

(Re)Search Towards Exhibiting Architecture

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Maristella Casciato is the Senior Curator of Architectural Collections at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. She was previously associate director of research at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). Maristella Casciato was a tenured associate professor of History of Architecture at the University of Bologna, School of Architecture from 2002-2012. Prior to that she taught History of Architecture at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. She has lectured widely in European and North American universities and has organized and chaired several international symposia. Casciato served as chairwoman of the international non-profit organization Do.Co.Mo.Mo. (Documentation and Conservation of the architecture of the Modern Movement) under the aegis of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication from 2002 to 2010. During her tenure Do.Co.Mo.Mo. has grown from a European group of activists to a global organization. Casciato's scholarly studies focus on the history of the twentieth-century European architecture and the theory of the conservation of our recent past. She has published and co-edited books and essays translated in several languages and has contributed many essays to international peer review journals. She has been awarded the Fulbright Fellowship (1992), a research grant at the INHA in Paris (2004), and the Mellon Senior Fellowship at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal (2010).

ABSTRACT

The aim of this text is to provide a reflection on my experience in exhibiting architecture based on research projects, considering my particular vintage point as scholar/curator, who has spent the past years as senior staff in major research institutes. It is indeed a unique circumstance, having been the Director Research at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal, prior to move to become Senior Curator, Head of Architectural Collections at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) in Los Angeles.

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At the CCA I was involved in curating an exhibition, which initially originated from the acquisition of Pierre Jeanneret's archive. I shall focus on some aspects of this exhibition, which may prove to define a very fruitful research trajectory in the process of exhibiting architecture.

Another specificity to my experience comes from the fact that both the CCA and the GRI have exhibition spaces, which are specifically devoted to exhibitions on architecture and art related topics though they do not have a permanent collection on display. As a matter of fact, the venue conditions are those of a space whose characteristics are intended to exclusively host drawings, models, and objects to be exhibited temporarily.

What seems more relevant is to underline an epochal transformation that took place at the CCA as well as at the GRI (and this may be very much the case in other research institutes too) in the course of the last decade. The motivations have changed from curating the collections to curating knowledge, transferring the brief from the solely scholarly research to new approaches, which implies the need to make the archival holdings more visible and eventually search for alternatives for reaching the public.

The central issues, as summarized at the conference *Research on Display* (TUDelft & NHI Rotterdam, 2015) are:

- Which formats and typologies of display establish a profound relationship between exhibition and research?
- What is the relationship between archives and knowledge production?
- How can exhibitions combine the accumulation of historical experience and analysis with looking for further expansion?
- How scholars will work in the future considering that the collaborative model is modifying research behavior and the whole concept of authorship?

I am not fully positive that it is possible to create good architecture exhibitions, which are not pure *mise-en-scène*, or facsimile of the building.

I certainly tried to achieve results of excellence, though my point of departure has never been the architectural object, rather its history, context, materiality, reception. I would say that the research always preceded the subject matter.

What I have experienced is more the exercise of putting on stage a research project allowing the public to engage with the contents it enhanced and the way it was displayed. The educational purpose of such an attempt has seemed to me among the priorities. By the end the exhibition came into being at the convergence of multiple objectives, which embodied its *raison d'être* far beyond the pure visual result.

When exhibiting contemporary architecture the problem for the

curator(s) is quite complex. The most complete manner in which architecture appears is in its built form. This is already a major challenge: Architecture exhibits/performs outside the museum. The building is just not there when the exhibition is on place. The very expensive and complex way of creating architecture inside a museum space remains a challenge and removes architecture from its everyday life and context.

In the most obvious way architecture exhibitions do recourse to derived materials. These include drawings, photographs, scale models, video/moving images, and digital media. The objective is to document how a project/a concept/a plan developed. This gives some hope not only for exhibiting architecture, but also for understanding it. Yet, architecture inheres in building, but it is not the same as building. If one can distill what is architecture from building, then one can also say that an exhibition is in itself architecture, as it is about building.

