

# 03 Background: When Architecture Became Art (1975-1977) Carlos Mínguez

The examples selected in this short article describe the first instances, in the mid-1970s, where architectural documents – particularly drawings – were absorbed into the art market by commercial galleries in New York<sup>1</sup>.



Despite several decades of major exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), it was relatively rare for architecture to be exhibited at New York art galleries. *However, in the late 1970s, over the course of barely three years, the city increasingly began to see architecture – through the discipline's drawings, models and installations – in its leading commercial galleries. What was it about those years? Why did architectural exhibitions suddenly flourish?*

This change was driven to some extent by the growing interest in architectural drawings, in part precipitated by the significance and impact of the exhibition *The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux Arts* staged by Arthur Drexler at the MoMA and opened to the public on 29 October 1975.

The exhibition mainly featured large-scale work in watercolour by 19th-century students at the aforementioned Paris school. The drawings included designs by Henri Labrouste, Charles Garnier and plans for other French and US buildings rendered in the same style. *In other words, as most of the exhibition was dedicated to student assignments it essentially presented a collection of drawings of buildings that were never intended to be built. Those buildings were, moreover, beautiful.* As Paul Goldberger wrote in his review of the exhibition for the *New York Times*:

“Visually, this is the most beautiful architectural exhibition in memory, and among the most attractive shows of any kind ever mounted in New York”<sup>2</sup>.

As well as being a transformative event for the discipline of architecture, the show presented architectural documents that could be easily understood by non-architects and appreciated solely for their colour and beauty. The spectacular watercolours and drawings particularly drew attention for their aesthetics; purpose, context and technology were of secondary concern<sup>3</sup>.

Seven months before the big exhibition on beaux arts opened, Emilio Ambasz, at that time Curator of Design at the MoMA, staged a small exhibition entitled *Architectural Studies and Projects*.

It was installed in the museum's penthouse and was open from 13 March to 15 May 1975. The venue, located on the MoMA's sixth floor, was also the site of the Art Lending Service (ALS), widely known as the museum's sales and rentals gallery, which doubled up as the museum members' lounge and restaurant<sup>4</sup>.

The ALS offered museum members the opportunity to rent works of art for two months on a buy-or-return basis. *The ALS earned a percentage on the work loaned or sold, just like a commercial gallery.*

THE ALS started out in 1951 as a way of connecting the museum with New York's galleries and collectors and began holding exhibitions in the penthouse in 1955. The first shows featured a selection of works from the ALS's own collection. However, from the early 1960s onwards, the exhibitions gradually became more elaborate thanks to the creation of the Art Advisory Service (AAS). Supported by members of the museum's Junior Council, this service attached to the ALS was set up with the intention of developing the institution's contemporary art collection. Consequently, from 1962 onwards the shows staged in the penthouse became broadly thematic and the AAS began inviting guest curators in to organise them. Curators like Campbell Wyly, Pierre Apraxine and John Garrigan put on numerous exhibitions, focusing principally on painting, sculpture and photography, under titles like *Young West Artists* (1965), *Nine Print Portfolios* (1970) or *Prints for Collectors* (1972). When the ALS held *Architectural Studies and Projects* in 1975 it was the first time that it had organised an architecture exhibition, and it was also the first time that it invited Emilio Ambasz to be guest curator.

Emilio Ambasz was Curator of Design at the MoMA from 1970 to 1976. He organised various exhibitions on architecture and industrial design, including Italy: *The New Domestic Landscape*, in 1972; *The Architecture of Luis Barragán*, in 1974; and *The Taxi Project*, in 1976. *Architectural Studies and Projects* presented 52 architectural drawings, defined, according to Ambasz, as a series of “visionary projects, imaginary creations never intended to be built”<sup>5</sup>. The show was an “informal exhibition of [...] recent drawings by American and European architects”. Ambasz invited 23 individual and teams of architects to submit a maximum of three paper drawings for the exhibition.

The designs included in the show spanned a broad range of projects and styles by leading exponents of the day's various lines of architectural thought. The breakdown by country reads as follows: from Austria, Raimund Abraham and Friederick St. Florian; from Italy, Ettore Stottsass, Superstudio, Gaetano Pesce, Lauretta Vinciarelli and Alessandro Mendini; from Holland, Events-structures, and Rem Koolhaas with Elia and Zoe Zenghelis; from Great Britain, Peter Cook, Michael Webb and Cedric Price; from the United States, Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, John Hedjuk, Richard Meier and SITE INC; and from Argentina, Rodolfo Machado and Susana Torre. The works ranged in price from \$200 to \$2000. As standard practice, the Art Lending Service took a 15% commission on all sales.

In one of the invitations to the exhibition, Judith Price, Chair of the ALS, makes the programme's commercial intention clear:

“We hope you will agree to participate in what we believe will be a significant exhibition presenting the drawings of leading architects to collectors”<sup>6</sup>.

