

ARTCHITECTURE

The Exhibition Spaces of the Future

by Alessandro Bava



John Knight
"A work in situ" (2016); Installation view at REDCAT, Los Angeles
Photo: Rafael Hernandez

What are the exhibition spaces of the future? Hybrid museum buildings, domestic spaces that defy our transparent, commercialised world, or the urban fabric itself? Alessandro Bava on the rediscovered relevance of architecture and the desire for real experience.

Architecture is slowly finding a new relevance in the cosmos of the twenty-first century, at least in theory. After a couple of decades of dematerialization, the precious and irreducible fact of architecture's physical presence is back on the agenda. In a world where everything seems accessible, the specificity and uniqueness of experience has gained tremendous currency in the realm of commodities. The newfound relevance of architecture as a means of administering experience is easily explained through its role as a technology for containing and determining tridimensional space at a time when this is clearly the next frontier of digitisation. If digital technologies have created their own intangible universe (notwithstanding the materialists pointing out that "the internet runs on burnt coal"), they are now slowly colonising and recording physical space. They are doing this in two ways: actively, by harvesting previously unattainable data via its spatial coordinates (e.g., by capturing preferences and habits with an unprecedented degree of spatial precision), but also passively, by fostering a craving for specific, unique and unrepeatable experience: providing a rich context of material and immaterial histories, memories and site-specific narratives; and serving as a carrier of endless possibilities for individual fruition.



En Garde Arts
Father Was a Peculiar Man (1990), directed by Reza Abdoh

This newfound relevance of architecture is manifesting itself embryonically as the emerging context of art exhibitions, which have already integrated a lot of the changes happening to space as it's being redefined and appropriated by digital technologies. Many recent exhibitions by younger artists have in common the acknowledgment of their specific physical and cultural setting, perhaps also as a reaction to the early days of post-internet art, which revelled in the freedom offered by placeless image dissemination. Artists are now, instead, walking the problematic line of wanting to give their audience a one-off experience that cannot be captured in a single iconic image while also maintaining a criticality towards the so-called experience economy. Here, architecture offers a mode of resistance to art's commodification, functioning as a device that can absorb narrative and spatial ideas, and even imply community and history, to counter the banality of a commodity-based art world and the increasingly established practice of buying art from jpegs.

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I'm thinking of exhibitions like Lena Henke's "Available Light" (2016) at Kunstverein Braunschweig, in which personal memories and cultural history are conflated in an environment shaped by different lighting techniques and sculptural elements referencing Frank Gehry's work with the dancer Lucinda Childs; or "Hütti", curated by artists Veit Laurent Kurz and Ben Schumacher at Ludlow 38 in New York, for which they built a material and intellectual context for a group show as an alpine hut made of painted cardboard. A similar approach is offered by Tobias Madison's 2013 exhibitions at Carnegie International and the Kunsthalle Zurich, where he and his collaborators tried to explode the physical contingencies of the gallery by using sound or water, along with a program of social events outside of the institution.



"Hütte" (2017); Installation view at Ludlow 38

The work of the artist John Knight already provides an archaeology of this new understanding of space and can also give an insight in its possible future developments. Since the early 70s Knight has used the contingencies and specificities of architecture as a material to construct a critique of the supposed neutrality of spaces to exhibit art. If the white cube is dead, Knight killed it before it existed; in his recent exhibition at REDCAT, an art institution that occupies the original underground parking area of the Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles, Knight "restored" the space using only the graphics and signage of a car park, while maintaining the ambiguity of the space as a traditional white cube.

Such an undressing and exposing of exhibition spaces is instrumental in rethinking the shifting relationship between art and its context. But the context itself is changing, too: if the spatial archetype of modernism was the industrial loft, a place of production and political struggle, today's most generative spatial metaphor seems to be the home, the soft spot of contemporary production and reproduction, a space that, however unlikely it sounds, has come to represent a site of conflict and meaning-production more than any public space. Indeed, the home as it's understood today has to do with the biopolitical production of identities and the transmission of cultural values known as social reproduction as much as with actual production. The home is also going through a historical renegotiation of its essence as the paradigmatic private space, the last safe haven from an increasingly transparent world.



Marc Camille Chaimowitz
"Belated Opening" (2017); Installation view of "This Way out of England" at Raven Row

