

Design of Architecture Exhibitions: an agenda for education

Case study of 'The São Paulo International Architecture Biennale'

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Abstract

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Architecture exhibitions are communication vehicles, which propose public presentation of architecture as a cultural theme, as seen from two main angles.

Using concepts which define, on one hand, architectural representation, and on the other, museum exhibitions, the intention is to make evident a few aspects of this transfer process: from the space dealing with architecture representation to the representation or 'scenery' of the exhibition space. The first angle seeks to acknowledge the value of the design work as a piece holding cultural interest. The second angle focuses on accepting of the extension of architecture in an institutional exhibition to encompass the cultural role performed by the architecture exhibition, allied to other support activities, defining it as an informal vehicle for diffusion and education of architectural culture for the general public.

A research into The São Paulo Biannual International Architecture Exhibit pointing at accomplishments and existing problems in architectural exhibits and their communication with the audience.

Some Particulars of Architecture Exhibitions

Architecture Exhibitions have some particular characteristics.

Let us first, analyze architecture as a theme of an exhibit and the pieces and objects to be shown.



For now, we shall not address the important and equally particular matters connected to the communication of cultural heritage sites, dealing with the visiting of architectural sites, world heritage sites and public areas. We shall focus solely on the usual exhibits situated in enclosed spaces in museums and similar

Starting from themes and objects, what are the theme and what are the objects inherent of an architectural exhibition?

As it is impossible to present “real architecture” in an enclosed exhibit space, architectural representations or the resulting products of architectural project, are mainly what represent it.

An art exhibit presents objects which are art itself. An archaeology or natural history exhibition, for example, can revolve around a tool fragment or fossilized remain of an animal and through it, rebuild his history. In practice, all exhibits of all areas present challenges because they need objects to use as starting points from which they can build interpretations and definitions.

What then, would be the prerogative for differentiating an architectural exhibition from all the other kinds?

There seems to be a detail that differentiates the concept of an architectural exhibition from other kinds, such as arts, natural science, industry, technology and so forth. It is a prerogative that any exhibit in an enclosed space should communicate with its visitors by means of their objects. As mentioned above, art exhibits can expose objects or pieces which are ‘art itself’, whereas architectural exhibits usually present the products of the project phase. The architectural images and representations are used to transmit a concept, an ideology in living manners and construction of social areas, which can then be used as a base to build a discourse relevantly adapted to an exhibition. This method of connecting with an architectural piece, which is not physically there is a “must” in architectural exhibits and influences a totally differentiated curatorial approach.

As for matters concerning the collection, interest in creations of architectural projects has become more evident. Drawings, sketches, plans, models, notes, audio-visual images and other observations that architects have left about their projects, are objects that have cultural value, both for architecture, as well as museum studies.

As a theme, it is interesting to notice that the subject of architectural representations, so specific to theory and project methodology, take centre stage through its objects. The objects of an architectural project have cultural, artistic and documentary value. They are purchased for collections, are shown in exhibits and are, finally, presented to the public.

As a simplified example, let us use an traditional exhibit, which presents an architectural project-piece of an architect, the sketches, notes, projects, drawings, blueprints, images and models. All these are objects that make up a traditional architectural exhibit. It is noticeable that for the layman, the interpretation of the architectural spaces is not an easy task. For an architect, however, there is much information to be extracted. Every exhibit deals with levels of information that must be dimensioned and distributed, and in this case we have information produced by a professional that must be assimilated by the layman.

Although many times, the project is presented as the piece itselfⁱ, providing a wide range of documental, artistic and visual information, we must consider that these objects contain factors that are not always easily assimilated, which may put a bigger strain on the public's capacity of interpretation. Certain aspects of graphic representation, including spatial interpretation, could prove to be too difficult to grasp. The possibility of having the "real thing" as a built piece, on an architectural scale more easily assimilated, out of the walls of the exhibit area is, however, an argument that should not demean the concept of architectural exhibitions in enclosed spaces. As mentioned before, the task of communicating the cultural heritage sites, or a real architecture piece would be a different story altogether.

