

EXHIBITING PLACES

INSTALLATION PRACTICES AT THE MARGINS

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The paper illustrates how the experiments by some emerging architectural practices, adopting the tools of temporary setup, often not far from installation or exhibition design, claim a deeper sense of architecture, and identify marginal areas –distant from the centres of our cities as widely accredited attractive areas for tourism or leisure– as valuable reservoirs of resources, redefining their established patterns. Their interventions create an intermediate space, which instead of obsessively opposing centre and periphery, urban and rural, modernity and tradition, global and local, is able to instil a deviation, staging new images and opening up to a new imagery. In the ephemeral character of the presented projects lays

one of their more powerful strengths. They concentrate an enormous amount of energy in a certain place at a certain moment and this phenomenon has a big transformative potential. In this context, performances, installations and exhibitions can be understood as activist's tools making the appropriation of marginal areas as well as devices capable of strengthening community interactions. This paper is part of a broader analysis connected to a research project that starts from the assumption that architectural exhibitions today should be recognised as a mean oriented not only towards the documentation and presentation of architecture, but as a proper instrument for the production of architectural experiments.

The time seems to have come to 'turn the telescope' with which the environmental phenomenon has been observed so far. Up to now (starting from the last three centuries; it was different before) the optics have been focused towards the city –as a set of artefacts and circulation systems– the background, consisting of the countryside, the landscape, the natural environment, has continued to be observed in passing. Only recently, the observation of the background has become more attentive, but it remained a background and therefore blurred and of little significance. Now, driven by the consequences of modes of transformation that are antagonistic to the basic interests of the human beings and any living species, it becomes necessary to establish that 'the environment is everything' and that territory, landscape, countryside, urban peripheries, cities, historic town centres, buildings, squares etc. are individual cases of the environmental universe. (De Carlo, 1991, p. 152)¹

What do we mean, as architects, by periphery? And what do we mean by countryside? As stated in the call/manifesto for this issue, for a long time we have dismissed those places measuring 'their value only in relation to the city': an approach that, ironically, could be summed up as a *hic sunt leones* attitude. Nevertheless, during the last few years, a renewed awareness by the side of architects and urban planners in territories 'beyond the city' emerges, an interest that testifies their relevance also as far as it concerns the cultural production located within urban contexts.

Starting from the assumption that architectural exhibitions are today widely recognised as tools not only for documenting and presenting architecture, but a thing in themselves (Szacka, 2019) and a proper instrument for the production of architectural experiments (Colomina, 2008), we want to address the issues examined in this paper starting from examples that belong to the exhibitionary complex (Bennett, 1988) of architecture. Exhibitions and temporary installations respond to changes in current phenomena with more reactivity and promptness than architecture itself,

which deals with slower and longer timescales. In this sense, the analysis of exhibitions –of architecture exhibitions in this specific case– often enable us to detect in advance certain paradigm shifts and accelerations in the thematic evolution of the discourse on architecture. If in the exhibitions architecture has been treated for decades as a merely urban or metropolitan fact, in the last years, the ‘lens of the telescope’, according to Giancarlo De Carlo’s metaphor, seems to have been turned towards more marginal contexts, towards the peripheries to a certain extent.

In 2016, the 15th International Architecture Exhibition organised by La Biennale di Venezia, curated by Alejandro Aravena, was titled *Reporting from the Front* and made the value of ‘frontier’ places for architectural practice (Aravena, 2016) explicit. This position resonated in some of the exhibitions that were presented by the National Pavilions, such as *Arcipelago Italia* (Cucinella, 2018), or *Building a Future Countryside*, (Xiangning, 2018), which showed how some of the most innovating projects, paradoxically, take place just outside what for decades was recognized as an undisputed centre: the city.

