

61th SAH annual meeting April 2008/ Cincinnati

Worlds of Today: Architectural Innovations at International Expositions, 1958-2000 *The Atomic Exposition: Nationalism and Architectural Innovations at the 1958 Brussels International Exposition*

All too modern?

The pavilions of the Federal Republic of Germany, the USA and Italy at Expo 58

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Expo 58 was the first post-war international and universal world's fair. Some 150 pavilions were erected in an all-modern environment, situated at the outskirts of Brussels on a 200 hectare site, including the Heysel Plateau of the 1935 fair and the Parks of Ossegheem and Laecken.¹ The popular press reported with enthusiasm on the fair.² Expo 58 had presented a peaceful world, put an end to the reconstruction period and announced the welfare society in a new, festive enclave. But the architectural press was more critical of the fair's imagery. Notwithstanding the broad variety of often contradictory reactions, contemporary architectural critics in Belgium and abroad appeared to agree on the omnipresence of modern architecture and on the fact that the fair fostered a *rapprochement* between modern architecture and the public at large. The evaluations in the press, the built pavilions and the testimonies of architects contributing to the fair, reveal the then complex and divergent concepts on modern architecture.

¹ Early 1954, the architect-in-chief Paul Bonduelle had divided the site in five sections: the Belgian Section (59 pavilions), the Colonial Section (7 pavilions), the Commercial Section (31 pavilions), the Foreign Section (39 pavilions by 43 nations) and the Mundial Section with the new inter-governmental and older supra-national organizations (9 pavilions), each marked by a specific topography and regulations.

² The exhibition soon became a touchstone in the memory of the Belgians: "After Expo 58, everything had changed" was an ever-repeated refrain which hinted of the nation's hidden and visible modernization processes that had become apparent at the fair. From April 17 to October 19 1958 some 41.5 million visitors attended the fair, among 80% of all Belgians. An official opinion poll reported over 95% of the Belgian visitors being delighted with the event and its modern décor. In Belgium, the multiple celebrations on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Expo 58 in the year 2008 illustrate the remaining attention the exhibition is attributed with in the host country.

The organizers of Expo 58 – high officials mainly, but also politicians and influential industrialists – had opted for a moderate, yet distinct modernist imagery from the first initiatives on. Their choice for a contemporary idiom was consistent in their official print work, their own housing, their promotion for the modernization works in the capital, the construction of the décor of the fair and the imposed regulations in the Belgian, Colonial and Commercial Sections. Additionally, the organizers continuously urged the participants to strive for excellence and progress in their architecture projects.³ At the official presentation of the foreign projects, the architect-in-chief, Marcel Van Goethem,⁴ proudly announced that all participants had acknowledged the primordial role of architecture and that, to his relief, ‘every nation has expressed its national spirit in completely new techniques, without any uniformity.’ Hence, Van Goethem concluded, ‘the architecture of the Exhibition of 1958 will not be modern but twenty years ahead of its time.’⁵ This introduction implicitly revealed the organizers’ concept of contemporary architecture: the diversity of the Foreign Section was considered in opposition with what was perceived as “merely modern architecture,” a certain monotony resulting from a loyal implementation of the *international style* or of the then rising *corporate modernism*. In parallel with the development of the theme of Expo 58, *Balance sheet for a more human world*, the organizers sought to develop a concept of contemporary humanist architecture which merged a progressive, modernist appearance with traditional, classical values and references. Their tolerant but moderate approach to modern architecture, rooted in an academic criticism on the Modern Movement dating from the interwar period, was at the basis of the décor of Expo 58, which triggered both approving and dismissive reactions with the participating architects.

³ As is apparent from their official communications and from the establishing of the architecture challenge cup for foreign pavilions. This *Challenge d'Architecture de l'Exposition Universelle* or the *Trophée de l'Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles 1958* was a reward for foreign architects, not for the participants, as was the case with the other official prizes. See: *Trophée de l'exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles 1958*, undated preparatory note, 6 p. Brussels, Royal Archives, Fund *Expo 58*, file number 3.50.30.

⁴ Marcel Van Goethem (1910-1960) was the assistant of Paul Bonduelle (1877-December 1955) in the Technical Service of Expo 58. After Bonduelle’s decease, he was succeeded by Van Goethem, who carried out Bonduelle’s plans.

