ARCHITECTURE BY DESIGN:
EXHIBITING ARCHITECTURE ARCHITECTURALLY

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There is a moment in a visit to an architectural exhibition when the full measure of architecture—the art of building, as the Renaissance architect and theoretician Leon Battista Alberti proclaimed in his fifteenth-century treatise—reveals itself. This revelation may occur through the conduit of architectural artefacts—sketches and drawings, photographs and plans—as these objects collectively evoke the presence of what, in most instances, is not—and cannot be—included in exhibitionary form: the physical building. On such occasions, images are selected not for their mimetic ability to authenticate architecture, but rather for their capacity to represent interconnected facets of architecture itself: form, detail, scale, texture, relationships, and site.

Yet as an act of representation, this approach to exhibiting architecture neglects what is inherent to architectural practice: the potential for transforming environments into embodiments of architectural thinking and experience. As a form of media, exhibitions are narrative structures that rely on both cognitive and phenomenological modes of engagement. Through the particulars of their mise-en-scène, they have the ability to transcend a strictly didactic presentation of material and to embody both a literal and metaphoric engagement with objects and ideas, thereby opening up the exhibition space to polyvalent meanings. When the discursive strategies of architecture are highlighted through the mise-en-scène of the exhibition and become inherent to the installation itself—in other words when architecture draws reflexively upon its own principles to communicate a curatorial message—the architectural exhibition achieves yet another level of meaning as well as the full potential of the exhibition medium. In this way, the exhibition is both part of the act of signification, and an experience of it, becoming, in the words of

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Michel de Certeau, a “spatial practice” of the narrative structure in which it takes part.  

Drawing on a series of exhibitions curated and installed at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal throughout the 1990s and the early millennium, this essay analyzes how architecture and its representation in museological exhibitions have innovated forms of communication and display practices, transcending the traditions established by the fine arts paradigm since the late eighteenth century. I argue that in addition to providing a heightened recognition of the narrative and performative potential of the exhibitionary setting, the discourses and tensions specific to architecture and architectural practice have led to a rethinking of the communicative potential of the exhibition environment. Principles inherent to architecture—spatiality, materiality, and the experiential—are fruitful when considering the possibilities of exhibition design to elucidate multiple levels of meaning, and these principles have led to architecture’s coming-of-age in the museological environment in ways that are specific to re aedificatoria—the art of building itself.

Exhibitions As Media

The exhibitionary setting has long been theorized as a medium for producing and disseminating information and knowledge. When positioned within media theory, this has led to a body of scholarship that has understood exhibitions for their semiotic functions—an ensemble of objects that are presented and received according to a transmission model of communication, as classical semiologists would argue. Another approach is to explore these sites in light of what they do not share with the text: exhibitions mediate objects in space. This fundamental condition is one that exhibitions have in common with architecture, and, like architecture, exhibitions are designed to deploy space in operative and symbolic ways. When exhibitions are conceived as sites that extend beyond a purely didactic representation and display of objects, they create the circumstances for a more-than cognitive experience for visiting publics. In the manner in which they situate objects and ideas in mediated

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environments, direct visitor movement along deliberate itineraries, and use compositional devices such as framing, metaphor, and palimpsest within a choreographed mise-en-scène, exhibitions constitute multi-dimensional narratives within the museological apparatus.

This particular understanding of the exhibition environment highlights the dual undertaking inherent in the curation and design of the exhibition venue: the exhibitionary setting is both representational and experiential, recalling that representation and perception are two sides of the same coin. Understanding their duality should be central concerns in exhibition practice. In addition to framing content, the exhibitionary apparatus forms it, epitomizing Marshall McLuhan’s dictum that the medium is the message. To understand the exhibition venue as media is to recognize the potential of the exhibition to create the space for putting objects on view, and to constitute this space. It is precisely this characteristic that lends the exhibition one of its defining conceptual frameworks as a form of media: the exhibition, as French theorist Jean Davallon has argued, is at the service of that which it displays and proposes a mode of reception for how to perceive such objects on display.  