In 2020, a solid institution as the Guggenheim Museum in New York opened *Countryside. The Future*, the eagerly awaited exhibition curated by AMO and Rem Koolhaas (Koolhaas & AMO, 2020), as the result of several years of research involving various scholars and universities around the world¹, while the Canadian Center for Architecture in Montréal promoted the research program *What About the Provinces*³, a series of essays, revised archival projects and video documentaries around the “posturban phenomenon” in Japan (Ota, 2019) and all over the world. *Countryside. The Future* examined the modern conception of leisure, the politics of large-scale planning, climate change, migration, human and non-human ecosystems, market-driven preservation, artificial and organic coexistence, and other forms of radical intervention that are altering landscapes across the world according to the well-known systemic and globalist approach emblematic for AMO, the think tank of the Office for Metropolitan (!) Architecture

(AMO). Cynically and provocatively, the rural, remote, and wild territories are collectively identified as “countryside”, or “the 98% of the Earth’s surface not occupied by cities”, an “ignored realm” “largely off (our) radar” (Koolhaas & AMO, 2020). On the other hand, the initiative promoted by the CCA “looks at places beyond the metropolis: small and medium-size towns, little cities, remote villages, [...] places that we cannot simply reduce to non-urban” and where “our crises – political, social, economic, environmental– are magnified” (CCA, 2019).

“Province –states the introduction to the research– it is also where experimentation is supposed to be more free. We head out there for new kinds of architecture and community, and a better life (or at least its illusion)” (CCA, 2019). In the narrative proposed by the CCA’s programme, the gaze is rather focused to local contexts, to the possibilities offered to architecture by the escape from the globalist contexts and processes mentioned in *Countryside. The Future*.

Thanks to this season of exhibitions, among other things, the identity of the countryside as a land of traditions, backwardness, and ‘nature’, whatever this term implies, is being questioned. The countryside seems rather to be a new ambiguous and ambivalent utopia, in the double sense assigned by Thomas More’s first distinction to the word (Goodey, 1970; Agostini, 2015). On the one hand, the abstract character of the countryside provided by the Guggenheim show seems refer to a *utopia*, to something outside the defined and pre-established realm (from *ou-tòpos* = non-place); on the other hand, the quite real, concrete and specific character with which the outskirts, island and villages of *What about the Provinces* are described, seems address the idea of *utopia* as a more proper and righter place (from *eu-tòpos* = good place). Even the notion of *periphery* (from *peri-pherein* = around the circle, or in other words around the city), works by negative, defining places as ‘outside of’, avoiding any more qualitative or specific attributes.

Eventually, in order to show the issues listed above in an exhibition context, also a new need for representation arises.

Fig. 1 Orizzontale, La Rivoluzione delle Seppie, *Wonder Living Rooms, Crossings* 2018, Belmonte Calabro (CS). Courtesy Orizzontale.



The places 'outside of' are shifted to the centre of the narratives, in tight relation to the information flow of cultural institutions, typically belonging to the city. At the same time, and in an interesting reverse and complementary movement, the countryside and the provinces enter the exhibition space. Displaying practices land in peripheral geographies. Due to their intrinsic nature, installation practices activate a process of showing, and, in so doing, they act as centres of observation for the new territories.

While an approach driven by architecture and urban planning struggles to break out of urban-centric logics (and how could it, being urban-ism?) (Dematteis 2009; Balducci, 2020), installation, staging and set-up architecture, operating on an in-between field, offer a direct and daring engagement with more landscape-based notions such as image and imagery. With the tools of temporary measures, often not far from exhibition and set design, the architects claim a deeper sense of architecture, and identify marginal areas as valuable reservoirs of resources, redefining their established image.

In her essay *The Posturban Phenomenon*, the curatorial text accompanying the above mentioned CCA's series of documentary on rural Japan, Kayoko Ota describes the experiments carried out by several architects in remote islands or marginal

Fig. 2 . Campomarzio, *Bolzanism Museum*, 2019, Bolzano.
Photo credit: Valentina Casalini,
Courtesy Bolzanism Museum.



locations in Japan, seen as spaces of freedom, in contrast to the capitalist logic that dominates urban centres. Elsewhere in the Japanese archipelago, Kazuyo Sejima commutes to the tiny island of Inujima to carry out a long-term, participatory planning process focused on the landscape⁴, Toyo Ito proposes the collaborative construction of a Home for All in post tsunami fragile conditions⁵, and Atelier Bow-Wow allocates a woodworking shop, in synergy with local economies⁶.