⁵ ‘chaque nation a manifesté son esprit national dans des techniques tout à fait nouvelles, sans qu’il y ait aucune uniformité’ and ‘l’architecture de l’Exposition de 1958 sera non pas moderne mais de vingt ans en avance sur son époque.’ Marcel Van Goethem, “Allocution prononcée par M. Van Goethem, architecte en chef,” *Journées de contact des commissaires généraux étrangers. Deuxième session. 21 et 22 Novembre 1956* (Brussels: Commissariat Général du Gouvernement, [1956]), 39 and 41. The final plans for the Foreign Section had to be transmitted to the Technical Service before June 20 1956. Unless qualified otherwise, all translations are by the author.

The present paper assesses the pavilions of the Foreign Section, more specifically those of the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany), of the USA and of Italy. The pavilions are considered illustrations of three possible stances the commissioners of pavilions could assume with respect to the “merely modern architecture” of the period. These positions are reflecting the participants’ visions on modernist architecture and can be categorized as (1) a consensual attitude, (2) a critical or reformist stance or (3) an inclination for avant-garde subversion.⁶ Given the then geographical spread of modern architecture, its increasing acceptance by the general public, the diplomatic background of a world’s fair and the imagery of Expo 58’s official promotion campaign, “building modern” at the fair had become a confirmation of the public’s presumptions and was hardly ever put into question. Nonetheless, the definition of modern architecture was openly questioned by all parties involved. Hence, the subversive approach was, from the perspective of the participants, almost excluded at Expo 58. Misha Black judged the situation: “The fact of being at Brussels with the door of invitation widely opened is a gesture of good will towards the world.”⁷ Yet, as the case of the Italian pavilion will show, some architects’ intentions were steered by pronounced antagonism.

Heir to the German modernist tradition: the FRG pavilion

To the young Federal Republic of Germany (FRG),⁸ Expo 58 was the first occasion to officially present, to a large audience, post-war, divided but appeased Germany. The pavilion’s concepts were developed mainly by members of the federated *Deutscher Werkbund*.⁹

⁶ The analysis is part of an ongoing Ph.D. study on the modern architecture of Expo 58, which focuses on the discussions among the different parties involved in the production of the built modern environment of Expo 58 (Due summer 2008). The attitudes presented above are based mainly on Umberto Eco’s analysis in “Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture,” in Geoffrey Broadbent, Richard Bunt and Charles Jencks, *Signs, Symbols and Architecture* (Chichester/New York/Brisbane/Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1980), 45-46. A more layered classification was proposed by Sarah Williams Goldhagen, who suggested a similar criterion with respect to the relation of architects with respect to the existing political and economic system – capitalism and democracy mainly. Sarah Williams Goldhagen, “Coda: Reconceptualizing the Modern,” in *Anxious Modernisms. Experimentation in postwar architectural culture*, eds. Sarah Williams Goldhagen and Réjean Legault (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 301-323.

⁷ Misha Black, “A display of character,” *Progress* 46, n. 259 (Summer 1958): 234.

⁸ The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) or *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, commonly named West Germany, was founded on May 23, 1949. Only on May 5, 1955, the FRG was declared fully sovereign. In 1954, at the time the invitations to Expo 58 were sent, Belgium had recognized only the FRG as an official state.

⁹ In contrast to its earlier incarnation, the post-war *Werkbund* had a federated structure which enabled the different local chapters to function rather independently. The Expo 58 project was explicitly attributed to the *Werkbund* in contemporary concept notes, whereas it is more plausible to ascribe the pavilion to the narrow circles around Hans Schwippert, then president, and not to the *Werkbund* as an entity. The organisation had

These architects and designers were experienced in the official representation of the nation in exhibitions and were noticed voices in the debate on the development of an official architecture fitting to the FRG. For Expo 58 they developed the concept of restraint with stunning consistency: their *Haltung der Zurückhaltung*¹⁰ posed that it would be experienced as inappropriate by the international public to victoriously celebrate the FRG's *Wirtschaftswunder* or to stress the (still ongoing) post-war recovery. A “human” or un-victorious architectural idiom was deemed key to the German participation. This idiom was presented explicitly as a counterbalance to the 1937 Nazi pavilion by Speer and as a self-conscious reference to the German interwar modernism, Mies van der Rohe's 1929 Barcelona pavilion in particular. The project was accounted as the first major international demonstration of the new national building policy - ‘Germany's return in the circle of western cultural states.’¹¹ At the moment the FRG's acceptance on the participation in Expo 58 was filed,¹² lively discussions on the close relations between the image of official buildings and modernist design and architecture took place in both governmental and architectural circles.¹³ This debate focussed on the appropriateness of modernist architecture and loaded transparency and lightness of construction with social and political meaning.¹⁴ For the architects invited to design the FRG Expo 58 building, Egon Eiermann and Sep Ruf,¹⁵ the pavilion was their first contribution to the official building programme to represent the new state.¹⁶ Given the FRG's sensibility to its reception abroad, particularly with regard to the former Allies, the positive foreign press reactions to the Expo 58 project quickly became a powerful argument in the defence of the concepts at the basis of the pavilion and a much-cited point of reference in the rhetoric of

