



Exhibited Thoughts of Architecture

Anna Rosellini

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ABSTRACT:

In recent decades, architecture exhibitions have become the subject of a specific study, as corroborated by the international diffusion of conferences and publications dedicated to this theme. Several essays discuss the relationship between architecture on display and publics, and the need to adapt the specific language of the discipline to support processes of presentation of architecture in its innumerable declinations. The essay originates from these inquiries, with the aim to stimulate wide-ranging reflections on the importance of architecture exhibitions in the general historical-artistic and social framework, allowing us to identify some possible forms that architecture display has taken over time, as well as to frame the architecture exhibition as a relevant event in the definition of possible architectural histories, and to interpret it as a tool capable of disseminating design practice and research.

Negli ultimi decenni, le mostre di architettura sono diventate oggetto di uno studio specifico, come confermato dalla diffusione internazionale di conferenze e pubblicazioni dedicate a questo tema. Diversi saggi discutono la relazione tra l'architettura esposta e i pubblici, e la necessità di adattare il linguaggio specifico della disciplina per sostenere processi di presentazione dell'architettura nelle sue innumerevoli declinazioni. Il saggio nasce da queste ricerche, con l'obiettivo di stimolare ampie riflessioni sull'importanza delle mostre di architettura nel generale quadro storico-artistico e sociale, consentendoci di individuare alcune possibili forme che il display dell'architettura ha assunto nel tempo, nonché di inquadrare la mostra di architettura come un evento rilevante nella definizione di possibili storie architettoniche, e di interpretarla come uno strumento capace di diffondere pratiche di progettazione e ricerca.

Opening Picture:

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Anna Rosellini

OCS, Umr AUSser 3329, ENSA Paris-Est, Université Gustave Eiffel; Department of the Arts, University of Bologna.



The issue *Exhibited Thought of Architecture* focuses on the architecture exhibitions and on the idea of the exhibition as an essential opportunity to present the fundamentals of the project of architecture and their cultural, social, political, and economic outcomes.

Architects, artists, critics, and curators have produced an extensive corpus of architecture exhibitions. This corpus shows the multifaceted roles played by architecture exhibitions. They function as manifestos in specific cases, capable of redefining the foundations of the architecture project. Additionally, they contribute to expanding the investigation around the concept of space; offer places of discussion and production of experimental projects; convey new ideas of city, landscape, and countryside; expose, to the publics, the cultural principles of the architecture project; challenge traditional display formats with immersive and multidisciplinary experiences; and reflect over related issues, such as environmental concerns, circular economy, and social engagement.

Given the complexity of the subject, the issue resorts to the use of a scientific approach that combines historical analysis of the different aspects of architecture exhibitions with an investigation of the context of their production and the development of specific case studies.

The issue proposes an interdisciplinary approach that integrates an analysis of the curatorial and design aspects with an examination of the cultural, socio-economic, and political context in which the exhibitions were organized. The evolution of exhibitions, organized by architects, collectives and curators will be the

object of consideration. The role of specific institutions – such as Centre Pompidou Paris, and CIVA Brussels – will also be considered, without neglecting the economic aspects, the collateral cultural investments, and forms of fruition, enhancement, and circulation of the architectural heritage through traditional, analogical, and digital tools.

The various essays serve multiple purposes. They provide an overview of architecture exhibitions organized from the 19th century to today; focus on experimental exhibitions which present theoretical reflections contributing to defining significant design criteria; identify the narrative methods used to present architectural content to the publics; highlight critical aspects useful for framing the position of architecture exhibitions regarding current issues such as digital turn, sustainability, and human rights.

