FROM UNIVERSITY: EXHIBITION AS DIDACTIC EVENT or
BARCELONA IS NOT MOSCOW

A EXPOSIÇÃO DE ARQUITETURA. HISTÓRICO, ATUALIDADE E PERSPECTIVAS

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DA UNIVERSIDADE: A EXPOSIÇÃO COMO EVENTO DIDÁTICO ou BARCELONA NÃO É MOSCOU

RESUMO

A melhor arquitetura em exibição é, sem dúvida alguma, a própria arquitetura. A arquitetura é um fenômeno complexo que precisa de uma experiência sensorial além de um profundo conhecimento para compreender a sua própria realidade. O conhecimento arquitetônico transcende o físico para entrar no campo do Pensamento. De acordo com Le Corbusier “Nada é transmissível, exceto o pensamento”, e o pensamento é alimentado pela experiência e o conhecimento. Portanto, como é que vamos converter experiência e conhecimento numa exposição em um evento didático?

Este artigo procura refletir sobre a transmissão do conhecimento de arquitetura através de um determinado tipo de exibição que poderíamos chamar exposição didática; após uma breve introdução histórica e através da história da experiência pessoal com duas exposições, “Grupo R, uma revisão da modernidade” e “Le Corbusier. Paris n'est pas Moscou”. As duas exposições diferem entre si em termos de tempo e intenção, mas o meu objetivo é examinar os dois eventos e sua capacidade de entrelaçar conhecimento, experiência e capacidade evocativa para transmitir o significado e pensamento por trás da Arquitetura.

Esta experiência de arquitetura em exibição como um fato didático é feita a partir de um contexto e uma responsabilidade particular: a investigação na Universidade. Uma exposição pode ser vista como um momento intenso de investigação - não apenas como sua difusão - e também não se pode considerar simplesmente uma promenade através de diferentes objetos. As palavras que definem o nosso trabalho são “investigação” e “didática”. Uma exposição pode ser o prazer da união de ambas para transmitir o pensamento arquitetônico.

Palavras-chave: Arquitectura, Exposição, Didática, Le Corbusier

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ABSTRACT

The best architecture on display is, without any doubt, architecture itself. Architecture is a complex phenomenon that needs a sensorial experience plus a deep knowledge to understand its very reality. Architectural knowledge transcends the physical to enter into the field of Thought. According to Le Corbusier “Nothing is transmissible but thought”, and Thought is nourished by experience and knowledge. Therefore, how do we convert experience and knowledge at an exhibition into a didactic event?

This article tries to reflect on the transmission of architectural knowledge through a particular type of display that we might call didactic exhibition. After a short historical introduction and through the story of the personal experience with two exhibitions, “Group R, a review of modernity” and “Le Corbusier. Paris n'est pas Moscou”. The two exhibitions differ from each other in terms of time and intention, but my purpose is to examine these two events and their capacity to interweave knowledge, experience and evocative capacity to transmit the meaning and thinking behind Architecture.

This experience of architecture on display as a didactic fact is done from a particular context and responsibility: University research. An exhibition may be seen as an intensive moment of research – not only its diffusion- and neither can it be consider a simple promenade through different objects. The words that define our work are “research” and “didactic”. An exhibition can be a happy union of both in which to transmit architectural thought.

Keywords: Architecture, Exhibition, Didactic, Le Corbusier.
1. INTRODUCTION

Nothing is transmissible but thought.
All this happens inside the head, formulating itself, passing through an embryonic stage, little by little in the course of a lifetime that flies by in a vertigo, whose end one reaches without even realizing it.

Le Corbusier, MIse au point, Paris. July 1965

The best Architecture on display is, without any doubt, the Architecture itself. Architecture is a complex phenomenon, because its internalization is a result of many components: its place, orientation, geometry, space, materials, vision and sound. It is only possible to know building completely by walking around and inside it, touching and feeling its presence. But is it enough? Probably in a “patient research” we should know more aspects: its precedents, relationship with other buildings by the same or different authors, geometric characteristics or technical mysteries. Knowing is not only having an experience.