While the ideological differences between the projects on show were extremely wide, the response to the exhibition highlighted their shared poetry and vision. As Paul Goldberger wrote in his *New York Times* review:

“Architectural Studies and Projects, which opens today in the Penthouse of the Museum of Modern Art, deals with the most peripheral, yet perhaps the most luxurious, aspect of architecture: the making of purely visionary drawings, schemes that have no connection with reality”<sup>7</sup>.

The way the exhibition presented the architectural drawings seduced the public in general and the art market in particular. Goldberger continued: "One of the objectives of the show has been to encourage public interest in architectural drawings as art, and on this level it is likely to be successful"<sup>8</sup>.

And it did succeed, not only because 11 of the 23 creators sold their work, but also because art collectors readily took the bait.

Pierre Apraxine worked as assistant curator of painting and sculpture at the MoMA from summer 1970 through to 1973. At the time of Architectural Studies and Projects, he became curator to Howard Gilman, owner of the Gilman Paper Company. His task in this role was to put together a collection of contemporary art. It was intended to revolve around minimalist and conceptual art, but after visiting the exhibition in the MoMA penthouse Pierre Apraxine changed his mind and decided to collect architectural drawings, creating the so-called Howard Gilman Collection of Visionary Architectural Drawings, work on which began in 1975 and was all but completed by 1980. The collection was donated to the Museum of Modern Art in November 2000<sup>9</sup>.

In 1977, three architectural exhibitions opened in commercial galleries in New York: *Towards a More Modern Architecture*, staged by Robert Stern and held at the Drawing Center and the Cooper Hewitt Museum; *New York: Past, Present, and Proposed*, at the recently opened Gallery Spaced; and the most significant of the three, *Architecture I*, curated by Pierre Apraxine at the Leo Castelli Gallery.

At the time, the Leo Castelli Gallery – one of New York's most influential – focused particularly on the abstract expressionism, minimalism and pop art movements, showcasing artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Frank Stella and Cy Twombly. The show at the Leo Castelli Gallery was the most significant of the three not so much for the work on display but because it revealed the extent to which architectural drawings had become an artworld phenomenon. After *Architecture I*'s success, in 1977 the gallery started representing architects and, over the next few years, organised a series of architectural exhibitions, starting with *Architecture II: Houses for Sale* in 1980 and the third in the series, *Architecture III: Follies* in 1983.

The show at the Leo Castelli Gallery presented the work of seven architects: Raimund Abraham, Emilio Ambasz, Richard Meier, Walter Pichler, Aldo Rossi, James Stirling and the firm Venturi y Rauch. Three of the architects, along with the curator, had also contributed to the exhibition in the MoMA penthouse. According to its curator, the show sought to illustrate "the diverse aesthetic and philosophical attitudes prevalent in contemporary architecture. It presents therefore a cross-section rather than a single architectural doctrine"<sup>10</sup>.

The following years saw many more art galleries stage architectural exhibitions. While the content, format or objective may have varied, they tended to have one thing in common: the architectural works were commissioned, selected, presented and promoted with the aim of being sold.

Commercial art galleries saw an opportunity to sell the output of an untapped realm. In parallel, several architects saw galleries as a space in which to develop ideas and projects that neither the discipline's professional sphere nor its journals and publications had a place for. Commercial galleries offered a space that complemented the other formats in which contemporary ideas of architecture circulated, a space positioned between the disseminating role played by publications and the historical consolidation offered by museums.

Commercial galleries also offered access to a new audience. While architecture journals were mainly read by those active within the discipline (from students to academics and practising architects), the public at the architectural exhibitions held in New York's commercial galleries was much more heterogeneous, attrac-

ting experts and professionals, dealers, art collectors and curators along with art enthusiasts familiar with avant-garde movements but with largely little or no prior knowledge of architecture. Similarly, it was not an audience targeted by a working building, e.g. direct users or local inhabitants or recipients of the texts, documents, photographs and publicity about that building.

It is important to note that the way in which the architectural works were exhibited by the art galleries was markedly conventional. The drawings and models were largely treated as if they were works of art. They were presented without any context, treating the plans for a housing project in the same way as a painting, or a model for a public building in the same way as a sculpture. Presentation of the works emphasised the author's name — reinforcing the idea of the architect as artist — and showed no sophistication as regards the projects' social, political and cultural components.

The welcoming of architectural representations into the exhibition rooms of New York's leading art galleries is not only proof of the art world's interest in this domain, it also represents a trend in architectural practice that saw galleries as a fresh site on which architects could build both their ideas and their reputations.

