

From Fantasy to Experimentation: The one-to-one scale in Architecture Exhibitions

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Abstract

The framework for the architectural exhibition usually lies on the relationship between a concept of architecture as “container” and its objectification into “content,” along with traditional juxtapositions to artistic practices such as the performing arts and spatial installations. However pertinent this framework might have been for the affirmation of the discipline’s autonomy, it also limits the discussion into a superficial glance of the symptoms of the practice and its representation, instead of drawing from a broader and more complex debate on the potentialities regarding experimentation, mediation and emotional engagement in architecture exhibitions.

Focusing on examples that emphasise the object itself, this paper explores the relevance and the potentialities of one-to-one scale installation in the exhibition context, investigating its roots in fantasised architectures and stating its contemporary role in fostering creativity and exploration within Architecture. Ephemeral architectural installations facilitate the overlap of disciplinary boundaries and, additionally, enables other levels of effectiveness regarding public engagement. On the other hand, eluding function and reason unblock a free way to imagination and experimentation, there is to say, to creative freedom.

Building one-to-one scale, for the extent of this paper, is based on the idea of unmediated experience, excluding other ways of representing architecture besides the spatial experience.

Keywords: fantasy, folly, pavilion, architecture exhibition, environmental art

1. Architecture in Exhibitions

The participation of architecture in exhibitions, as content, is related initially to the *Beaux-Arts salons* but also the rising of national museums all over Europe: the presence of drawings and scaled models amongst the broad content in Fine Art exhibition, was a common feature in the nineteenth-century art exhibitions.

On the one hand, the museum collections of drawings, scaled models or monuments’ fragments were frequently used for pedagogical purposes, as they were archetypes to be copied. On the other, the

architects also participated in annual shows – the *beaux-art salons* – along with several different art expressions: painting, sculpture, drawing, watercolour, engraving, pastel and other minor arts, aiming at promoting their work. In this context, architectural drawings and scaled models were considered and presented side-by-side with artworks and evaluated fundamentally by their aesthetical qualities.

Nevertheless, all over Europe and especially in more wealthy countries, the economic capacity of some museums allowed different kinds of encounters amid architecture and fine-arts, that exceeded the sharing of a wall.

Coincident with a period of national

affirmation and more massive archaeological expeditions, the tendency towards historicism originated a particular interest in historical architecture exhibitions and, consequently, in archaeological finds. By showing fragments of monuments, or plaster casts of classic buildings, it was believed to be possible to recreate the experience of those distant places in the museum galleries, by supporting a one-to-one experience.

As Mari Lending explains, in her essay “Out of Space: Circulating Monuments” (Lending, 2015, p.26),

“The cast collections confirmed the emerging opinion that architecture was actually best experienced out of place, in well-tempered, light-controlled curatorial environments. In fact, in 1818, the prominent museographer Quatremère de Quincy (...) stated that disintegrated buildings elements offer a more genuine understanding than an original building could ever provide, whether intact or in ruin. Not only out of place, but relocated in time as well, the temple fragment induced, according to Quatremère, a veritable time travel, propelling the observer back to their moment of creation.”

Simultaneously, in a parallel kind of effort towards patriotic affirmation, most governments enrolled in international World's Fairs events, promoting their achievements and identity at a global scale. To do so, the container, where either artistic artefacts and traditional goods, alongside with industrial, scientific and technological enterprises, were showcased should, necessarily, transmit a coherent and appealing image to the visitor and a strong statement to other nations. The Romanticism that dominated European culture, at the time, was translated into ephemeral historical architectures through retrieving particular forms linked of each nation past and tradition, alongside with exotic and distinctive vocabulary found in the colonial world.

National monuments would then be reinterpreted into temporary small-scale pavilions, in a very imaginative formulation based on singular architectonic elements, with no necessarily direct connection to existing concrete architectures.

Nevertheless, the ideological constraints and

conditioned commissions limited the free expression of the architects. The laboratorial potentiality, related to the creation of ephemeral structures design, would be only possible many decades later, after the fall of main dictatorial and fascist regimes, as we will see later on.

1.1. Fantasy

“The faculty or activity of imagining impossible or improbable things.” (Oxford English Dictionary)

Going back in time, until the eighteenth-century, another different type of structure started to be a standard feature in private parks. Being widely spread as an expression of a Romanticist and nostalgic view, *follies* punctuated the territory and the new British landscape design. Built merely for their owners' pleasure and personal delight, as long distance “eye-catchers” or private secret spaces, the *follies* were generated by the practice of commissioning special projects, in between architecture and sculpture, that would virtually elude any functional or reasonable constraint.