Through an object exhibition, we can talk about planning, solutions, ideologies, material construction of society, technique, esthetics, art and above all, space construction. All this in a subjective manner, through representations.



In a nutshell, it would be interesting to analyze some of the particular characteristics of the objects that make up an architectural project and that are a part of most of the existing collections since they shall be leaving their specific niche of professional knowledge and will be available to the public, via these types of exhibitions.

Besides the object problem, it has also become necessary to consider the levels of complexity that exist in architecture as a theme, according to its own theoretical definitions.

It would be interesting to highlight the architectural communication topic, the project as art concept and the architectural representations as complex themes in museum studies.

What are the defining concepts and the knowledge being transmitted? How can architecture be defined? In practice, is it the simple edification? Is it the study of the esthetics of edification? Is it edification with a social significance? Is it the project in various phases? In theory, is it a cultural medium? Is it a language? Is it an extra quality that becomes noticeable in spaces? And what about the architectural project? Can it be considered as much an work of art as the real architecture? On what foundations can we present architecture?

Architectural theory and criticism argue about these questions, and if they seem complicated to a professional, let us once again, see them through the eyes of the layman at an architectural exhibition.

We must also consider that the continuous revision of some concepts is necessary, so as to maintain the essence of the fundamentals that are being presented at an exhibit, as would be necessary for an exhibit of any nature. We have known for quite a while, that architecture is a type of open, multi-disciplinary study, which can be explored from many different angles.



We must try to make the general public understand that architecture is a far-reaching study, fundamentally composed of two central moments in its accomplishment process: architecture as a built space and as a project; as space and the conception of space; as tangible reality and a representation of reality.

An inter-disciplinary approach to the design of exhibits: an agenda for education

It's important to try to develop intellectual motivations in the layman that already exist in the professionals, so as to arouse their interest in appreciating architecture exhibitions. An educational briefing in connection with the exhibits is essential for the general public's information and the educational factor doesn't necessarily have to rule out the entertainment one: uniting pleasure and learning has been one of the main guidelines in organizing architecture exhibits.

The techniques which have been applied to architecture exhibits have shown that experimentation in the use of languages can be used as a resource: the use of installations, multimedia resources, full-scale models, interactive cenographic spaces, are all resources that stray from the traditional modalities and can transform an architecture exhibit into something more accessible. However, depending on the objects presented, these options may not be viable or even desirable.

The project and design of exhibits is intimately connected to the curators' work and generally includes educational links. This condition makes the inserts the designer into an inter-disciplinary effort.

In relation to the work committed to the designer, cenographer or architect, we can highlight some characteristics:

The exhibition concept is flexible and is composed of many variables: each exhibit has its own specific characteristics according to its theme and pieces, which presents different needs. In any instance, an exhibit should be put on to provide communication between the pieces and the public, especially if the latter come from a diverse informational background. Exhibits are not isolated events: they can mediate educational activities and launch products such as books, catalogues, websites, etc.

Architectural or design language is different from museum professionals' language. Designing exhibits requires an adjustment of repertoire. This can be attained through practice and more specialization during studies.

In terms of solutions and positioning, there is no such thing as a neutral space for pieces to be exhibited, especially for the art objects. Every spatial solution involves interference with the object to be exhibited and this should be considered positively, as in which resources are more efficient in communicating with the public. In this case, whenever possible, architecture exhibits should be better designed in terms of spatial experimentation.

Verify the educational potential of each setup. The educational activities connected to the exhibit can be used as an extra element when planning the exhibit space.

remember that the assessments of exhibits can be applied, systematic evaluations are the base of results obtained in terms of audience reception and contribute to advance of expographic concepts.