The telescope, as suggested by De Carlo, has been turned. On a different scale and putting in a dialectic relation not dichotomies as city and countryside, but rather different parts of the urban fabric as central and peripheral areas, we identified some Italian examples of architecture exhibition or mediation that seem to be consistent with the issues described above. Also in the following examples—as previously described for the international references—the narrative of the outskirts is shifted to the centre, and places traditionally neglected and perceived as peripheral (meant in a negative sense) are put in a completely new light and exposed to discovery and surprise. They are design and curatorial practices related to architecture exhibitions that prove their intrinsic ability to become powerful tools in marginal places, to activate new relationships and processes, and to imprint a new image, like an unexpected layer, over an established imagery.

A process of village revitalization has been underway for several years in Belmonte Calabro (Cosenza), under the coordination by *La Rivoluzione delle Seppie*⁷. A series of abandoned historic buildings have been recovered in a pact between the municipality and a series of workshops have been held in collaboration with the architectural firm Orizzontale, the association Le Seppie and London Metropolitan University. From October 2020, the students of a whole course at the university moved to Belmonte, or Belmondo (Beautifulworld), as the village has been renamed during the initiative. Engaged in distance teaching, as required by the pandemic emergency, a new proximity to an unexplored world has been found, which proved to be unexpectedly rich in resources. It is important to mention here that Belmondo's founding act was the construction of a chair, a prototype soon multiplied and transformed into a large number of light urban furniture pieces as a result of the collaboration between a local blacksmith, some English, and Roman students and various migrant communities: the chair represents here an occupying, founding, yet mobile, principle. Subsequently, in random order, further actions have come, ephemeral yet capable of taking roots: the construction of a floating raft to recover a position facing the sea, the design of a shared lunch along the streets of the village, the construction of some light devices in the surrounding landscape, and festivals, discussions, workshops and finally followed the acquisition and the progressive restoration of a common house, where one of the British students decided to deeply establish his roots and interweave them with the ones of the other more or less transitory inhabitants. Also in this case the perception of the peripherality of an almost abandoned village in the south of Italy has been radically converted. Interventions aimed at re-thinking and re-vitalising the urban fabric in order to re-habit the village again—under completely renewed conditions— are put in the centre of the narration and the act of exhibiting oscillates within a twofold value: to show the possibilities of the re-conversion through the activation of the visitors who are addressed by the show itself.

Fig. 3 Post Disaster Rooftops, EPO2 *A new abnormal – A common world*. Lecture by Paolo Patelli, 2019. Courtesy Post Disaster



On the other end of the Italian peninsula, in Bolzano, a small piece of architecture self-built by Campomarzio with a group of students from the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, is the symbolic landmark of a new –even if tiny– cultural institution: the Bolzanism Museum. It stands isolated in the centre of a neighbourhood built by the fascist regime at the end of the thirties, nowadays a peripheral district in the perception of Bolzano’s citizen. As result of a collaboration between the architect’s firm, the local Theatre Cristallo and the cultural enterprise Cooperativa 19, a peculiar museum was opened in 2017 as which aim is to show the very neighbourhood to which it belongs. From here, the public can explore the architecture of Bolzano’s West-end through direct testimony of its protagonists –inhabitants or designers– as well as the context in which it was conceived. During the visits of the open-air museum, conceived as a sort of theatrical performance, the social utopias of which the built realm often remain the only mute testimony⁸ are brought to light. The performative guided tour in the working-class neighbourhood offers inhabitants and visitors a lens through which to reinterpret familiar everyday places in an augmented version of themselves. It represents an opportunity to re-signify the traces of an uncomfortable past and interpret through a *curating* lens the stratification of histories and episodes that