been disbanded in 1938 and re-founded in 1950. Soon after World War II (1947), the local chapters of the *Werkbund* would resume their activities, leading to the official re-launching of the (West) German *Werkbund* in 1950.

¹⁰ See for instance: Ernst Johan, “Haltung der Zurückhaltung,” *Werk und Zeit* 6 (June 1958): 3-6. *Werk und Zeit* was published by the *Werkbund*.

¹¹ Wulf Schirmer, *Egon Eiermann 1904-1970. Bauten und Projekte* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1984), 12.

¹² The application was filed on March 23, 1955. The invitation was sent to the first Federal Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, on June 8, 1954.

¹³ On the ongoing discussion, see: Ingeborg Flagge and Wolfgang Jean Stock, eds., *Architektur und Demokratie. Bauen für die Politik von der amerikanischen Revolution bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1992).

¹⁴ See for instance: Deborah Ascher Barnstone, *The Transparent State. Architecture and politics in postwar Germany* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-4.

¹⁵ Egon Eiermann (1904-1970) was one of the founding members of the *Rat für Formgebung* in 1950 and member of the *Werkbund* since the interwar period (1931). Sep Ruf (1908-1982) was president to the Bavarian chapter of the *Werkbund* from 1954 to 1958.

¹⁶ Eiermann later realised the Chancellor's Bungalow for the West German Embassy in Washington DC (1958-'64), the West German Embassy in Moscow (1969) and the “Lange Eugen” federal building in Bonn (1965-'59); Ruf the Chancellor's Bungalow in Bonn (1963-'64).

the new building in West Germany.¹⁷ The rarely pronounced, but omnipresent concept of transparency – used as a visual analogy for democracy – was manifest on three levels. Not only in the choice of the exhibits and in the story on life and work in Germany, but also in the architecture of the pavilion and in the German commissariat’s communication on its participation to the (primarily German) public. The most literal translation of the concept can be traced in the see-through architecture of the pavilion. Eiermann and Ruf avoided building an overwhelming, monumental building by designing a pavilion composed of eight see-through volumes. The glazed necklace of edifices was carefully positioned in the slanted landscape and enclosed a large inner garden, a modest but widely appreciated design by Walter Rossow. The precision and consistency of the architectural project led to some of the most extolling evaluations of Expo 58-projects in the international architectural press. The German architectural press generally formulated a similar positive account on the Eiermann and Ruf pavilion and even in the short-tempered popular home press little objections were made against the slick, modernist architecture of the pavilion.¹⁸ On the other hand, strong reactions were formulated against the choice of the exhibits in the pavilion and even the general exhibition concept was severely criticized. Generally speaking, the most frequently uttered criticism – by conservative newspapers or street publications mostly – reproached the West German delegacy for not being nationalist enough. Not only was the exhibition considered too courteous, it was judged as too elitist and therefore, not demonstrative of the nature of the German people it was said to represent. The seemingly all-embracing and transparent German exhibition might well have been open, bright and in celebration of happiness, but it remained a serious, humourless, well-controlled show.¹⁹ In its fending off of German clichés and its abstract reasoning on *Lebensheiterkeit* (zest for life), the German delegacy had damaged, according to the homeland press, the true German spirit: ‘if they only had remembered our states and their folk art, and, hell, as far as I am concerned, they could

¹⁷ The German pavilion was also one of the most appreciated pavilions by the official international jury of Expo 58 and won a Gold Star (as did others), the highest prize possible. Less notable, but maybe more important: the pavilion was lauded in the volume IV of the memorials as ‘one of the greatest successes of the exposition.’ Ado Baltus, *l’architecture, les jardins et l’éclairage*. Vol. 4 of *Exposition de Bruxelles 1958. Mémorial* (Brussels: Commissariat général du Gouvernement près l’Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles 1958, 1961), 140.

