The Architectural Public Sphere

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Abstract

In his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere*, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas described the emergence, transformation, and disintegration of the public sphere in the late eighteenth century and in the beginning of the nineteenth century in France, Germany and England. After giving a brief summery of Habermas' theory on the public sphere, this paper will attempt to draw a parallel between these ideas (generally applied to literature, art and politics) and the development of the architectural exhibitions presented by the Venice Biennale between 1968 and 2006. In other words, this paper will aim to see whether there is such a thing as an "architectural public sphere" and, if so, will try to determine how this particular type of public sphere had evolved in the last 40 years.

Keywords

Introduction

In his book Alpes et Pyrénées, Victor Hugo had quoted Napoleon who, in front of the Auch Cathedral said: "There are cathedrals one would like to be able to put in museum" (Pierluigi 1982, 33). Although slightly awkward, this affirmation summarized the essence of the paradox around architectural exhibitions.

Image 1
2006 Venice Architecture Biennale

Image: Léa-Catherine Szacka

Architectural exhibitions usually deal with issues of representation. As has often been said, the paradox of this type of exhibition is their attempt to show something within the museum that is forever outside the walls of the museum.

Indeed, as soon as architecture is brought into a museum (or a cultural institution), it therefore ceases to be living architecture. It becomes something else. Something that is closer to a representation, a reproduction or a metaphor of some sort.

Architectural exhibitions are nothing new. Indeed, the first attempt to exhibit pieces of monuments or representation of built works goes back to the end of the eighteenth century. Despite that, it is not before the 1930s that the idea of presenting architecture inside the art institution really took form. It is thanks to one particular institution—the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York—and to the vision of one particular man that the presentation of architecture in an art institution became something accepted and,

now highly common. In 1932, MoMA presented the exhibition "Modern Architecture International Exhibition," curated by Philip Johnson and Henry–Russell Hitchcock under the direction of Alfred H. Barr Jr. That exhibition and its catalogue are historically considered the origin for the term "International Style," used to designate a Modernist architectural style of the 1920s and 1930s. Since the end of the 1970s, we have seen a massive wave of architecture museums, centres and special events opening in Europe and in America.

It is therefore in an epoch of general increased interest for the exhibition of architecture that was born the architecture sector of the Venice Biennale. This sector was officially launched in1980 but had a pre-history that took place between 1968 and 1980, while architectural exhibitions were regularly presented as part of the Venice Art Biennale.

Looking at the evolution in the way architecture was exhibited at the Venice Art Biennale during the last 40 years and, more generally looking at the actual situation in the world of architectural exhibitions, one may observe that there is a movement away from popular education and public debate on cultural matters to the public consumption of culture. Using the concept of the public sphere as elaborated in 1962 by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, this paper will discuss the evolution of architectural exhibitions, in order to analyze and understand the paradox of architectural representation (Habermas et al 1992).

It is thus with the lens of Habermas' concept of the public sphere that we will here observe the problem of architectural exhibitions. Indeed, in an attempt to show how, the "architectural public sphere" had evolved throughout the last 40 years, this paper will draw a parallel between the development of the Venice Architecture Biennale and Habermas' theory on the public sphere.

My hypothesis is that the development of the architecture Biennale is, in some sort, repeating the same schema as the emergence, transformation, and disintegration of the public sphere between the eighteenth and the twentieth century. It is agreed that I am comparing two things that took place in very different periods of time: While the transformation of the public sphere as describe by Habermas took place over about 300 years, the transformation of the architecture Biennale occurred in the late

capitalist epoch, over a period of a little more than thirty years. Nevertheless, knowing that, I do assume that the uses of Habermas' theory will contribute to a better understanding of the late development in the field of architectural exhibitions.

Habermas and the public sphere

In his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas gives an "historical-sociological account of the emergence, transformation, and disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere." (Habermas et al 1992, xi). He explains how, in the late eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth century, a variety of social changes in France, Germany and England contributed to the appearance of new objects and places of culture: Novels, literary and political journals, reading societies, art salons, museums and coffee houses were the places where a critical public opinion was first developed. Habermas then demonstrates how, with the rise of this new social class (the bourgeoisie), a political and literary self-consciousness was developed and diffused by the press and broadcast media.