came after the fascist dictatorship and are worth being read in order to fully understand the present. Back to the South of Italy, in Taranto, the architecture and art collective *Post Disaster* invited scholars, designers, performers and artists to contribute to a collective investigation on the fabric of an industrial city that embodies the disparities inherent with the western contemporary world. Here the transmission of contents inherent to the built realm traditionally presented through static architecture exhibitions becomes interactive and performative. *Post Disaster Rooftops* are collective performances aiming to de-centralize the production and sharing of knowledge, which is usually absorbed by the territories that benefit economic and cultural advantages⁹. They happen on the city roofs, places on the margin of a house if this is read in section, often neglected spaces where the building meets the sky. Roofs are understood here as non-conventional spaces that are free from the main hegemonic forms of organization of life and capital. Although they are urban spaces, the rooftops are not subject to the traditional spatial regulations, allowing a wide freedom of action.

The three above mentioned architectural interventions are presented in this paper as Italian approaches to architecture exhibition consistent with the approach indicated by OMA, the CCA and Alejandro Aravena in the first lines. They are probably temporary, certainly incomplete in the functional aspects –those that conventionally distinguish architecture from art– offer new points of observation, that can be understood as new starting points for tracing a map: ephemeral and yet foundational acts. Due to its performative agency, exhibition practices possess indeed, beyond other meanings, the capability of literally reshape the imagery related to a certain place and influencing the behaviour of its actors. In the ephemeral character of the projects mentioned above lays one of their more powerful strengths. They concentrate an enormous amount of energy in a certain place at a certain moment and this phenomenon has a big transformative potential. In this context, performances, installations and

exhibitions can be understood as activist's tools making the appropriation of derelict buildings or marginal areas as well as devices capable of strengthening community interactions.

In marginal, 'peripheral' territories, just when the lack of certainties and landmarks would seem to be diametrically opposed to the anguish produced by the metropolitan "overflow" (Augé, 2003) a similar need emerges: the creation of an intermediate space, which instead of obsessively opposing centre and periphery, urban and rural, modernity and tradition, global and local, deliberately chooses to instil a deviation, in a direction contrary to the distinction, which is placed in the middle: staging new images and opening up to a new imagery that will enable us to look at the contemporary city from a complete new point of view, the one far-sightedly indicated by Giancarlo De Carlo in this fragment written in 1995:

So what interests me about the Contemporary City? I am interested in its energy, which I feel is intensive tense and creative even if it is disordered, even if it is in some cases pathological. I am interested in the disorder because I suspect (and hope) that this entails a higher form of order which rhythms and cadences are arcane, and therefore it seems to be disorder: because we have not managed yet to understand its complex correspondences. I am interested in bad taste because it is not institutional; it is indeed a salutary position insurgent against the problem of aesthetics, which is so manipulated and adulterated that it mostly becomes an instrument of cultural terrorism. I am interested in the continuous change. I am interested in the singularity of the architectural forms that proliferate in the Contemporary City, because they are unpredictable, manifold, pungent, prone to stratification. I am interested in the possibility of disengaging from the stupidity of conventional and official urban planning. I am interested in the fact that that there is no obvious correspondence between the use of the space and the quality of space. I am interested in illegal building; and not because it violates the law, but because to become actual it needs the human participation. (De Carlo, 1991, p. 161)¹⁰

NOTES

1 “Sembra venuto il momento di ‘girare il cannocchiale’ col quale è stato osservato il fenomeno ambientale finora. Sino a oggi (a partire dagli ultimi tre secoli; prima era diverso) l’ottica è stata puntata sulla città – come insieme di manufatti e sistemi di circolazione – e si è continuato a guardare di sfuggita allo sfondo, costituito dalla campagna, il paesaggio, l’ambiente naturale. Solo di recente, l’osservazione dello sfondo è diventata più attenta, ma sempre sfondo è rimasto e perciò sfuocato e scarsamente significativo. Ora spinti dalle conseguenze di modi di trasformazione antagonisti dei fondamentali interessi degli esseri umani e di qualsiasi specie vivente, diventa necessario stabilire che ‘l’ambiente è tutto’ e che territorio, paesaggio, campagna, periferie urbane, città, centro storici, edifici, piazze, strade ecc. sono casi particolari dell’universo ambientale. Questo significa sconvolgere le incastellature interpretative a senso unico per sostituirle con modi di ricerca più fluidi che possano arrivare a interpretazioni e proposizioni seguendo percorsi multidirezionali, itineranti, erratici, più aderenti alla complessità ambientale.” (De Carlo, 1991, p. 152)

2 The exhibition presented investigations by AMO, Koolhaas, with students at the Harvard Graduate School of Design; the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing; Wageningen University, Netherlands; and the University of Nairobi.