¹⁸ Nevertheless, the modern glass-and-steel architecture that typified the idiom of the pavilion was contested both within the discipline and by the public in the post-war era, see: Frank Hartmut, “The Late Victory of Neues Bauen. German Architecture after World War II,” *Rassegna* 14, n. 52 (June 1993): 58-67.

¹⁹ With acceptance of Marie Marck’s cartoons in the “Towns and Homes” section.

have twined a garland of German beer and sauerkraut.²⁰ The *Werkbund's* choice for a stern, transparent pavilion was never questioned, but the German popular press judged the idiom in need of a populist or human counterbalance in the exhibition.

Not too modern, but of romantic vitality: the pavilion of the USA

At the time the United States government officially accepted the invitation to participate in Expo 58, 12 October 1954, a new policy on the architecture to represent the nation abroad was being developed. 'Unambiguous political architecture'²¹ had become the concern of the State Department's Foreign Buildings Office (FBO)²² and was deemed an outstanding tool to reflect an American character of 'assurance, importance, tact and vitality'²³ abroad. Reporting on FBO's booming foreign embassy programme, *Architectural Record* summarized their intentions as 'a significant experiment in regional architecture for diplomatic objectives.'²⁴ Edward Durell Stone was selected to erect the American Expo 58 pavilion. By appointing Stone, who was already engaged in 1954 to build the strategically important New Delhi embassy, the State Department had chosen for a neo-classical, ornamental but expressly modern architecture. This so-called "modern humanism" of the FBO was defined as an integration of business with the arts and sciences, for which the modern architecture of the *international style* was deemed an unfit idiom. Instead, the policy promoted an atmosphere 'against anonymity, uniformity, and all the things that go to make up modernism.'²⁵ Following the American Cold War propaganda, the architecture of the embassies (and the Expo 58 pavilion) needed to express a "friendly democratic spirit," which was to be achieved by a relatively large freedom in architectural design,²⁶ together with three points of attention:

²⁰ 'Hätte man sich doch unserer Länder mit ihrer Heimatkunst erinnert und, zum Teufel, meinentwegen dem deutschen Bier und Sauerkraut einen Kranz geflochten.' Peter Steinbach, *Frankfurter Nachtausgabe* (April 17 1958) as reprinted in Wend Fischer and Gustav B. von Hartmann, comps., *Deutschlands Beitrag zur Weltausstellung Brüssel 1958. Ein Bericht* (Düsseldorf: Generalkommissar der Bundesrepublik Deutschland bei der Weltausstellung Brüssel 1958, [1959?]), 106.

²¹ Ron Robin, *Enclaves of America. The Rhetoric of American political architecture abroad, 1900-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 140.

²² Since January 1954 FBO's Architectural Advisory Committee (AAC) was 'composed of men of real stature, to serve not as a figurehead but as a hard-working, trusted "building committee."' Presented in "USA abroad," *Architectural Forum* (December 1957): 115. In 1957 the committee was renamed Architectural Advisory Panel (AAP).

²³ "USA abroad," 114.

²⁴ "Architecture to represent America abroad," *Architectural Record* (May 1955): 187.

²⁵ "Citizens and architects," *Architectural Forum* 110 (January 1959): 90.

²⁶ The State Department was not the only official organ to hire artists, see Robert H. Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty. Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1950s* (Washington/London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 15.

the local history of the building site, the exploration of newness and the expression of “Americanness.” The expression of a distinguishable American flavour or the ‘packaging the United States,’²⁷ is what Stone was deemed most competent in by 1956.²⁸ Notwithstanding popular support, Stone was not given the opportunity to fully realise his plans for the pavilion. When Stone’s design was presented to the national press, January 1957, his plan comprised not only a building, but an exhibition layout as well. Stone wanted everything within his building to be part of the architectural experience. Nevertheless, the American Commissioner General, Howard S. Cullman, hired designer Peter G. Harnden, a USIA favourite,²⁹ and Bernard Rudofsky for the development and supervision of the exhibition displays. Harnden and Rudofsky had warned the commissariat for the preconceptions of the European visitors, to whom this presentation most probably was not the first encounter with post-war America. Hence, ‘another repetition of production statistics could be counted on to arouse boredom, perhaps irritation, certainly envy.’³⁰ Less than providing surveyable, scientific information, the exhibition would speak of an atmosphere of “American spirit of democracy and freedom,” intensively debated, demonstratively uncensored, not devoid of self-criticism and irony and hence, following the discourse of the designers, illustrative to the American freedom of speech. Although the laudatory reactions of the European visitors and press proved the success of the designers’ approach, the easy-going atmosphere of the pavilion stirred many American visitors. Eventually, the lack of “high-quality” objects, illustrative of American industrial superiority, became an issue in the Congress where, already from the start of the project, the American participation to Expo 58 and its considerable sponsoring had been questioned on several occasions.³¹ Opposition in the

²⁷ Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 160.

