hold on architectural training and state and local authority commissions through to the Thatcherite ax in 1979. Casson as a historical figure is interesting because he showed there were other paths to be taken. This may have made for a more “tasteful” modernism than that which prevailed latterly, but it was nevertheless part of a dominant design idiom. Moreover, as British architects seem ever more keen to become Royal Academicians, as the academy itself increasingly courts the profession, and the RIBA seems to be becoming less powerful, not least as patron of architecture exhibitions, Casson might be said to have been something of a trailblazer.

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Energy: Oil and Post-Oil Architecture and Grids
MAXXI Museum, Rome
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Architecture exhibitions are of two kinds: those that celebrate an epoch—or a practitioner—that has already left its mark, and those that give credibility to emerging movements. Curator Pippo Ciorra attempted to do both, situating the narrative in Energy: Oil and Post-Oil Architecture and Grids between a poetic reflection on the “Petroleum Interval” that is coming to an end, and a foreshadowing of a new era of energy production and distribution.1 He achieved this through a cogent organizational strategy, dividing the exhibition into two parallel sections: “Stories” recounted the past, while “Visions” presented projects for the future.

The content of the exhibition was not really about “energy” but rather about our cultural fixation with all that energy implies. Energy is the magic input that will bring Italy out of its postwar slump to realize its own American dream. And rethinking energy today, in the aftermath of decades of this American dream, will magically bring us back from the brink of ecological disaster.

In the exhibition, energy was equated with mobility. No reference could be found to the 50 percent of the country’s energy that is consumed by its buildings; it was all about cars and speed. The unstated presence of the Futurists hung heavy in the air, especially in the “Stories” section, as if Marinetti and the Marshall Plan were joining forces to fuel an engine for rapid growth, snaking across the Italian countryside. But whereas in the United States, highway subsidies paralleled low-interest homeowners’ mortgages, spurring an exodus to the suburbs, in Italy postwar growth was divided between the architecture of the city and that of the road.

The “road architecture” that was the focus of the “Stories” section, curated by Margherita Guccione and Esmeralda Valente, offered architects of the early sixties a long-awaited respite from the monumentalism of the Fascist ventennio and melancholy pseudovernacular postwar neorealism. It built on the strong rationalist foundation formed, despite political obstacles, during the first half of the twentieth century, but infused it with an almost baroque dynamism.

But the architecture of Italy’s economic boom was not just about inventing a new formal language. Building types emerged without precedents: the service station, the roadside motel, and the “autogrill” (Italy’s roadside restaurant chain). Looking today at Angelo Bianchetti’s 1959 renderings of the Fiorenzuola, the first autogrill to bridge its highway, or his 1958 Villoresi project, which was more a sign than a building, we can sense the giddy excitement with which these must have been greeted (Figure 1).

This architecture refused to acknowledge scarcity and emerged out of no discernible context. A photo of an Agip station in Libya was identical to the Italian models displayed. Regionalism played no role in this world of cheap fuel. It rejected the weight of history, a discourse that would be sidelined until its return to the academies in the 1970s. It rejected the frugality that informed much neorealist architecture of the fifties, such as the INA-Casa housing developments, although some of those architects were also represented in Energy (for example, Mario Ridolfi with his entry for the 1969 Motel Agip competition). The architecture of the road left the city at breakneck speed like a Fiat, oblivious to the source of its power or the impact of its exhaust trail. Looking back at this work from the perspective of the postpetroleum era (well, the cusp of it at least), one has the sensation of witnessing an adolescent fantasy of the future, a world of speeding vehicles and weightless structures. A Jetsons world. It is tempting to smile condescendingly, appreciating the design as we might a classic Vespa, while recognizing how dated it has become.

Figure 1 “F” model city gas station from the 1950s (lender Walter Berselli; photo Flaminia Nobili, courtesy Fondazione MAXXI).
And then the exhibition turned to the future, where another fantasy unfolded, one also based more in rhetoric and image than in urban analysis and research. In the “Visions” section, “seven architects hailing from five different continents have designed the space of the service stations of the coming decades and tell how the cities will be influenced by the new energy devices.”

