

# Exhibition as a Pedagogical Tool for Experimental and Public Architecture

**Borrowing his father’s metaphor, Pedro Gadanho characterizes the architectural profession as “cannibalistic,” being destroyed from within: a system of consumption in which young unpaid interns grow to either hate or replicate it.<sup>1</sup> This dichotomy is by no means foreign to current educational systems of architecture, which not only reinforce this cannibalism, but also further divide the community.**

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In an era where mainly growing bottom-line profits are the focus of universal corporate cultures, being creative and experimental is less affordable, and also there is a lack of equal opportunities for all. Architecture, both in practice and education terms, remains competitive and very much attached to the rich-client/genius-architect couple.

In my pedagogy, I critique and challenge this enterprise by taking a different approach that allows and reinforces creativity and experimentation for students, while equipping them to become emergent professionals with skills to envision and produce a more social and more public architecture that integrates larger concerns. In doing so, I have developed a pedagogical model that is based on exhibitions and art installations which I had used and tested as part of my *Thesis Lab* course.

## **A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL FOR *THESIS LAB***

I designed and taught *Thesis Lab* course, at Wentworth Architecture between 2012–2014, as part of the thesis curriculum for the one-year graduate Architecture Program. As a thesis methodology, the course borrows media from art, such as installations, exhibitions, and participatory practices, and certain concepts from philosophy and theory, such as laboratories and atmospheres, and relations among experimentation, participation, and emancipation.

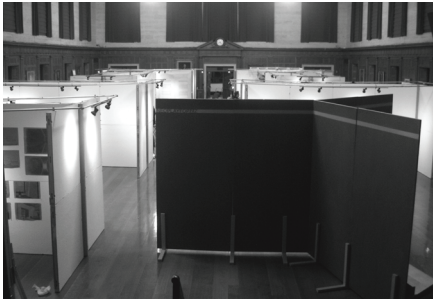
Exhibitions have been used in architecture throughout its history as a general rule to present unbuilt projects, competitions, retrospectives of architects, and particular histories and future visions. At the same time, in periods of bad economies and crises, exhibitions have served as alternative practices. Lately, as architectural practice has shifted more towards research, exhibitions (together with publications) have become a more regular mode of practice. Architectural exhibitions are typically focused on final outcome, well-crafted representations of architecture of pristine models and drawings. The same happens within education venues too. In my pedagogy, I am interested in exhibition’s capacity to engage the experimental (allowing maximum creativity to creators), and the experiential (offering closer relation to the public). And I find this as more viable through the medium of art installation.

Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist also discusses experimental exhibitions together with art installations. As examples, he mentions concepts such as: installations as network, exhibition as laboratory, live exhibition, exhibition within exhibition, self-organized exhibition, and display, which grow in time. For Obrist art installations and experimental exhibitions are the media to expand beyond the object and objecthood to interactions, relationships, events, intensities, and processes.<sup>2</sup> And this applies to architecture's regular object, the building. This space (beyond the building, and beyond the object) can be also described through the concept of atmospheres. Peter Sloterdijk presents *sphere* as philosophy of space that helps individuals to position themselves, as well as in relation to the others, and the world. For example, our *bubbles* help us overlap and create couplings. Spherology is essentially a way to move between private and public spaces.<sup>3</sup> Philosopher Bruno Latour discusses the concept of atmospheres in relation to Olafur Eliasson's work and the theories of spheres by Sloterdijk. Latour considers these works as ways of escaping modernism. In addition, Latour discusses such work in relation to theories of laboratory. In his *World Wide Lab*, Latour explains how old divisions between wild and domesticated, private and public, inside and outside technical and organic, no longer exist. On the opposite side: due to science experimentation, which has now moved outside the laboratory, we can all participate and engage ourselves in a series of experiments. And we all collectively attempt to survive within the atmospheres.<sup>4</sup>