²⁸ As is expressed in many press reports on the New Delhi embassy. At the time the project was debated, *Architectural Record* (July 1957) published a special issue on Stone’s work, entitled “An architecture of space and grace” (153-176), featuring the model of the Brussels pavilion on the cover.

²⁹ Because of the fair’s emphasis on culture, the State Department is put in control of the US participation. In most cases, US exhibits abroad are arranged by the Department of Commerce or by USIA, the United States Information Agency (founded 1954), responsible for dissemination and interpretation of information on the US. Peter Harnden had worked already as designer and producer for thirty-five US exhibitions in national and international trade fairs. For the Brussels pavilion Harnden was supported by the Harnden-Bombelli Anstalt (Vaduz, Liechtenstein).

³⁰ “Brussels ’58, the United States speaks to the world. Progress Report,’ *Interiors* (September 1957): 135.

³¹ On the funding of the pavilion and the debates about the relation with the USSR pavilion, see Kint, “We look at them, they look at us: USA versus USSR,” *Expo 58 als belichaming van het humanistisch modernisme* (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 2001), 243-301. Illustrative is the fact that the funds for the exhibition were approved only as late as April 1957. Also, the American government spent 15 million dollars, in comparison to the Russian 60 million. (amounts based on press reports)

homeland to this “Cold War defeat” got tough and President Eisenhower sent George V. Allen, head of USIA, to report on the exhibition. By the end June, Allen wrote to the president: ‘On balance, my reaction was favourable,’ more particularly, the soft-sell approach proved to be successful, because ‘Europeans are particularly impressed by the absence of heavy-handed propaganda and the fact that the United States, which they know to be powerful industrially and economically, had not attempted to overshadow the Fair with a show of industrial might. The general air of our exhibit is one of friendliness, animation, and humanism.’³² Allen’s critical remarks were explicitly restricted to some exhibits, which were considered independent of the exhibition hall. This building - and this was listed as the first positive point of interest - ‘from both an architectural and engineering point of view’ was evaluated as ‘brilliant.’ Allen’s appraisal coincided largely with the contemporary enthusiasm for Stone’s work in the American architectural and popular press. His testimony of the US’s new foreign building policy in Brussels illustrated the FBO’s discourse on modern “government character” or “democratic symbolism.”³³ Experimenting with new materials and techniques was as a common achievement in this architecture, which Stone deemed subservient to his search for an expression of a romantic “American spirit.” In contrast to the American press, some European architectural critics did reject the pavilion’s architecture, which was experienced as outdated, too monumental,³⁴ too decorated³⁵ or too ostentatious.³⁶ Stone, and FBO with him, labelled his architecture as “More than modern,” answering a popular ‘need for richness, exuberance, and pure, unadulterated freshness.’³⁷ Freedom of speech, to the FBO, was reflected in a mitigated modernism, in pitch with the taste of the public and the architects’ boredom with the idiom.

Against modern formalist bravura: the Italian pavilion

³² *Text of the report to the president by George V. Allen, director of the United States Information agency. For release in Sunday papers, June 29, 1958.* Brussels, Royal Archives, Fund *Expo 58*, file number 3.56.05/1.

³³ Peter Blake, “What is government character?,” *Architectural Forum* 1 (1959): 81.

³⁴ For instance: Bruno Zevi, “Chiusura su Bruxelles. Il simbolismo carie dell’espressione architettonica,” *L’Architettura Cronache e Storia* 36 (October 1958): 364-365 or Otto Frei, “Formes, techniques et constructions humaines,” *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* 78 (June 1958): 4.

³⁵ For instance: Jacques de Bary, “L’architecture de l’exposition universelle,” *RAIC Journal* 35, n. 8 (August 1958): 301.

³⁶ For instance: Jürgen Joedicke, “Expo Brüssel. Rundgang durch die Weltausstellung,” *Architektur und Wohnform* (November 1958): 391.

³⁷ “More than modern,” *Time Magazine* (31 March 1958).

