

## **Exhibiting architecture: the exhibition as open work**

ARX Arquivo/Archive study case

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### **Extended Abstract**

#### **ABSTRACT**

The present dissertation has as its central theme the exhibition of architecture, and constitutes itself as a critical reflection on the act of exhibiting, understood in a broad sense, since the conception until the perception of the exhibition. This study aims to comprehend the contemporary role of the exhibitionary practice, in both the context of architectural and cultural production. In this sense, while considering the various factors that influence and determine the outcome of the exhibition, the center focus of the study is its public character as a cultural venue, and its potential to convey a critical dialogue between the specialized practice of architecture and the generality of its final users. The participation in the construction of an actual architecture exhibition allowed for firsthand experience, constituting a basis to understand and reflect upon these issues. Moreover, a hypothesis for reading and performing the architecture exposition is presented, which is a particular synthesis of the knowledge gathered in the course of the investigation.

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## INTRODUCTION

The first approach to this study was a theme specific bibliographical research, on architecture exhibition, exhibiting architecture and curating architecture. This initial series of readings revealed the general stand point of the authors towards the architectural exhibition, which invariably identifies contradiction as an intrinsic characteristic of the architecture exhibition, due to the allegedly impossibility of its plain concretization. According to this line of thinking<sup>1</sup>, the architecture exposition is always a paradox, since it can never exhibit “the thing itself” like the art show exhibits the work of art. To accept this premise as valid, implies considering namely that the purpose of the exhibition is showing the building, and that nothing else but the building itself is architecture.

The second phase of research, which is the basis of the case study analysis, was of practical nature, consisting in the collaboration with architect and curator Luís Santiago Baptista, in the process of conceiving and mounting the ARX Arquivo/Archive exhibition. This moment of contact with the actors of the exhibitionary project, as well as with conceptual and operative concerns that are brought up during the procedure, was crucial to deepen the case study analysis further. Likewise, it hinted the inexistence of common ground between the opinion broadly shared by numerous authors, and the reality of the architecture exhibition.

Given this sharp disconnection, the continuing theoretical research was directed towards the clarification of this incoherence. The adamant conclusion is the groundlessness of the generalized opinion, which seems to have taken the form of common wisdom, continuously verbalized without questioning, and without parallel with the subject’s actual work.

In face of this circumstance, the study takes the form of a problematization, which implicates that the premise is not taken into account as a proven fact, but rather as a question of investigation, in need of grounding. The interrogations that arise, such as what is the role of the architecture exhibition, what is indeed exhibited if not architecture, and what does it mean to exhibit, are guidelines to the dissertation’s development and organization.

The study is structured as to convey a progressive approach to the exhibition, firstly through its historical contextualization, followed by the characterization of the present situation and the contemporary practice of exhibiting architecture. Thirdly, the case study is presented, a critical analysis of the ARX Arquivo/Archive exhibition. The last part of the essay, the exhibition as open work, is a thesis resulting from the crossing of theoretical knowledge, practical experience and personal reflection about the architecture exhibition, articulated by Umberto Eco’s thoughts on *The Open Work – Opera Aperta*, 1962.

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. Chang, 2010; Levy, Menkin, 2011; Sejima, in Pagnacco, 2010.

## HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

This contextualization aims to clarify the answer to the question about the role and the purpose of the exhibition, by providing some insight on the past of this practice, appointing a few exemplary situations or expositions.

The History of public architecture exhibitions dates as early as the mid-18th century, when they became part of the Parisian Art Salons. After the French Revolution, they gained new historic value, as a means of preserving the memory of the nation's glorious past, in the first modern museums. After London's Great Exhibition in 1851, the context of the universal exhibitions is stage to innumerable innovations and exposition purposes, from the pavilion – which served as an icon and national representation –, to the city observatory structures – where both the structure and the city itself were on display – and also experimental projects, mainly dedicated to the improvement of labor-class housing.

The first half of the 20th century is one of the most interesting moments on the history of the architecture exhibition, as it served as a vehicle for the emergence of a completely new architecture. For instance, Tony Garnier's project *Cité Industrielle*, of which he submitted a study plan for the 1901 Salon (although it wasn't accepted until three years later), was exhibited exhaustively until its publication in 1917, giving to know a groundbreaking modern architecture. Moreover, the European architectural vanguards developed and became known by the exhibitions they organized or participated in, (namely Mies van der Rohe), which were an instrument of diffusion not only of formal architectural innovations, but also of a whole mindset and ideology. It is in this context that the first urbanization is constructed as an architecture exhibition, *Weißenhofsiedlung*, Stuttgart, in 1927; projected by Mies and featuring buildings of various modern architects, it will be the inspiration for various exhibitions of the same type, especially after the second world war, for the reconstruction of European urban areas. Polemical as it may have been, Johnson's and Hitchcock's 1932 *Modern Architecture*, International Exhibition at MoMA, represents the introduction of vanguardist European architecture in the USA, and simultaneously its universalization, changing forever the main characters and the course of Western architectural production.

