exhibitions without resonance in the intellect and in the will of poetry that inhabits every human being.

With the belief then that every exhibition (project) is a political act, a manifestation of ideas in a sociocultural framework, we already start from a firm base of support. In our case, Brazil, one always has to ask, “What are we? What do we want to be? “

The signs of slavery – long lasting – left deep consequences that are strong barriers in our hard way in building a more just country. These signs are felt in every act, gesture or manifestation in the most varied Brazilian social and cultural contexts. The architecture of cities – true maps of social inequality – are strong mirrors of this heritage. A kind of deaf warfare (sometimes not so much) dwells in our present lives, more than a hundred years after the emancipation.

It is worth remembering Darcy Ribeiro:

Brazil was the last country in the world to end slavery. Brazil's current ruling class, made up of children and grandchildren of former slave owners, have the same attitude of vile contempt towards the black people. For the ruling class, the black slave, the liner, and the mulatto were merely manpower. For their descendants, free black people, mulatto and poor white represent paltry, laziness, ignorance, and innate criminality. All are blamed for their own misfortune, explained as characteristics of race and not as a result of centuries of slavery and exclusion ...

These questions here are a kind of a warning, and they make sense when we return to the initial questions: exhibitions for what, for whom? They are questions that, if well reflected, bring in themselves part of the answers and the paths to be followed in our projects. Returning to our

theme, we may ask ourselves: after all, what is it, what is an architecture exhibition for? Why do we continually practice architecture in the history of mankind? What moves us constantly in the quest for a better habitat? What can you say about architecture?

Well, in architecture, architecture is everything! Drawings, photographs, physical and electronic models, texts and even movies often almost represent the three-dimensional object of multiple physical and psychological relations of architecture. But no, they cannot. Nothing replaces the experience and experience of space in time, that is, the individual enjoyment that makes architecture “a garment that dresses us.” And even in collectivity, architecture is perceived differently by each individual as a psychic / bodily experience captured by the five senses. As architect Steven Holl has put it, “architecture is the container of existence.”

Physical space changes behaviors, changes moods, comforts, upsets, rejoices or saddens. This all happens in a range of relationships and reactions that escape the intellectual tools of other disciplines and interpretive languages unrelated to the very experimentation of space in time. Even the phenomenological approaches, which come closest in the narratives of the experience of space, do not replace the very experience of architecture.



Figure 1. General view of the exhibition “Brasil Arquitetura: a tradição do novo” (“Brazil Architecture: the tradition of the new”), Tokio Art Museum, 2009. Projected by Brasil Arquitetura architectural office.

In saying all this, I may sound an unbeliever in the communicative efficiency of an architecture exhibition. Nevertheless, what I want to do is reinforce the difference of the nature of this discipline, if we can so name it. In addition, it increases the challenge of representing architecture, no doubt. To speak of architecture in an exhibition is like speaking of a boat out of water, out of its foundation, of its function in its habitat of action, which is the clash with the waters. Just like the boat out of water, an architectural exhibition already comes out at the start with some disadvantage. (Figure 1)

It is necessary then to find in the expository language its own forms of communication with the spectator that is in passing, a time of visitation that ends, like the patience that ends. (Figure 2) In an exhibition, the so-called insights—stimuli that move us without knowing exactly where they come from—are fundamental. In our case – architecture – we need to find forms of communication that carry us to the maximum for the experience of the “sailing boat”, without caricatures and extreme juggling, of course. Hence, poetics is a great partner.

An architectural exhibition is, above all, an exhibition, even if it contains its own architecture. To assume this truth can be a liberating light in the creation and accomplishment of expographies and exhibition spaces. From there all complementary disciplines and languages of communication are valid. (Figure 3) We can have good help from literature, cinema (documentary or not),



Figure 2. Detail of the exhibition of furniture produced by the office and by the Baraúna woodworks-office. Exhibition “Brasil Arquitetura: a tradição do novo” (“Brazil Architecture: the tradition of the new”), Tokio Art Museum, 2009. Projected by Brasil Arquitetura architectural office.

photography, scenography (including lighting), music (including noise), and use the most varied media, techniques and supports in the construction of our “History”, that is, of the exhibition.

The magic of the originals (sketches, notes, old photos, models of study, etc.) that generated and are testimonies of an important architectural project, undoubtedly can, in an exhibition, surpass the documentary sense – that is very important. Certain documents and objects, when exposed in a certain way, related in a new context other than that of their origin, can illuminate the course of the spectator creating a new reality, the so-called expository reality. Something new. (Figure 4)

Reinforcement: It is important to always keep in



Figure 3. Detail of the central panel. Exhibition “Brasil Arquitetura: a tradição do novo” (“Brazil Architecture: the tradition of the new”), Tokio Art Museum, 2009. Projected by Brasil Arquitetura architectural office.



Figure 4. Overview of the exhibition “À Flor da Pele”, from Bob Wolfenson’s photographs, Praça das Artes, São Paulo, 2015. Projected by Marcelo Carvalho Ferraz.

mind that in an exhibition of architecture we are dealing with the theme outside its context of origin. The possibility of touching some objects, such as simply sitting in a chair – which is not always possible in an exhibition for a variety of reasons – can add much to the experience. (Figure 5) But it is always good to know that an exhibition is not a book, a movie, a class, a religious service or a show, nor should it “want” to be, even though it may have a little bit of it.



Figure 5. Detail of the “Girafa” chair (Lina Bo Bardi, Marcelo Ferraz and Marcelo Suzuki), in the center of the hall. Exhibition “Brasil Arquitetura: a tradição do novo” (“Brazil Architecture: the tradition of the new”), Tokio Art Museum, 2009. Projected by Brasil Arquitetura architectural office.

The expository grammar is its own and, to complicate it even more, it varies according to the topics covered and the approaches that one wants to construct. In addition, this grammar is further defined by the human and material resources available. Thus, each story told by an exhibition is unique. Two people have two different approaches to the same theme. Therefore, exhibitions are interpretive cuts, unique individual creations, even if performed by a group of curators.

An exhibition has independence, its own light and, in many cases, more charms than many of the themes or projects presented in it. It is not necessary to mimic or want to “go by” to navigate in these murky and troubled waters of architecture.

So we come back to ground zero from nothing is allowed and everything is allowed? Sort of. The maxim “every case is a case” still counts. That is, resources and circumstances define and assist in the “drawing” of an exhibition, giving tips, opening trails and paths.

But always without jeopardizing the protagonism of the theme, which should be the source to radiate all the expographic solutions in the construction of the story that will be told. As in every creation (and to make an exhibition is to create), the measure is arbitrary, it is the unmeasured, which can work very well, but can also be a great disaster.

Here are some reminders: an exhibition is an exhibition and should try to speak its language, pure or of Babel; an exhibition is always a political gesture.

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