The Italian pavilion at Expo 58 was a surprise to many: to the visitors, to the Belgian, foreign and homeland press, to the Italians, but even to those involved in the production process, its designers, architects and commissioners. Nevertheless, neither the commissioners nor the architects ever intended the pavilion to be a surprise. The pavilion, to its architects, was an expressive statement against the contemporary currents in modernist architecture. To its commissioners, the pavilion was to be a testimony of the post-war resurgence of a modern Italy, its achievements in the reconstruction of the nation, its economic successes, democratic (non-fascist) ideals and political alliances. Although not incompatible, due to the imagery of the final design of the pavilion – resembling an Italian village – miscommunications between several parties and given the context of the modern architecture of the neighbouring pavilions, the commissioners experienced the pavilion as in conflict with their aim to deliver proof of a prosperous Italy. The divergent reactions in the international and Italian press – both popular and specialist – only added to the confusion. Popular press in the home country was furious and launched a taunting campaign even before the opening of the pavilion, which had ‘disastrously weighed on the public opinion of our nation during the period the exposition was opened.’³⁸ Although much criticism aimed at the scandal of not having the pavilion ready in time (at the opening of the fair), clearly, the indignation also hid a profound disappointment of not finding Italy represented as a radiant modern nation in a fittingly modernist pavilion. The commissioners and the homeland press did not agree with the “aesthetical characteristics” of the pavilion. Consequently, the popular press deemed national pride offended with a so-called neorealist image of Italy,³⁹ unfit for an international fair, as it could be easily interpreted as an ‘elegy for a regressing and reactionary Italy, barely fleeing from a nervous breakdown for it has been too preoccupied with tuberculosis and famine.’⁴⁰ By the time the fair closed its gates, public opinion in the home country had changed. Positive accounts in the Belgian popular press and the relatively high

³⁸ ‘funestement pesé sur l’opinion publique de notre Pays durant toute la période où l’Expo a été ouverte.’ Agnoldomenico Pica, in the introduction to Cesco Tomaselli’s positive article as printed originally in *Corriere della Sera*, in *L’Italia présente. Numero celebrativo della partecipazione italiana all’Expo ’58*, ed. Andrea Pais Tarsilia (Rome: Bureau de presse du Commissariat du Gouvernement italien pour l’Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles 1958, January-February 1959), 173.

³⁹ On the position of BBPR in this debate, see: Sara Protasoni, “The Italian Group and the Modern Tradition,” *Rassegna* 52 (theme: “The last CIAMs, December 1992): 28-39.

⁴⁰ ‘elogio di un’Italia retrograda e reazionaria in cui ci si salva dell’esaurimento nervoso perché si è troppo occupati con la tubercolosi e la fame.’ Bruno Zevi, “Padiglione italiano a Bruxelles. Successo dell’ultimo minuto?,” *Chronache di Architettura III dall’Expo mondiale di Bruxelles all’Inaugurazione di Brasilia 191/320* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 1971), 100. In this article, Zevi takes up the defence of the project. The citation is Zevi’s summary of the reactions in the Italian popular press.

number of visitors had opened the eyes of the critics for all the things the pavilion did had to offer, and first and foremost for its welcomed contrast with the clamour of the exhibition. Nevertheless, the full spectrum of the architects' polemical intentions was seldom fully grasped and was limited mainly to the later architectural press.

In the winter of 1955 the *Commissariato* had invited five of the most renowned Italian architects to participate in a closed competition for the pavilion. The invited studio's, the BBPR studio of Milan (Lodovico Barbiano di Belgioioso, Enrico Peresutti and Ernesto Rogers), Ignazio Gardella (Milan), Amedeo Luccichenti and Vincenzo Monaco (Rome), Giuseppe Perugini (Rome) and Ludovico Quaroni (Rome), were all architects known for their modern work.⁴¹ Although little detail is known on the competition brief,⁴² what was clear from the commissioner's closed competition and its choice for the architects is the ambition to have a pavilion that was in tune with the latest currents in modern Italian architecture. Although working in divergent directions, the invited architects determined to collaborate in the same project. Under the influence of Ernesto Rogers, the then editor of *Casabella-Continuità*, the team of architects opted for a theoretical and polemical stance with respect to the so-called "formalistic structuralism"⁴³ that was to be expected dominant at the fair. The pavilion had to be illustrative of 'the dynamic idea of the path the Italian has covered to evolve from nature and the individual to an organized society.'⁴⁴ Due to several budget cuts, further on site adaptation, problems during construction and the harsh winter conditions in 1957-'58, the pavilion was opened with a delay of twenty days. The reactions in the homeland against this "failure" were that aggressive that the commissariat felt obliged to publish a defence in the conclusive report on the Italian participation.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, between the official opening of Expo 58 and the inauguration of the Italian pavilion, the Italian government also had publicly denounced the pavilion: "The government pushes the

⁴¹ Adolfo De Carlo, then collaborating closely with Quaroni, joined the team from the beginning. Luccichenti and Monaco left the team in 1957.