As Nick Crossley and John Roberts explain in their introduction to *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, "over a relatively brief period social conditions provoked and facilitated a situation in which large numbers of middle class men, came together to engage in reasoned argument over key issues of mutual interests and concern, creating a space in which both new ideas and the practices and discipline of rational public debate were cultivated." (Crossley and Roberts 2004, 2). This space was a zone of mediation between the State and the private individual.

The people participating on a voluntary basis in these new social activities were not just passive but rather started to have certain opinions upon what they saw, read and listened to. Indeed, through art and literature, the bourgeois individual was aiming at increasing self-cultivation while developing their subjectivity. This was achieved by "the private consumption of artistic and literary work." (Crossley and Roberts 2004, 3). At this period, art and literature were not just consumed but also became "a focus for public discussion and debate." (Crossley and Roberts 2004, 4). These discussions and debates first took place in the coffee houses and salons that started to open in the centers of major European metropolises during the eighteenth century. Also, the improvement in printing technologies contributed to the emergence of newsletters and journals in which the bourgeoisie were

allowed to discuss and debate. In the time of the salons, the public sphere was reserved to a certain type of educated people. "Thus, in the first half of the eighteenth century the enlightened amateurs formed the inner circle of the new art public", and through culture created a public that had a newly formed critical rationality. (Habermas et al 1992, 40).

Between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, museums started to open in France, England and Germany institutionalizing judgment on art. "Discussion became the medium through which people appropriated art." (Habermas et al 1992, 40). If, in the first half of the eighteenth century enlightened amateurs formed the inner circle of the new art public, art became then accessible to a broader public and the person of the professional art critic started to have a position of control.

According to Habermas, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the public sphere disintegrated for two major reasons: the rise of mass media and the interference of the state in rational-critical discourse– He wrote: "The press and broadcast media serve less as an organ of public information and debate than as technologies for managing consensus and promoting consumer culture." (Habermas et al 1992, xii). The schema proposed by Habermas is simple: the development of mass media, together with the rise of capitalism, transformed the autonomous public sphere into a sphere of cultural consumption.

In recent years, the omnipresence of media in our day-to-day life has brought along a lot of questions and debate regarding concepts such as "public sphere," "public opinion," and "public use of reason." (Crossley and Roberts 2004, 1). These questions are applied to many aspects of today's societies, the built environment and architecture being one of them. And, as reminded by Roberts and Crossley, "it has been Habermas' own work on the public sphere, both in Structural Transformation and later studies, which has set the agenda for much of the debate on these issues." (Crossley and Roberts 2004, 1).

Is there such a thing as an "architectural public sphere"?
Looking at Habermas' concept of the public sphere, we can wonder if there ever was such a thing as an "architectural public sphere"– a variety of places where a critical public opinion about architecture and an architectural

Image 2
2006 Venice Architecture Biennale

Image: Léa-Catherine Szacka

self-consciousness was developed. In the same way as novels and literary journals were used in the eighteenth century to develop the public opinion on social and political issues, architectural representation organized around particular themes or key ideas developed the public's opinion about the built environment.

Nowadays, many institutions mediate architecture. Indeed, exhibitions are only one type of institutions where mediation occurs. Books, magazines and even television contribute to the formation of a critical public opinion and a self-consciousness about architecture.

When the Venice Biennale (an institution that had existed for more than a hundred years) decided to create an independent architectural sector, it also created one of the major institutions of architectural mediation on the planet. Still little known, the history of the Venice Architecture Biennale, is not straight and regular, but rather presents an evolutionary schema with many divergent episodes. What is clear, is that the nature of the exhibitions

of architecture presented at the Biennale changed a lot between 1968 and 2006, so providing a Venice Architecture Biennale is a good case study for this paper.

Venice Biennale: an institution for the arts

The Venice Biennale was created in 1895 as a bi-annual international art exhibition. It was then described as an "institution of public utility and benefit." (Di Martino 2005, 10). Since the very beginning of its existence, the Venice Biennale has provoked discussion and controversy in the public as well as in the press.