It's important to stress that the academic Brazilian urbanism and architecture area still needs more studies dealing with museums, as far as the matter of the formation and divulgation of these projects goes. The published works are recent and come from books and catalogues that detail the work of institutions, foundations and cultural centers, dealing with work in diverse areas.

Educational challenges to construct an audience: How to see an exhibition, how to understand an architecture exhibition?

In respect to educating the public for an architecture exhibit, it is wise to ask:

Does the public know what architecture is?

Is architecture and urban planning present in their daily lives?

Does the public know how to "look at" an exhibit?

When analyzing the demand for this type of exhibit, it is possible to see differences in urban life as atmospheres that can influence the public's education. Although it is not among the most common kinds of exhibits, architecture exhibits are more frequent in first-world countries, where the production, in terms of preserved historical sites, architecture, urban projects and design, are much more abundant and are imprinted in these countries' culture. On the other hand, it is fair to assume that in most countries where these exhibits take place (USA, Canada, France, and the Netherlands, for example), people are more familiarized with exhibits and cultural events. The people in these countries are better informed and are exposed to better education. It is also fair to say that they, therefore, enjoy a more complete infrastructure in their equipment, transport and consequently, architectural references.

In the end, architectural alphabetization should be compulsory in the relevant cultural means, especially in institutions that work with the communication of architectural collections and edified constructions.

It must be a joint effort undertaken by cultural and educational institutions, backed by a cultural policy that promotes education of the general public in respect to the social dimension of architecture and its qualitative, material and cultural value, focusing on a better understanding of the reality and urban surroundings in which we live. To promote architectural alphabetization, we must work in our own cultural contexts.



Besides the architectural alphabetization problem, there are other matters, equally related to the educational activities that deal with the establishment of a critical standpoint, especially in the museological sector, denominated as "museological alphabetization".

From this point of view, educational projects connected to any kind of exhibit should create educational and monitoring activities that give individuals conditions to come up with his own doubts and reflections, forming overall, an audience that is capable of responding critically to what it sees.



However, this whole process is very complex and although it seems ideal, may not be applicable, due to its particular characteristics. The museological and architectural alphabetization project is part of a bigger project in each country's educational reality, according to its cultural policies, so, success experiences must be analyzed and understood in each one's context.

Brazilian Contexts and Architecture Biennales in São Paulo

The São Paulo Architecture Biennales are temporary events of great magnitude, which divulge the panorama of contemporary, national and international architecture, attracting great emphasis to the exhibits.

Housed in a 28,000 sqm. Pavilion, the Architecture Biennales provide an insight to the production in architecture, design and urbanism, both on a national and international level, in spaces planned for contests, meetings among architects, forums and the publishing market.

The "1st. Architecture Exhibition" realized by Bienal Foundation was born with the first Art Biennale in 1951. In 1953, the Arts biennales were transferred to the Grand Pavilion, designed by Oscar Niemeyer, situated in the Ibirapuera Park. The architecture exhibits were a segment of the Arts Biennale and were divided into two basic groups: The International Architectural Exhibition and The International Contest of Architecture Schools.

The event were held every two years and in 1973 came the first International Architecture Biennale of São Paulo,

as an independent exhibition. They were scheduled to go on every 2 years, as usual, but due to problems within the foundation and miscommunication between the Brazilian Architects Institute and the architecture colleges, the second International Biennale of São Paulo came out 20 years later in 1993. This large hiatus was severely criticized and gave rise to speculations over the validity of these events in Brazil. In fact, the São Paulo Architecture Biennales were not up to standard until its third edition in 1997 and the fourth in 1999. The fifth São Paulo International Architecture Biennale will also be late and shall take place in 2003 ⁱⁱ

Of all the biennales that have taken place in South America, there has always been a greater exchange with the Biennale of Buenos Aires, which last took place in 2001 amid serious structural problems. However, the 'International Architecture Exhibitions of the Biennale de Venezia' have been great references in organizing the São Paulo Architecture Biennales. The shows in Venice are not held in one great pavilion, as in Brazil. Instead, each country has its own. Brazil has its own pavilion in Venice and the Brazilian participants are entered through Fundação Bienal de Arquitetura de São Paulo. In terms of total area of exhibit space, the São Paulo International Architecture Biennale surpasses the pavilions at the Biennale.