Claire Bishop also connects the notion of experimentation with participation, particularly in art and educational platforms. In *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop devotes a chapter on pedagogical projects, where a class becomes a work of participatory art itself.<sup>5</sup> Although many of her examples are workshops or extra-curricular educational activities that do not fall under curricular and institutional rules and expectations, Bishop questions experimentation, equality, and participation in situations that belong to what she calls "hyper-bureaucratization of education of the western hemisphere."<sup>6</sup> What becomes clear in many of these examples is that to further approach the public or become more public, the old-style combination of one creator and one large audience needs to break apart. In many of his texts, Jacques Rancière tackles such hierarchical inequalities in relationships between an artist and their audience, as well as between a teacher and their students through the concept of emancipating the spectator (and student).<sup>7</sup> Krzysztof Wodiczko, also breaks the polarity between creator and audience, but in his case, there is an intermediate, whom he identifies as the *inner public*, consisting of those people, who believe in the project and co-create its success, and therefore making others believe in it as well.<sup>8</sup>

In *Thesis Lab*, I have structured these aforementioned, interlinked concepts through the dyad of *laboratory* and *exhibition*, to simultaneously emphasize experimentation (laboratory as process) and dissemination, both towards the architectural discourse and architecture's multiple publics (exhibition as presentation). The *laboratory* includes hands-on experiments, testing of theories, analysis of the results, development of models, and the making of installations, mock-ups or prototypes. The *exhibition* refers to the design and presentation of exhibitions, and also includes publications, participation in blogs, social media, and other platforms in order to engage with communities and various groups. This process is illustrated in a bow-tie diagram that emphasizes simultaneous focus and expansion, the need of a *thesis*, even within free experimentation, to always return to a position.

Exhibition brings the student towards the public through a celebratory process, by inspiring and supporting him/her with confidence as well as providing the necessary resources to produce the work and to realize the vision. Throughout the course the idea of the exhibition is paired with e-publishing: students use blogs and media platforms to comparatively document, and reflect upon, their progress, and to essentially form (from day one) their *own experimental methodology*: Through the constant action of exhibiting and publishing, students contribute their positions to the discourse through dialogue with the guests



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(or readers) who are no longer reviewers, or critics, but co-creators in this experiment. An experiential event in which students collaborate to present their projects together as one experiential (and often time-based) exhibition becomes an opportunity to disseminate student ideas to the public. At the same time, the event becomes a festivity where participation and engagement replace judgment and opposition without excluding critical dialogue.

Two experimental exhibitions that came out of this course and pedagogy have been *Neoplayformz* time-based exhibition that took place in April 2013 at Watson Auditorium during final graduate architectural thesis reviews, and *Thesis Lab 2014* exhibition/publication, took place in April 2014 at Annex Building.

### EXHIBITING THE ACTS

*Neoplayformz* has been a time-based exhibition, as an alternative format to the final architectural review; less of a collection of artifacts, and more of an assembly of experiences. During its occurrence the audience would engage together with the students into a series of collective experiences that simulated in “theatrical” terms civic actions and unusual collective events. The experiences were organized around three main *acts*, or types of experiences, named as *Networked Terrains*, *Reactive Arrangements*, and *Augmented Interludes*. During these *acts*, each guest, instead of “performing” the role of an architectural critic, he/she would “be assigned” to act as a discussion panel participant, a playful and curious wanderer, and a social gourmand, among other.

To organize these experiences and in order to produce a kind of public space during the exhibition, students collectively had designed and fabricated the exhibition set, known as the *Y-Not?* design. The “Y” structure responded critically to the typical “H” structure used in the reviews at the school as “pinup walls.” The “Y” consisted of three walls that, when combined, formed different configurations (“Y”, “U”, “Z” and so on). This feature along with its lightweight material would create the possibility to separate the different acts of the “play” (time-based exhibition) with a “set change” that would rearrange the layout of the “pinup walls” for each group of students. “Y” became eventually a performative structure for multiple acts, as it allowed the students and the audience to engage in the various experiences appropriately. Instead of preparing the display at the “backstage” with stress and agony during “intermissions,” the students celebrated the preparations together with visitors as well as with random people through orchestrated, but also improvised, performances. “Y” essentially reflected the idea of “playformance” that was the central theme throughout the studio, during the exhibition, and also captured in the title (*Neoplayformz*). (Figure 1)

In this exhibition, both the individual projects and the theatrical format, including the display design, contributed to the generation of a new public space. This affected the physical space temporarily, at least within the time constraints of the exhibition. It was experienced through the shifting of hierarchies among different groups of participants. The projects themselves, through their projective character preserved a vision for the new public space, whose elements would depend on collective actions such as pleading, publishing, hacking, playing, eating, or dreaming together.