Unlike the medium of film to which it is perhaps most readily compared, the exhibition is mediated by its realization in three dimensions: it presents objects and information at the same time that it creates the conditions and space in which visitors engage with this material.

Conceiving of the exhibition setting as a unique, if not unified, environment—in the words of twentieth-century architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, as “one piece of architecture”—is a useful starting point for understanding the variety and specificities of the exhibition ground as media and two-fold space of communication and experience. While wide latitude may be given to the concept of exhibition in contemporary museums—owing to an array of practices and intentions at play in museological genres as diverse as art, science, natural history, and architecture museums—it is nevertheless possible to speak of a language, or languages, of exhibition design, of conventions and tropes that shape the exhibitionary apparatus to create the immersive environments we have come to know in Nelson Goodman’s terms as other possible worlds.

Contemporary exhibition design is an integrative process that combines the techniques of architecture, interior architecture, and scenography, in addition to graphic design, audio, video, digital media, lighting, and

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interactives. Drawing also upon inspiration from such wide-ranging practices as retail, fashion, advertising, and film, exhibition designers produce a multi-dimensional approach to communication that transcends the sender-recipient model of traditional communications theory to create a multi-sensorial and immersive experience.7

Architecture’s influence is manifest in a number of different approaches to thinking through the design possibilities for spatializing exhibition content. The appropriation of architectural tropes of maps and labyrinths in exhibition design, the heightened attention paid to creating immersive environments through installations, and the role of sensory aesthetics that transcend the visual to incorporate the olfactory or haptic senses within this practice provide these sites with the means to come to life not only as didactic exercises but as highly developed sensorial environments as well. Thus beyond fulfilling a certain documentary or informational imperative, when designed well, the content and form of the architectural exhibition are capable of expanding upon the didactic representation of material (such as wall texts and objects) to allude to what is endemic to the subject itself: building in space.

The Architectural Exhibition: An Evolving Praxis

Since its relative institutionalization in the emergent public museum of the late eighteenth century, architecture as the subject and object of museological display has generated a series of questions pertaining to the form, function, and place of architecture in exhibitionary settings. The two-fold dynamic of exhibiting architecture and the architecture of exhibitions has introduced its own problematics to the broader phenomenon of cultural display practices. Notably, questions of authenticity, scale, and context have assumed a different tenor from their museological counterparts in the fine arts. What, exactly, is being offered up for display in the architectural exhibition? What place does architecture occupy in the exhibition setting, and exactly how does one put architecture on display? Should architecture be exhibited in fragment or in whole? As replica or reconstruction? If epistemologically and pedagogically architecture and the fine arts of painting and sculpture overlapped in eighteenth-century contexts, the subject of architecture has sought to distinguish itself ever since in matters of representation. The historical trajectory of exhibitions of architecture is perhaps best understood as a practice seeking to define the particular terms of its engagement in the museological setting—and this, in

relation to specificities inherent in architecture itself.

The architectural exhibition has a long museological history, much of which has intertwined with traditions in the fine arts. Like exhibitions of paintings and sculpture, architecture has often been represented in exhibitions pictorially—in framed sketches and photographs—and in the scale representation of models atop plinths and in display cases. In this, the architectural exhibition as genre largely borrowed from the well-established paradigm of fine arts displays focusing on product over process, on the completed building rather than generative or exploratory ideas.

Yet as distinct from exhibitions of painting and sculpture, architectural exhibitions have, throughout their history, both borrowed from the paradigm of the fine arts, and departed from it. As a genre of exhibition dedicated to exploring the built environment, the architectural exhibition is distinct from the activity of exhibiting the fine arts in both function and pedagogical intent: it “constructs its arguments structurally,” as scholar and curator Eve Blau has argued, evidence that the architectural exhibition is a genre that has, over the course of the twentieth century, arguably come into its own. Thus, unlike exhibitions of the fine arts, architectural exhibitions generally cannot show completed work, and this fundamental distinction poses certain enduring challenges for the curation of architecture. With the notable exceptions of open-air museums, a specialized museological genre pioneered in Scandinavia in the late nineteenth century that displays full-scale reconstructions of buildings assembled from different geographical locations and historical eras, and the pavilions of international expositions that are themselves displays of architectural acumen and innovation, the architectural exhibition defies a conventional approach to representation.