Suspending the reason and the logic, fantasised architectures opened up for freedom, lightness and creativity, setting the ground for future formal and conceptual experimentation.

Although many of these structures were based in past architectures replicas or ruins, not having a clear and undeniable consequence in architecture disciplinary development, it cannot be denied that this type of commission, close to site-specific artistic assignments, created a context that would facilitate new forms and architectonic expressions.

Contemporary ephemeral architectures, are direct heirs of this tradition and are still spreading worldwide.

1.2. Experimentation

The end of WWI and consequently dictatorial regimes and propaganda policies, opened up an era of intellectual freedom, with natural

and direct consequences on ephemeral architectures, mainly, in the exhibition context.

Regarding the World's Fairs framework, as we were discussing previously, an enormous change occurred: resumed after twenty years of interregnum, since the last New York's show, held in 1939, the Brussels World's Fair of 1958, would start a new era, by focusing on scientific and technological advances aiming at peaceful purposes. This does not mean there was no architecture experimentation ahead: Mies van der Rohe double intervention – the *German Pavilion* and the *Germany's Electric Utilities Pavilion* – in *Barcelona's 1929 International Exhibition* is an undeniable example of it. But in Brussels, the fair's organisation would specifically recommend the adoption of modernist "style" for the building up of national pavilions, opposing the inherited nationalistic ideals, facilitating a new stage for architectural experimentation. Le Corbusier's famous *Philips Pavilion* is the uppermost example of the new paradigm.

On the other hand, the emergence of conceptual art tended to blur the limits between artistic disciplines. Concurrently, the institutional critic also favoured the expansion of art interventions outside the museum, increasing site-specific installations that gradually dissolve the distance between architecture and sculpture. An increasing abandoning of form as the central purpose of sculpture production – a walking around an object – gave place to installations / environmental art, common ground for researching in art and architecture. The transdisciplinarity created after environmental art considered a broader sensory experience, and used simultaneously different artistic fields – painting, photography, literature and poetry, digital art, video and cinema – mixed and concurrent in the materialisation of the concept that was at its origin.

Aiming at legibility, the installation became multidisciplinary; the body of the visitor became an integral and active part of the work. The entering of the "real life" in the museum, in a simultaneous and antagonistic

movement of spreading art in non-institutional context, corroborated the central role of the visitor in the exhibition. Museums aimed at being more than culture archives, developing devices and strategies to educate audiences and to involve the visitor. The exhibition space was then onwards considered as an extraordinarily powerful device for transfer knowledge and generate discussion.

1.3. Mediation - Emotional Engagement

Recurring to mediation tactics, museums try to stimulate the presence of the public, decoding curatorial narratives, creating space for dialogues and debate, and fomenting creativity and intelligence. By promoting guided tours, workshops and many other parallel events, the PR departments (many times under the direct responsibility of curators) explore ways of increasing communication, legibility and engagement. The use of multidisciplinary contribution, as well as multisensorial approach, in the creation of a particular environment can promote a deeper involvement and absorption – an immersive experience –, and consequently an opportunity for more efficient transmission of contents.

The awareness regarding the usefulness of emotional engagement is widely studied, since the appearance of environmental art, aligned with the consideration of the visitor as an active part in the art experience. At the same time, market studies, cognitive development and education are exploring the potentialities of physical experience in learning processes and involvement strategies. A complete sensorial experience helps us to build and fix memories, our perceptive background – cultural, social, emotional and aesthetic – and can also be an active contributor in the creation of new associations or interpretations, when stimulated and confronted with new information, and therefore, capable of build knowledge through creative processes.

In architecture exhibitions these ideas can be

investigated in a specific way, considering the capacity of generating engagement.

Focusing on legibility issues, the curatorial narrative, and the importance of aesthetic experience, the container is the key to generate empathy and to foster curiosity within the public, while being a powerful occasion for experimentation.

1.4. Intelligence

“The ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills” (Oxford English Dictionary)

According to this line of thought, art and architecture share a large group of common concerns, from experimentation and research potential to public engagement, particularly when developed within the exhibition environment. It is precisely considering these two apparently opposed features, aligned with the idea of a shared ground of overlapped disciplines, that this paper will discuss some of the contemporary examples of *folies* and architecture exhibitions installations, deeply related to art curatorial methods, goals and manifestations, supporting the relevance of the experimental condition in the architectural display.

