

The New Curator: Exhibiting Architecture & Design

Fleur Watson

Routledge

Exhibiting  
Architecture  
& Design

# THE NEW CURATOR

Fleur  
Watson





Architects, designed with scenographer Shizuka Hariu, that explored the notion of light as a 'material' experience.<sup>20</sup>

Because of the sheer scale, production and, in some instances, spectacle of the collective installations, it could be argued that *Sensing Spaces* lies in the tradition of 'live architecture' – that is, 1:1-scale architectural fragments sited in the 'neutral' space of the gallery. Goodwin's curatorial intent, however, pursues an open-ended agenda that was explicitly committed to experimenting with entirely new and untested architectural commissions. By foregrounding each work as an exhibit within itself – *design as exhibit* – *Sensing Spaces* is conceived as a choreographed sequence of heightened encounters with architectural 'experience' in each gallery space. As the viewer moved through the galleries, they were challenged to move from a position of rational analysis to one in which they focused on their emotional and sensory response to the works they encountered. In doing so, the exhibition brought to public attention the haptic and emotional qualities of architecture and its contribution to and impact on our experience of everyday life.

*Sensing Spaces: Architecture Re-imagined* represented a stark and ambitious departure from previous large-scale career surveys at the Royal Academy such as *New Architecture: Foster, Rogers, Stirling* (1986) – which also included a large-scale 1:1 exhibit by Stirling – or, more recently, the monographic *Renzo Piano: The Art of Making Buildings* (2018–19) – the latter a relatively small exhibition by comparison. Goodwin recalls the curatorial challenges associated with *Sensing Spaces* and the rapid production and installation process, open brief and the deliberate exclusion of lengthy explanatory texts or didactic materials to guide a mainstream audience: "As the primary goal was to place the emphasis on the experience, interpretation was kept to a minimum, a decision that faced some resistance during planning..."<sup>21</sup>

The experiment lay in the visitor's willingness to engage with an experiential encounter rather than an educative one: the *design as exhibit* approach enabled the exhibition to offer a transformational encounter while still being accessible for a diverse audience. The experiment and risk paid off: *Sensing Spaces* was a popular success for the Royal Academy with 164,000 visitors over 72 days, and engaged a diverse demographic through substantial press and social media coverage. In his review for *The Guardian*, architectural critic Rowan Moore sums up: "The show is as much about presence as the senses, about the awareness of what it is to be in a place that might be small, large, light, dark, rough or smooth, and to move through it. It's a reminder of properties of architecture that are fundamental but [often] overlooked."<sup>22</sup>

#### CASE STUDY 4

*Liquid Light* by Flores & Prats (Venice Architecture Biennale, 2018)

The Venice Biennale of Architecture is recognised internationally as the world's most influential international 'exposition' of contemporary architecture. Through its collective form – where nations respond to a designated central theme with their own curated exhibitions alongside the

director's own exhibition and various 'off-site' offerings and programs – the Biennale brings together a global survey of the ideas, preoccupations and challenges of contemporary practice.

As Brett Steele, former Director of London's Architectural Association, states in the preface to the publication *Architecture on Display: On the History of the Venice Biennale of Architecture* (2010): "The biennale's importance today lies in its vital dual presence as both register and infrastructure, recording the impulses that guide not only architecture but also the increasingly international audiences created by (and so often today, nearly subservient to) contemporary architectures of display... By this stage, the biennale has itself become a kind of living record – of architecture's own contemporary struggle as a form of cultural projection on the one hand, and that production on (and not only of) display on the other."<sup>23</sup>

While the Biennale's display of visual arts stretches back more than a century, its inaugural official exhibition of architecture was staged in 1980. Directed by Paolo Portoghesi and titled *La Presenza del Passato* (The Presence of the Past), the exhibition focused on the influence and potential of the postmodernism movement via a series of full-scale displays.

In the publication *Architecture on Display: On the History of the Venice Biennale of Architecture* (2010), Aaron Levy and William Menking set out to explore "the vexed relationship between architecture and its public, [which unites] around a simple premise that architecture problematizes its own display."<sup>24</sup> They write that Portoghesi's exhibition at Venice included a "section titled *Strada Novissima*... in the newly restored Corderie dell'Arsenale [consisting] of a series of dramatic facades by leading international architects..." Levy and Menking argue that "[the exhibition's] highly theatrical quality... continues to serve as a benchmark for subsequent curation [today]."<sup>25</sup>