The different modes of presenting architecture have developed over the last centuries and their conceptual nature has changed from expositions to exhibitions. Currently architectural exhibitions have turned into documentations of contemporary practices and built forms; they present tendencies. They have become reviews, monographic or thematic evaluations and critical in the manner of art exhibitions. In the curatorial practices of today exhibition is an expository tool that, in showing its content, creates an alternative coherence to offer a new, critical or laudatory, psychological or scientific, perspective.

This is a methodological approach true both in terms of historic exhibitions, as in explorations of contemporary topics in architecture, which more and more frequently foster the influences of new, digital technologies. In the later case the curator can use technical descriptions to give enough information to viewers to get a decent sense of what the building might be. The exhibition might itself be part of the distillation of architecture from building. Finally, architecture is a form of art, and a tool for prying open what we think, we know, and we experience.

I have participated in the production and presentation of several exhibitions since the late 1970s.

Funzione e Senso. Architettura casa città in Olanda 1870-1940 was presented at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome in 1979. It represented my first venture in displaying original documents outside the archive. Hundreds of original drawings together with textual documents, book and journals, and vintage photos were selected from the collections of the Dutch Documentation Center in Amsterdam and critically assembled to narrate the epic of the construction of working class housing and the Dutch modern city. The attention to this modality of displaying architectural history, design and planning received wide attention in Italy and beyond, and resonated in many exhibitions in the following decade.

I wish to examine more closely two exhibition projects, both deeply grounded in an in-depth research conducted in the archival holdings of the research institutes I have been affiliated in the past five years.

How Architects, Experts, Politicians, International Agencies, and Citizens Negotiate Modern Planning: Casablanca Chandigarh was presented at the CCA in Montreal in the Fall 2013. The exhibition has been the result of a research project elaborated in collaboration with Tom Avermaete, architectural historian and professor at TUDelft. We also co-curated the exhibition and co-authored the book *Casablanca Chandigarh. Reports on Modernization*.¹

The following quotation: «Modernity entails several different, competing master narratives, different social forces and conflicts between modernity and anti-modernity, and different cultural contextualization of the past-future contrast. But these different varieties do not simply coexist and challenge each other they are entangled with each other in various ways»² is explanatory of the aims of the exhibition:

1. By mapping a new geography of modern urbanism as developed in Chandigarh and Casablanca through the role of internal and external actors, we want to nuance and extend our historical knowledge on the modern city.

2. By focusing on the entangled character of modern urbanism we intend to introduce fresh themes into the contemporary debate, most notably on the position of the designer and the character of the urban project.

The exhibition aimed to foster fresh discussions on modern urbanism as rooted in multiple locations out of western geo-political and cultural boundaries and to develop visions of modernism that engage local particularity without getting stamped with epithets such as “derivative” or “mimicry” – a syndrome that Dipesh Chakrabarty calls «being relegated to the waiting room of history».

The exhibition aimed to decenter this dominant optic, catalyzing an approach that takes seriously the distinctiveness of modern urbanism and urbanity across the Global South. We intended to contribute to a new geography of the modern city attentive to the entangled multiplicities of modern urbanism that is to say to the mutual appraisal and interaction across borders.

Against this background the exhibition focused on two different, but complementary urban realities that each in their own way have played a paramount role in the imagination, the definition and redefinition of the twentieth century modern city. On the one hand there is Chandigarh – planned by a team consisting of Le Corbusier, Jeanneret, Frey, Drew and local architects and planners – which contributed to build the myth of the modern city designed by modern architects. The new capital was based

1. T. Avermaete, M. Casciato, *Casablanca Chandigarh: A Report on Modernization*, Zürich, Park Book, 2014.

2. Göran Therborn, 1995

on a design approach of “particularity” that relied on the design of very specific and contextual urban morphologies and housing typologies. On the other hand we find Casablanca – conceived by Michel Ecochard and a team of young French and Moroccan architects – which would redefine what the generating conditions of development were in a modern city, introducing concepts such as that of “tissue generateur”, eventually moving into the humanized urbanism of Team 10. The planning of Casablanca was largely based on the universalist principle of the grid. Ecochard believed that he could develop a general system of investigation and design that was adaptable to a variety of sites and conditions.

