Exhibitions

Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Chicago
18 September 2013–14 December 2013

The object is no longer conceived as an isolated entity... but rather as an integral part of the larger natural and sociocultural environment.¹

In May 1972, Gordon Matta-Clark installed an industrial container between two galleries in New York’s SoHo district. In it, he created an interior divided into three spaces and consisting of scavenged wood and discarded doors. An accompanying Super 8 mm film documented the happening: Matta-Clark and several other artists and visitors occupied the labyrinth of small rooms, which served as a multipurpose staging ground for unscripted activities and performances. Meanwhile on Fifty-Third Street, the Museum of Modern Art staged an exhibition curated by Emilio Ambasz titled Italy: The New Domestic Landscape. Nearly 200 manufactured objects such as chairs, tables, and light fixtures (categorized as “conformist,” “reformist,” or “contestatory”) were placed outdoors in the sculpture garden, while twelve commissioned “environments” were situated in the galleries.²

As a curator in the museum’s Department of Architecture and Design, Ambasz was undoubtedly aware of Matta-Clark’s work, as he was of the trend among some American schools of architecture toward reframing the discipline within the expanded field of “environmental design.” As such, the simultaneity of these two events was not accidental, but rather indicative of the shifting fields of inquiry in both art and architectural production. Matta-Clark was engaged in a practice that straddled minimalism, conceptual art, and site-specific installations. Since much of his work was ephemeral, documentary photographs, preparatory documents, and videos served as material residues and ersatz artifacts. Ambasz brought to American audiences the stars of the Italian architecture and design scene. The objects, on the one hand, and the environments, on the other (all designed and manufactured in Italy), illustrated a similar straddling: a heterogeneous and often divergent body of work that nonetheless shared similar interests in the subjective experience of the viewer in both questioning and celebrating the discreet and unique object, in impermanence over permanence, in a critique of advanced industrialized societies, and most importantly, in domestic space as the genus locus of social and political resistance.

Environments and Counter Environments. “Italy: The New Domestic Landscape,” MoMA, 1972, curated by Peter Lang, Luca Molinari, and Mark Wasiuta at the Graham Foundation, revisited the groundbreaking MoMA exhibition through a sequence of installations that revealed for the first time via archival material the “backstage” production that ultimately resulted in the public staging of full-scale prototypes in New York.³ These documents, which included preliminary studies, drawings, collages, models, and photographs, were organized by the participating architects according to each of the submissions: the “house environments” of Gae Aulenti, Ettore Sottsass, and Joe Colombo; the arguably more provocative “mobile environments” of Alberto Rossellini, Mario Bellini—all of which were, in turn, categorized by Ambasz as examples of “Design as Postulation”; Gaetano Pesce’s “Project for an Underground City in the Age of Great Contaminations” as an example of “Design as Commentary”; and work by Ugo la Pietra, Archizoom, Superstudio, and Gruppo Strum categorized as “Counterdesign as Postulation.”⁴ All the material was, in turn, accompanied by explanatory texts that served two primary functions: to reintroduce the projects and their architects to a contemporary audience and to situate the work within a larger historical project.

In addition, and in what was perhaps a calculated move, the Graham exhibition began not with documentation of one of the commissions but rather with a submission by 9999 titled “Vegetable Garden House”—the winning entry of a parallel “Competition for Young Designers” also instigated by Ambasz. Rather than proposing their own environment, the Florentine group presented material that documented the yearlong design and installation of a greenhouse as living space. Comprising what the architects referred to as an “ecosurvival device,” the project’s main concern was to focus Ambasz’s curatorial intent on the ecological aspects of the word “environment.”

As for the commissioned participants, Ambasz’s main criterion for choosing them was the extent to which they were dedicated to exploring, in his judgment, the role of domestic design within a broader framework of political and social
engagement. The choice at the Graham to highlight the origins of the speculative environments (and to omit the mass-produced objects that formed the other major component of the 1972 exhibition) is a testament to the current and persistent interest in theorizing the sphere of domesticity. An exhibition about an exhibition, the Graham show was, at its core, referential, analytical, and as such, not a restaging in either content or layout. The interesting exception to this rule was the revival of the films from the original show. As at MoMA, they were used to accompany the design work—not meant as stand-alone pieces but as performative supplements enacting potential in situ scenarios for the environments.