The history of putting architecture on display in the modern era has been informed by several interrelated traditions, ranging from late-eighteenth-century landscape architecture and garden design, which theorized the choreography of objects in spaces of experience, to the displays of progress and nationalism that characterized the industrial fairs and the national pavilions of
world expositions inaugurated by the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations (The Great Exhibition), in London’s Hyde Park in October 1851.\textsuperscript{11} Within the purview of museological practice, however, traditions of architectural displays have run the gamut from the installations of large-scale, reconstructed, authentic, or replica historic and monumental buildings in both interior (at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin and the British Museum in London since the 1930s) and exterior settings (at the Musée des monuments français, in Paris, in the 1790s, and almost one century later in the emergent genre of the open-air museum),\textsuperscript{12} to the display of drawings and models representative of architectural works in museums dedicated to the fine arts (the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Arkitekturmuseet in Stockholm, and the Nederlands Architectuurinstituut in Rotterdam are all prominent examples).

The conceptual frameworks that underlie these displays are akin to the distinction between representing architectural process, the ideas of architecture, and the desire of capturing, as architectural historian Wallis Miller has elsewhere suggested, “the experience of a building at full-scale.”\textsuperscript{13} Inherent in these frameworks is the obvious contradiction between the didactic purpose of the architectural exhibition—to provide information about the subject on display—and the exhibition’s capacity to unleash other possible meanings through alternative modes of communication. The endeavour to communicate not only the appearance of a building, but also an experience of it, is a clear example of how the exhibition ground has the capacity to convey polyvalent meanings. I will return to this condition in my discussion of \textit{Shaping the Great City} at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA).


\textsuperscript{12} The museological genre of the open-air museum developed in the late nineteenth century and was specifically intended for the display of buildings outdoors. The first open-air museum was established in Bygdøy, near Oslo, Norway, in the 1880s, and a second Scandinavian open-air museum opened shortly thereafter in Stockholm at Skansen, on the island of Djurgården. See Sten Rentzhog, \textit{Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea} (Östersund: Jamtli Förlag, 2007).

Metaphors of Practice in Architectural Exhibitions

When, in the early twentieth century, new metaphors of the museum and exhibition disrupted prevailing paradigms of display, one of the distinguishing characteristics was the high level of interactivity curators orchestrated between the visitors and the objects on display. This was a moment that was paralleled, as Michelle Henning has argued, in other avant-garde movements such as theatre with the transcendence of the proscenium arch. The modernist installations of artists Marcel Duchamp, El Lissitsky, and Frederick Kiesler, and their colleagues of Dada, de Stijl, Bauhaus, and Constructivism in the 1920s and 1930s, challenged traditional notions of the exhibition environment as frame, drawing heightened attention to both the potential and role of space in the exhibitionary apparatus. These avant-garde exhibitions and their progenitors alluded not only to a shift in focus from product to process in display strategies, but also to a changed sensibility to the architecture of space.

Social anthropologists Sharon Macdonald and Paul Basu have characterized a similar approach in more recent practice as one of “exhibitionary experimentalism,” noting that the exhibitionary apparatus is understood for its capacity to generate knowledge and information, rather than merely to provide the frame in which to represent knowledge. According to these authors, the very processes of exhibition practice have become visible, resulting in the “reflexive” or “meta” creations of recent years and which range in scope from the exposure of select exhibitionary methods to entire institutional critiques, as the Canadian Centre for Architecture’s innovative approach to the Laboratories exhibition in 2002, or Daniel Libeskind’s designs for the extension to the Jewish Museum in Berlin (opened in 2001), make apparent.

