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## Experiencing built worlds

### *Atmosphere in the contemporary practices of architecture exhibition*

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**Abstract.** *Building an exhibition means giving shape to an artificial environment in which certain meanings are transmitted. In a dialectical relationship with the visitor, objects reclaimed from the context that generated them are ordered and presented, defining situations full of new meanings and dimensions. In this context, atmosphere plays a significant role: objects and public are simultaneously in one place and, to ensure a successful communication, the emotional component takes on strategic importance. Building an architecture exhibition means giving shape to an artificial environment in which the object of the display is absent. Therefore, in some cases, the purpose of the show becomes the issue of making a spatial experience accessible to the public. Some architecture exhibitions do not define their goal as an objective presentation based on technical drawings, models and strangely uninhabited photographs but, on the contrary, they try to reconstruct a certain “something” that becomes part of the object of display. If the construction of an atmosphere is of extreme importance in every form of show, which particular role does it assume in the case of exhibitions in absence – an issue that characterises the display of architecture?*

**Keywords:** *architecture exhibition, spatial experience, atmosphere, narrative space*

### **To exhibit**

To exhibit means to communicate in space. A selection of objects or any other kind of artefact is then followed by an ordering and organisation process and by the arrangement of these objects in space, with the aim of recounting something. The space of the exhibition is a narrative one and one that is far away from the places where the actions of our everyday life take place. The space of the exhibition is configured around at least two operations of decontextualization: objects, torn away from the contexts that created them and that they belong to, are organized and put into a relationship with each other in a frame that aims to transmit a story; furthermore the content of the exhibition is communicated to a visitor who has been transferred to a different space, hopefully not far away from us, but still a space that does not coincide exactly with the places where our daily lives unfold. For this reason, contexts and relationships within the show are artificial, but the exhibit design of a show is not mere scenography, since the objects put on display are real and the opportunity to come face-to-face with the originals and not replicas is an element that strongly characterizes the experience generated in an exhibition. As a result of the decontextualization described above, the visitor is placed in a condition of increased receptivity (Tuminelli, 1977). The message reaches the recipient as part of a synesthetic experience, made of the reciprocal relationship between object, visitor and space.

An exhibition is the result of a collaboration in which the designer puts into action his design skills and instantiates the thought of a curator, thus generating a series of spatial sequences conceived so that this thought reaches the recipient and simultaneously stimulates all his senses. The experience related to visiting an exhibition is in fact quite different, for example, from the reading of a text. The information provided by the printed word describes things that you cannot directly see while you are reading. When we are in an exhibition we are stimulated in a completely different way. In an exhibition we see, interpret, establish connections, we move, we refer to things that have been placed around us and react to the presence of other people who are with us in the place where the show is taking place. It is not merely the space that is activated by the exhibition, the visitor is also transformed from a passive recipient to an individual who is physically and intellectually involved in the narration that takes place within the exhibition space. Through the construction of these contexts a whole world is generated into which one can dive. Thanks to this immersion each of us is allowed to develop his own personal opinion on the theme of the exhibition.

### **Exhibiting architecture, to present or to represent**

To exhibit architecture is a paradox because inevitably the actual works and content are physically absent. Generally, this hurdle is overcome through the display of documentary material about the object of the exhibition such as drawings, photographs and three-dimensional models (Polano, 2008). Therefore, the question of the architecture exhibition focuses on the issues of representation. In the exhibition of architecture it is not possible to expose built works. The reason is primarily practical and linked to the size of the exhibited object, but secondly this is due to the fact that the architecture has its reason for existence (and above all) outside the context of the exhibition. Therefore, the presence of architecture within a space conceived in order to transmit contents is always and exclusively the result of an operation of translation.