“Within fine art (Olafur Eliasson, Gordon Matta-Clark), music (Steve Reich, John Cage), and film (Mike Figgis, Christopher Nolan), one gleans architectural ideas that, when exhibited, might reveal to architects’ dimensions of their discipline that are neglected in the practice of building design. As such, exhibitions can themselves produce, rather than merely convey knowledge” (Chan, 2010)

Trialling ideas in a laboratory context, away from real architecture constraints can still be done in a diverse way. From the museum context, to biennial and architecture festivals, including special commissions, this paper points up some different examples that took place in those different domains or occasions. Exploring the Swiss national Pavilions at Venice Architecture Biennial latest editions; *Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined* Exhibition (Royal Academy of Arts, London 2014); and the Summer Pavilions of the Serpentine Gallery (Hyde Park, London, 2000 - ...), are placed in confront asserting the

different potentialities regarding production of knowledge while enhancing immersive spatial experience.

2. Laboratories

2.1. Biennials and Art Installations

Contemporary art exhibitions, as well as art objects, can still be seen as models for architectural curatorial production or even for architecture interventions. Edoardo Tresoldi's large-scale sculptures, made in tight metallic meshes simulating historical architectures, or James Turrel's sky-spaces, as insights on deeply spatial creations, could carry us into hypotheses of interventions, for instance, in classical heritage and on the construction of poetic spaces, respectively.

If we add, on this set of references, Incidental Space exhibition, designed by Christian Kerez and curated by Sandra Oehly for Swiss National Representation at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennial, there are no significant differences between their potential, regarding experimentation around space.

Their starting points and final goals are, indeed, different, but the way they rehearse about space, test the disciplinary limits and question signs and meaning, can reasonably be considered analogous.

“The goal of the [Christian Kerez] pavilion was to present fundamental research by critically interrogating the daily conditions of architecture (...) The aim is to investigate the possibilities — technically, as much as in our imagination — of how to think, build and experience architecture differently (...) The project sounds out the borders of what is presently architecturally possible: how can one use the medium of architecture to think about an abstract and simultaneously complex architectonic space? How can one illustrate and produce such a space?” (Press release—Incidental Space)

The Swiss pavilion of the latest Venice architecture biennale, in 2018 – *Svizzera 240: House Tour* –, follows quite the same principles, considering the spatial experience as the central concept of curatorial design. Winning the Golden Lion for the best national pavilion, it is a provocative answer to the

main theme of the Biennale: Free Space, here understood as

"as an architectural search for potential, generosity or surprises that are latent within the world, the city or, for us, the apartment" (Bosshard, 2018)

What is particularly strong about this pavilion is the shift between the building and its representation. Quoting the curators:

"Instead of representing building (or using representation in order to build), the architects build representation" (Mairs, 2018).

The exhibition shows the dominance of a particular apartment image across Switzerland housing market – white walls, wood floors and plastic window frames – questioning its ubiquity.

"The surface [decoration] becomes the exhibition by itself and it's asking what kind of architecture are we surrounded by all the time." (Mairs, 2018).

"On this tour, you are no longer an apartment dweller, builder or buyer –nor are you an academic or even an architect– you become an entirely new architectural subject, a house tourist" (Press release– Incidental Space)

The incapacity of representing space, recurring to images, is here at play, and in fact, although it is possible to frame different scale compartments in a picture, or even use a human scale, it would not be possible to understand the real scale and variations of the space.

In synthesis, the power of this intervention relies on the absolute absence of any legend or explanation that is coincident with a surprising sequence of spaces, plus a ludic opportunity. Both Switzerland's interventions are outstanding proofs that "architecture can be presented through the medium of architecture itself" (Kerez, 2016) but also testimonies of playful and performative dimensions regarding interactivity with the visitor.

2.2. Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined

Another example, this time within a museum context, is the collective exhibition, *Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined*, curated by Kate Goodwin for the Royal Academy of Arts,

in 2014. In the first text of the respective catalogue, Christophe Le Brun, president of the Royal Academy of Arts, declares the main goals of the show:

"to redefine what an architectural exhibition can be (...) to offer visitors the opportunity to get directly involved with architecture, experiencing it through their bodies and senses" (Le Brun in Goodwin, 2014)

The exhibition brings together a group of seven architects, from an extended international circuit, which conveys considerable cultural differences that reinforce the diversity of the presented proposals. "Going beyond the consideration of the purely visual components and the resolution of functional issues" (Goodwin, 2014), the exhibition focuses on different sensations of space, aiming at the dialogue between the diverse interpretations and cultural approaches.

Kengo Kuma (Japan) and Li Xiadong (China) are the Asian representatives; the Chilean Pezo von Ellrichshausen, represents South America; from Africa, more specifically from Burkina Faso, the chosen one is Diébédo Francis Kéré; and from Europe two pairs of architects are selected: the Grafton Architects, from Ireland, and the Portuguese Pritzkers duo, Álvaro Siza Vieira and Eduardo Souto de Moura.