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16 *Laboratories*, exhibition, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Canada (18 April–15 September, 2002).
At the CCA, Atelier Big City’s playful installation was the first of six room-sized works dedicated to rethinking the foundations of architecture in a post-9/11 age. *Interchange* cleverly challenged the foundational notion of architecture-as-ground by inviting visitors to walk its slanting surfaces in homage to the architectural walking tour. Libeskind’s extension to the Jewish Museum also proposes an experience of architecture, albeit in completely different terms, such that the building itself has become an exhibit. In his work, angled walls and narrowing corridors are intended to evoke the oppressive environment of the Holocaust, thereby reinforcing the narratives produced by the museum’s collections. In these examples, as in many others, exhibition themes are thus translated into spatial, material, and ultimately bodily terms, and special appeal is made to communicating information to visitors both corporally and viscerally. In a postmodern world, the metaphor for many
exhibition makers has become the laboratory, and the exhibition, a site for process and experimentation—not product. 

Macdonald and Basu’s observation identifies an epistemological change in our understanding of the exhibition space from one that is representational and didactic to one that is experimental and open-ended. It also accounts for the radical rethinking of the possibility of the exhibitionary apparatus to produce knowledge through the very strategies that are specific to architecture—in this instance, through the modes of arrangement and the deployment of the space of display that serve to realize the potential of the exhibition as an architecture of design.

These examples serve to demonstrate how architectural conventions such as material and structure can be successfully deployed to further the communicative functions in exhibition practice. They begin to unpack what it means to consider exhibitionary experimentalism and the communicative dimensions of the exhibition medium when architecture itself is put on display, when content is form and form content, and when the subject, to quote architect Hani Rashid, “can be enfolded and embedded within the form and space of the exhibition” and where, “inextricably linked, environments can be created that go well beyond the merely didactic.”

More than functioning as experimentations that give three-dimensional form to research and representation, in their contemporary incarnation architectural exhibitions have become richly nuanced environments that probe the boundaries of the exhibitionary apparatus as a means of communication.

**Architecture By Design: Challenging the Fine Arts Paradigm**

Architectural exhibitions have proliferated most notably over the past forty years, owing in large part to the formation of a series of purpose-built architecture museums that were founded in Europe and North America beginning in the late 1970s. The creation of the International Confederation of

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Architectural Museums (ICAM) in 1979 gave this new museological genre increased stature in international circles. Notable institutions such as the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal (founded in 1979 and opened to the public in 1989), the Deutsches Architecktur museum in Frankfurt (1979), the Architecktur museum in Basel (1984), and the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam (1988) have not only aimed to endow the architectural museum with a strong research mandate specifically dedicated to architectural and urban issues, they have also generated momentum by radically re-thinking the form that architectural exhibitions should take. While architectural exhibitions in architecture and design departments of art museums had previously challenged exhibitionary conventions as noted in the instance of the avant-garde exhibitions of the 1920s and 1930s—and MoMA’s exhibitions are a case in point—the corpus of recent exhibitions reveals a field that continually reinvents itself, and in so doing, the exhibitionary apparatus.

In the spring of 2000, the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal, Canada, opened its doors to an exhibition entitled *Shaping the Great City: Modern Architecture in Central Europe, 1890–1937.* Curated by a trio of scholars—Eve Blau, Dieter Bogner, and Monika Platzer—and the product of a remarkable eight years of research, the exhibition considered how experimental and modern ideas had marked the development of civic infrastructure in the cities of Central Europe, in the declining decades of the Hapsburg Empire and the early years of Central Europe’s new republics.