Architecture exhibitions cover a wide spectrum of activities, which extend to a variety of curatorial and authorial intentions and positions: A model neighbourhood; the show of architectural drawings; the public presentation of the results of a competition; and the presentation on the occasion of the completion of a building, are all architecture exhibitions (Chan, 2010). Each of these moments can be conjugated according to different ways of understanding the practice of displaying: one can explain buildings; one can submit a complete documentation of an architecture (for example, through photography or video – but in this case it is useful to mention the fact that often architectural photography intentionally neglects the human presence, and this shows that, in this case, photographing architecture means *representing* and not *presenting* it); one can exhibit drawings that represent the architecture in an abstract form (sketches, diagrams, plans, elevations, sections, renderings) and three-dimensional scale models. Especially in the last two cases it is useful to recall that these are not instruments conceived for the communication of the presented object to the outside. On the contrary, these are internal devices of the architectural discipline, which have been developed to visualise the design process and have established themselves as indispensable tools to the achievement (construction) of architecture. Therefore, presenting architecture in an exhibition context through the conventional instruments of its representation inevitably generates a series of questions with which those who curate and those who design the show have to come to terms. The public of an architecture exhibition is required to possess the ability to interpret a code/language which belongs to the shown discipline and is not conceived for the purpose of mediation. In the case of an exhibition of architectural drawings the graphic-communicative work of the architect is invested with an *aura*, despite being born in a functional context such as that of the realisation of a piece of architecture. The drawings are treated as if they were paintings and the models, as sculptures (Urbach, 2010). One of the purposes of communicating architecture is to make a spatial

experience accessible to the public. However, by using the tools mentioned above in the representation of architecture, we end up neglecting an important aspect of the mediation process.

## Experiencing architecture

In the definition of the spatial experience we are witnessing when we relate to architecture, it is essential to consider the way we position ourselves in relation to the object of observation. You cannot participate in a spatial experience whilst remaining outside the architecture, as happens when we look at an architectural drawing. Plans, sections and elevations describe a geometrical space and allow us to judge the quantitative and formal relationships that exist between the elements that a building is composed of, but tell us little about other key aspects of the experience of architecture. Furthermore, not everyone is capable of visualising a building just by looking at its plan (Rasmussen, 1995). To gain an experience of the built world we must immerse ourselves in its space. The space is the *space of our physical presence* in which our experience becomes corporeal and tactile. Within this space we refer to all our senses simultaneously, here the geometry is not absolute, but dependent on the centre which we represent by being in this place. We no longer speak of measures, but of the distance from our body, we do not talk about positions, but about relationship with the place where we are (Böhme, 2006). All other matters related to the tactile characteristics of the materials and textures of the environments in which we live should also be taken into account, since architecture has a mainly bodily relationship with life (Zumthor, 2006). Furthermore we should not neglect colour, the presence of light and its impact on surfaces, and how all this is in a state of permanent flux in relation to our position in space. And we cannot ignore the effect of time passing on our physical presence within a constructed space. In this way and from this point of view, the experience of space becomes dynamic. We do not relate to a still image of the space as if it were a photograph taken from a fixed and defined point of view, but we mentally construct a sequence of frames in which the relationships described above are constantly changing in relation to the passage of time and to our position within the space. The experience of architecture should not be reduced to a purely visual one and, above all, issues relating to the perception of space through the other senses should not take a secondary position when compared to the privileged role of sight (Pallasmaa, 1996). Blurring, renouncing a vision centred on a few selected elements of space, represents an opportunity to intensify our relationship with space itself, so that this relationship becomes part of its materiality. Everything that makes up a building strikes me. A place and the feelings experienced within this are inextricably bound together because, as Peter Zumthor states “a building is neither message nor sign, but envelope and background to the unfolding of life. A sensitive container for the rhythm of steps on the floor, for the concentration of labour, for the silence of sleep (Zumthor, 2006)”<sup>1</sup>.