3 The program *Islands and Villages*. a documentary series commissioned by CCA on the posturban phenomenon in rural Japan, as part of the CCA Issue *What about the Provinces*. Kayoko Ota is curator of CCA c/o Tokyo, the second in a series of temporary initiatives that are locally anchored in different cities worldwide. www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/issues/26/what-about-the-provinces

4 See the video documentary *Inujima. Kazuyo Sejima designs a new participatory landscape*, produced by the CCA as part of the study *Islands and Villages*.

5 See the video documentary *Omishima. Toyo Ito assumes the role of voluntary masterplanner* produced by the CCA as part of the study *Islands and Villages*.

6 See the video documentary *Momonoura. Atelier Bow-Wow renews a fishing village’s social and ecological cycles*, produced by the CCA as part of the study *Islands and Villages*.

7 Further information can be found in the series of self-published publications INK36, which can be downloaded from larivoluzionedelleseppie.org/

8 In the words of the designers: “*Bolzanism* is thus, above all, a way of narrating places that are called ‘periphery’, stimulating a process of redefinition and identity re-appropriation which is historical and aesthetical and recovers the value of that neighbourhood while it generates a sort of ‘building ethnography’ that enables the working-class architecture of the built artefacts to speak and transforms them into identity key elements of the community that inhabits, transforms, and identifies with them. In this sense Bolzanism understands itself as an experimental project that mediates among the architectures, the places of Bolzano’s periphery and the people that inhabits them. A museum that, while making of the peculiar context of Bolzano’s periphery its own permanent exhibition, invites people to question the city, promotes the *wonder* as a principle that generates creativity,

culture and diversity, and brings to light the urgency of recovering a city project, an action perspective that –starting from a critical reading of the material heritage of the periphery– could be a platform to imagine an idea of the future”. See Teatro Cristallo, Cooperativa 19, Campomarzio, *Bolzanism Museum, Bolzano-Bozen*, 2020, in Turriz Babel, no. 123, 2021 (Forthcoming).

9 Gabriele Leo and Grazia Mappa (Plasticity Studio), Peppe Frisino, Gabriella Mastrangelo (2018), ‘Suggestion for Design. Post Disaster Rooftops’, *PAD. Pages on Design*, 15, 140-149.

10 “Cos’è dunque che mi interessa della Città Contemporanea? Mi interessa l’energia, che io sento intensa, tesa e creativa anche se disordinata, anche se in qualche caso patologica. Mi interessa il disordine perché ho il sospetto (e la speranza) che si tratti di una forma superiore di ordine i cui ritmi e la cui cadenze sono arcane, e perciò appare come disordine: perché non siamo ancora riusciti a capire le sue corrispondenze complesse. Mi interessa il cattivo gusto perché non è istituzionale; addirittura è una presa di posizione salutarmente rivoltosa nei confronti del problema dell’estetica, così manipolato ed adulterato e falsificato da essere il più delle volte strumento di terrorismo culturale. Mi interessa il cambiamento continuo, Mi interessa la singolarità delle forme architettoniche che proliferano nella Città Contemporanea, perché sono imprevedibili, molteplici, penetranti, inclini alla stratificazione. Mi interessa la possibilità di disincagliarsi dalla stupidità dell’urbanistica convenzionale e ufficiale. Mi interessa che non ci siano corrispondenze ovvie tra l’uso dello spazio e la qualità dello spazio. Mi interessa l’abusivismo, e non perché viola la legge, ma perché per diventare attuale richiede partecipazione umana.” (De Carlo, 1991, p. 161)

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