The Venice Biennale has always been closely linked to the destiny of the peculiar city in which it takes place. Very political and bureaucratic, the organization of this cultural institution has been marked by the changes of the municipal and national governments.

The architecture sector of the Venice Biennale was established in 1980, with the opening of the first "Mostra Internazionale d'Architecttura di Venezia" under the title "The Presence of the Past". But in reality, it is between 1968 and 1980 that the creation of one of the most important international architecture events was taking form.

1968: The end of an era

In 1968 the Venice Biennale—like many other cultural institutions—was occupied by artists and students that formed a boycott committee in order to prevent the opening of the show. Fighting against the "emborgeoizement" of art, the rebels proclaimed the end of an era. After the incident, the status of the Venice Biennale was revised, giving rise, in 1973, to a new status for this institution.

However, 1968 did not only mark the end of an era for the Venice Biennale. It also marked the beginning of a new sector, yet to be created. Indeed, although the architecture sector of the Biennale would only be created in 1980, it is in 1968 that the architecture was shown for the very first time at the Venice Biennale.

In 1968, in the middle of all the agitation, under the directorship of Marzio Dall'Acqua, an architecture show was presented for the first time at the Biennale. In the catalogue of the 34th Art Biennale, the small architecture

exhibition was described as follows: "four personalities of contemporary architecture (Franco Albini, Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, and Carlo Scarpa) will not only exhibit some of their past work, but will rather offer a testimony of their language analyzed in the most formal aspect."

The four small architectural exhibitions were inside a bigger exhibition dedicated to show examples of abstract art (Pop art, optical art, …). (Lanzarini 2003, 215). The Louis Kahn room, designed by Carlo Scarpa, offered a rather simple display: two large and low tables on which seventy two autographed drawings showed a selection of work by the American master. In Rudolph's case, the exhibition was a little more conventional. It mainly shows one project—the Graphic Art Centre in New York—designed in 1967 for a site near the Hudson River. The project contained offices, apartments, a school, a recreational centre and other services (Lanzarini 2003, 215, 230). An enormous model of this center (looking more like a sculpture than architecture) was presented in the middle of the room while gigantic photographs, suggesting the insertion of the building in a Manhattan context, were hanging on the walls. (Lanzarini 2003, 219). Albini, more respectful of the scope set by the organizers of the exhibition tried to show the expressive aspect of his work. He presented photographs of his projects completed with a 1:1 model of his façade for the department store la Rinascente in Rome. This model, a mixture of marble and iron again looked more like a sculpture than anything else. Finally, Scarpa did something completely different. Respecting the intention of the curators, he decided to create an original project that could enter into a dialogue with the other structure he had created for the Venice pavilion. (Lanzarini 2003, 219).

In this first architecture exhibition of the Biennale, architecture was approached for its purely formal quality, almost like art pieces. As explained in a letter sent by the Biennale's organizers to the Franco Albini, the scope of the exhibition was to express and symbolise the particular mode in which each architect forms and defines space (Lanzarini 2003, 215). Therefore the exhibition did not operate as a promotional device for particular projects or for the national and regional governments, but exhibited an abstract expression of the work of each architect.

1972: Quattro Progetti per Venezia / Four Projects for Venice
In 1972, another architectural exhibition was organised inside the Art Biennale. Titled "Quattro progetti per Venezia" (Four Projects for Venice) this

show offered to the attention of the public four projects designed for the city of Venice (between 1953 and 1972) by masters of contemporary architecture: The Palazzo Masieri by Frank Lloyd Wright, The San Giobbe Hospital by Le Corbusier, The Palazzo dei Congressi by Louis Kahn and the public park in Jesolo by Isamu Noguchi. "Four projects that were never elaborated and that many today consider as four missed opportunities for Venice." (Di Martino 2005, 64).