## Absence and replacement

A *conventional* architecture exhibition can aim for a simple description of an architecture, without inquiring into matters that would go beyond the plain presentation of the work of those who designed it. The risk, in this case, is that this presentation is limited to describing and explaining buildings through drawings, models, photographs or movies, but – in the absence of the buildings themselves, the experience of the architecture is denied to the visitor. This kind of exhibition does not generate empathy between the object and subject visiting it. To directly solve the problem of its absence, the exhibited object is made *portable* and can be rebuilt in exhibition space. But if we focus on the exhibition itself and not solely

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1. Translation by the author from the original in German.

on the object being shown, new possibilities open up that transform the exhibition not merely in the instance in which information and communication are transmitted to a passive visitor, but in a situation in which the visitor is activated and moved closer to an experience. The less one focuses on the occupation of the exhibition space through *substitutes* of things that cannot be presented, the more space will be left to *something else*. The meaning of being physically present in the exhibition becomes important. In this way the exhibition does not only replace a work that is located elsewhere, but it comments on an architectural idea on the generation of knowledge through the project. In an architecture exhibition many other materials are gathered that are not merely documenting the characteristics of a building. Therefore every object and artefact in the exhibition should not be understood as an inappropriate substitute for something that is not there, but as original and specific material, representing the development of an architectural idea, its interpretation and its effects (Zardini, 2010).

### **Atmosphere generated through the space of the exhibition**

In 2010, after a long period in which practicing architects had been excluded from this role, the task of curating the Venice Architecture Biennale has been given to Kazuyo Sejima. In the past Sejima already participated in some editions of the event, and in defining the criteria around which to organize the exhibition she starts exactly from her former position as a participant (Levy & Menking, 2010). The show's title is *People meet in architecture*. In an historical moment in which contact between people has been radically transformed as a result of technology diffusion, Sejima decides to deal with the relationship between individuals and places, between places and individuals and with the reciprocal relationship between individuals (Sejima, 2010). Sejima shares this question with the participants to the show. The solution is not given, the possible answers are to be found in the suspended atmosphere of the show. The curatorial team does not want to overload the visitor with information, but to leave plenty of room for the interpretation and feelings of participants and visitors. Paraphrasing the charismatic title chosen for another edition of the Biennale, we can say that the motto of the show could be summed up with *less information, more emotion*<sup>2</sup>. Avoiding any intervention through exhibition design, Sejima decides not to present objects, but simply divides the space, and makes it available to the participants, asking them to present their work. This not only ensures that people meet in the show and experience the exhibited projects, but permits real contact to occur with the projects. The only available material is the space and the participants are required to generate an atmosphere through this space. The visitor to the exhibition is not put through a purely intellectual stimulation. The show is delightfully empty when compared to previous editions of the Venetian event. Those who move within the spaces of the Biennale are accompanied by the almost invisible hand of the curatorial team from station to station. Intense moments alternate with quieter ones generating a rhythm that succeeds in never making the exhibition boring. The visitor is led and his senses are stimulated at a carefully controlled pace that prevents him from feeling overburdened by the proposed concepts.

Sejima is aware of the difficulty posed by the display of architecture, where the curator is in the condition of exposing in the absence of the very object of the exhibition. In an interview, she explains that the aspect that characterizes the different environments of her exhibition is that in each one it is possible to experience a different atmosphere which characterizes that specific area. In this way the visitor understands that the space itself in which he moves, is part of the work that each participant is showing. Not only architects are invited to take part in the exhibition, but also environmental engineers, video- and media-artists, poets, filmmakers, photographers, critics, landscape architects, planners, and museum curators.

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2. In 2000, the VII<sup>th</sup> Biennale, curated by Massimiliano Fuksas, was titled *Less aesthetics, More ethics*.

The introduction of projects characterised by a strong atmospheric component in the show makes use of its evocative power in order to explore the grey zone, that vague boundary between the disciplines, which characterises the present cultural production.

Matthias Schuler of Transsolar and Tetsuo Kondo present the project “Cloudscape” in the Arsenale spaces. The visitor of the exhibition is given the opportunity to make a bodily experience, to be physically located within a cloud and to feel its heat and humidity on his own skin. The cloud is in constant transformation. One can experience this from above, below, and by soaking into it by moving on the free catwalk that Tetsuo Kondo has suspended on the Arsenale columns. The ephemeral and evocative nature of the installation stimulates a new interpretation of space by the person experiencing it, creating a relationship of mutual transformation between space and individual (Sejima, 2010).