Experience and knowledge can be the medium to interweave networks with which to capture the meaning of what surrounds us and its architecture. How translate that to the huge field of exhibitions? Even more, what kind of exhibitions are we talking about? Actually, there are exhibitions about Architecture and Architecture on display. There even are many differences between Architecture and what we think about Architecture, i.e. Architectural criticism. According to Le Corbusier “Nothing is transmissible but thought”, and Thought is nourished by experience and knowledge. Therefore, how do we convert experience and knowledge at an exhibition into a didactic event? Is it the same to exhibit and to teach?

It is necessary a methodological approach to three terms that define the problem. “Exhibir, exponer y enseñar”. Exhibition, exposition and teaching.

I recognize the difficulty starting with the etymology of words when they are translated into another language. The reflections are intimately linked to language. We think with images and words, and these with their meanings and nuances. As a consequence, it is convenient to depart from Spanish words to develop this dissertation in English.

We can translate “Exhibir” by “exhibit, display”, and it means “mostrar en público”: “to offer or expose to view”. If we turn it into a pronominal or reflexive verb, "exhibit" takes on a new
meaning: "draw attention": "to show off", even "to expose oneself", "to hold up to ridicule or reprobation".

"Exponer", “to expose” is etymologically “poner algo fuera”, “to put something out" or "beyond" concerning place or time. Somehow, it is extracted from its origin, temporal or physical to be contemplated. And this effort implies that is valuable and it must be appreciated. It is also “to manifest”, “to explain” or “to make known”. In the Spanish dictionary we can read: “To declare, interpret, explain the true meaning of a word, text or doctrine that can have several meanings or be difficult to understand”. Thus “to expose” carries a possible interpretation and it can make something understandable to the observer. To expose is also communicating.

But in Spanish, “to expose” also has another meaning: to risk, to put in danger. And this is also a characteristic of every interpretation; therefore an interpretation doesn’t have to be acceptable to the public: but it does involve a risk.

The last word, “enseñar”, comes from the Latin, (in signare) which provides advice on the way ahead. It is defined as "to instruct, indoctrinate, to train with rules or precepts" is also "to show or expose something to be seen and appreciated," and it is translated as "to teach" or "to demonstrate" in these meanings.

We could collect all these meanings in one: to expose is to put something (valuable) out of its space and natural time to reveal its nature. I have written "valuable" in brackets because I am asking myself: what is its true value? The value of the objects on display themselves or the importance of the knowledge revealed by them.

I am going to use two exhibitions in which I have participated as “curator” and "designer" as a backdrop on my reflections in this topic. But prior to this I would like to talk about two historical examples for their capacity to illuminate our discourse.

2. DIDACTIC AIMS IN THE ORIGIN OF EXHIBITIONS

All of us know that the origin of Arts and Architecture on display can be dated in the first Renaissance when a first historical consciousness is installed between artists and men of culture. The recognition of the superiority of the classical past incites these humanists to create their first private collections: cabinets, studioli, reliquaries, treasure chests, antiquaria or the first pinakothekae, gathering artistic pieces or exotic curiosities. These places, initially designed for the deposit and delight of the collector, begin to become places for display in society as a sign of prestige and social recognition.
In the seventeenth century the practice of Grand Tour becomes very popular. English and French noblemen travel to the classical ancient ruins and gather their collections of original archaeological remains. The relative despoilment of the ruins raises a new industry: the reproduction of fragments, folders of engravings and architectural guidelines. From 1770 are in Rome cork models made by artisans such Augusto Rosa (1738-1784) and Antonio Chichi (1743-1816), are commercialized, these objects are high-priced but as faithful as possible to the much-admired monuments of the past. This is the origin of the first temporary or permanent exhibitions, in which the architecture itself - and not the cult of the remains of the past- is the subject of study.

One of the first exhibitions with a didactic goal was probably the Galerie des chefs-d’œuvre de l’architecture des différents peuples by Louis-François Cassas. At the presentation of the exposition written by Jacques Guillaume Legrand, one of the first historians on architecture, he explains that the purpose in focusing on the Architectural Knowledge which previously had not been given sufficient importance in France. According to Legrand, the challenge is to educate visitors through this exhibition “represented by models in their correct proportions, and designed to the correct scales, offers a unique and powerful means of instruction in this genre”.