In *Carlo Scarpa L'architetto e le Arti: gli anni della Biennale di Venezia 1948-1972,* Orietta Lanzarini says that the architectural project exhibited at the XXXVI Biennale di Venezia were called "provocative and scandalous". (Lanzarini 2003, 228). This exhibition, she says, was aiming to centre the attention of the public on a series of problems proper to the city of Venice. At the time, there was still hope that these projects would be built, reaffirming the city of Venice as a capital in its territory while helping it to not stay fixed in the past and not to become a sort of Disney Land of stones for tourists.

As with the salons and literary circles of the eighteenth century, this part of the 36th Venice Art Biennale certainly encouraged visitors to form an opinion on the four polemical projects designed for the city of Venice. In addition to cultivating their architectural judgment by admiring the work of four masters of modern architecture, the visitors to the show had to build up their opinion on particular questions related to architecture: were they for or against the construction of modern building in a particularly well preserved historical environment like the city of Venice.

1975: A proposito del Mulino Stucky / Regarding the Stucky Mill
In 1974, the Italian architect Vittorio Gregotti was appointed director of the visual arts sector of the Venice Biennale. But Gregotti was an architect and therefore laid down his conditions before accepting the directorship: The Visual Arts Sector of the Venice Biennale had to become the Visual arts and Architecture Sector and the biannual event had to include an exhibition on architecture. (Gregotti, in interview with the author, 2008).

Starting from there, the architectural component of the Venice Art Biennale was developed, until it became an independent sector. In 1975, a special edition of the Biennale was organised by Gregotti. Two shows were presented in the former salt Warehouses (Magazini del sale) at the Zattere. The first

show was centred on Marcel Duchamp's piece *La mariée mise à nu par ses celibataire*, while the other one showed architectural propositions for the rehabilitation of the Mulino Stucky, a massive neo-gothic former mill on the Giudecca island (in the Venetian Lagoon lying immediately south of the central islands, from which it is separated by the Giudecca Canal).

The show called *A Proposito del Mulino Stucky* was presented from September 15th to November 4th 1975. It presented the result of an international workshop proposing "a common theme as a ground for confrontation" between art and architecture. (Raggi 1975, 21). About thirty teams presented a project regarding the old factory . The task of this workshop was not to propose a finished project or a plan for re-use of the Mulino. It was more at the level of ideas and less at the level of realization, the re-use of the factory being more an issue for the institutional town planning authorities to deal with (and not the Biennale itself, Raggi 1975, 21).

Here again, the exhibition was certainly aiming at provoking discussion and debate. Here again, the theme was closely linked to the city hosting the exhibition. The question remains to know how the public and the critics perceived this exhibition. Highly artistic, most of the projects must have been difficult to understand for the general public.

In interview, Gregotti—former director of the Arts and Architecture Sector of the Biennale—explained: "The 1975 exhibition on the Mulino Stucky was not really important. It was more local. It was just a series of manifestations in order to find a popular basis on which to rebuilt the Biennale. In fact, after such a long break [from 1968 to 1974] the Biennale had a lot of local and more international and political problems. That's why the manifestations were directed towards local problems like the issue of the Mulino Stucky or other important problems of Venice."

The exhibition "A Proposito del Mulino Stucky" was part of a broader experiment started by the Biennale. Indeed a working group started, in 1975, a community based audiovisual experiment on the Giudecca island. In **1975 Yearbook** published by the Biennale (La Biennale 1975) it is said that the Mulino Stucky exhibition engendered a vivid polemic, and was an experiment which had the merit of bringing a local problem to an international level of reflection. In this exhibition, there was a real desire to involve the public. In the *1975 Yearbook* it is said that the private sphere had been transformed into a public awareness.

1980: The first Venice Architecture Biennale.

In 1980, under the curatorship of Paolo Portoghesi, the first Venice Architecture Biennale was launched. Called *La Presenza del passato* (*The Presence of the Past*) this exhibition is now mainly known for its Strada Nuovissima, an assemblage of 20 real-scale façades built by some of the most famous architects of the time (Rem Koolhaas, Ricardo Bofill, Charles Moore, Robert Stern, Franco Purini, Stanley Tigerman, GRAU, Thomas Gordon Smith, Arata Isozaki, Massimo Scolari, Constantino Dardi, Michael Graves, Frank O. Gehry, Oswalt Mathias Ungers, Robert Venturi, Leon Krier, Joseph Paul Kleihues, Hans Hollein, Christian de Portzamparc, and Allan Greenberg). This First Venice Architecture Biennale was a place of innovation, and proposed a real interaction with the visitors. Particularly overlooked by scholars, this exhibition was important for it launched the architecture sector of the Venice Biennale while proposing a new technique of display for architecture and marking an historical shift from modern to post-modern architecture (for the little these is, see Roddolo, 1980; *Controspazio*, 1980).