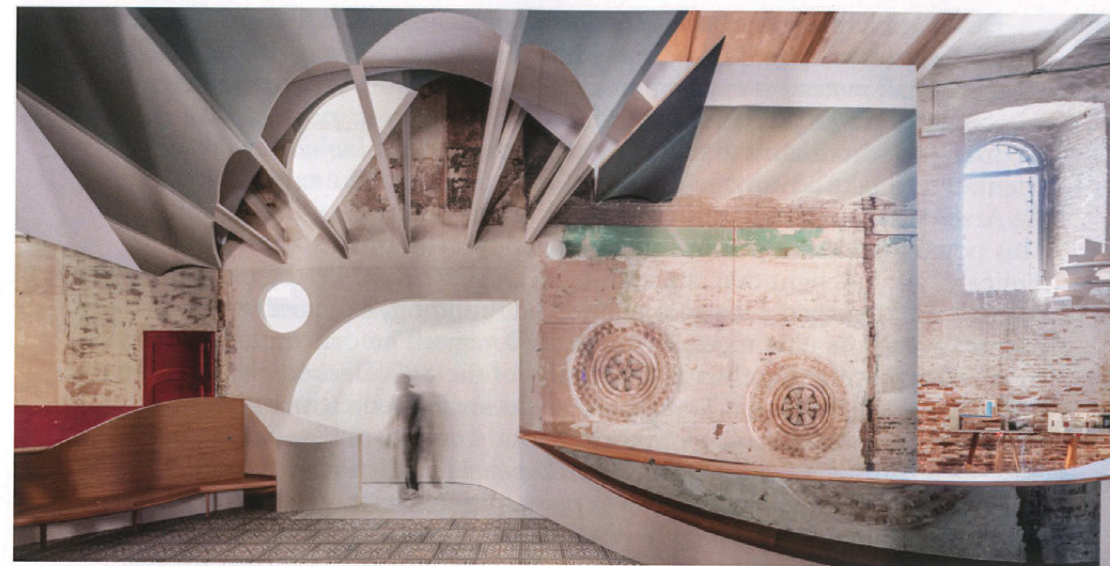
As Levy and Menking identify, the ongoing influence of Portoghesi's theatrical 'façade-ism' and full-scale exhibits continues to be an enduring curatorial strategy for Venice and resonates with the historical lineage of the 'extract' or 'live architecture' display. For the main international exhibition, curated by the Biennale's appointed creative director and held in the expansive spaces of the *Corderie* (an ex-naval building), the invited exhibiting practices often attempt to address the vast scale of the space by producing a 1:1 replica or 'mini building', most of which are positioned or juxtaposed with little connection to each other in concept, provocation or ongoing research beyond representing a diverse array of responses to a broad and singular theme. Past iterations have included *Less Aesthetics, More Ethics* (2000), *Out There: Architecture Beyond Building* (2008), *Common Ground* (2012) and *Reporting From the Front* (2016).

More recently, however, a new spirit of mediation is emerging at the Venice Biennale: a more porous, exploratory and spatially performative intent that resonates deeply with the *design as exhibit* move. An example is *Liquid Light* (2018) by Barcelona-based architects Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats. Exhibited as part of the central *Freespace* exhibition in the Arsenale building – curated by the 2018 Biennale's creative directors Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara of Grafton Architects – the exhibit translated essential qualities of Flores & Prats' recently completed adaptive reuse project, the Sala Beckett theatre in the Poblenou district of Barcelona.





This spread: Flores & Prats conceived of the exhibit as two 'fragments' with distinctive intentions rather than as 1:1 replica. On the front-facing side of the exhibit is a fragment of the Sala Beckett in Barcelona including a reference to the building's skylight, while on the reverse side is an extract of the studio containing the process, reflections, doubt and tests behind the making of the project. *Liquid Light*, Venice Biennale of Architecture, 2018. Courtesy: Flores & Prats. Photography: Adrià Goula.





While still clearly related to the legacy of the 'live exhibit' in its full-scale form, *Liquid Light* moved beyond a simplistic exact 'replica' of its original; instead it experimented with display methodologies that referenced scenography and the notion of the *mise-en-scène* in theatre production rather than the conventions of the gallery. *Liquid Light* was orientated to take advantage of the fall of natural light from a window to the Arsenale's south, and pulled it into the very fulcrum of the exhibit. This powerful gesture poetically referenced, yet did not attempt to replicate, a ray of light that the architects had discovered to be piercing through the damaged ceiling of the derelict building, a former workers' cooperative that had lain empty for over 30 years. The concept of channelling natural light drove the design of the Sala Beckett's circulation space and, here for *Liquid Light*, became an abstracted element charting the movement of the Venice sun throughout the day.

The material qualities of *Liquid Light* also shifted between real elements and those that clearly spoke to the transitional nature of the *mise-en-scène*. Surfaces shifted between real and simulated elements while textures moved between original and digital printing. A real timber bench seat emerged from a half-height wall providing a space for visitors to rest before it dovetailed back into a full-height, timber-framed wall. Footsteps fell on ceramic tiles to then step off again onto the concrete Arsenale floor. The most direct reference to the theatre, however, lay in the very thinness and fragile qualities of the 'set-like' timber-framed wall. Moving behind the set, the visitor discovered another replica or fragment of Flores & Prats' studio in Barcelona comprising multitudes of models, drawings, films and documentation; it literally unfolded the rich layering of ideas, tests and process developed over time during the making of this specific piece of architecture.