In recent decades, architecture exhibitions have become the subject of a specific study, as corroborated by the international diffusion of conferences and publications dedicated to this theme. Several essays discuss the relationship between architecture on display and audiences, and the need to adapt the specific language of the discipline to support processes of presentation of architecture in its innumerable declinations.¹ The studies have highlighted an evident yet essential problem: exhibiting architecture implies the translation of works, which by their nature cannot be contained in the exhibition space, into forms, images, installations, and devices capable of being framed in limited environments such as exhibition halls.² Furthermore, recent studies

have focused on the importance of architecture exhibitions in the broader historical-artistic and social framework, allowing us to identify some possible forms that architecture display has taken over time,³ as well as to frame the architecture exhibition as a relevant event in the definition of possible architectural histories,⁴ and to interpret it as a tool capable of disseminating design practice and research.⁵ In the bibliography on the subject, the wide spectrum of exhibition events in which architecture was the protagonist has been discussed: from installations created for international exhibitions to exhibitions showcasing architectural drawings to public presentations of competition results, to exhibitions organized by individuals architecture associations, as well as initiatives organized to celebrate the completion of a building, up to recurring events such as Biennials and Triennials.⁶ Each of these phenomena is associated with the different curatorial and display practices necessary to communicate, document, and represent architecture in abstract or interpreted forms – from drawings and models to videos, photographs and immersive installations.⁷ In some research, these display practices are also discussed in relation to those adopted for art exhibitions.⁸

The expansion of studies on architecture exhibitions has certainly been fostered by the growing diffusion, starting from the 1970s, of public and private places, museums, research centers, and institutions dedicated to the presentation, exhibition, and dissemination of architectural heritage.⁹ The essays published so far mainly discuss the installations of a single architect

or architectural collective.¹⁰ Others offer a historical-critical reading of specific case studies or single national or international events,¹¹ or retrace a detailed picture of the exhibitions organized in a well-defined historical period.¹²

The issue *Exhibited Thought of Architecture* originates from these research efforts, but with the aim to underline specific methodological tools of analysis in this important chapter of the architectural discipline, and to investigate the role of exhibitions in the construction, redefinition and presentation of architecture, in its theoretical, cultural, social and political foundations. For this purpose, the organizational, planning, and curatorial strategies, as well as the cultural, social and political implications of architecture exhibitions are analyzed to also identify their potential contemporary developments. To achieve these objectives, it appears essential to consider both international-oriented events, such as the recent editions of the Venice Biennial and the Lisbon Triennial, and those specific and alternative experiences, sometimes of a markedly experimental nature, which have not yet found the right place in the history of architecture exhibitions, but which could prove to be fundamental in describing the peculiarities of architecture exhibitions, even beyond the main cultural poles, already commonly considered by historiography.

The choice to narrow down the research focus to the specific case studies is instrumental to the need to better outline the evident specificities of the architectural debate. However, maintaining the corres-

pendence with what has been happening in the international context will remain crucial, especially in order to identify useful criteria to define the exhibition of architecture as a device to redefine the theoretical and cultural foundations of the discipline, as well as a functional tool for the enhancement, communication, and dissemination of architectural heritage.

Within the chronological period considered by *Exhibited Thought of Architecture*, the architectural discipline and its protagonists have pursued different objectives. These range from the simple explanatory presentation of architectural works (especially through drawings and models) within sector-specific contexts, passing through exhibitions whose installations projected, around the visitor, a new idea of architectural space, up to, in recent years, the presentation of themes and concepts so innovative as to compel architecture to seek support within other forms of art to express those lines of research that traditional means of display had proved inadequate to represent. Therefore, in the history the issue retraces, the Louis-Auguste Boileau's exhibitions and their media coverage, the Piano, Rogers and Hulten layout for the Centre Pompidou, the shows at *ar/ge kunst*, and the exhibitions of OFFICE at the Venice Biennial can coexist, given the common basis, or the radical foundation, that binds together these experiences of exhibiting architecture.

It should also be emphasized how the architectural discipline and its presentation have been conditioned, over time, by the evolution of two 'categories': that of the exhi-