In the course of the development of the planning process the architectural projects that were shown in the exhibition revealed that these were the collective work of professionals from diverse fields as design, engineering, business and politics.

In other words, Chandigarh and Casablanca were not inadequate copies or adoptions, mere translations or distortions, but they had their own logics and might be considered as unique and creative definitions of the modern: they are alternative modernisms (Michael Hanchard) with a strong indigenous basis (Jyoti Hosgrahar).

Chandigarh and Casablanca represented two new and innovative architectural perspectives vis-à-vis modernity that still have some relevance for our contemporary thinking and practice. Both Chandigarh and Casablanca have performed for several decades and both have been appropriated, transformed and redefined by their inhabitants, according to changing conditions, dwelling needs and aspirations.

In the rooms of the CCA the Japanese Atelier Bow-Wow have challenged the relationship between object and meaning, introducing the idea of thematic clusters. We have exhibited drawings and models; we have used projections, films and other evocations to create a palimpsest of what planning new modern cities meant in a postcolonial context and during the cold war years. We asked two contemporary photographers, namely Yto Barrada and Takashi Homma, to illustrate how Casablanca and Chandigarh have allowed for several decades now for change, adaptation and transformation.

Currently, at the GRI I am curating with Idurre Alonso (associate curator of Latin American Art) the exhibition entitled *The Metropolis in Latin America, 1830-1930*. The show is scheduled to be on view August 29, 2017 – January 8, 2018 in the GRI Galleries.

The exhibition examines the unprecedented growth of cities in Latin America from 1830 to 1930, observing how socio-political changes and upheavals activated major modifications in urban scale and architectural landscape, creating the conditions for the emergence of the metropolis.

The research focuses on six major cities: Mexico City, Havana, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, and Lima and points to the Spanish colonial city as the imposed model and the republican city as the negotiated transfer by examining how imported models were interpreted and accommodated.

The Metropolis in Latin America proposes a rich visual survey through the presentations of maps, prints, period photographs, paintings, sketches, books and travelogues, and film clips, with the ultimate aim of providing an understanding of how this transformative period of exchanges and transfers provided the ground for the emergence of the modernist culture in Latin America, and the affirmation of the modern architectural language in the emergent metropolis.

The dominant materials in display are photographs, featuring representations of the Latin American urban conditions in very diverse situations. The photographs are primarily conformed by early vintage prints of city views by some of the most prominent photographers of the time period including Francois Auber, Abel Briquet, Desire Charnay, the Courret Brothers, Marc Ferrez, Augusto Malta, Benito Panunzi, and Charles Betts Waite. The narrative of the exhibition is structured according to a double articulation, with a series of themes organized along a diachronic thread, and a cluster of key words.

The profusion of city views generated mainly during the second half of the nineteenth century highlights the significant interest of the production of this specific type of photography by government entities, commercial companies and local and foreign collectors, and provides us with noteworthy documentation of the transformations and growth of the cities. Next to the photographic documentation, the printed materials will be an eloquent part of the exhibition and will include series of maps, original drawings, and posters, as well as books, travelogues, and professional press. Moving images and sound will also be part of the exhibition through the presentation of excerpts of documentary and fictional movies showing cityscapes. These clips will also include examples of the presence of neocolonial architecture in American films as an element that gained a mass audience in Latin America and generated a process of assimilation of both architectural features and life style.

In conclusion, what I have learned by curating these exhibitions has transformed my research approach. I am aware of the many purposes of an exhibition, which go far beyond being propaganda and marketing. By collecting and spreading knowledge I have been able to achieve critical results and to question the field. Exhibitions create new meanings and generate attention (if not enjoyment) for architecture engaging the audience in overcoming the boundaries between representation and reality.