

Just as I sit down to write this essay the news comes out that the Golden Lion at the 2008 Venice Architecture Biennale has been awarded to Greg Lynn for an installation of toys made out of recycled furniture.

No. That sounds wrong. Let's try again.

Just as I sit down to write this essay the news comes out that the Golden Lion at the 2008 Venice Architecture Biennale has been awarded to Greg Lynn for an installation of furniture made out of recycled toys.

That's better; if still a bit bemusing. So I look up the jury's citation.

The recycled-toy furniture advances the digital-form problem to a new level that intrinsically engages traditional architectural concerns such as meaning, aesthetics, and advancing fabrication technology with the recycling, an issue of broad, immediate and pressing concern.

Isn't that heart warming? You can be aesthetically and technically progressive, and save the planet at the same time! In Technicolor!!

Even making allowances for the touching portentousness that translations from Italian so often engender, this justification, and the award itself, takes us to the furthest shores of architectural hubris. But this is only to be expected, because exhibitions like the Biennale serve to fuel architecture's self-aggrandisement. They set up a bubble of false hope, in which the visual noise blocks out any evidence of dirty realism beyond, and so in which a closed set of architectural values is played out. This invokes a state of removal in which the objects on display, in all their visuality and abstraction, are seen to stand for architecture.

What, you might ask, is wrong with this? Why shouldn't we be allowed to indulge in this innocent pleasure of being seduced or stimulated by form? Isn't this what happens in art – so why not let it happen with architecture, the mythical mother of the arts?

The answer is that whereas the cycle of production in the art world is often instigated by and then finishes with the gallery, the production of architecture has a much more extended and tempestuous path. Within the gallery, the artist's artefact exists precisely as a removed object, with its production and reception highly mediated by this context. The architectural object of display within an exhibition is,

however, only a tiny part of the wider context within architecture is situated. The problem is that limit is not recognised, and so the architectural exhibition presumes an equivalence between the objects on display and architecture. Of course the objects, in all their fixity, could never begin to represent the dynamic and contingent presence of architecture. Indeed this very dynamism and contingency presents a challenge to the stability of the profession. Faced with this threat the best thing is to deny that openness to others forces and pretend that architecture exists over and above time and society. Where better to do this than in the exhibition – a place in which conditions can be controlled and one can present a fiction of a world set apart?

In this light, as Florian Kossak notes in his essay in this book, the exhibition plays rather more an important part in the production of architectural culture than is perhaps recognised. This is why the two key architectural movements of the twentieth century, modernism and postmodernism, are so closely associated with two exhibitions, the 1932 Modern Architecture exhibition in New York and the 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale. It was these exhibitions that established the international authority of these movements, and they did so by gathering the innumerable variables associated with any architectural project and then presenting them as a coherent body, removed from the contexts that had given rise to the projects in the first place and suppressing their differences. In this condition of removal – removed in the sense of being apart but also of eliminating – a certain set of values is privileged, which are then carried over into the heart of architectural culture. Most obviously the visual dominates, but in a very particular manner that displaces any bodily engagement with space. Because of the impossibility of recreating the scale of architecture, the exhibition necessarily 'reduces' the visual experience to abstractions, within which the foreground issues of style, surface and form override the background sense of space and occupation.

The viewer is kept at bay within this visual field. PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH. Signals of control are given, either literally or by implication. Please do not touch my world; please do not besmirch it with your presence. The visitor is reduced to passive observer of things, which in all their beauty shrug off the stains of future occupation, of time, of mess. The exhibited object thus reproduces – or more precisely actually

helps produce – a certain architectural value system in which the user is reduced to passive occupant and the building is conceived apart from contingent reality. And so, if these objects that are seen to stand for architecture are then taken out into the real world and become architecture they carry with them that attitude of distancing, but the viewer of the object has become the user of the architecture. Please do not touch my building. Of course occupants will touch (and much, much more) and in this upset the values first perfected in the exhibition gallery, but by then the photographs have been taken and the architects have left the scene with their trophies of style and form.



PLEASE ~~DO NOT~~ TOUCH  
Installation in British Pavilion, 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale  
Jim Preveit with Jeremy Till

It was to counter this controlling and distancing of viewer/user that we introduced an object with a twist into the British Pavilion at the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale. A big sign – PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH – hung over a model with bits of cities on it encouraging the people to rearrange the space of the model. The twist was that these multiple reinventions were filmed and then projected onto a big screen, and at the same time carefully mixed with a live projection of the room itself, confusing scales and realities. In this way the viewers became occupants of the city that others that others were creating. The distance between viewer and model, user and space, was collapsed in a conscious attempt to invoke messy participation in the production of architecture. In all its playfulness this installation managed at the same time to invoke the wrath of the architectural press but also the delight of the lay audience and mainstream press.

With this very minor intervention in the annals of architectural exhibitions comes a call for architectural exhibitions to face up to both their limits (they can only present a cipher of architecture) but also to their role within architectural production. The curatorship of any exhibition, as so many essays in this book persuasively argue, is hardly an innocent act, so any control should not be abused. If, as that Golden Lion suggests, architecture really is reduced to matters of taste and style then we are rapidly moving to the condition predicted by Manfredo Tafuri of architecture as pure form. If curators have been complicit in joining, and to a certain extent propelling, this trajectory, then equally they have the opportunity, and responsibility, to help us get out of it before architecture is forever trapped in a prison-house of formal gymnastics. But for this to happen curators will have to seize architecture's wider social and political context, in all its contingency, as a strength to be worked with and not a threat to be suppressed. If they don't, I will throw all my toys out the pram in a fit of pique. Or maybe not. I could not bear the idea of them being transformed into fatuous form.

First published as: Jeremy Till, 'Please Do Not Touch', Afterword to *Curating Architecture and the City*, eds. Sarah Chaplin and Alexandra Stara, (London: Routledge, 2009), 246-248.

Published here under a Creative Commons, non-commercial, no derivatives license.