These models, arranged in chronological order, were accompanied by paintings and engravings by Cassas himself showing the same buildings in their place and original period or in their appearance of ruin, in an attempt to show their social and historical context. The appearance of daily and picturesque scenes tried to acclimatise and transport visitors to that age. And according to Legrand, “for the benefits of instruction, he (Cassas) wanted to gather in a leaflet, written with accuracy, a historical summary of each monument and an analysis of the principles of architecture, the beauty it contains, the examples presented, and the various applications it can receive from us”. With this teaching aim on History of Architecture, there is also a desire to contribute to “the greatest and safest medium of instruction that has ever existed for Architecture”.

1 Louis-Francisco Cassas (1756-1827) was a French painter, drawer and architect, which after some years travelling abroad opened to the public its Model Gallery in Paris.
2 “Exécutée en modèles dans leurs justes proportions, et rapprochée sur des échelles convenables, offre seule un puissant moyen d'instruction en ce genre”.
3 “Au profit de l'instruction, il (Cassas) a désiré rassembler dans une notice, rédigée avec précision, l'abrégé historique de chaque monument et l'analyse des principes d'architecture, ou des beautés qu'il renferme, des exemples qu'il présente, et des applications différents qu'il peut recevoir parmi nous”. Ibid, p. xiii.
4 “Le plus grand et le plus sûr moyen d'instruction qui ait jamais existé pour l'architecture chez aucun peuple » and « un perfectionnement de l’art et du goût qui doivent résulter de cette exposition d’un genre tout-à-fait neuf » ibid, p. xvi and p. xv.
These models were displayed on the rue de Seine in Paris in a somewhat narrow room given the scenes represented. The models were arranged in two continuous pedestals on both sides of the walls and were accompanied by Cassas’ paintings. A view of 1806 made by Bance - a collaborator on his travels- shows the relative accumulation of objects observable only frontally from the wide centre aisle, but allowing quick comparison between them and other buildings with an obvious pedagogical value.

In any case, as Werner Szambien⁵ says, there was an overlap between a didactic determination and perception exclusively interested in the picturesque effect. And indeed in those years, besides its pedagogical possibilities, models were becoming cult objects.

The Enlightenment was intimately linked to this didactic spirit demonstrated through manuals, dictionaries or exhibitions that allowed sorting, classifying and understanding the reality and thereby instructing society. There were many other contemporary museums or exhibitions with similar challenges. For example, the Musée des Monuments Français (Museum of French Monuments) was created in Paris in 1795 under the responsibility of Alexander Lenoir in order, firstly, to avoid postrevolutionary vandalism and, secondly, to create a museum with the remains of destroyed monuments and to explain the glorious history of France.

This historic part can finish recalling other experiences that combine knowledge and evocation as what is called “period rooms”. In the late nineteenth century, some museums like the Museum of Nuremberg (1888), Kaiser Friedrich Museum (1897), the National Museum in Munich (1900), the Swiss National Museum in Zurich (1898) or the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm (1873) were the first to use scenography to explain history and national arts. The mechanism is very effective: to reproduce one or more rooms at real scale like a theatre scene to present a daily space easily recognizable but surprising for the visitors. But its rise occurs especially in the United States. According to Georges Bazin⁶, Americans need to evoke an atmosphere accompanying the objects impregnated by a past that they don’t possess. It was the Metropolitan Museum of Art New York, with the opening of its American Wing in 1924, who started this tradition with its “colonial style” rooms that were quickly extended across multiple cities.

Therefore we can think about two initial traditions on architecture on display: first, the reproduction the Antiquity through an accurate scenography as period rooms; second, to show an architectural story through models, engravings or paintings. Both of them simultaneously intend two goals: objective knowledge and evocation. The history of

⁵ Szambien, Werner, Le Musée d’Architecture, Paris: Picard, 1988, p. 15
architectural exhibitions is full of examples where these models are used together or separately, as a means for the transmission of architectural thought. These experiences could be seen as antecedents to the two exhibitions that are result from my personal experience.