*Shaping the Great City* was one of a growing number of exhibitions recently mounted by the CCA that challenged museological conventions of exhibitions dedicated to architecture. This exhibition was innovative because it drew reflexively on the architectural possibilities of installation and concepts of the total environment to further the curatorial intention of presenting early twentieth-century ideas of urban planning and civic infrastructures. Reinforcing that this was an exhibition dedicated to civic infrastructure, a thirteen-tonne infrastructural exhibitionary apparatus was deployed, designed by the principals of the Viennese-based architectural firm Coop Himmelb(l)au (Wolf D. Prix and Helmut Swiczinsky), a firm known for its innovative practices, exhibition

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19 *Shaping the Great City: Modern Architecture in Central Europe, 1890–1937*, exhibition, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Canada (May 23–October 15, 2000).

20 *Shaping the Great City* was jointly produced by the Bundesministerium für Unterricht und Kulturelle Angelegenheiten (Austrian State Ministry for Education and Cultural Affairs) in Vienna, the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal, and the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, in association with the Kunstforum Wien, in Vienna, and travelled to these venues, in addition to Prague, throughout 1999, 2000, and 2001.
design among them.21 Set on the diagonal, Coop Himmelb(l)au’s imposing stainless-steel structure snaked its way through the CCA’s six main galleries, creating cubic and rectangular grid-like-rooms from which were hung, attached, or interwoven materials ranging from period-films and photographs to architectural watercolours, sketchbooks, presentation drawings, models, posters, and books.

This modular construction not only occupied the CCA’s six main exhibition halls, it intervened in them, necessitating that a new doorway between galleries be created and thereby a unique architectural program be inducted for this exhibition. The provocative structure was comprised of hundreds of modular steel tubes that were reconfigured into connecting cubical frames at each of the exhibition’s venues, providing Shaping the Great City with a site-specific grid

that also made reference to competing modernist views underpinning the exhibition itself—those of turn-of-the-century Viennese architectural theorists Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner who often shared little more than competing ideas about place-making in their attitudes toward city planning.

*Shaping the Great City: Modern Architecture in Central Europe, 1890-1937, installation view, 2000. © CCA, Montréal*
Shaping the Great City: Modern Architecture in Central Europe, 1890-1937, installation view, 2000. © CCA, Montréal
The grid was both the continuous spine of an exhibition that covered the trajectories of several cities’ development, and its metaphor, by simultaneously alluding to the very nature of the exhibition’s investigation. By design, it was the infrastructure to an exhibition on infrastructure, borrowing in form, function, and materiality from that which it intended to exhibit. It was, quite simply, a brilliant statement about the potential of architecture to display itself.

Ambitious in its temporal and geographic scope, *Shaping the Great City* charted urban design innovations in no less than half a dozen cities throughout Central Europe, including Vienna, Budapest, Prague, and the lesser known L’viv, Krakow, Zagreb, and Ljubljana, with representations of watercolours, photographs, books, periodicals, and journals. The display was a multimedia assemblage of images that were not only affixed to wall spaces in the traditional manner, but also to the steel construction itself. From atop the installation, slide projectors cast images onto the floor, literally engaging the space—and the visitor as the modern flâneur within it—in an immersive environment modeled on the idea of “bustling streets and busy public places” and intended to evoke “a sense of the cultural and political ferment of Central Europe in the years before and after the break-up of the Habsburg Empire.”22 One progressed through the exhibition in the manner of a promenade—stepping over steel bars, dodging between modular units, and navigating the classical display spaces of the CCA which had, if only temporarily, been bisected into smaller display units. In this instance, the architectural program offered yet another level of metaphorical interpretation of the exhibition space as civic environment.

Organized by chronology, geography, and theme, *Shaping the Great City* was itself shaped by the curatorial message: the city (read exhibition gallery) was considered a site of innovation and experimentation at the same time that it mediated practices in architectural making defined by traditions of place. Coop Himmelb(l)au understood this imperative perfectly: its design of a modernist modular steel ensemble confronted the classical galleries of Peter Rose’s 1989 building without overpowering them, allowing a dialogue for the co-existence of styles. Nor did the eponymous exhibition catalogue23 reiterate or record the installation of *Shaping the Great City*—rather, it expanded upon