For her “Forty Part Motet”, Janet Cardiff places forty speakers, which correspond to the forty members of a choir, in the exhibition space. From each speaker comes the singing voice of a single person. With this intervention the relationship between choir and audience is distorted. The visitors of the exhibition are involved in the first-hand experience of the diffusion of sound within a space. As they move freely between the speakers, they are confronted with the song from the point of view of the singer who perceives the piece of music in a unique and personal combination.

Caruso St. John and Thomas Demand present “Nagelhaus”, a project for the refurbishment of a square in Zurich. In this project the famous Chonqing house – demolished in 2007 in China after years of opposition from its owners to a process of urban speculation – reappears in Zurich, in a square, under a highway, in the form a Chinese restaurant open twenty-four hours a day. Within the space of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Caruso St. John and Demand reproduce a 1:1 scale model of the house made entirely of paper. The process of abstraction and alienation from reality that characterizes the work of Demand when he takes pictures of reproductions of significant places in our history made of paper and on a reduced scale, repeats itself in this exhibition space as a sort of endless hall of mirrors. The house, witness of an abuse, is reconstructed in Zurich and reappears again, frozen in an extraneous material such as paper, in the Venice exhibition.

In the architecture exhibition, in addition to the often-cited absence of the very object of the show, those who have made the work are also missing – but this is the very nature of every exhibition. Hans Ulrich Obrist catches the point proposed by Sejima and interprets the title of the exhibition *People meet in architecture* as a space for the gathering of people within the show. It is an encounter between the visitors and between the visitors and the ideas underlying the construction of the spaces presented in the exhibition. Chairs scattered in the empty Arsenale space offer the possibility to sit in front of screens broadcasting interviews with the participants made by Obrist. These pictures and these stories are not intended as supplementary material or information. Obrist’s videos are in effect a contribution to the exhibition: the answer of a curator to Sejima’s question about the relationship between communication and space today.

Sejima designed a series of independent exhibition spaces between the houses of a village on a small Japanese island, which was once famous for the production of granite, and is now almost uninhabited. The aim of the project is to give new life to a place through an intervention in which village, museum and nature coincide and the presence of visitors overlaps with that of the inhabitants. The public of the exhibition is immersed in the rarefied atmosphere of the village, where time seems to stand still. In the presentation of the project at the Venice Biennale, Fiona Tan, who works at the exhibition along with Sejima’s office, brings together the island and the visitor of the exhibition by presenting a series of videos in which she describes the slow passing of time on the island through a portrait of the old inhabitants as they go about their daily chores.

Given the fact that architecture exhibitions are increasing in popularity and that interest in the topic is rising, many other examples could have been taken into account to provide support to arguments presented in this paper. However, the last edition of the Architecture Biennale – a show that brought an innovative breath into the world of architecture mediation and communication – provides sufficient evidence to endorse the point of view expressed in this paper.

The 2010 Architecture Biennale certainly represents an instance that had the capacity to move the visitor closer to a more meaningful architecture experience. With her exhibition Sejima has managed to create out of a spatial experience the true content of an exhibition featuring architecture and buildings, demonstrating that a multifaceted experience is possible even outside the context that produced the exhibited objects. In many of the projects presented the visitor is physically present among the artefacts and the issues displayed. He is not left out. On the contrary, he is challenged to immerse himself in a physical experience. I do not know if this was a specific request of the curatorial team, but the scarcity of technical drawings and the displacement of the projects within the context of the show as was seen in *People meet in architecture* have placed the discipline in much greater proximity to a far broader audience (without discussing here the issue of the ongoing spectacularisation of exhibitions, the fact remains that the Sejima Biennale was the most visited Architecture Biennale ever) demonstrating that even an architecture exhibition of the highest quality is not necessarily addressed to an audience of purely specialists. This emphasizes the point that making architecture also means being open to those who are going to inhabit the spaces we design.

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