After WW2 the exhibitionary practice takes on a critical dimension, that finds its way through dictatorial regimes, as is the case of the "Plastic Arts' General Exhibitions", held in Lisbon between 1946 and 1956, and regularly censored by the political police for promoting art and architecture that were in clear opposition with the government's ideals; in the USA the critical exhibition finds a favorable place for its growth, and multiplies in numerous forms and targets, from the social hegemony of the architect (*Architecture Without Architects*, Rudofsky, MoMA, 1964), to the consumer culture (*Italy: A New Domestic Landscape*, Superstudio, MoMA, 1972). The 80's are a period of major changes in architecture exhibiting, initiated right in 1980's *Strada Novissima*, the memorable scenic street projected by Portoghesi for the first Venice Architecture Biennale. It represents a return to the historical exhibition, in a sense reflected as well in the opening, around that time, of diverse museums dedicated exclusively to architecture, throughout the Western world. The regular presence of architecture in the Venice Biennale inaugurates a new era for the exhibitionary practice, when it starts to take its current place as an event and a cultural production, attended more and more by a broader public. The environment of the star-system that emerged in the nineties, contributed a

great deal to the generalization of the architecture exhibition, namely the monographic type, which showed the work and thought of the featured architect, sometimes through an actual construction to be experimented.

As we come closer to the present moment, the venues and the modus operandi of the architecture exhibition take on shapes and conceptual approaches ever more diverse, resurrecting old typologies, like the garden pavilion common in the 19th century's universal exhibitions was by the Serpentine Gallery (since 2000), and inventing new ones, such as the performative exhibition, which focuses on public and social engagement, reconnecting the increasingly specialized conventional practice of architecture (building) with its true users and natural expression, the city.

## CONTEMPORANEITY

Alongside with the institutional venues of the architecture museums, local exhibitionary cycles such as biennales and triennales, have been investing a great amount of effort in showing architecture and they also work as a means of distinguishing the city as a worthy spot in the route of cultural escapes, as it has been for a long time now with art and music, for example. Independent architecture exhibitions, not conceived in connection to any organization, but rather linked to a particular architecture office or a curator, have likewise taken their place as regular public events. This kind of periodicity allied with ephemeral intensity, in both situations, calls for constant experimentation and innovation, opening a territory for new practices and new practitioners.

The current social and economic situation cannot be disregarded on this matter, as the lack of investment has effectively reduced the opportunities for building architecture projects, which causes the architects to pursue other paths that allow them to employ their architectural knowledge and interests in projects that are not dependent on building. The architecture exhibition gains in this sense a powerful expression, even more considering its common ground with architecture itself, in terms of the subjects they both work with, such as spatiality, materiality, composition, physical experience and cognitive perception of space, to name a few.

Therefore, the architecture exhibition is an architectural production, hence an architectural experience. The role of the curator is a mediator one, between architecture and public, which makes the exhibition an oriented experience, intrinsically different from the everyday perception of architecture. This is to say that the exhibitionary space conveys a body of knowledge distinctive from the one made available through the actual living and using of architectural objects in their natural habitat.

These concepts speculate on a possible characterization of the contemporary architecture exhibition. For one, the prominence of the curator, not only on the conceiving of the exhibition, as it has always been, but also on its perception; that is to say that the exhibition is a means of expression for the curator, being irrelevant the type of exhibition considered (documental, research, critical manifestation...), he at all times acts as a cultural mediator. On the other hand, the concept of experience implicates that the spectator is not of passive nature, and equally isn't the space. Both are activated during the exposing period, and act on the perception of the exposed objects. The term

to exhibit means indeed to expose, to unveil, and to reveal something. Exhibiting architecture thus means to disclose something in the exhibition that was previously unknown or out of sight. This is not a literary reference to the objects displayed, usually only made available in that specific place and time, but to ideas and thoughts that are in the origin of the architectural process, but not explicit in the known livable building.

Being a mediated experience, the contemporary architecture exhibition is made up of the synchronic and multidirectional relationships that are established between curator, space, objects, and public. This characterization is in accordance to curator Jeffrey Kipnis definition of architecture exhibition, which employs a pertinent analogy with a particular kind of theatre, where actors, audience, props, set, lightning, orchestra, and even the stage, are at the same time into play, with no script (Kipnis, s.d.).

## CASE STUDY: ARX ARQUIVO/ARCHIVE

ARX Arquivo/Archive is an exhibition on the twenty years' work of the portuguese architectural office ARX. On display at Centro Cultural de Belem from 27 March to 15 August, it is part of a new exhibitionary venue exclusively dedicated to architecture exhibits, recovering the tradition abandoned a few years ago.