This is the key point of departure that I propose moves *Liquid Light* beyond the lineage of 'live architecture' to the more explorative and open-ended *design as exhibit* move. Here, the exhibit is not conceived as an architectural replica – to directly simulate the properties of the building itself – but is intended, via a direct analogy with the architecture's program of the theatre, as a layered *mise-en-scène* with an intent to reveal over time the ideas and process that resulted in this piece of architecture.

The genesis of Flores & Prats' distinctive approach for the architectural 'extract' can be traced to Eva Prats' practice-based PhD completed at RMIT University in 2019. Prats' dissertation titled *To observe with the client, to draw with the existing: Three cases of architecture dealing with the 'as-found'* describes her research process in which she reflects on the durational process of re-making the Sala Beckett project – a building with a significant history – while, at the same time, communicating the 'conversations' inherent to this design process with the client and with the existing building.

Furthermore, Prats' PhD research along with the installation *Liquid Light* in Venice greatly informed a comprehensive exhibition of the Sala Beckett project at the Roca Gallery in West London in 2019, curated by Vicky Richardson. *What Where: Crossing Boundaries in the Architecture of Sala Beckett* documents the process behind making the project, its relationship with its namesake, playwright Samuel Beckett,

and its contemporary evolution for the resident theatre company under the directorship of Toni Casares. This 'springboard' or catalyst effect is characteristic of the porosity and openness of the *design as exhibit* move and, in this respect, *Liquid Light* opened up new terrain to explore and unravel a set of ideas for further development rather than applying an intellectual frame or overarching voice of authority.

## CONCLUSION: CURATOR AS SPACE-MAKER

The case studies profiled in this chapter demonstrate a clear curatorial intent to foreground the design of an exhibition as an integral part of the core conceptualisation of a curatorial project, not a background for its ultimate display. *After Dark* showed the directness of *design as exhibit* and, as a result, manifested in an immersive space of shared encounter where ideas are unified and shared. It created a direct relationship with performance and scenography, using choreography to instigate a process of interaction and exchange. For *The Future Is Here*, the *design as exhibit* move was extended to create an opportunity for the curatorial process to unfold conceptually – and for the exhibit to literally unfold in its space – as the exhibition was made. By accepting risk, the curatorial framework became more dexterous and responsive and, in doing so, it potentially made its intent to perform the making of design ideas resonate more strongly with an audience.

In *Sensing Spaces*, *design as exhibit* allowed an established institution to break out of its traditional paradigm. Through a sequence of individual yet collectively choreographed sensory encounters in the gallery, it enabled the curator to test an audience's willingness to engage with an abstracted, emotional response to exhibiting architecture. As architectural historian Philip Ursprung states in his catalogue essay: "To use an exhibition – not as a means to represent what we already know, but as an opportunity to learn more about what we don't know – opens up new terrain."<sup>26</sup>

Finally, *Liquid Light* progressed from the long tradition of the 1:1 replica at the Venice Biennale of Architecture, plunging it into new territory – and a direct analogy with the theatre – through the use of the *mise-en-scène*. Here, the visitor had a heightened awareness of being part of a set-like condition that both communicated the daily program of the subject and gave an intimate insight into the richly iterative material process of the architect in the development of making it.

All these projects display an openness to experimenting with new ways of mediating an experience or set of ideas through foregrounding the *design as exhibit* – albeit in diverse contexts and with differing intent. Here, the curator clearly accepts and, at times, heightens and leverages the fact that the exhibit can never be a piece of formal architecture in its own right – it lacks the realities of context, program or site. To this end, the *design as exhibit* move performs an abstracted architectural experience through a heightened spatial encounter in which qualities such as light, compression, interaction and sound are orchestrated for the purpose of an intended experience. This spatial mediation also acts as a piece of scenography for shared exchange where design ideas can be revealed, explored and opened up for interaction and discussion.

Critically, it is clear that the opportunity for the *design as exhibit* move in contemporary curatorial practice lies in an agency to act as a platform for debate and change – to open up possibilities, 'sketch'



scenarios and subvert preconceptions of what our cities and communities should be and how we might envisage them differently. In this context, the potential to encounter a performative, sensorial or scenographic experience of an exhibition lies with the ability to reveal something new in our relationship to architecture that remains long after the temporal footprint of the exhibit is gone.