#### **Carlos Mínguez Carrasco**

**He is an architect and architecture curator. He is currently Senior Curator at ArkDes, Sweden's National Centre for Architecture and Design. He was Associate Curator at Storefront for Art and Architecture from 2012 to 2017. Before that, he was Senior Curator, alongside the After Belonging Agency, of the Oslo Architecture Triennial in 2016 and Assistant Curator of OfficeUS, the US pavilion at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale. A graduate of Barcelona's ETSAB school of architecture, he holds a master's degree in Critical, Curatorial, and Conceptual Practices in Architecture from Columbia University, New York. He has organised a wide range of exhibitions, events and competitions, focusing particularly on how social and political disputes influence contemporary architectural culture. He has edited several publications, including *After Belonging: The Objects, Spaces, and Territories of the Ways We Stay in Transit* (Lars Müller Publishers, 2016), *OfficeUS Manual* (Lars Müller Publishers, 2017) and *bodyspacemotionthings* (Performa, 2019). His articles have been published in various exhibition catalogues and journals such as *Domus*, *Migrant Journal* and *Código*. He has also lectured at a number of universities and arts centres in Europe, the United States and Latin America, including Columbia University GSAPP, Harvard University GSD and Princeton University SoA.**

## Notes

**01.** This investigation started in 2009 (Critical, Curatorial, and Conceptual Practices in Architecture program) at Columbia University GSAPP, and was developed during the following years. Since then, several articles and publications have been published about this subject. The most extended and finished work that studies the cases shown in this text is KAUFFMAN, Jordan, "Drawing on Architecture, The Object of Lines 1970-1990" MIT Press, 2018.

**02.** GOLDBERGER, Paul, "Beaux Arts Architecture at the Modern", *New York Times*, 29 October 1975.

**03.** That was not the only intention of its curator, Arthur Drexler. For detailed information on the exhibition, its curatorial brief and its impact on architectural discourse, see SCOTT, Felicity D., "When Systems Fail", in *Architecture and Techno-Utopia*, MIT Press, 2007.

**04.** PRICE, Judith, *Chair of the Art Lending Service*, in a letter to Andrea Branzi of 7 November 1974.

**05.** Museum of Modern Art, *Architectural Studies and Projects* press release, 13 March 1975.

**06.** PRICE, Judith, *Chair of the Art Lending Service*, in a letter to Andrea Branzi of 7 November 1974.

**07.** GOLDBERGER, Paul, "Beaux Arts Architecture at the Modern", *New York Times*, 29 October 1975.

**08.** Idem.

**09.** APRAXINE, Pierre, in conversation with Paola Antonelli in the catalogue for *The Changing of the Avant-Garde: Visionary Architectural Drawings from the Howard Gilman Collection*, Museum of Modern Art, 2002.

**10.** APRAXINE, Pierre, in the preface to the catalogue for *Architecture*, New York, 1977.

## Images

**01.** View of the exhibition Architectural Studies and Projects, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1975.

# 04 Stadium and Museum: A Mapping of Narrative Impulses Alejandra Celedón

Building a Stadium for a Museum was the operation behind "Stadium", Chile Pavilion at the 16th Venice Biennial in 2018. The exhibition recovered a forgotten event of recent local history where, during Pinochet's dictatorship, 37,000 property titles were awarded to Santiago slum dwellers in Chile National Stadium. For the event in 1979, a footprint of the building was redrawn, which instead of grandstands traced polygons with the name of more than 60 towns on the outskirts of Santiago, from where those summoned that day came. The drawing, the starting point of "Stadium", brings together a cartographic and a narrative impulse in the same effort. Stadium debate its premises from a second adaptation of the pavilion, in which the stadium is reconstructed for the Museum of Contemporary Art of Santiago in 2019. The exhibition, like the event of the past, transports the city into a building, and makes visible the periphery in the centre. Thus, the Venetian Arsenal and the Contemporary Art Museum of Santiago echo its content and open new disciplinary reflections from the operations involved: in them a building is compressed inside another, or even a city compressed within another. "Stadium" takes up Rossi's premise on Architecture for the Museum and raises its potential to open critical debates about architecture and its practices.



Obstinacy, as Aldo Rossi would say, is the begetter of theory in art and architecture. It reflects the fact that certain subjects of discussion return time and again, irrespective of the material we have before us. Behind Stadium, the pavilion representing Chile at the 16th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2018, lay an obstinate belief in drawings as founts of knowledge, in the drawing (and redrawing) of architectural plans as an active means of administering lives and land, and in buildings as political and social projects, with architecture's meaning remaining constant in relation to the city, the public and its history. Behind it lay an obstinate belief in objects and their capacity to tell a story, and in museums as the place for them to recount them. A year later, Stadium was adapted for exhibition at Santiago de Chile's Museum of Contemporary Art. In both cases, the principal task was to compress an enormous building – the National Stadium – into a tiny exhibition area: the *Sala dell'Isolloto del Arsenale* in the first case and the Museum's central hall in the second. The show not only installed a scale model of the stadium inside the exhibition space but also, following the example of Cézanne, who said he only painted for museums, conceived and built a stadium specifically for a museum.