One could argue that a drawback to this meta-staging was that it presented a largely two-dimensional reexamination of the original show. While there were some models on view, the films remained the primary access to the spatial qualities of the built examples. And yet, the success of this exhibition lay precisely in the absence of the objects: the message then and in 2013 was that objects were less important in and of themselves and that the semantics of the term “environment” befit a broader design mandate. Environments require users, not spectators, and only then can architecture mobilize action.

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Notes
2. According to curator Peter Lang, Ambasz exerted significant influence on the design of the environments and even asked the participants to revise their designs two or three times. My thanks to Peter Lang for this insight.
3. The Graham Foundation iteration was one in a series of traveling exhibitions originating in Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation in the Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery before traveling to the Swiss Architecture Museum, Basel; the Dôme Hub Barcelona; and the Arkitekturmuseet, Stockholm. None of the versions were identical in either content or layout and varied according to availability of material and space considerations.
4. Enzo Mari was the only previously involved architect who was not represented at the Graham. Given his radical antiobject, anticonsumerist stance, he was invited by Ambasz “not to design an environment.” In Ambasz, Italy, 262.

Centre Canadien d’Architecture/
Canadian Centre for Architecture
Montreal, Quebec
26 November 2013–20 April 2014

Two plywood partitions snaked across the back room of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA)’s exhibition on Casablanca and Chandigarh during the fall and winter of 2013–14. The mounted reproductions of planning grids first displayed at CIAM (Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne) IX, Aix-en-Provence (1953), exemplified an innovative approach to exhibition design by the Tokyo-based firm Atelier Bow-Wow and cocurators Tom Avermaete and Maristella Casciato. Openness to multiple modes of display—photographs, models, original drawings, film, information graphics, and facsimiles—conveyed a desire to engage with the complexities of modern planning during a period of decolonization.

The exhibition was organized around three themes: exploring, planning, and designing the civic fabric. The projects for Casablanca, a planned development of the ancient Moroccan city’s periphery, and Chandigarh, a new capital city for the post-partition state of Punjab, India, mirrored each other along a vertical axis centered on the “Transnationalism”–themed room, with both projects converging in the back room with its undulating partitions. There, the focus was on the historical moment when their respective grids were displayed at CIAM IX, which led to intense debates and contributed to the subsequent dissolution of CIAM. This rhetorical move encouraged visitors to compare and contrast the planning techniques led by Michel Écochard (Casablanca) and Le Corbusier (Chandigarh). There, and in other sections of the exhibit, similar quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis such as survey, sketching, and photographs were displayed for both projects. Despite these efforts at clear comparability, the question of how similar or different these two developments were remains an open one. The gallery texts and archival material suggested less easily quantifiable tendencies toward sociology (at Casablanca) and poetics (at Chandigarh) that complicated and enriched the exhibition’s objectives.

The growing interest in vernacular and everyday practices drove disagreements at CIAM IX, where human science-influenced grids were presented in opposition to the Chandigarh grid. The Habitat du Grand Nombre grid by the GAMMA Group (Groupe des Architectes Modernes Marocains), led by Écochard and Georges Candilis, deployed data on building typologies and spatial practices to argue for learning from the bidonville, or Moroccan informal settlement. In contrast, the Chandigarh grid focused on geographic analysis and diagrams of density and the organization of the residential center, thus exemplifying Le Corbusier’s proposed use of the grid as a planning tool at CIAM VI, Bridgewater (1947), in which four functions (living, working, circulation, and cultivation of body and spirit) served as a standardized system for developing universal solutions for the modern city.

The challenges of delineating a paradigm shift in modern planning were evident not only in the mirrored galleries for the two cities but also in the central room that visitors could traverse several times. The exhibition was anchored by this “Transnationalism”–themed room, which detailed the harnessing of modern planning theories in the name of technical assistance to the developing world. A round conference table, laid with facsimiles of planning documents, invited visitors to scrutinize the methods, objectives, and discourses of development and modernism that directly affected citizens. In one example, a series of leaflets on the “Village Problem” published by the Ford Foundation for the Indian Ministry of Food and Agriculture