bition promoters (architects, professionals, curators, etc.), and that of those who benefit from their work (publics, institutions, etc.). Both of these categories, in their broadest and most diverse meaning, are treated through Éric Lapiere's experience as chief curator of the fifth Lisbon Triennial of architecture in 2019; the role of exhibitions and participatory interventions in DAAR's practice; Luca Galofaro's work as architect and curator of the exhibition *Architettura a regola d'arte*, opened at the MAXXI in 2023; Socks Studio's use of digital technologies for the presentation of architecture; the architecture exhibition as proposed at the CIVA in Brussels; and the show *Taking the Country's Side*, curated by Sébastien Marot. These different experiences constitute fundamental issues of analysis for evaluating the significance, especially of the design and social aspects, of the events considered. In fact, they have been conceived as occasions not only for the encounter between various architectural actors for the definition of certain cultural orientations, but also as moments for presenting crucial issues to increasingly diverse audiences. These issues were challenging the very foundations of the architectural discipline, encompassing the evolution of the concepts of space and structure, the diffusion of new materials, the image of cities and landscapes, the role of history in the definition of architecture, the relationships between art and architecture, as well as the design of the contemporary habitat, the impact of social, cultural and political contexts on the architecture project, the role of social and environmental sustainability, the coexistence between different species, and hu-

man rights. All these factors have contributed, and are still contributing, to the rethinking of the architectural discipline, as architecture exhibitions continue to document.

From this point of view, in the vast set of exhibitions, the section “Dossier” of *Exhibited Thought of Architecture* focuses, for specific in-depth studies, on those exhibitions that have been specially designed as crucial events in the formulation of innovative theoretical programs and in the definition of project criteria bound to profoundly influence the development of the architecture discipline.

Louis-Auguste Boileau is one of the leading figures in the architectural debate in 19th-century France for his theoretical positions, his experimental projects and partly also for his realizations, which were always characterized by a quest to find geometries for space suitable for new structural systems. Known for his critical stances and for the theoretical conflict that arose with one of the most famous theorists of the 19th century, Viollet-le-Duc, Boileau has been the object of scrupulous historical research, conducted over the years by Laurent Koetz in archives and libraries and through the direct study of his works, the results of which have been translated into essays that finally offer the possibility of a documented and complete picture of both the practical and theoretical endeavors of one of the leading French architects. It was precisely his activity as a polemicist and popularizer of a new architecture, associated with the experimentation of the most recent industrial materials, that had led Boileau, as demonstrated by Koetz, to

participate in various public events with drawings of his works, not infrequently devised as a demonstrative function to exhibit a theoretical thought and to demonstrate the quality of the spaces of the new structures, also through selected perspective shots outlined to make visible the contrast between the grandiosity of the voids and the gracility of the supports made possible by the new industrial materials. The author also traces the strategies of the official press, enters into the mechanisms devised by Boileau to make the most of the public exhibition system of the Salons and to engage the public in order to involve them in the new dimension of experimental space. Through the analysis of reviews written by protagonists of French architecture at the time, including Anatole De Baudot, Koetz delves into the merits of Boileau’s research for a new representation of architecture. Against the backdrop of the various exhibitions discussed and presented in the essay with philological precision, we see the major theoretical themes of the debate on the new architecture, the principles being defined between stylistic aspirations and technical experimentation, and we witness the emergence of a true representation strategy designed to persuade the new audience, facilitated in no small part by the construction of surprising models. Koetz’s research demonstrates Boileau’s ability to create his own ‘system’ of presentation of his work aimed at catching the eye of the exhibition public, and which appears to have been one of Boileau’s decisive contributions to the emergence of the contemporary era architect.

The myth of an architecture that was

appropriate to the second age of the machine, as outlined by Reyner Banham, managed to find its concrete and unexpected celebration in the city that knew in its streets the beginning of the student revolt of May 1968. Among those same streets, a few years later, a machine of metal components, ducts and grandiose voids was already standing, whose very features shunned every possible idea, even the most avant-garde, of architecture. That machine, devised thanks to a fruitful collaboration between London engineers and architects, between Ove Arup & Partners and Piano+Rogers Architects, landed in the center of Paris, wanted by Pompidou next to another metal machine that was nevertheless being dismantled at the same time – Baltard’s Halles. The so-called Centre Pompidou has recently become the subject of a series of publications by Boris Hamzeian, all based on original and scrupulous research in the various archives, supported by interviews with the various protagonists. These publications are by now indispensable in order to understand, in every detail, the origins and meanings of that extraordinary machine for a kind of art exhibition that, at least in its original intentions, should have been an alternative to the usual criteria of museography. Hamzeian’s essay traces all the phases of the definition of the exhibition system, the conflicts between the exhibition vision of Pontus Hulten – the first artistic director of the Centre Pompidou –, eager to shelter art in a series of new “Cabannes” to be set up in the grandiose “Lofts”, and the demonstrative expectations of the designers team, not at all inclined to renounce the expression of the