The brief here clearly set its own limitations; it was about new forms for a changing energy landscape, but it was not ready to examine from an ecological or urban point of view the implications of the end of the petroleum age. The projects displayed picked up on compelling formal images and from them built elaborate visions of the landscape of the future, sometimes utopian, sometimes dystopian. The Tasmanian firm Terroir’s beautiful sectional models of a different kind of freeway, or Modus Architects’ “Heads up Highway” are both, in the end, highways, a fact that assumes individuals will continue driving fast from place to place, stopping to fill up with some kind of fuel at “service stations” of the future. Sou Fujimoto Architects’ “Energy Forest” is a beautiful sculpture but has little to do with energy harvesting and much to do with the icons of the age of green, trees without roots, wind turbines without foundations surrounded by a comic book sky of flying machines.

Lifethings of Seoul, Korea, proposed a thoughtful discourse on, and solution for, food energy and transportation, namely, a building that would reduce food miles by bringing food production closer to the city in theory and rationing people’s access to energy, as governments do with other dangerous substances such as pharmaceuticals. But the building that demonstrated this, replacing the existing gas stations of the old economy, looked a lot like the adolescent fantasies of the future seen in the historical section of the exhibition. Only now the future is “green,” literally, with shrubs on roofs and fish in ponds next to parking lots. Strangely absent was any reference to architects such as Paolo Soleri or Buckminster Fuller who posed alternatives to our fossil-fuel growth model long before it was fashionable.

Sandwiched between the science fiction visions of the future from the past, and the future as envisioned from the present, Energy presented a compelling selection of photographs, the “frames” that represent our current energy economy. In this small exhibition curated by Francesca Fabiani, three photographers examined present-day energy production, distribution, and consumption. Their images conveyed a gripping realism from which the sugar-coated architectural fantasies sought to escape. There we realized that the fantasies inspired by cheap fossil fuel and those inspired by the prospects of clean renewable energy are not all that different.

Finally, one cannot visit an exhibition at the MAXXI Museum dedicated to energy without noting that few buildings of the early twenty-first century have so totally ignored energy performance as Zaha Hadid’s Roman project.

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Related Publication

Notes

Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture
Netherlands Architecture Institute, Rotterdam
6 September 2012–6 January 2013
Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany
23 February–11 August 2013
National Museum, Oslo, Norway
18 October 2013–26 January 2014

Since the end of the 1960s, Louis Isadore Kahn’s reputation as one of the most important architects of the twentieth century has grown. Kahn’s concrete-and-brick buildings, with their enigmatically monumental appearance, can be experienced only through costly trips to the United States, South Asia, and Israel. The Kahn retrospective (in Weil am Rhein at the time of writing and exhibited previously in Rotterdam) was only the second opportunity since an exhibition at the ETH in Zurich in 1969 for those on the European continent to take a look at his work.

Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture, organized by the Vitra Design Museum, the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam, showed a new generation of the European architectural community the work of the architect in an exhibition that was enormously rich in material. The concept of the exhibition was developed by the Swiss architectural theorist Stanislaus von Moos and the Vitra curator Jochen Eidsenbrand. They aimed for a picture of Kahn in the context of the latest scholarly research, concentrating on Kahn’s biography and his discerning, philosophically inspired understanding of nature. The exhibition was conceptualized as a thematically structured multimedia show.

Frank Gehry’s Vitra Design Museum (1989), a sculptural conglomerate of nested geometric bodies that at times tilt into one another, would seem at first fully opposed to the archaic strength of Kahn’s architectural language. Inside the exhibition rooms, the strain between Gehry’s deconstructive staging and Kahn’s almost always right-angled forms nonetheless largely resolved itself. They impinged upon each other occasionally, as when in the upper story Gehry’s asymetrically angled skylights met the iconic monumentality of Kahn’s parliament and administrative buildings for Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Ahmedabad, India.

The exhibition summarized Kahn’s work under seven main headings, the first focusing on biography, followed by the thematic categories of city, science, landscape, house, eternal presence, and community. These categories link Kahn’s buildings to a notion of universal concepts. The curators thereby put Kahn’s philosophically inspired self-image, formulated in 1961 in