For this exhibition, on top of offering to the visitors a "real-scale" experience of architecture, the organizers of the Biennale realized one of the "most outstanding examples of contemporary re-cycling." (Kulterman, 1981). In fact, the first Architecture Biennale in Venice was held in the old Corderie of the Arsenale (situated between Piazza San Marco and the Giardini di Castello), a monumental building of the 16th century and originally destined to be a rope factory. Now one of the main exhibition spaces for both the art and the architecture Biennale, the Corderie of the Arsenal was visited in the fall of 1979 by Paolo Porthogesi, curator of the Strada Nuovissma. At the time says Portoghesi, the space was full of dust and needed to find a new function. (Portoghesi, in interview with the author, 2008).

In an article published in *Architecture + Urbanism* in 1981, Udo Kulterman summarized the original goals of the Architecture Biennale—"The 1980 Architecture Biennale in Venice is the beginning of a long-range and complex program dedicated to the improvement of architectural concepts and architectural realities as we define and realize them today. In order to make this program successful there will have to be critical debates as well as dialectic atmosphere of controversy and stimulation, all fundamental for the continuation of tradition." (Kulterman, 1981, 15). Unfortunately, what then happened at the architecture Biennale was a little bit different from this original scenario.

1985 and 1991: The competitions

In 1985, the third International Exhibition of Architecture of the Venice Biennale opened under the title of "Venice Project". Directed by the Italian architect Aldo Rossi, that Biennale was essentially made of the presentation to the public of different competition entries. In the introduction of the "Venice Project" catalogue, Porthoghesi (who was, by this time, chairman of the exhibition) explains that the third edition of the Biennale was aiming at presenting both "Internationality and Venetianity." (*Terza Mostra Internazionale di Architettura*, 1985, 1, 11). Organizing an ideas competition on the Venetian territory was really peculiar as it made Venice the protagonist of the exhibition.

No less than ten competitions were organized for the third Venice Architecture Biennale (for Piazza di Badoere; Piazza di Este; Villa Farsetti; Piazze di Palmanova; Castelli di Giulietta e Romeo; Rocca di Noale; Prato della Valle; Ponte dell'Accademia; Mercato di Rialto; and, Ca'Venier dei Leoni): architects and planners from all over the world concentrated their attention on the small territory of the city called la Serenissima. Approximately 1,500 projects were produced for the show, the majority of which came from "new voices including many students and student groups." (*Terza Mostra Internazionale di Architettura*, 1985, 1, 17). The sites and the problems raised by the competitions were real but there was no intention to realize any of the proposals. It was thus an exhibition of paper architecture, or, as suggested by Diane Ghirardo, "a response to the problem of what to do with the remnants of the past." (*Terza Mostra Internazionale di Architettura*, 1985, 1, 16).

In 1991, on the occasion of its fifth exhibition, the Biennale presented the entries of three major architectural competitions (for the Italian Pavilion at the Giardini, for the Palazzo del Cinema at the Lido, and for Piazzale Roma—two competitions upon invitation and one open competition). It was thus, again, as with the Biennale of 1985, a Biennale of competitions, but with less fantasy, operating in a more pragmatic way. In an interview with the author (in 2007) Paolo Scibelli (who has worked for the art and architecture sector of the Biennale since 1988), the difference between the Biennale of 1985 and the Biennale of 1991 can be explained by a simple historical fact: There was an epoch in which the competitions of ideas were more valorized followed by a crisis and a period of less utopian thought. In 1985, the Biennale had organized a competition purely about ideas, in 1991, it was

something more pragmatic with the aim of realizing buildings. But despite the good intention of the organizers, no building was realized according to the projects presented at the fifth architecture Biennale.