For Goodwin, "their work raises intriguing questions about the boundaries between art and architecture, the human qualities of space" (Goodwin, 2014). Moreover, the emphasis is placed on space, on its physical nature, our perception of it, and their evocative capacity.

According to the expected diversity, the answers reflect object-based proposals, of sculptural affiliation; evocative and symbolic approaches; and others, particularly site-specific, exacerbating certain spatial effects or proposing new interpretations regarding the pre-existing background.

The will to be connected and engaged with the gallery space is manifested in all the proposals, continuously testing the interaction between the galleries, the new structures and the visitors. In synthesis, all the installations result from a reaction to the

immediate environment intersected with the main conceptual interests of the different authors.

Looking closer to the interventions, another level of detail arises. It is notable the desire to highlight the sensitive side of Eastern cultural tradition, where smell and touch are brought to greater experiential awareness. In Kengo Kuma and Li Xiaodong spaces, by reducing the presence of the light, the installations invite the visitor to circulate freely between two rooms of fragrances released by a light bamboo structure. Kuma's proposal tries to show that,

"architecture is no longer just about physical presence and visual effects with other senses as secondary elements. Exhibitions can provide opportunities to hint at the new tide for design and I predict that architecture will soon move into a more sensual mode" (Kuma in Goodwin, 2014)

In an opposing intention, Grafton Architects work fundamentally with manipulation of light vs shadow, seeking to activate imagination and memory. The ceiling manipulation, capable of amplifying the natural variation of light, creates a striking contrast between the first room, and the second space where matter and gravity are the explored subjects.

The South American duo opts for an object-based installation, placed at the end of one of the museum's largest galleries. The gallery space is interpreted differently, and the installation is reduced to one single and autonomous piece. The ambiguity of the large-scale object, without suggesting crossing at first glance, makes the proposal of Pezo von Ellrichshause, much more intriguing. The dualities explored in many of the exhibition halls, using contrast as the main strategy to highlight the differences and the changes in between installations are, in this room, manifested by working on the section of the object. This approach needs the visitor to get inside, in order to understand the suggested path. Sensory stimulation tested by other proposals – such as touch or smell –, is here translated by the bodily consciousness of the climbing, made by crossing a narrow staircase dominated by the shadow and the

intense smell of wood. This confined ascension results in a surprising new viewpoint at the top of the object.

Another manifesto-type intervention, results from a greater symbolic idea, than the stimulation of synesthetic experience. Francis Kéré designs a structure that is, simultaneously, an allusion to participatory architecture, plus an opportunity to test new materials. The cultural reference brought up by the chosen material – plastic – is another surprising characteristic of this intervention. For an architect that almost work only with a palette of autochthonous materials, extracted from the places where he builds, working with plastic generates a political layer that goes beyond a site-specific proposal.

The Portuguese architects work with fundamental elements of construction to interfere with the pre-existing space. Álvaro Siza and Souto de Moura interventions seem particularly aligned with the Venice Architecture Biennale theme of that year: Fundamentals, proposing a door-frame and a column.

The capacity to read the site, bold characteristic of Portuguese architecture, is manifested in both installations, in a quite far-fetched way. Souto de Moura centres his attention on two of the original interior door-frames of the museum, proposing a facsimile but introducing a twist regarding their materiality and position in space. By replicating the door-frames in concrete, an absolutely contemporary material, Souto de Moura drastically opposes the Modern and Classical language. Moreover, he slightly rotates the new elements creating a new visual axis, reinforcing, simultaneously, and bringing attention to the presence of the pre-existing ones. More poetic and interpretive than at first sight it may seem, in a context where surprise and unexpected spatial succession is the dominant tone, Souto de Moura does not define its installation as Architecture, on the contrary, affirms that "it is a reflection of the architecture".

Álvaro Siza's intervention, on the other hand, reinforces the idea that "doing architecture means starting with what is on the site" (Siza

in Goodwin, 2014).

The yellow and deconstructed column is distributed in three different pieces in the front patio of Burlington House, aiming at introducing some surprise and contributing to the spatial awareness of the surroundings.

"The scale [of the courtyard] is more domestic than monumental, but the facade of the building - with its portico and its columns, whiter than the rest of the stone - has a very strong presence. My first reaction was almost to panic when I thought of what to do. Then the idea of the column emerged and I imagined that I could make an installation that evoked the birth of the column"(Siza in Goodwin, 2014).