potential of their extraordinary and pervasive technological devices. Thanks to the reconstruction proposed by Hamzeian, today we can look at the history of the construction of the Centre Pompidou with different eyes; it can even appear to us in the guise of a monument erected to a heroic epoch – that, precisely, of the second age of the machine declaimed by Banham. The freedoms offered by the machine, as it was glimpsed by the London neo-avant-gardes and from which the invention for the center dedicated to art wanted by Pompidou was born, constitute the precious inheritance passed on to us by the Paris monument which must not be dispersed in this phase of critical revision of every design principle. It is also true that precisely in the phase in which Pompidou’s machine is about to be “renewed” or “restored”, it would require a radical interlocutory attitude, therefore an attitude similar to the one that generated it in order to verify whether it could become – and despite the fact that it was the ultimate and accomplished expression of a super-technology – the foundation of a new life cycle where art too would no longer be the official one that invaded its Lofts compartmentalized in conventional rooms.

An art gallery located in the north of Italy, in Bolzano, the *ar/ge kunst*, managed to become a place of experimentation for the genre of architecture exhibition. Consisting of only two overlapping rooms, set up by architect Christophe Mair Fingerle – as Roberto Gigliotti recalls in his essay that is fundamental for understanding the role of this gallery in the history of architecture since its foundation in 1985 –, *ar/ge*

kunst has hosted exhibitions by internationally renowned architects, critics and protagonists of what had been radical architecture, as well as by young people engaged in the search for an alternative contemporary architectural discipline. The analysis of the activities carried out by ar/ge kunst became for Gigliotti the occasion to develop a theoretical framework of the different ways of exhibiting architecture leading him, with support from statements by Colomina or Borasi, to indicate in architectural exhibitions made from specific spaces a sort of laboratory for the enunciation of more general problems concerning the discipline itself. After all, the history of the 20th century is studded with architecture exhibitions whose displays have imposed themselves as experimental experiences for the staging of a certain vision of architecture and have therefore distinguished themselves from being a device for showing the public constructed or designed works, as if the exhibition were an extension of the pages of an architecture magazine. In the reconstruction of the main architecture exhibitions hosted by ar/ge kunst since its foundation, Gigliotti emphasizes some pivotal passages, when the space itself takes on a new significant role for the exhibition design and ceases to be a neutral entity hosting extraneous objects (in this perspective, he recalls the importance of the 1996 PAUHOF installation, designed to enhance the gallery space). The latent risk in the new trajectory of research on space – and thus in the understanding and staging of the intrinsic qualities of each place – lies in the enclosure of the architectural project in its favorite entity – space – which takes on

absolute and abstract forms, like an academic exercise. But the conclusion of Gigliotti's reasoning with the description of Matilde Cassani's installation, *It's just not cricket* from 2018, dispels all doubts by presenting a model in which the essence of architecture – rather than its physical consistency as an object – is a space with devices that require the active participation of the public, as if architecture were therefore nothing more than a stage designed for life.

One of the leading contemporary architectural practices operating not only in Europe, OFFICE, is brought to the reader's attention by Christophe Van Gerrewey. Within OFFICE's important production, art and architecture exhibition installations constitute a decisive chapter. The strategy adopted by OFFICE varies from case to case. Sometimes OFFICE proposes sequences of identical rooms, where the works are displayed, in order to verify a concept pursued in the design of houses or residential buildings. In the beginnings of OFFICE's activity, it is worth mentioning its two first installations in the world's top event dedicated to architecture, the Venice Biennale, in 2008 at the Belgian Pavilion – 1907... *After The Party* –, and in 2010 in the Virgin Garden – *Garden Pavilion* (7 rooms, 21 perspectives). In both cases OFFICE interrogated the existing rooms in the two constructions to enhance the concept of space through an intervention that in the pavilion aimed at the constitution of a high fence with which to correct the orientation with respect to the geometry of the garden, and then to introduce the visitors into the pavilion rooms left empty, covered with a mantle of confetti and with