The Archive project started with the collaboration of curator Luís Santiago Baptista with ARX for the purpose of a monographic publication; the research process through the remnants of old projects – drawings, diagrams, technical documents, and mostly models, everything of every size – revealed a great amount of material and drove the architects to realize they were in need of putting together an archive. The archive then became a curatorial project, and thus the exhibition became the archive site.

**CURATORIAL CONCEPT:** set off from the concept of a material and special archive, the exhibition grew on to be an ARX global archive, which is to say that it extended beyond the simple storage and organization of objects, to carry a deeper critical meaning on this architectural practice. Ranging from the earliest mental processes from which architecture originates, addressing the successive translations in materialized forms, to the last phase of using and living the physical building. These three moments are materialized in the three dimensions of the Archive exhibition, the ARX Atlas, ARX Cabinet of Curiosities and ARX Cinema.

**DESCRIPTION:** ARX Atlas is a 64m panel inspired in Aby Warburg's Atlas Mnemosyne, where the author disposed side by side images triggered by intuitive memory, in order to unveil unpredictable relationships between them, and therefore new meanings. In the ARX Atlas the curator Luís S. B. presents a set of images that are exterior to the architectural practice – evocating the multidisciplinary character of the architects' work – and around them various documents retrieved from the ARX archive; this Atlas aspires for the same cognitive and relational exercise as Warburg's, which in turn instigates new meanings and expanded perspectives on this particular architecture. ARX Cabinet of Curiosities is an appropriation of their 17th century homonymous, also known as Wunderkammer, private collections frequently open to the public, which consisted of a clutter of exotic objects or specimens. This was the chosen concept to present the thousands of models, of every material and

size, all organized in hundreds of standardized boxes; except for the eventual model that levitates from its container, indicating that the project resulted in an actual building that exists somewhere outside the exhibition. Five of these buildings were chosen to be featured in the ARX Cinema, the third archival dimension, which documentates their common usage, in films produced by architect and film-maker Carlos Gomes.

"...for me, to have the object there not really necessary. Obviously what interested me, beyond the object that is already available for whoever wants to see it in its natural place, was the act of thinking, the act of doubting, the act of creating; and the act of creating is fairly complex." (Nuno Mateus, translated from Mateus, J., N., 2013, p.112-113).

**OBSERVATIONS:** It is clear that the exhibition does not aspire to substitute in any way the physical constructed building; rather, it seeks to capture the immateriality of the architectural work, through the presentation of numerous elements that performed as references, vehicles, tools, and representations in the creative process. This intention is recognizable in the way the objects are displayed, as there are no descriptions accompanying the elements, besides the wall texts that provide insight on the curatorial concept. This way, the visitor is welcomed in the ARX universe, confronted with the architects' mental process without explanations, just some hints and suggested relationships. These are chiefly conveyed in the Atlas, which before being a basis for the expanded reading of ARX architecture by the visitor, was a platform through which the curator exercised his own critical view on that practice. The spectator in this exhibition is inexorably active, as he is stimulated to perform a similar critical role, by constructing his own spatial and conceptual narrative, his personal interpretation to extract meaning out of what he is perceiving. The message of ARX Archive is so to speak undetermined, as it is the opposite of univocal, being dependent on each thinking subject and therefore different for every visitor.

## THE EXHIBITION AS OPEN WORK

To further this thesis, it is firstly relevant to address the premise of the exhibition as a work:

"(...) came to see a group of objects reunited by a producer, the visitor will find himself transported to the world to which these objects belong. Therefore, it appears as a constitutive condition of the exhibition that the object is there to represent its world and not the intention of the producer. Any exhibition that abandons this constitutive rule, also abandons the territory of the exhibition to enter the one of the work" (translated from Davallon, 1999 cited in Laberge, 2012, p.93).

The author refers to objects which have an original context different from the one of the exhibition is the case of the contemporary installation as well as the architectural exhibit. They both employ vocables which have commonly known semantics, but that the curator intends to show in a new light, enriching them with new meaning, and in so doing, the exposition turns into work.

The exhibition as an open work is a hypothesis to think critically upon the exhibition, based in the study of Umberto Eco's *Opera Aperta*. Being an essay about philosophy, art, music and literary critique, it allows for an expanded perspective on the notion of the spectator as an active agent on the exhibition space, founding its arguments beyond any disciplinary boundaries. Eco distinguishes in the book two

kinds of openness: one of them is inevitable, and happens every time someone perceives a work; it is associated with the impossibility of the subject to fully grasp the author's vision, due to his individual characteristics, that unquestionably influence his reading of the work. The other one, and the one that is of interest for this thesis, is an openness which is intrinsic to the work itself, independently of its perception by an exterior subject. This means that the openness is a characteristic that takes part in the making of the work, consciously included as to elevate its value and meaning: "(...) rather than submit to the 'openness' as an inescapable element of artistic interpretation, he [the author] subsumes it into a positive aspect of his production, recasting the work so as to expose it to the maximum possible 'opening.'" (Eco, 1989. p.5).