Playing with the visitor's memory, by creating a conceptual connection between both Portuguese interventions is intentionally expressed. Moreover, imagination and intelligence are stimulated by the multiple interpretations and connections suggested by the spatial interaction between the different proposals. Goodwin stresses out her goals and hopes for the exhibition: "to enable us to find more pleasure in the spaces we inhabit" and perhaps "raise our awareness of the sensory realm of architecture and thus encourage the creation of more rewarding built environments." (Goodwin, 2014).

2.3. Serpentine Pavilions

Even outside dedicated and specialised institutions or festivals, ephemeral architectures can be commissioned and contribute, in a closer way, to awaken public interest and curiosity.

The *Serpentine Gallery Summer Pavilions* are a constant presence in the garden of the art gallery in Hyde Park, since 2000. This project, launched by Julia Peyton-Jones, annually invites leading international architects, who have never built in the UK, to design a temporary structure that reflects their understanding of architecture. This initiative represents one of the most visited architecture exhibitions worldwide and a strong testimony of a method that brings society closer to architecture.

Although not consensual among the critic, for their association with extravagant *follies*

indicating a formalism and lacking of meaning,

"There is nothing more dispiriting than seeing talented architects exert their energies on hastily planned follies with no meaningful outcome or overarching idea, and no more danger than divorcing architecture from the real-world constraints under which it thrives" (Wainwright, 2016),

these pavilions are "intended as an exciting and accessible way in which to introduce the public to contemporary architecture" (Julia Peyton-Jones in Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, 2005).

Every year each architect has to respond just a minimum programme: a 300-square-meter living space that hosts a cafe, during the day and a forum for debates, shows and other activities at night, during the four months that the structure stays in Hide Park.

Since 2000, several architects engaged with the request in different ways. If Oscar Niemeyer decided to build his Pavilion (2003), based on key and recognisable formal elements of his buildings, along with some of his furniture; David Libeskind (2001) *Eighteen Turns*, evokes the folding and complex shapes that characterise his architectonic processes, without referring to its final shape in a direct way.

As another example, and possible variation regarding a different interpretation, Siza and Souto de Moura's pavilion (2005) explores a quite radically different strategy regarding their architecture production. Experimenting with new materials and formal generation methods, the Portuguese team works from a wood grid structure, organically distorted, that transforms the pavilion into an arachnid looking silhouette. As pointed out by Edwin Heathcote,

"The extraordinary, sensual, almost zoomorphic form seems such a radical departure for the architects. Yet both are highly skilled contextualists, exponents of a scarce skill in an age of simplistic architectural icons; and here, the lightness and transparency of the gridshell structure defers to the conservative brick solidity of the gallery and to the lush landscaping. Somehow the architects have achieved a design which is both expressionistic and self-effacing" (Serpentine

Gallery Pavilion, 2005, 8-9).

Indeed, even considering their expertise in reacting to new contexts, it is undeniable that, in this case, as an ephemeral and free of current constraints commission, both Siza and Souto de Moura explored new and unknown territories. Their pavilion seems to be the result of clear moment of pure delight and experimentation.

3. Final Considerations

Serpentine's *follies* are fairly groundbreaking in their origin, purpose and strategy, as a specific and dedicated architecture commission, renovated every year, for an ephemeral and free of constraints building project. Nevertheless, *Young Architects Program* (YAP), developed by the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, was already established in 1998 as an annual call for young and emerging architects to develop gathering spaces at the MoMA P.S. 1 patio. It can also be said that YAP's programme has a strong point for enabling recognition for such young practitioners; in the end, both invest in fresh and creative approaches to the same problem, while focusing on the expansion of the museum / gallery into the society.

Significant other action, developed worldwide, could be mentioned, like the *Gwangju Folly Project* (2011 and 2013) or *Bruges Contemporary Art and Architecture Triennial* (2018), among others. Both are promoted in urban context, demanding for new public interactions, political and social engagement, and a rising of consciousness of the built environment. Used as gazebos, shelters, gathering places or merely contemplating spots, these ephemeral structures or contemporary *follies* are bringing art and architecture, in a decoded and unmediated way, out of the museum, into the urban life.

Both playful and performative aspects of real-scale ephemeral architectures, mainly regarding interactivity with the visitor, are explored whatever context they happen to be inscribed. Designed without any functional constraint, focused on the corporeal experience of space – *Sensing Spaces*:

Architecture Reimagined –, manipulating real spaces generating a ludic interface – *Svizzera 240: House Tour* –, or commissioning site-specific temporary buildings – *Serpentine Gallery Summer Pavilions* –, many are the approaches that keep following *follies'* imaginative attitude.

Overlapping disciplinary borders, fomenting emotional engagement and fostering the creation of knowledge through creative stimulation are, as demonstrated, contemporary and valuable strategies for reaching out general public audience.

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