sparse garden chairs; in the Virgin Garden, on the other hand, it was limited to the addition of an all-white metal and cloth canopy, which formed a portico at once solemn and graceful, reconstituting the unity of the discourses in images set up in each room with Bas Brincen's photographs and OFFICE's collages. The key to interpretation proposed by Van Gerrewey in presenting the installation in the Belgian Pavilion to analyze the complex cultural relations existing between OFFICE's work and the pioneering work of Koolhaas/OMA, is entrusted to the reconstruction of what might appear a detail to a non-specialist of the debate on the theory of architecture in the transition between the 20th and 21st centuries: "confetti". That frivolous carnival game, which OFFICE re-enacts in the installation, is in fact the significant fragment of a theoretical system that OMA had developed on the competition project for the Parc de la Villette in Paris, and from which a new attitude in the organization of the elements on a grand scale had emerged. The confetti sprinkled over the entire surface of the pavilion, including the garden segment enclosed by OFFICE's high metal wall, and the metal chairs of the Parisian model of the Luxembourg garden, scattered at random, bring a new cultural and social perspective to OMA's theoretical system, under the banner of the free appropriation by visitors of the concept of space – thus an attitude, that of OFFICE, very similar to that which had induced the Archizoom to leave the Ambiente Grigio they had set up at the MoMA in New York in 1972 empty in order to offer the space to the free imagination of visitors. During his visit to the pavilion,

Van Gerrewey himself had taken a handful of confetti and thrown it at one of his friends, as proof of the success of an installation that was meant to incite participation and be festive. The invisible appeal of OFFICE was to appropriate the beauty of space and encourage play. Van Gerrewey's sophisticated interpretation, as an active protagonist of those times, follows the paths of literature; it springs from the sheet of paper from which the confetti is made; it calls writing into question; it traverses Victor Hugo's famous opposition between printed words and stone devices; and it ends up glimpsing in OFFICE's installation the death of an era supplanted by the unbearable lightness of the digital age.

In both cases, 1907... *After The Party and Garden Pavilion* (7 rooms, 21 perspectives), as Van Gerrewey points out, OFFICE had succeeded in staging a vision that allowed a glimpse of an architecture so subtle as to appear evanescent, yet at the same time so secure and present by its very geometry, as to create places that suggested what is the subject of the discipline itself: People Meet in Architecture (this was the title of the theme of the 2010 Biennial).

Endnotes

- 1 Bois, Hollier, Krauss 1999; Kossmann, Mulder, den Oudsen 2012; Zardini 2012.
- 2 Di Carlo 2010; Arrhenius, et al. 2014; Chan, Pelkonen, Tasman 2015.
- 3 Polano 1988; Greenberg, Ferguson, Nairne, 1996; Bonnemaïson, Eisenbach 2009; Pelkonen 2018; Dellapiana, Failla, Varallo 2020.
- 4 Cohen 1999.
- 5 Colomina 1996; Sparke, Sudjic 2008; Patteeuw, Vandeputte, Van Gerrewey 2012; Patteeuw, Szacka 2018.
- 6 Chan 2010; Levy, Menking 2012; Figuerido 2018; Lopez Serfozo 2018.
- 7 Urbach 2012; Gigliotti 2015; Watson 2021.
- 8 AA.VV. 2015; Castellani, Gallo, Strukelj, Zanella 2018; Massa, Pontelli 2019.
- 9 Szambien 1988; Cohen 2009; Borasi, Ferré, Garutti, Kelley, Zardini 2019.
- 10 AA.VV. 2005; Lanzarini 2003.
- 11 Pansera 1978; Rocca 1999; Volpiano 1999; Levy, Menking 2010; Szacka 2016; Dellapiana 2020.
- 12 Cimoli 2007; Catalano 2013; Cecchini, Dragoni 2016; Toffanello 2017.

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