The 1985 and 1991 architecture Biennale were meant to provoke discussions and opinions among the visitors. These kind of exhibitions (presenting competition entries) is a way of showing all the creative potential generated by architectural competitions. They are also a way of showing to the citizen, the options that are available to them, for the benefit of the future of their city. Again, these two shows were strongly linked to the city of Venice. It was about asking the world what to do with la Serinissima.

Of course, those Architecture Biennales that exhibited the results of architectural competition presented, by definition, the judgement of various experts. In the 1985 and 1991 Biennale the judgments of critics (or architects-critics) like Ignazio Gardella, James Stirling and Francesco Dalco (for the Italian Pavilion competition) were presented. As with art in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the figure of the critic started to have a position of control.

The Architecture Biennale in the Twenty-First Century

Three architecture Biennale have been organized in the twenty-first century: the 8th architecture Biennale in 2002 under the title *Next*, the 9th architecture Biennale in 2004 with the name of *Metamorph*, the 10th Architecture Biennale in 2006 that was called Cities, Architecture and Society, and, finally, the 11th Architecture Biennale in 2008 under the title *Out There: Architecture Beyond Building*. These three Biennale have more than one common point. They were all curated by non-Italian directors (the 8th edition by a Briton, Deyan Sudjick, the 9th edition by a Canadian, Kurt W. Foster, the 10th edition by another Briton, Richard Burdett, and the 11th by an American, Aaron Betsky), they all attracted a large number of visitors and were concerned with international matters. The 8th and 9th Biennale followed a very similar organization, showing a huge amount of projects from a large number of practices (150 projects by 90 practices for the 8th edition, and 200 projects by 170 practices for the 9th edition). A lot less provocative than previous Biennale, these exhibitions aimed at informing the public on the construction or projects soon to be built, the transformation in the formal world of architecture, the current state of our metropolises. They were more about consuming than about judging. They contained an

overwhelming collection of drawings, models, films and photographs that did not leave a lot of space for reflection, critical judgment or even self-cultivation of the public.

There is a huge contrast between the first manifestation of architecture at the Biennale (1968, 1972, 1975, 1985 or even 1991) and the later exhibitions (2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008) that attracted between 101,000 and 130,000 visitors. (the exact data, provided by the press office of the Biennale, are: 101,693 visitors in 2002; 115,099 visitors in 2004; 130,226 visitors in 2006; and, 129,323 visitors in 2008). The last editions of the Venice Architecture Biennale seem to be a lot more economically driven and internationally oriented.

According to Habermas, the disintegration of the public sphere occurs when means of exchanging ideas are no longer controlled by the people writing the critique but rather by the media or by the State via the media. From the 1970s to the middle of the 1990s, local architects or architectural historians and critics controlled the architecture Biennale. Later, the event became a lot more mediated and metiatized. It is now generally directed by international stars and partly controlled by the Italian State via political nominations on the Biennale board or by different governments via national representation at the Giardini.

Nowadays, the public no longer gathers in the architectural exhibitions of the Biennale in order to provide criticism of projects (as was the case at the Art Biennale of 1972 and 1975 or at the Architecture Biennale of 1985 and 1991) but rather absorbs a massive amount of images or data (as during the last architecture Biennale curated by Ricky Burdett) in order to be informed on what is going on in the world of architecture.

From the Public Sphere to the Cultural Consumption

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas dedicated a chapter to the switch from a cultural-debating (*kulturräsonierend*) to a culture-consuming public. Talking about the literary public sphere, Habermas writes: "The public sphere in the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or shame-private world of culture consumption." (Habermas Burger et al, 1992, 160). In the literary world, the more expansive and exclusive novels were transformed in affordable paperback for the lower-middle class and students.

Between 1972 and 2006, the presentation of architecture at the Venice Biennale repeated the schema of the emergence, transformation and disintegration of the public sphere proposed by Harbermas. Indeed, the architecture Biennale changed from a place where a critical public opinion was developed, to a place where the critic started to have a position of control, finally becoming a place of cultural consumption.

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