From 2003, new references may be adopted, such as the first Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam, which will present itself with the theme 'Mobility', focusing on the flow of public transportation in large cities. Self-denominated, the 'city of architecture', the Rotterdam Biennale will not be limited to one spot and its exhibits, debates and seminars will be spread throughout reference spots in the city. It has a very versatile program planned, which includes, among others, areas for children, studios, workshops, city tours and monitored visits to the main architectural sites in the city including the on-site presentations of the architects responsible for the buildings.

In São Paulo's case, although the Architecture Biennales have a majority of specialized visitors, consisting of architects and students, there has been some call for the media to stimulate the visiting of the non-specialized public. Basic projects of educational activities have been incorporated to its latest editions, where there was constant monitoring and small workshops directed to school students. Up to now, no serious research has been done on the visitors themselves, but it is estimated that the last edition had about 80,000 people, approximately one quarter of the public present at the Arts Biennale which is held in the same spot.

As far as the exhibit space goes, some problems were previously diagnosed.

The last biennale's theme was 'Architecture and Citizenship'. However the choice of theme is not a pre-requisite for the organization of the exhibiting space, as usually happens with the Biennale de Venezia, where the participants must adapt their presentations to the theme. In São Paulo, the final lay-out of the exhibits resembles a 'quilt', where exhibits on independent themes overlap. This results in a lack of clarity in respect to the continuity of the exhibit as a whole: the visitor can leap from one exhibit to the other without establishing any link between them whatsoever. This is due, in part, to the fact that many of the international exhibits are part of a traveling show and are booked for the biennale according to their availability at the stipulated time. Another factor is that most of the national exhibits are planned and set up based on each architect or designers own criteria and resources and the Biennale architect adopt a mere supervisory role during the installation of these exhibits. Therefore, due to a lack of resources and adequate guidance, many exhibits are set up in billboard language and contribute to making one large monotonous show.

There are exceptions however. There are good exhibits, but the sea of exhibits that clog the floors of the pavilion dwarfs them: the physical extension of the biennale is another problem that needs to be revisited.

In these conditions, there are some issues that are being analyzed, such as:

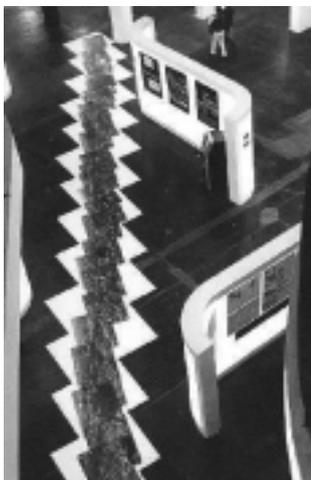
Considering the attributes of cultural and educational formation, are the Architecture Biennales doing as much as they can? Are there any limits?

Considering the general characteristics of the event, do the Architecture Biennales, in the erratic way in which they are presented, really fulfill an educational role? As it is temporary, shouldn't we consider permanent exhibits in places such as institutions, museums and cultural centers, which would be more equipped to offer the general public better planned exhibits and a differentiated educational program?

In the end, confronting these problems reveals a positive intention in creating the minimum foundations necessary for a discussion on architecture exhibits and their promotion vehicles. These hypotheses should not be understood as a partial conclusion or a means to exclude or nullify in any way, the validity of the current accomplishments. On the contrary, the advances over each Biennale are clearly visible, but a strategy directed by the curators in terms of projecting space for these events, a priority in exhibit quality and the use of academic materials, which the exhibits provide through educational activities, might promote the initial step for architectural alphabetization.



