

Exhibition architecture / architecture exhibitions

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EXHIBITING ARCHITECTURE: THREE PARADOXES

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1. About exhibiting

Every time we discuss about exhibition design the lack of an adequate amount of critical studies becomes evident. Since, as Sergio Polano affirms in his *Mostrare* (1988), there is a sort of indifference towards the exhibition design that is often perceived as a natural activity, or reflects an immediate action of the designer, and exhibition design as a result of technical needs.

When stepping from theory to practice it is possible to identify three very clear elements that are characterising any exhibition design activity: the objects, even when intangible or used as mediator of meaning; the place, as the context in which the exhibition is on show; the *exhibitionary complex*, theorised by Tony Bennett in 1998, as the network of relationships activated among objects, space and people by the exhibition design.

There is also the need to highlight the differences and the gap separating exhibitions *presenting* objects and/or works and the ones *representing* themes and/or knowledge in which objects appear just as simulacra or tools to evoke the presence of what cannot be present. Also the tangible or intangible nature of content has a great impact of the exhibitionary complex that can be simplified recurring to two different modalities: in the first case, we can speak about *presenting* objects/works, that is to offer them to the fruition and the understanding of the audiences; in the second one, we have to speak about *representing* themes and/or intangible heritage, that is to evoke something is not present, something that cannot be there, re-constructing its meaning and somehow its presence.

2. Presentation vs Representation

Authors of exhibition designs that are focused on the presence of the objects/works are fully aware of the meaning those objects/works carry and they know the goal of their design proposals. In this case, it is not about building a narrative but about finding the most appropriate solutions to *present* objects and works to audiences and fighting against the most relevant aspects connoting whatever exhibition: the displacement every work/object is subject to in order to be exhibited. A transfer – of place – which produces that lack of understanding the exhibition design is in charge to fill through its exhibits, and most of all through the whole exhibitionary complex. Achieved by bridging the distance between the object/work and its home, its audience, its new space and its neighbours.

Somehow this is similar to the translator work, also the designer has not to overlay his interpretation and understanding but – as much as possible – to let

the work/object speak by itself and directly to its audience: the exhibit becomes a connecting device amplifying the communication.

At the opposite, thematic exhibitions, such as the ones concerning science or the ones concerning intangible heritage, have developed an interesting investigation on the exhibitionary complex, by pushing on exhibits and digital devices due the lack of presence of objects and the need to *represent* them properly. In these circumstances, the exhibition design becomes both object and subject, signifier and meaning of the show: an abstract representation of an intangible content. As exhibition experiences in Europe at the beginning of the XX Century very well testify, within this framework the design takes over and the setting up turns into an incredible and powerful place for architectural investigations and experiments. This knowledge typically has an influence on architecture where it is not always possible to use the design assignment as an occasion to explore new ways of thinking and building architectural space.

3. Exhibiting Architecture: between Presentation & Representation

But when it comes to exhibiting architecture, we are faced with 3 paradoxes that characterize its phenomenology.

The first paradox of exhibiting architecture consists in facing, on the one hand, a tangible object, a real product of material culture, and on the other hand, an impossibility of being able to *present* it as such because its physical dimension exceeds always that of the staging that must contain it, its rooting to the place makes it impossible to move and its same functional destination prevents it from being used differently. All factors that make architecture, in terms of exhibition, more similar to intangible assets than to material ones.

The second paradox consists in the fact that the phenomena is entirely endogenous to architecture, where architecture is at the same time the object and the media of representation: to represent it, we need to use the same discipline and the same principles of what we are called to show off. Therefore, there is a direct involvement of the designer that is impossible to reproduce on other exhibition occasions.

The recourse to architecture to *represent* other architectures seems like an unforeseen challenge, as demonstrated for example by the countless installations at the Venice Architecture Biennale and by the many other biennials and triennials that have begun to populate the calendar over the last twenty years: from the Rotterdam one to that of Lisbon, from the Oslo one to that of Chicago, and so on.

Typically, in architecture exhibitions you find *presentation* of mock-up fragments and installations to evoke and *represent* the absence of the real architecture and, most of all, you find the *presentation* of documents that are at the origin of architecture: drawings and models. Reducing the complex and three-dimensional phenomena of architecture to its bi-dimensional representation: the one from which architecture is always born.

It is clearly the endogenous character of these very special exhibitions, where architecture manipulates its tools and its environment just to produce the *presence* of something that is not *present*: that is just another architecture.

In this framework, the design activity becomes more like a speculative investigation and loses part of the detachment required for a neutral presentation when exhibiting works of art and/or material culture objects. For the direct and inner involvement of the designer with exhibition content, we can also consider the exhibition design as a form of research. A specific research similar and connected to the so called operative research: a research endeavouring a critical linking of theory and practice and defining studies aimed at advancing knowledge but also at legitimizing a practice. Along with the research by design, operative research represents a crucial relational junction between a merely cognitive activity (research) and a purely operational activity (design practice). This stands true regardless of the fact that the concept of operative research – related to the use of history – has found its own theoretical formalization in architecture within Manfredo Tafuri's thought and work, lastly in his essay *Il progetto storico* (1980) where he defines also *La critica operativa* - operational criticism. When interpreting the exhibition design as a critical investigation, the show can be understood almost as an inhabitable book: we can move between the spaces of the exhibition as we would move between the pages of a book and the show becomes a sort of hypertext at human scale, where digital technologies appear complementary and not so decisive as the contemporary trend enshrines in almost every occasion.

Finally, in some situations, a further paradox is added. A third one.

In fact, there are exhibitions where the authors themselves are called to put on show their work that is an act of reflecting on it, staging a simulacrum of their activity.

In these cases, the exhibitionary system, using the same operational tools as the architectural project, transforms the exhibition into a sort of theoretical summa of the author who is called to express himself and to recount his own thoughts in a built-form, in absolute assonance with his own practice. Here, it is correct to talk of a self-reflective research by practice, since the operation is not merely linear but involve a critical interrogation upon own activity, identifying path of development and deeper understanding of the design process and trajectory.

Building up clearness and awareness in own design and decision-making paths. And communicating it via architecture *presentation/representation*: a short-circuit putting together all dimension of architectural activity.