⁴² One of the proposals of the commissioner would have been, according to a newspaper article, to construct a facsimile of the Coliseum. See: "La testimonianza degli architetti conferma le responsabilità del governo all'Expo," *Unità* (27 April 1958), s.p. Also: Ludovico Quaroni and Adolfo De Carlo in an interview with Renato Pedio, "Inchiesta sul Padiglione Italiano a Bruxelles," *L'Architettura Cronache e Storia* 36 (October 1958): 405.

⁴³ See for instance: "La testimonianza degli architetti," s.p. and other declarations by the architects.

⁴⁴ 'Idée dynamique du chemin qu l'Italien a fait pour passer de la nature et de l'individu à la société organisée.' *Rapport sur l'avant-projet architectural. Section italienne* (7 p., by the architects). Brussels, Royal Archives, Fund *Expo 58*, file number 3.56.18.

⁴⁵ The delay was marginalised as several other pavilions also were not ready in time. The so-called offence on the fact that the building was "not modern enough" was presented as a misinterpretation, which was altered as the closing of the fair approached. "Testimonianze. Témoignages," *L'Italie présente*, 167 and following.

responsibility of the scandal of the expo over to the architects.”⁴⁶ Reading the many accusations and, especially, the defences of the architects in the popular and specialist press, it is clear that the practical arguments in this quarrel are not the main issue in the “scandal.” The fact that the pavilion’s architecture had a naïve or even reactionary air, was cause of national disgrace. The Italian pavilion at Expo 58, indeed, strongly resembled a picturesque, Mediterranean village. ‘With the Italian pavilion we have tried to make a serene and quiet work, rooted in our culture. Maybe we have forgotten that the taste of most of today’s visitors is so spoilt and we should have added much more pepper to the salt,’⁴⁷ Rogers later concluded on the project. While rehabilitated in Italy, the pavilion was either completely ignored in the international architectural press during the fair, or merely touched upon with terms of disbelief and miscomprehension.⁴⁸ Alexandre Persitz, who was involved in an ongoing discussion with Rogers,⁴⁹ had judged it in hindsight as “incomprehensible,” one of the monsters ‘which discourages every criticism and provokes a sentiment of perplexity in face of efforts this costly sterile.’⁵⁰ Ironically, the pavilion and its concept came to the fore fully only one year later, in the discussions on the then tendencies in modern architecture, more specifically: on Italian neo-liberty and the role of tradition and the duties of the modern architect. Reyner Banham spoke of ‘the Italian retreat from modern architecture’ and accused the Italians of ‘infantile regression vis-à-vis the modern movement.’⁵¹

More than modern

⁴⁶ ‘Il governo scarica sugli architetti le responsabilità dello scandalo dell’expo,’ *Unità* (27 April 27, 1958), s.p.

⁴⁷ ‘Noi abbiamo cercato di fare opera serena e tranquilla, radicata nella nostra cultura, con il Padiglione italiano. Forse abbiamo dimenticato che il palato di tanti visitatori è ormai viziato e avremmo dovuto aggiungere al sale molto più pepe.’ Postscript of Ernesto Nathan Rogers, “All’Expo ’58 il futuro (dell’architettura) non è cominciato,” *Casabella-Continuità* 221 (1958): 5. Two years later, the article was published in English as: “The Future was not to be seen at Brussels,” *Architects’ Yearbook* 9 (1960): 132-139. The postscript on the Italian pavilion was omitted.

⁴⁸ James M. Richards spoke of ‘One of the puzzles of the exhibition’ in *The Architectural Review* 124, n. 739 (1958), as did *The Architects’ Journal* (May 29, 1958), reporting that ‘This distinguished team decided to abandon modern constructional technique and, indeed, all that we mean by “modern architecture.”’ Misha Black wrote: ‘Italy has also chosen the path of slight self-deprecation, at least as far as its building is concerned,’ see: *Progress* 46, n. 259 (Summer 1958).

