The Albertina has one of the most significant holdings of architectural drawings in the world, and the drawings are seldom exhibited outside Vienna. There were a few years during which, under the influence of postmodernism, public interest in history and heritage grew, and a series of large exhibitions devoted to the history of architectural representation took place—examples in the German-speaking world include Architektenzeichnungen 1479–1979 (Berlin, 1979), The Architectural Drawing: From Baroque Ideal Plan to Axonometric (Munich, 1987), Bernini to Piranesi: Roman Architectural Drawings of the Baroque (Stuttgart, 1993), and Architectural Models of the Renaissance: The Harmony of Building from Alberti to Michelangelo (Venice, 1993; Berlin, 1994). But architectural drawings are now most often seen in small one- or two-room exhibitions.

Thus it is all the more to be welcomed that Sergei Tchoban has, with the Tchoban Foundation, created a space specifically for changing exhibitions with a focused format. The small but spectacular exhibition building offers, with its discreet lighting and human-scale spaces, an intimate atmosphere fostering direct dialogue with the drawings on display. While digital formats are becoming indispensable to architectural historical research and dissemination, it is only through such exhibitions that we are introduced to the hand of the artist. These exhibitions are rare pearls, and they must remain so for reasons of conservation and finance. The opportunities they offer for direct encounters with the drawings are precious gifts.

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Related Publication
Christian Benedik, ed., Meisterzeichnungen der Architektur aus der Albertina/Architectural Master Drawings from the Albertina (Berlin: Tchoban Foundation, 2016), 167 pp., illus. €30 ISBN 9783944890053

Yona Friedman: Architecture mobile = Architecture vivante
Cité de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine, Paris
11 May–6 November 2016

The French Hungarian architect Yona Friedman has suffered an odd historiographical fate. He is known, to quote Archigram’s Peter Cook, as a “Daddy of the megastructure” and a leader of an international network of experimental urbanists in the 1960s and 1970s. He is acknowledged as a pioneer in the theorization of key design concepts such as mobility, adaptability, and improvisation, and he is lauded as an influential progenitor of participatory design. But these plaudits appear mostly in footnotes, interviews, blog posts, and passing asides. Friedman remains an “architect’s architect,” receiving scant attention from historians. The recent retrospective Yona Friedman: Architecture mobile = Architecture vivante, held at the Cité de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine in Paris, attempted to rectify this state of affairs and introduce Friedman to a broader audience.

Curated by Caroline Cros, the show glossed Friedman’s biography and his major projects. Filling one large gallery, it was arranged roughly thematically, with walls dedicated, respectively, to architectural works on paper, models, and artwork made by Friedman in the 1960s to decorate his home and studio. The final wall displayed a series of philosophical comic strips that Friedman created in the 1990s. The exhibition was augmented by interviews with Friedman and documentation of his career accessible through television monitors equipped with stools and headphones. Books by Friedman were available to visitors, and his Instagram account was live streamed, creating a casual environment that encouraged sustained engagement.

A central aim of the exhibition was to argue for a wider acknowledgment of Friedman’s place in the canon. The first vitrine encountered upon entering displayed ephemera tying Friedman to well-known figures such as Le Corbusier and Moshe Safdie. Implicitly challenging the Anglo-American narrative constructed by Reyner Banham, the show’s wall texts quoted praise from stalwarts of the Parisian avant-garde, such as Pierre Restany, who featured Friedman alongside the likes of Duchamp and Warhol in his famed “red book” of criticism (on display), and Michel Ragon, who declared Friedman’s highly influential manifesto Architecture mobile (1958), from which the exhibition took its name, to be as consequential as CIAM’s Athens Charter.

In his manifesto, Friedman advocates letting the people who use spaces design them. He calls on architects to cede aesthetic authority, redefining urbanists as technical facilitators of self-planning. Friedman, who has built little, explores this egalitarian reversal of roles between users and designers in more than six decades’ worth of publications, drawings, and models, a sampling of which was on display at the Cité de l’Architecture. This commitment was most clearly apparent in the wall of models, which was the highlight of the exhibition. More than forty rarely seen models, drawn from the holdings of the French National Foundation for Contemporary Art, allowed viewers to trace the development of Friedman’s thinking. They showed a continuous search for ways to facilitate improvisation and for ever-simpler building techniques, reducing the need for expertise. Their quick and loose quality conveyed Friedman’s open-ended participatory process. The diversity of the chosen models effectively demonstrated that mobile architecture is not a monolithic project and not—as is often presumed—synonymous with Friedman’s best-known project, Ville Spatial (Spatial City). Rather, for Friedman, Spatial City is just one among many possible ways to democratize planning.