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the exhibition’s research, its numerous essays proffering still further avenues of study on the vast subject of urban renewal in the cities of Central Europe over a half-century period.
The significance of *Shaping the Great City* in terms of exhibition design lies in its unique formulation of an exhibitionary approach that draws upon metaphor to substitute reality with an alternate reality, and thereby, another level of meaning. To return to my introductory remarks in which I suggested a method for thinking through the exhibitionary apparatus and its multiple modes of communication, the curatorial message of *Shaping the Great City* amounts to the sum of its parts: a collection of objects, an itinerary (or architectural program) that unfolds as the visitor progressed through the installation, and the sensorial effect of the environment as a whole. One understands the content of the exhibition through its form, and this bodily engagement achieves a level of engagement that heightens the relationship between architecture (as a whole), the visitor, and the curatorial intent of the exhibition. Modalities of design and the spatial experience that unfolds contribute to the creation of narrative in the exhibition setting and its communicative dimension.

*Shaping the Great City* was not the first of the Canadian Centre for Architecture’s exhibitions to challenge the fine arts paradigm. The museum had seen a handful of earlier exhibitions use the medium of architecture to literally transform the galleries into fictitious archaeological landscapes (*Cities of Artificial Excavation*: The Work of Peter Eisenman, 1978–1988, installed at the CCA in 1994) and artificial lawns (*The American Lawn: Surface of Everyday Life*, installed at the CCA in 1999). In these and others, architects were invited to design installations of the exhibitions, and through these experiments in space and form, to establish new relationships between ideas and their multiple modes of expression. Where these exhibitions departed from traditions in exhibition design was in their use of space: not only to house the story, but to narrate the story of architecture as well.

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24 This title refers to the body of work that architect Peter Eisenman developed over a decade beginning in 1978. These projects, ranging from submissions to competitions and theoretical work to public commissions, “are situated between the abstract design methodology, derived from modernism, of Eisenman’s earlier houses and his current experiments in complex, three-dimensional geometry.” Quoted in Jean-François Bédard, Introduction to *Cities of Artificial Excavation: The Work of Peter Eisenman, 1978–1988*, ed. Jean-François Bédard (Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1994), 9.

25 This exhibition was curated by the team of Beatriz Colomina, Elizabeth Diller, Alessandra Ponte, Ricardo Scofidio, Mark Wigley, and Georges Teyssot, upon whose research the exhibition was initially based. The exhibition was designed by the New York-based architectural firm, Diller + Ricardo Scofidio, with the assistance of Lyn Rice.
These innovative exhibitions notwithstanding, the installation methods of the first generation of exhibitions mounted by the CCA had been informed largely by exhibitionary practices established by a fine arts paradigm, in that they deployed display supports and wall space to similar effect as one would see in a fine arts institution. Framed drawings, sketches, paintings, and other two-dimensional material provided the wall space compliment to plinths and display cases exhibiting objects. In this, the CCA was not unlike many institutions to approach the display of architecture as an extension of fine arts traditions. Installed in 1990, one year after the CCA opened its first purpose-built structure adjoining the restored Shaughnessy House between rue Baile and boulevard René-Lévesque, Ernest Cormier and the Université de Montréal26 made some attempts to recreate the sense of Cormier’s personal library by providing a domestic ambiance to the setting (incorporating bookshelves and drafting table, among other accessories). However, in essence the installation did not diverge from traditional exhibitions of architecture at that time.

26 Ernest Cormier and the Université de Montréal (May 2–October 21, 1990) was organized by guest curator Isabelle Gournay and CCA Founding Director and Chair of the Board of Trustees, Phyllis Lambert.
Ernest Cormier and the Université de Montréal, installation view, 1990. © CCA, Montréal

Ernest Cormier and the Université de Montréal, installation view, 1990. © CCA, Montréal
Yet the potential for innovative exhibition practices lay at the very core of the CCA’s intellectual and conceptual activities. The CCA’s inaugural exhibition, *Canadian Centre for Architecture: Building and Gardens* (Octagonal Gallery, 7 May 1989 to 25 March 1990)—also the eponymous title of the CCA’s own published and documented history—announced itself not only as a celebration of the CCA’s thoughtful and intelligent design (combining both the restoration of the nineteenth-century Shaughnessy House with the new facility designed by architect Peter Rose to wrap around this core in an allusion to Beaux-Arts traditions of letter plans), but equally as an invocation of “the potential of a museum of architecture as a *statement*: about the nature of the works it collects and exhibits; about its role in the life of a culture or a city; and about architecture itself.”