In an ideal situation, part of the architectural alphabetization could occur simultaneously with the non-formal mediums of education and culture, through institutes, museums, foundations and cultural centers, more directed towards research and promotion of architecture, urbanism and design. These institutions can offer elementary and high school programs, making the knowledge more open and accessible, something that is still restricted to tertiary education levels.



In the absence of institutions of this facade in Brazil, the programs linked to cultural promotion of architecture are sparse and we can count on few references. Exceptions can be made to the museums that exhibit architectural sites, but still connected to tourism and a lot needs to be done in respect to educational activities.

Therefore, we have contexts that demand differentiated needs and as they are impossible to resolve in the short-run, should at least be considered and discussed.

There is still a long way to go in creating foundations for educating and interesting the general public in architecture, and the São Paulo Architecture Biennales, despite their growing importance, are not enough.

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The First International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam www.1ab-rotterdam.nl

Nai Netherlands Architecture Institute www.nai.nl

CCA Canadian Centre for Architecture www.cca.qc.ca

Notes on the pictures

Picture 1: 4 BIA - Bienal Internacional de Arquitetura de São Paulo, detail of the pavillion. Architec: Oscar Niemeyer. Photo: Fundação Calouste Goulbekian.

Picture 2: 4 BIA - Bienal Internacional de Arquitetura de São Paulo, Educational activity, workshop for schools. Photo: Lilian Amaral, workshops Coordinator.

Picture 3: 4 BIA - Exhibition: "Herman Hertzberger - Articulations" , Curator: Max Risselada, Award for methodological excellence, Photo: Stella Miguez

Picture 4: 4 BIA - Exhibit "Mecanoo" , Curator: Max Risselada, Award for methodological excellence, Photo: Stella Miguez

Picture 5: 4 BIA - Exhibit "Raumplam versus Plan Libre - Adolf Loos e Le Coubousier (1919-1930), Curator: Max Risselada, Photo: Stella Miguez

Picture 6: 4 BIA - "Exposição geral de Arquitetos", Curator: Lucio Gomes Machado, Photo: Stella Miguez

Picture 7: 4 BIA – Exhibit "Paulo Mendes da Rocha Pensando a Situação e o Lugar". Curator: Paulo Mendes da Rocha Photo: Stella Miguez.

Picture 8: 4 BIA – video exhibition "Paulo Mendes da Rocha" Photo: Stella Miguez.

Picture 9: 4 BIA – Exhibit "Projeto Tamanduatehy". First Coordinator: Cândido Malta. Photo:Stella Miguez.

ⁱ Footnotes

(i) The architectural referral does not always exist. Many projects have never been carried out and exist solely on paper, as "paper architecture", as is the case of the exhibition and publication "The Changing of Avant-Garde: visionary architectural drawings", from Howard Gilman's collection or as in the Biennale de Venezia, where the pieces were projects to be built.

ⁱⁱ This case study was initiated in 1999/2000 and used the Fourth International Architecture Biennale as reference. The theme was "Architecture and Citizenship" and at the current stage of development, some things need to be considered in respect to 5th Biennale, to be held in September 2003. The characterization of the biennale is being divided into researches that divide themselves into three areas: curators, educational programs and exhibit studies.

Brief Biography

Stella Miguez was born in Santos, Brazil, in July, 1967.



She arrived in São Paulo in 1989, and since then, she has been studying in Architecture and Urbanism at 'USP- Universidade de São Paulo'. At first, she focused on the interest by the theme of the Architectural Representation within the practices of the projectual process. During this time, she had developed educational activities as teacher, working on drawing classes for beginner students whose applied for Architecture.

At the same institution, Stella Miguez has concluded her Master's degree in 2002, and now she's PhD candidate developing the tesis and research in: "*Architecture Exhibitions and Interdisciplinary Practices: an Estudy of Case of the Architecture Biennales*".

This subject is as an extension of the Architectural Representation theme, which can be applied to the Museologic theory and practices. All this academic work have been supported by FAPESP foundation.