That said, Spatial City is by far the most influential of Friedman’s projects, something the show acknowledged by opening with an array of striking collages, photo-montages, and drawings visualizing spatial cities, which are essentially massive space frames hovering above cities or bodies of water. They are meant to be utilitarian frameworks that contain and support self-planned environments, freeing people from the structural concerns that keep them dependent on professionals. Whether taken literally as design proposals or viewed as evocative illustrations of Friedman’s philosophy, these images marked the postwar architectural imagination and galvanized the birth of megastructuralism.

An interesting aspect of Friedman’s work is his early call for preserving traditional built environments, as could be seen in the exhibition in a presentation drawing for the 1971 Pompidou Center competition proposing a space frame above Les Halles, sparing the historic market whose subsequent demolition was so controversial. By turning urban sprawl vertical, Friedman aimed to shield cities from modernism’s appetite for tabula rasa, a point he
makes visually by using postcards of iconic buildings in his Spatial City collages. In the postcard pieces displayed, one could see how Friedman’s image-making process follows the layering, modular logic of his urban planning theories.

Cros’s decision to allot as much space to Friedman’s philosophical comics as to his models and architectural imagery was astute. In doing so, she emphasized the centrality of the medium in Friedman’s oeuvre since the mid-1970s. Friedman’s comics—called manuals—are rendered in simple line drawings and block-letter captions. They aim to convey complex data with utmost simplicity, to maximum didactic effect. For example, in the show, interspersed among Friedman’s models, single-page manuals illustrated how the structures could be made in real scale or explained the theories of urbanism represented by the models. Friedman argues that for participatory design to work, people need to become architecturally literate. He devised his illustrated manuals as a way of teaching the principles of self-planning to children and laypersons, and they evolved into his primary mode of communicating ideas. Some of his early manuals, recently reprinted as artist’s books, were displayed in vitrines. More accessible were Friedman’s “slideshows,” animated offspring of his manuals, shown on several monitors. Composed of consecutive still images with captions, these short “drawing-movies” addressed topics as varied as the future of cities, sociology, and physics, evincing Friedman’s constitutional interdisciplinarity.

The choice to foreground Friedman’s narrative art corresponded with the exhibition’s framing of his work through the lens of art. The wall texts repeatedly gave his works an art historical pedigree, evoking Giorgio de Chirico’s painted cityscapes and linking Friedman’s use of photomontage to surrealism, for instance. Cros projected a recent video art homage to Friedman on a large screen, and its sound filled the space. The emphasis on Art with a capital A was indicative of what seemed to be the exhibition’s broader goal—laying the groundwork for a “unified theory” of Friedman the postwar architectural avant-gardist and Friedman the contemporary art star. In the late 1990s, Friedman was “discovered” by the contemporary art world; since then, he has been showing new work at high-profile art venues, including the Venice Biennale, Documenta, and Art Basel. Cros presented this activity as central to Friedman’s importance.

This emphasis ignored what Friedman insists are the qualitative differences in how different visual media communicate information. For Friedman, his narrative art is
necessarily private because, “as opposed to pictographic art, [it] is not precise enough: different people could ‘read’ it differently.”\(^3\) Clarity of message is an article of faith for Friedman; it is only when making work for his own pleasure that he allows imagery to be ambiguous. In these surroundings of video art and charming drawings of unicorns, it was difficult to see that Friedman’s life’s work has been dedicated to banishing the romantic figure of the artist-creator from the realm of architecture.

The distorting effect of the elision between Friedman’s art and architectural practices is most clearly seen in the way his politics were eclipsed in the show. For Friedman, mobility means choice, but it also means survival, and architecture is the domain of interpersonal responsibility (in contrast, he calls his narrative art “intrapersonal”). In the exhibition it was easy to miss the fact that Friedman made far more manuals teaching shelter construction and principles of agriculture for UNESCO than drawings of mythological scenes.