Thus, the exhibition, designed and curated by Toronto architect and University of Waterloo professor Larry Richards, prefigured the very direction that CCA exhibitions would take as these innovated in the arena of architectural exhibition design.

**Architectural Exhibitions and Narrative**

In this regard, for slightly over a decade the CCA has been redressing in its exhibition design strategies that which architectural historian Sophia Psarra has elsewhere defined as the dichotomy of architectural discourse. Psarra observes, “on one side there is architecture as an orchestration of concepts in the mind, and on the other as a perceptual condition experienced by bodies moving in space.” Seeking to overcome this dichotomy, Psarra posits that meaning-making is not simply the product of our experience in morphological space—the structures and forms we encounter—but is, more broadly speaking, a mediation of the conceptual and the sensual.

Psarra’s understanding of space is a direct confrontation of architectural and philosophical theory that, since Descartes’s seventeenth-century treatise, has canonized the duality of the mind-body split, resulting in the binary of mind and body, intellect and senses, which today continues to permeate academic and professional practices. In this, Psarra keeps good company with a number of architectural theorists and practitioners who have countered Cartesian conceptions of space with heightened attention to an architecture of the senses, and who have challenged Cartesian ocular-centrism with their interests in the

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roles of non-visual forms of perception in authentic architectural experience—Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Juhani Pallasmaa among them.

When viewed according to this model, the exhibitionary practices of the CCA reveal a similar shift in discursive thinking. In the galleries of the CCA, architecture is not only presented as a stand-alone material item to be apprehended by the viewing subject—that is, the encounter of the conceptual in a Cartesian metaphysical landscape—it is more often than not envisioned broadly as an idea, a theory, a history to be situated as part of a larger narrative system that involves the visitor making sense out of the combined processes of heightened sensory engagement and storytelling. And like a city whose urban morphology continually evolves, so too is the art of building imagined anew in each architectural exhibition. The coalescence of architectural installation, this installation’s programme or itinerary, and the total environment that this produces and that is the product of the architecture exhibition is no substitute for reality—and nor is it intended to be such. However, it does serve to cast architecture in a different context.

The importance of the exhibition environment for learning and experimentation, and the architectural exhibition chief among this distinct mode of cultural production, lies in how this environment is latent with meaning, but perhaps more importantly, also in the manner that the exhibition as a form of media has become a major venue for knowledge production and sharing. Innovative research may not only be conducted for the creation of the exhibition content, but also to inform the process of this content’s representation within the three-dimensional setting constituted by the exhibition halls; this too adds another layer of possibility for how architectural research is articulated spatially. The exhibition venue opens up many diverse possibilities for representation, and consequently for modes of reception and learning, and the ability to render this possibility explicit is one of exhibition design’s greatest challenges.

However, it would be shortsighted, if not wrong, to consider the installation of the exhibition as constitutive of a meaningful display environment in and of itself. *Shaping the Great City, Interchange, American Lawn*, to name but a select number of innovative exhibitions, each conceptualized the art of building into a unique form-content relationship that required their own logic, their own narrative structure in order to become cohesive. When we regard the exhibition venue as an opportunity to realize a narrative structure that considers both perceptual and conceptual modes of communicating with visitors—that is, when content is rendered as form in such a way that it communicates didactic and perceptual facets of information
spatially and at once—then the architectural exhibition as media will have achieved its greatest potential.
Works Cited


Ernest Cormier and the Université de Montréal. Exhibition. Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Canada, May 2–October 21 1990.