3. GRUP R, A CLAIM FOR MODERNITY, A VINDICATION FOR CATALONIA

The first one was the exhibition “Grup R, una revision de la modernidad” (Group R, a modernity review). Its distant origin is found in my PhD Thesis about the relationship between Italian and Catalan architecture from 1945 to 1968, that included a chapter about Group R. This team was formed by a variable number of architects, between nine and fourteen architects, as Oriol Bohigas, Antoni de Moragas, José Antonio Coderch, Joaquim Gili or Josep Mª Sostres, the theorist of the team. They were not very well known abroad, but their presence was indispensable to recover architectural modernity in Catalonia.


“Grup R, una revision de la modernidad”: Elvira Maluquer, Carmen Rodríguez and Jorge Torres, curators. Fernando Marzá and Jorge Torres, designers.
The research process followed with a book, Grup R, and it was the origin of that exhibition in the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona-Charity House in 1997. But the research work didn’t finish in that moment with this exhibition in a very important space, because there have been new contributions around this subject. In my opinion the exhibition could be seen as a privileged moment of the research process and diffusion of results.

What was the sense and the activity developed by Group R? Letter R meant revolution, regeneration, return to modernity in the wider sense of this word. The Spanish Civil War meant breaking from architectural and cultural modernity. An old academicism and monumentalism was installed in architectural thinking as it happened in other countries such as Italy, Germany or Russia. The first challenge for Group R Architects was trying to return to modernity with its goals, intentions, methods and formal language.

The exhibition presented at the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona was a proposal on three levels. On the one hand, two of the four exhibitions organized by the members of Group R to promote their work in the dark and sclerotic cultural panorama of the fifties in Barcelona were reconstructed with philological criteria. Inside these reconstructions were exhibited the photographs that Francesc Català-Roca made of the buildings and activities of the group, but they were treated as autonomous objects, to be contemplated themselves with independent aesthetic criteria. The circle was closed with the expository discourse proposed: a retrospective vision, supposedly not nostalgic, of a relatively recent moment of Catalanian architecture yet distant enough to support different levels of interpretation.
The exhibition tried to show these questions. First, the main marks in this process of modernization before and after the constitution the Group R in 1951. After, the history and the meaning of Group R until its disappearance around 1958. The exhibition rooms showed its activities through the reproduction of its displays, as the first exhibition of 1951 about the architectural works realized by its members took place.

The next room showed the second exhibition in 1954: “Industry and Architecture”, as an attempt of connection with social reality and the actual state of construction and the economy. In the middle of the construction materials –bricks, blinds, windows, lamps, or furniture- there were some plastic works by Jorge Oteiza, Ángel Ferrant, Juan Josep Tharrats Antoni Cumella, Eudald Serra and Antoni Tàpies. It was a demonstration about their interest on two of the recurring themes of that period: the integration of arts and industrial design.

Another room contained material from the students competitions promoted by Group R and the next one, more plans, models and photographs from the Fourth exhibition about the last buildings realized by the members of the Group. The display ended with a demonstration about the normalization of the architectonical culture and the return to modernity. At the exhibition we used original material by the architect offices (designs, plans, photographs), old books and magazines, original sculptures, lamps and furniture. For the missing material we reproduced old drawings and models made by the students of the Architectural School in Valencia.

The exhibition had a didactic purpose: to explain to the public what Group R was: its components, their works and activities and the meaning and importance of this team in relation to Spanish modernity. But there is another ingredient in this question: a nationalist claim in relation to Spain. Actually, the custom was accompanied by a claim for independence. In the dark period of the Franco dictatorship, Group R was the first free architects association in Spain that struggled for Modern Architecture. A nationalistic claim was behind this custom and the historical discourse.