At the opening of the exhibition Friedman sat surrounded by press. Characteristically focused on the future rather than on his retrospective, he pointed to printouts that he had brought with him, sketches for low-cost housing solutions for Syrian refugees. The project is a collaboration with architecture students in Beirut who discovered Friedman on Instagram. According to Friedman, they are figuring out the logistics of producing large-scale metal rings at minimal cost. When linked, these rings form structural skeletons for rooms that can be assembled by people who have no prior knowledge of construction. Unlike the standard tents found in refugee camps, these modules can be configured and clustered to suit the users’ needs (Figure 1). A few floors below Architecture mobile = Architecture vivante, shown simultaneously, was a topical exhibition titled Habiter le campement, on refugee encampments, mobile homes, and other temporary forms of shelter. The cost of unifying Friedman’s private art and public architecture was that no one going from one exhibition to the other would have recognized their connection.

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Notes
2. Jordi Colomer, X-Ville, video installation (2015), 23 min.

Playboy Architecture, 1953–1979
Elmhurst Art Museum, Elmhurst, Illinois
7 May–28 August 2016

Playboy Architecture, 1953–1979 was an intriguing exhibition that displayed the results of a research project by Beatriz Cololina, her students at the Princeton University School of Architecture, and other collaborators. The project started when Cololina was researching some of the most prominent architects of the 1960s and was surprised to realize how many of them had work for Playboy Enterprises on their résumés. How could the author of books on architecture and its connections with sexuality and the media rest following up? The resulting project has found several outlets, including an exhibition at the Netherlands Architecture Institute Maastricht in 2013, a collection of essays in the architectural journal Volume in 2012, and this exhibition.\(^1\)

Although a museum in suburban Chicago might sound like an odd place for such an exhibition, there was a reason officials at the Elmhurst Art Museum thought that it made sense. The museum incorporates the 1952 McCormick House by Mies van der Rohe, and the aim of the exhibition was to examine the connection between Playboy and modern architects and designers like Mies.

The exhibition, curated by Cololina and Pep Aviles, was both intriguing and puzzling. That there was an important connection between modern design and Playboy founder Hugh Hefner, Playboy magazine, and other Playboy enterprises there is no doubt. Given the photos of Playboy bunnies cradled in Womb chairs by Eero Saarinen, designs for Playboy houses and apartments, and articles on prominent architects in Playboy as well as advertisements for Knoll International and other furniture companies, this connection is hard to miss—so hard, in fact, that it is difficult to explain how little attention it had been paid in the past.

In a highly insightful talk given on the occasion of the exhibition at Maastricht, Cololina presented a personal and idiosyncratic tour of the research project, obviously relishing the unexpected connections and bizarre conjonctions that resulted from the collision between the brash, irreverent upstart Hefner, with his empire of hedonistic pleasures, and the often humorless and narrowly prescriptive tastemakers of high art modern architecture.\(^2\) Displaying for the audience a spread in the July 1961 issue of Playboy showing some of modern architecture’s brightest lights posed with chairs they had designed, Cololina asked what in the world compelled these busy and very serious architects to appear in the pages of a magazine most famous for its nude centerfolds. Here, as elsewhere, Cololina seemed more interested in posing questions than in drawing conclusions. She did, however, draw one very large conclusion: that Playboy was more important than any other single agent in the dissemination of modern architecture. More influential than House & Garden or Life? Hard to imagine. Still, it is an interesting provocation.

Unfortunately, in the concrete three-dimensional form of the exhibition, minus the elliptical and humorous asides possible in a lecture, the strengths of the project were harder to discern. The Mies house, however much it might have seemed at first glance to be an ideal venue for this exhibition, turned out to present several problems. The extensive window walls led the exhibition’s designers, the architecture firm of Amunátegui Valdés, to place most of the objects on platforms in the centers of the rooms, resulting in tight clusters that, combined with the glare, made some objects difficult to see (Figure 1).

Moreover, although the Mies building might represent one kind of modernism favored by Hefner and Playboy in the 1950s, the materials in the exhibition actually seemed to suggest that Hefner and his associates were, from the beginning, less interested in Miesian minimalism than they were in more exuberant versions of modernism, such as Scandinavian furniture and the futuristic designs of Eero Saarinen and John Lautner. In addition, conspicuously missing from the exhibition was any serious