⁴⁹ See for instance: Alexandre Persitz, “Casabella ... casus belli?,” *L’Architecture D’Aujourd’hui* 77 (May 1958): xxxiii.

⁵⁰ ‘qui découragent toute critique et provoquent un sentiment de stupeur devant des efforts aussi coûteusement stériles.’ Alexandre Persitz, “Souvenirs de Bruxelles 1958. Noirs et blancs,” *L’Architecture D’Aujourd’hui* 81 (January 1959): 94.

⁵¹ Reyner Banham, “Neoliberty. The Italian retreat from modern architecture,” *The Architectural Review* 747 (1959): 231-232. One of the illustrations shows the representation room of the Italian pavilion.

The three cases presented here illustrate the diversity of the then idiom of modern architecture, but also the flexible relation between its imagery and the divergent statements of the actors motivating their choice for this specific idiom. Consequently, the examples are also revelatory of the critical stances that were assumed by the pavilions' architects with respect to the then Modern Movement. Notwithstanding these divergent positions, modernist architecture or even the *international style* functioned as a widely accepted common touchstone at Expo 58. A single pavilion, but also the fair's décor or the enclave as a whole can be considered as place of debate on the then situation of modern architecture. This debate is not restricted to the professional interests of the designers of the pavilion, but is part of a broader architecture culture, involving also the clients (the organizers and the commissioners), the public at large (visitors and represented citizens or customers) and the press (architecture and general). These can be identified as the parties of a communicative process,⁵² to which the modern architecture of the pavilions is a mass medium in which the senders assimilated their preconceptions on the role of modern architecture as a medium in the exhibition and on its aptitude for the contemporary representation of their firm, organisation or nation. As the cases illustrate, the architectures of the pavilions fully became exhibits in their own right.⁵³ The architecture of these edifices had to testify of the message of the architects' clients.⁵⁴ These messages of the participating nations were similar:⁵⁵ over 75% of the participating nations deemed modern architecture as a fit proof, analogy or metaphor for the demonstration of their post-war achievements and for the overall modernization of the nation. In the above mentioned cases, the commissioners conceived of modern architecture as a fit idiom to represent the present and recent future (FRG and Italy) or the immediate past (USA) of the nation. Countries with a more mediated propaganda culture, like the then FRG and USA, consequently opted for architects engaged in the

⁵² A complex process of mass communication with different senders, receivers and messages and architecture as a noisy medium. Essential in this process is the shaping of the message (and medium) to the presumptions of the receiver (mainly: the public at large).

⁵³ This resulted from an ongoing evolution in the history of large exhibitions and was fostered by the then primacy of the free-standing pavilion, the blurring of differences in architectural concepts – the so-called omnipresence of modern architecture in both décor and pavilions – and the contemporary spreading of the Modern Movement.

⁵⁴ This pairing of intentions and imagery was most often written down in the commissioners' official catalogues, folders, guides and reports and acted as operating instructions on the "reading" of the building and the exhibition.

⁵⁵ Non-modern pavilions in the Foreign Section were replicas of national monuments or exemplary constructions of typical dwellings. First case: Thailand, Cambodia, Morocco, Tunisia, San Marino and Iran; second case: the Philippines, and Liechtenstein. These are among the smallest pavilions on site.

concurrent debate on appropriate official imagery. Other commissioners, like in the case Italy, engaged top national architects, but sometimes found the designers' concepts of contemporary building in opposition to their own. Clearly, the geographical and social dissemination – the so-called omnipresence and rapprochement – of modern architecture at the end of the fifties also introduced a diverging, often drastic appropriation of the idiom and its principles and, more important, the resignation of this type of diversification. Still, notwithstanding the alleged rapprochement at Expo 58, in the cases of the three pavilions presented above, the homeland public experienced their official modern representation as unfitting to their “national spirit.” The pavilions' exhibitions were deemed too courteous and modest in the case of the FRG and USA and the architecture of the pavilion had to balance this shortcoming. In case of the Italian pavilion, edifice and exhibits were experienced as embodying a reverse situation. Yet the modern architecture of the pavilions displayed deliberated choices on the implementation of new techniques and materials, spatial organisation, monumentality and the relation to the public and its taste. What united the pavilions was the conviction that the post-war state was most aptly represented in an idiom which took a self-conscious stance with regard to the *international style* and, hence, with respect to the organisers' modern humanism.