What was the “aura” of that exhibition? I think not in the plans shown, usually not understandable for the public, neither on the old objects, maybe it was a little in the atmosphere, but especially in the nationalist feeling. In its origin the exhibit intended a mere didactic purpose, but, actually, it generated atavistic sentiments.


4. PARIS N’EST PAS MOSCU

Last year in the International Congress LC2015 Le Corbusier 50 years later three exhibitions about Le Corbusier were inaugurated. The first one was “Le Corbusier à l’École” (Le Corbusier at School) devoted to works done by architectural students around Le Corbusier and its buildings. The second one was a bit special due to its film format: “Esprit de verité” about the filmography done or about Le Corbusier. The third exhibition, “Le Corbusier. Paris n’est pas Moscou” tries to reflect on two subjects: the projects carried out by the French architect in Russia: Ville Radieuse, Centrosoyuz and the competition for the Palace of Soviets; and their meaning in the thirties.

This exhibition parts from another research project started over ten years ago about the relationship between Technics with Architecture, especially what we can call “technical thinking”. The book Le Corbusier, visions of technics in five times was a first incursion into this topic. Centrosoyuz was one of the most important buildings in this text, due to two inventions introduced in this building by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: the “Exact Breathing” and the “Neutralizing wall”. This research work become collective by advising the PhD Thesis of Pedro Ponce about Palace of Soviets, and with the collaboration of Raúl Castellanos, the third curator of this exhibition. Therefore, Paris is not Moscow is a result from a shared research work with a didactic challenge directed at university students.

Our proposal is to accompany them on an intellectual journey similar to the voyage made by Le Corbusier crossing the centre of Europe towards Moscow. This journey from Paris to Moscow is what the exhibition intends to show, starting with some travel guides that introduce us to the Russian capital. It is an adventure through two cities and through the time evoked by some photographs, sketches and documents. These are not situated at the exhibition in a lineal way, but rather as a random walk like the place that they occupy in our memory.

It is as the second visit to Moscow made by Le Corbusier on June 1929. During the train trip, he devotes a brief text to the Czech artist Karel Teige, entitled “In Defense of Architecture”, in which he explains his incredulity at the favour granted by the Neue Sachlichkeit to his

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(Corbusier’s) functionalist project for the Centrosoyuz. Meanwhile, the contemporary pyramid of the Mundaneum is judged academicism. Against the attacks of rationalist vanguard, Le Corbusier responds defending the unity of the creative act: “Mundaneum and the Centrosoyus both emerged from our heads during the same month of June”.

Essentially, the controversy doesn’t make much sense for Le Corbusier because from his point of view, as author of both projects, rather than opposing each other, they are showing intimate coherence: “In 1928 it was the Palace of the Centrosoyus in Moscow […]. But at that time, other desks in the studio had drawings of the Mundaneum on them. The same architectural germs inhabited the whole atmosphere of our studio”. One would therefore say that the unity between these two projects apparently so different from each other - and geographically so distant from each other - was condensed in the atmosphere of the Atelier at Rue de Sèvres, similarly to some common principles that most probably inhabited the architect’s mind.

Figura 7 - Le Corbusier’s atelier Rue de Sèvres. S.d. Fonte: FLC L4-13-35

The exhibition Paris n’est pas Moscou intends to guide the observer through that dense atmosphere of Le Corbusier’s atelier during the design process of his projects for Moscow:

Ville Radieuse, Centrosoyuz and Palace of Soviets. Between the mid twenties and the late thirties, from the Plan Voisin for Paris to the Murondins Houses, Le Corbusier works on more than sixty projects (some of them are in the exhibition), through which he explores a wide variety of scales, programmes and techniques. His creative work branches out from a common stem, and results in works, whose diversity perhaps suggests, among its reasons, a collective authorship.

It is only possible to evoke such an atmosphere by re-building the site where those projects were conceived and drawn. The exhibition places us in the entrance to Le Corbusier’s studio, like a “period room” that we have recreated its interior. A yellow plan hung from the ceiling indicates the place of his office, some “windows” on the left side and the drawing tables on the right, reproducing the work site with his painting projected on the wall. On the left side the visitors can attend an architectural lesson about the three projects presented, the Radiant City, the Centrosoyuz and the Palace of Soviets. But this lesson offered by Le Corbusier is not historic, but deeply architectonic, as the references or the key words that our panels show: “precedents”, “composition”, “projects”, “circulation”, “circle and square”, “right angle”, “exact breathing”, “project system”, “process” or “movement”.

