

The Architecture Exhibition as Cross-Cultural Contact Zone

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Panel Session 16 (PS16): The Architecture Exhibition as a Cross-Cultural Contact Zone

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The Architecture Exhibition as a Cross-Cultural Contact Zone

This session engages with the methodological challenge of writing a global history of architecture through the lens of architecture exhibitions operating as cross-cultural “contact zones.”

With a boom in cultural institutions placing architecture “on display” in the late 1970s, research on architecture exhibitions gained currency. In the past decades, scholarship has elaborately focused on the thematic foci, the curatorial strategies, and the performative characteristics of exhibitions. Against this background, we lack a nuanced reflection on the role that architecture exhibitions play as sites of cross-cultural exchange that propel architecture culture. This is startling, since well-known examples such as the 1929 CIAM expo *The Dwelling for the Existenzminimum*, the German *Internationale Bauausstellungen* (IBA, 1901-) and the various *Venice Architecture Biennales* (1980-) have functioned as important platforms for the confrontation, exchange and development of architectural ideas from different cultures and geographies.

In this session, we want to explore this aptitude of the architecture exhibition to act as a cross-cultural contact zone. We borrow this term from Mary Louise Pratt, who defines contact zones as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt, 1992). In this view, the architecture exhibition is no longer conceptualized as a mere cultural event but as a constructive encounter between different architecture cultures that produces friction and resistance as much as “exhilarating moments of wonder, revelation, mutual understanding and new wisdom.” We hold that in architecture culture, specific exhibitions have played this role of contact zone in which architectural ideas are bounced back and forth multiple times and undergo a process of cultural negotiation and adaptation (*transculturation*). An example is the first Architecture Biennale in Venice (1980), where under the title “The Presence of the Past” different conceptions of postmodern architecture were confronted, resulting in a more multi-faceted approach of postmodernism that would affect architecture culture ever after.

Approaching architecture exhibitions as contact zones complies with an attempt to move beyond the Euro-American bias of the canonical histories of architecture toward more global and multi-authored modes of post-colonial historiography. A “contact” perspective on exhibitions emphasizes how architectural concepts are constituted in and by their relations to one another. Instead of maintaining that architecture is driven by heroic individual architects and their “unique” ideas, it will offer a perspective in which architecture culture is developed by the sheer co-presence, interaction and interlocking of people, theories and practices.

We invite scholars to explore exhibitions such as the *Sao Paulo Biennale* (Brazil, 1951-), the *UN International Exhibition on Low-Cost Housing* (New Delhi, 1954) and the *German Mobile Exhibition* (East and West Africa, 1963) in which designers, projects and concepts from different cultures encountered one another “on display.” Papers should address the regimes, characteristics and capacities of the exhibition as cross-cultural contact zones and explore, as a case study, an architecture exhibition that not only played an important role in the Western debate but equally engaged in the confrontation between so-called “centers” and “peripheries.”