## NOTES

- 1 — Adrian Forty, 'Ways of Knowing, Ways of Showing: A Short History of Architectural Exhibitions', in *Representing Architecture. New Discussions: Ideologies, Techniques, Curation*, eds. Penny Sparke and Deyan Sudjic (London: Design Museum, 2008), 43.
- 2 — We can trace the impact on the live exhibit of the international expositions at the turn of the 19th century, such as Sir Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace – an iron and steel structure built to house the Great Exhibition, London (1851) – or the Eiffel Tower for the Paris Exposition Universelle (1889): a temporary structure built to mark the site entrance before being adapted and moved to a permanent site as a radiotelegraph tower.
- 3 — Clare Newton et al., *Housing Expos and the Transformation of Industry and Public Attitudes: A Background Report for Transforming Housing: Affordable Housing for All*, (2015), accessed 31 May, 2019, [https://msd.unimelb.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/2603698/Housing-expos-paper.pdf](https://msd.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/2603698/Housing-expos-paper.pdf).
- 4 — *Housing Expos and the Transformation of Industry*, 5.
- 5 — Kristin Feireiss edited the influential publication *The Art of Architecture Exhibitions* (NAi, 2001) with essays by Catherine David, Elizabeth Diller, Daniel Libeskind, Bart Lootsma and Hani Rashid. Feireiss also established the independent architecture gallery Aedes Architecture Forum in Berlin in 1980.
- 6 — Daniel Libeskind, 'Beyond the Wall 26.36°' in *The Art of Architecture Exhibitions*, concept by Kristin Feireiss (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2001), 66.
- 7 — Leon van Schaik and Fleur Watson, eds., *Pavilions, Pop-ups and Parasols: The Impact of Real and Virtual Meeting on Physical Space* (special issue), *Architectural Design* 85, no. 3, (May/June 2015).
- 8 — Van Schaik and Watson, *Pavilions, Pop-ups and Parasols*.
- 9 — *After Dark* was commissioned and curated during the author's tenure as curator for State of Design Festival's cultural program (2009).
- 10 — Herbert Bayer, 'Aspects of Design of Exhibitions and Museums' (1961), as quoted in Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988, 25.
- 11 — Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998).
- 12 — Zoë Ryan, 'Taking Positions: An Incomplete History of Architecture and Design Exhibitions' in *As Seen: Exhibitions that Made Architecture and Design History*, ed. Zoë Ryan (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2017), 16.
- 13 — *The Future Is Here* was curated by Alex Newson (Design Museum) with Fleur Watson and Kate Rhodes, (RMIT Design Hub Gallery) and ran from 28 August to 11 October, 2014.
- 14 — Paraphrased from *The Future Is Here: Exhibition Guide*, curators Fleur Watson and Kate Rhodes (Melbourne: RMIT Design Hub, 2014).
- 15 — Leon van Schaik, 'Pavilions, Pop-Ups and Parasols: Are They Platforms for Change?', in van Schaik and Watson, *Pavilions, Pop-ups and Parasols*, 15.
- 16 — See also Ray Edgar, 'The Future Is Here at RMIT Design Hub', *The Age*, 12 September, 2014.
- 17 — Kate Goodwin, 'Sensing Spaces: Reflections on a Creative Experiment', in *Sensing Architecture: Essays on the Nature of Architectural Experience*, ed. Owen Hopkins (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2017), 16–46.
- 18 — Goodwin, 'Sensing Spaces', 35–36.
- 19 — Goodwin, 'Sensing Spaces', 35–36.
- 20 — Descriptions of the individual works are drawn from Kate Goodwin, 'Sensing Spaces: Reflections on a Creative Experiment', in *Sensing Architecture: Essays on the Nature of Architectural Experience*, ed. Owen Hopkins (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2017).
- 21 — Goodwin, 'Sensing Spaces', 42.
- 22 — Rowan Moore, 'Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined – Review', *The Guardian*, 26 January, 2014, accessed 31 May, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jan/26/sensing-spaces-royal-academy-review>
- 23 — Brett Steele (preface) in Aaron Levy and William Menking, eds., *Architecture on Display: On the History of the Venice Biennale of Architecture* (London: Architectural Association London), 7–8, accessed 31 May, 2019, [https://www.scribd.com/doc/56473891/Architecture-on-Display-FINAL-Web-Selections?secret\\_password=5vprmx1fmgow0x7nbv#download&from\\_embed](https://www.scribd.com/doc/56473891/Architecture-on-Display-FINAL-Web-Selections?secret_password=5vprmx1fmgow0x7nbv#download&from_embed)
- 24 — Levy and Menking, *Architecture on Display*, 11–14.
- 25 — Levy and Menking, *Architecture on Display*, 13.
- 26 — Philip Ursprung, 'Presence: The Light Touch of Architecture', in *Sensing Spaces* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2014), 53.

# Meta-curation

## for inclusion and diversity

## Catherine Ince (London) in conversation with Prem Krishnamurthy (New York/Berlin)