On the right side, spread out or rolled, there is Le Corbusier's simultaneous production on the tables. Today, however, Le Corbusier's collaborators have already left the drawing board, leaving behind the result of their work, the master's advice and teachings, their doubts. But the visitors can take these planes in their hands again, -they are accurate facsimiles-, and they can see how these projects collaborate in the construction of the story, weaving and playing at their will with the threads of history. A free and evocative discourse requires an active eye so as their implicit relationships made become evident, avoiding the contemplative attitude of those who are patiently waiting to receive a previously encapsulated message. It might well be only in this way that the affinity between the early drawings of Villa Savoye and Muscovite Centrosoyuz can be glimpsed; or the apparent contradiction between Errazuriz House and the maisons montées à sec; or, certainly, the most evident relationship between the strategies of the so called “les grand travaux”, the great works.

This economic strategy allows direct accessibility of students to certain facsimile plans, that they can take, open, deployed, view and draw on them, reproducing the work of the collaborators of Le Corbusier's atelier. Werner Szambien spoke of the loss of aura in reproductions of architectural exhibitions, but perhaps this can be recovered, evoked in the reproduction of an atmosphere and a whole creative process that remains open to free interpretation.

Object, place and time. Perhaps the specifications about the place are the most obvious ones; its physical existence doesn’t cast any doubt: it discards uncertainty. But the location on which these three projects are conceived and designed is not so much a point in space as a journey, a shift; it would resemble a return trip between two cities, the unmistakable history of Paris and Moscow experienced in first person by an architect who has imagined a similar future for both. Nevertheless, that familiarity does not deny the real experience of distance: 
Paris n’est pas Moscou. After all, the spatial and temporary delocalization of the current stage reveals that Paris is not Paris any more, but the place of thought (an idea); and Moscow is no longer Moscow, but the destination of the work.

Is not possible to replicate Moscow or Paris, neither is it possible to replicate Le Corbusier, but the narrow lateral bay of the Rue de Sèvres’ cloister; today missing, it embodies in itself the qualities of the myth. That studio that we can evoke today is nothing more than a “patient search” for new pieces of architecture. An indicible space, freed from time: the arcane place where ideas are engendered. But, today, for us, it is the space where the thought, “the noble fruit of our labour” is transmissible12.

5. CONCLUSION

Nothing is transmissible but thought, said Le Corbusier. This is our aim. But thought is formed by different ingredients: from architectural knowledge to subjective feelings caused by experience. Spaces, journeys, projects, books, films, drawings, paintings or memories are present in the design process. Architecture is also nourished by imagination and memory at the same time. All of them are united in thought. Thus, a didactic exhibition means to transmit thought, knowledge and evocation, because evocation could be knowledge too. But conversely, an exhibition might evoke feelings shared by a social group but not strictly architectural. The power of evocation clearly transcends knowledge, maybe thought too.

Picking up the words of Le Corbusier, our challenge is the transmission of thought. Therefore the challenge of a didactic exhibition is not only Architecture but Architectural Thought. In this last case, what we wanted to offer was a visual lesson on an intense moment in the architectural production by Le Corbusier. But we did not intend to make only a visual discourse, but rather to suggest an interpretation that, for us, deserved to be communicated. Communicative capacity defines the success of display, and it means searching for the correct pedagogical strategies to a particular public. It also presupposes allowing ease of

access to the documentation. The didactic goal doesn’t mean using original documentation
and founding is essential to allow the greatest possible number of visitors.

This experience of architecture on display as a didactic fact is done from a particular context
and responsibility: University research. An exhibition may be seen as an intensive moment
of research - not only its diffusion- and neither can it be consider a simple promenade
through different objects. The words that define our work are “research” and “didactic”. An
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