Editorial
Architectural Exhibitions: Virtually There

Architectural exhibitions are inherently virtual experiences. Although similar to art exhibitions, they differ in a fundamental way: except in the rare instance of recreated spaces or in the presence of full-scale models, architectural exhibitions represent absent three-dimensional objects while art exhibitions show objects that, by being exhibited, are confirmed as art. At an architectural exhibition, the public usually confronts an array of drawings, sketches, photographs, models, and sometimes furniture whose relationships to one another, not always immediately clear, set up a challenge to absorb and understand.

With respect to graphic media, while some viewers can read floor plans, many drawings appear inscrutable and analogous to conceptual art with words, lines, indexical movements, and so forth, readable only to technical specialists or learned literati. Drawings, as well as photographs, also introduce the problem of understanding scale and determining the relative size of buildings and spaces. That dilemma in turn leads to the problem of haptic experience: we feel buildings in the physical world as totalities with our bodies and senses, but the representations of architecture transform that physical experience in ways we can hardly define or control. Three-dimensional models of buildings pose special issues: are they simulacra or objects with an independent existence that at best recall a building by association? In either case, models are often the most pleasing and informative entities for the public visiting architectural exhibitions. They provide a view of a whole or an ensemble that is precluded from our actual experience. Not surprisingly, the public relates best to these three-dimensional objects and clusters around them at exhibitions. The problematic role of ancillary objects applies to furniture, fragments, and anything else lumped together as decorative arts. Removed from their contexts in buildings, what they communicate as freestanding forms is questionable.

The problems of creating exhibitions are legion: long lead times, ever-mounting financial costs, and political interventions from sponsoring institutions. Outside agencies or local politics can also interfere, as seen in Turin where the anticipation of the Olympics blocked the realization of a major exhibition of baroque architecture. Architectural exhibitions face the trend in museums to provide blockbuster entertainment and eye candy. While curators and their bosses may seek the big hits and cultural spotlight, those moments occur not merely from good concepts but from tapping into the deep issues affecting or challenging society and culture. Those moments are infrequent and demand rare prescience. Scholarly experts who often provide the intellectual content and direction to these efforts take the risk that, after years of work, a museum’s curator gets all the credit for an exhibition and is listed as editor of the accompanying catalog though he or she played little (or no) role aside from contributing a perfunctory introduction. This is one indication of the increasing gap between curator and scholar. As curators become less involved with scholarship and more involved with institutional bureaucracy, fund raising, and public relations, their viewpoints and skills differ from those of scholars, as they must answer to numerous constituencies. As experts, scholars bring unique and specialized knowledge to the museum and gallery setting, but they need to move beyond their myopic focus, become aware of the pressure curators face, and assist them in expanding the public’s understanding of architecture. Scholars should push curators to move toward the highest common denominator and not condescendingly view the public merely as consumers of entertainment.

While some current exhibitions attempt in their installations to overcome the difficulties of communicating with the public, new strategies will be helpful. Foremost consideration should be given to the creation of interactive environments where the viewer can engage architecture more fully. Moving beyond the limitations and isolating effect of desk-size computer monitors, large-scale projections and holographic images should become increasingly available. Aural experience—even sensory input, including smell and controlled digital lighting effects—will vitalize exhibitions in the future. Even with more conventional media, much can be done to inform the public. Museums and galleries should get beyond the fetishizing of architectural drawings and provide more extensive labeling that actually explains to the uninitiated just what they are viewing.

When architectural exhibitions are successful they transcend their challenges by creating a gestalt that the fragmented viewing of a building here or a drawing there cannot achieve. The benefit is thus similar to the optimal results of an art exhibition: insight, delight, and even inspiration both

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for the public and experts. Exhibitions can connect us to a larger world beyond our habitual spheres and make us think in new ways. Occasionally, an architectural exhibition can be epochal: the International Style show of 1932 and its repudiation implicit in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts exhibition of 1975 are two examples, both from New York’s Museum of Modern Art. In addition, exhibition catalogs and increasingly other forms of electronic media, including the CD-ROM and DVD, provide essential documentation for the ongoing pursuit of scholarship. As scholars we need to press for such documentation to transcend the status of coffee-table books. The pages of catalogs become the testimony of debates that may or may not be launched in the ephemeral moment of an exhibition. The mechanical devices of the catalogue raisonné, the exhibition checklist, and the index (all too often omitted) remain crucial tools for our work and the propagation of knowledge. In particular, the checklist is a valuable device. A listing of all the objects in an exhibition along with their thumbnail images can easily be included in catalogs as essays do not necessarily address these objects, whose public exposure is fleeting. After going to so much trouble to assemble the materials in an exhibition, they should always be included in an exhibition catalog.

The totality of an exhibition catalog can represent significant scholarly work involving years of research and writing, and the tendency to ignore it in considerations of tenure promotions in universities is regrettable. If a scholar can confirm their involvement in original research, the publication should count and should be peer reviewed; a scholarly catalog is a variation of the conventional book that tradition deems as proof of academic merit.

The reviewers of architectural exhibitions confront all the challenges of the medium in assessing an event’s successes, failures, and critical benefits. Reviewers generally may consider two generic categories of architectural exhibitions: contemporary topics and subjects drawn with a historical perspective. From my viewpoint as exhibition review editor of JSAH, I see many venues for the coverage of contemporary architecture’s exhibitions, but very few scrutinize in depth exhibitions of historical content that may not attract blockbuster audiences or provide a topical thrill. For that reason, my orientation has been to emphasize covering exhibitions with historical foci—we are after all a society of architectural historians—and to allow contemporary subjects to remain topics of architectural journalism. Criteria for commissioning reviews include an effort to introduce a range of subjects that is balanced chronologically, geographically, and thematically. International exhibitions receive particular attention.

Online publication will increasingly offer possibilities that extend beyond merely announcing exhibitions, providing a place for reviews that appear while an exhibition is up, discussion of objects on display, revision or expansion of catalog entries, and even storage of digital ephemera related to exhibitions. The future emergence of JSAH online will allow these exciting opportunities. While it is sometimes difficult to find independent and insightful reviewers to cover demanding exhibitions, they do emerge and generously donate their time, energy, and insights to our publications. To them, our reviewers, past, present, and future, I give profound thanks.

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