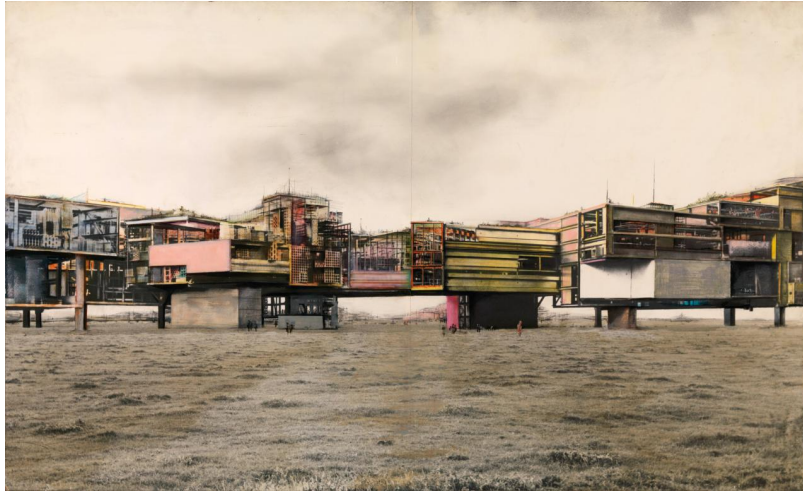
Photo: Mark Blower

Already in 1929, Le Corbusier was developing the model for his seminal Mundaneum project – a "world museum" that has been described as a "proto-internet" experiment – which grew out of his domestic projects like Villa Savoye. But back then the parallel between the house and the museum was banal: art has long existed on house walls more than anywhere else. Nevertheless his designs for museums are interesting as vectors of a certain approach to designing art spaces that is still very much alive: his idea of a continuous linear abstract space, governed only by historical forces and technical needs, is exactly the same approach as that taken by Renzo Piano for the new Whitney Museum building in New York. There, Piano's office produced a functional yet sterile machine to display art, and even the best curatorial efforts (e.g., the "Open Plan" exhibition series, for which the museum's entire fifth floor, the largest column-free interior space in New York, was used as a single open gallery) cannot defeat the obvious fact of its generic and climatized perfection.

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Like the Whitney, most institutions are governed by the architecture of their bureaucracy before they can even imagine what type of space they might want. Rem Koolhaas's museum projects exemplify how to deal with the overwhelming power of bureaucracy over architecture. In the 90s and 00s, his studio OMA proposed a series of designs for museums that almost entirely give up space from the design equation, or, better, achieve spatial specificity only and strictly through what architects would call programmatic invention – i.e., making changes to the building's brief or program. This typically postmodern approach can be understood as institutional self-critique: in the (cancelled) project for the LACMA extension, for example, Koolhaas tried to organise "the history of

the arts [...] as a single and simultaneous narrative showing moments of chronological coincidence, autonomy, influence and convergence” – suggesting an excess of critique that was already curatorial before it was spatial. It ultimately proved architecturally both too complex and too weak to actually get built.



Constant
View of New Babylonian Sectors (1971)

Some ideas from the LACMA project were, however, brought over to OMA's design for the Fondazione Prada in Milan, at least in its initial version, where some of the exhibition spaces were going to publicly display its normally invisible storage holdings in arrangements determined by a robotic archivist. When it was presented in 2008 I found this quite radical and confronted the foundation's director Germano Celant about it at the press conference: was architecture pre-empting the role of the curator, substituting it with an algorithmic brain?

Of course Celant was very offended and protested that he had “worked with space” since his early days as the ideologist of arte povera, but I remained sceptical. It is only in the soon-to-be-unveiled new mise-en-scène for the Stedelijk museum that OMA manages to produce a truly original spatial idea which engenders (or is engendered by?) a new curatorial vision for how to display the museum's permanent collections. The spatial devices designed by OMA will enable viewers to experience the permanent collection in two simultaneous ways: chronologically and rhizomatically. It is possibly the first situationist museographic project, and a very poignant inversion of the spatial clichés of museum design: that new art needs empty columnless spaces, while old art needs linear sequences, enfilades, straight walls. Here this equation will be inverted to reposition the uneven balance between temporary and permanent exhibitions.



"56 Artillery Line" (2017); Installation view at Raven Row

But still, a fundamental rethinking of the museum will have to go beyond that, and break beyond the limit of just being a critique or an inversion of what's already there. In a recent essay on e-flux I learned about APTART, a sort of P2P networked institution that was active between 1982 and 1984 in Moscow, which ran as a series of exhibitions in artists' apartments, outside the realm of Soviet "official art". The reclaiming of domestic space as a site of freedom of expression in a context where the private domain was almost unspeakable makes a very interesting case study for how the institutions of the future can be built and modified in the face of the omnivorous commodification of the private today. This shift is at the core of attempts at re-describing the relationship between art and exhibition space for institutions without a permanent home like the Fondazione Trussardi under the curatorship of Massimiliano Gioni, which opens up architectural gems and special locations to the public in a way that feels somewhat paternalistic and bourgeois; or the "56 Artillery Lane" exhibition currently on view at Raven Row in London, which stages a series of events happening at different times through day and night, aiming to contextualise the domestic past of the gallery "as a space for social, sexual and political agency", but perhaps remaining too well behaved and tasteful at that.



The fundamental problem of art spaces today is to negotiate the urge to disembodiment (opening up to the city, creating satellites, providing more interesting spaces with a history artists can react to, etc.) alongside the necessity of housing permanent collections that have an entirely different function related to memory, collective history, public education and so on. One wonders if maybe in the future, all permanent collections (private or public) should return to the homes of the dynasties and powers who acquired them and give up altogether the institutions' ambition of historicising the near-past, while collective memory should be built by direct and performed experience.

Theatre visionary Reza Abdoh's *Father Was a Peculiar Man*, a multimedia performance with a cast of more than 50, set in four blocks of New York's Meatpacking District in 1990, is maybe a model for this kind of future art institution. Abdoh eliminated a dramatic arc in favor of "an emotional through-line [which] will accumulate by the time the performance ends", weaving the historical reality of the still marginalised and lawless neighbourhood where the work took place together with the archetypical themes of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. The power of this work, performed through and with architecture, shows that it is possible to engage the fabric of the city in a direct way that is as spatial as it is thematic, and to construct a space for art that is participatory, unrepeatable, and democratic. But given that we probably live in a simulation of Constant's New Babylon, in which work is automated and creativity is omnipresent, maybe art will be altogether unnecessary.

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