The opening of a given work can be examined in terms of its ambiguity, or in other words, of its indeterminism and space to draw out multiple significations. The more the work is structurally composed of conventional elements, or the more probable it is, the more clear and univocal is its meaning. The more improbable and ambiguous, more information is contained in the message; more information means more possibilities for arranging that information, consequentially more disorder, and at the same time more possible interpretations and meanings. However, this "field of possibilities" performs within a determined structure with a relative order, which makes the production coherent, something recognizable that can be named a work.

In ARX Arquivo/Archive this ambiguity is latent, not only in the apparently chaotic surface of the Atlas, but also in the Curiosity Cabinet; the lack of descriptions leaves up to the subject to construct his own reading of each project's development, and associate it with the other dimensions of the Archive, incorporating even more information to his interpretation, and providing a transversal reading of the exhibition. Only the ARX Cinema has a definite formulation, although it does not pass any concrete and objective message. But then again, it does not incorporate the indeterminacy as a fundamental basis in its conception, like the other two dimensions do, by taking into consideration the performance of the observer in the performance of the exhibitionary dispositive.

As for the order that gives coherence to the exhibition, it is mainly the curatorial concept and its materialization in the exposition space, ideally constructing an atmosphere for the perception of the displayed elements, which will orientate the cognitive process of the observer. The concept of archive itself, as well as the sea of boxes in ARX Arquivo/Archive, and the myriad of possible readings it can convey when interpreted through the Atlas, testifies for Umberto Eco's idea that in an open work, an incomplete knowledge is necessary for its understanding, and so for the formulation of that same knowledge.

The thesis of the exhibition as an open work enhances the exhibition's potential as a means of a non-deterministic authorial expression, i. e. a work that being the product of its author, and recognizable as such, carries multiple readings and interpretations, constituting itself as a stimulus to the reflection upon architecture, and thus a space of connection and dialogue.

## FINAL NOTE

It is significant how close the relationship between historical events and the architecture exhibitions is, just as it is possible to trace architecture's parallel development with the one of civilization. Being an expression of its authors, and so of their time's values, it is not unforeseen that such a relationship reveals itself to be so evident, since the exhibition is a moment of contact between the specificity of the discipline and its place in a given culture or society.

It then becomes clear that the exhibition has been having multiple purposes and functions throughout its history, having performed a number of roles besides the simple display of previously built projects; from the presentation of projects without hope of being constructed, to the appropriation of the exhibition as a motto for urban reconstruction; from celebratory event, to critical contestation; from experimentation of new radical ideas, to remembrance and consolidation of collective memory. Moreover, the content and the way of exhibiting vary as well, accordingly to the exhibition's purpose and the author's intention.

Nowadays, the exhibitionary practice coexists more than ever in ambivalence, conveying innumerable formats, each one acting within its own particularities to expand the architectural discourse, engaging different manners of making architecture, and establishing a close proximity with the public, and so forth the society and place in which it is produced.

ARX Arquivo/Archive is an interesting example; inasmuch as it is a conventional exhibition – a monographic one, with very straightforward concepts that refer to documentation and safekeeping – it has a somewhat complex approach to those traditional conceptions, to such an extent that it turns out to be almost the opposite of what could be expected. By avoiding a univocal voice and message, the exhibition is open to all interpretations, inviting the spectator to think critically on the displayed architecture, and to put together the information that composes a possible exhibition's narrative.

Starting from a reflection on ARX Arquivo/Archive curatorial methodology articulated by Umberto Eco's *Opera Aperta*, the thesis of the architecture exhibition as an open work was introduced has a theoretical proposition, although it can be regarded as a practical approach to conceive the exhibition. The open exhibition is the one that not only recognizes the implausibility of a univocal communication with the spectator, but also takes advantage from that impossibility, by taking into account the subject's capacity to interpret the architectural work he experiences, and valuing each reading as an enrichment of the work itself.

To think the architecture exhibition as an open work demands accepting the subjectivity as its unalienable characteristic, from its conception to its perception; acknowledging different readings not in hope they end up in the same conclusion, but precisely because they contradict each other, complementing one another to generate new perspectives that enrich the meaning of the exhibition, hence the architecture's. It also mirrors contemporary concerns, such as the rethinking of spectatorship, prioritizing methods that promote his involvement, in this case intellectual. Asserting itself as a work that stimulates reflection and criticism, the architecture exhibition is, when open in nature, a democratic space for experiencing and thinking about architecture as a technical and cultural production.



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