### COLLECTING PUBLIC-NESS

In *Act I: Networked Terrains*, students, have dealt with network-embedded landscapes challenging issues related to private/public, ownership/sharing, utopia/heterotopia/dystopia. This first *act* introduced these topics through a panel discussion organized by the students, moderated by an outside-to-architecture person that would engage the audience into a very open public dialogue.

While working on the topic of complexity and influence of communication networks in cities, JT White used the newspaper medium for three reasons: It is a common place to host

Figure 1: *The Y-Not?* design of *Neoplayformz* exhibition, 2013.

information from various authors (therefore it becomes an alternative platform to present research material from multiple sources); it often presents stories and narratives (so it can include his *Operatopia* architectural proposition for the 2053); and finally for its capacity to spread the message around (and therefore becoming a communication medium itself). In addition, as an editor and producer of the *Operatopia* newspaper, White became eventually himself an operator of a communication network. As an evidence of coverage and reuse, White reported about a newspaper found in the men's bathroom, after the exhibition.

Such use of traditional print media, delivering the news through stories and narration to the public, along with the very open panel-forum served as a suitable method for *Network Terrains* to instigate public-ness. Not only to communicate the new visions and projects, but to also engage the larger audience, including parents and friends, to discuss and plead their positions on current and future states of public space in relation to ownership, accessibility, and privatization. (Figure 2)

In *Act II: Reactive Arrangements* attention shifted towards a more playful approach of public engagement within the city. Through deployable structures, collective creations, and even random arrangements, guests were expected to shape a series of models of public buildings according to their preferences and imagination, and by setting a new set of rules. This process allowed for an exploration that expands the designer's (or curator's) role from one single person/firm to the larger public. Visitors had to invent the rules, what constitutes a democratic process, to learn about architectural principles, and to have fun. Here, public-ness was constructed through collective authorship, and the *act* of playing, making a case for public architecture in which the citizens have the capacity to literally transform and rearrange the buildings and environments according to their needs and desires.

*Act III: Augmented Interludes* offered heightened social experiences, manifested through different methodologies, and resulting in intriguing and temporal experiences for the users. It is through this *act* that new social and temporal architectures were co-created by the visitors, who shaped the experiences based on their memories, senses, and intuitive explorations.

Elements such as the transparent scrim screen and the temporary room with black plastic that reinforced collectiveness during the immersive unusual experiences, such as the *acts* of dreaming together, as in Sinead Gallivan's *Architecture Asleep* project, and eating together, as in Iga Wyrzykowski *Social Darkness* project. More specifically, the rear projection back from and in front of the scrim in *Architecture Asleep* that simultaneously displayed the shadows of the audience together with the multiple recorded visual and audio narratives for the site intervention, emphasized subjectivity and collective identity by bringing together audience's own histories, memories, fantasies, and interpretations to further transform that site. Similarly, the sensorial experience in the dark room, along with food, created a safe and surprising environment in which hierarchies among participants dissolved: the usually silent and exhausted (at that day) students became the most vivid participants in the dialogue. Collective eating in darkness reinforced the dialogue among reviewers/visitors, and class participants, but beyond arguing with each other, the participants "conspired" all together through the collective, unusual experience.

#### A LABORATORY FOR ARCHITECTURAL ACTIVISM

*Thesis Lab 2014* exhibition and publication focused more on the topic of experimentation, full-scale installations-architectures and immersive experiences, towards the exploration of alternative future practices in which architecture further integrates civic matters. The class has become a laboratory for critical ideas within the institution that tested constantly the boundaries of public-ness and unconventionality through spatial experiments. The four dominant themes throughout the course have been: *installation, experimentation, intervention,*

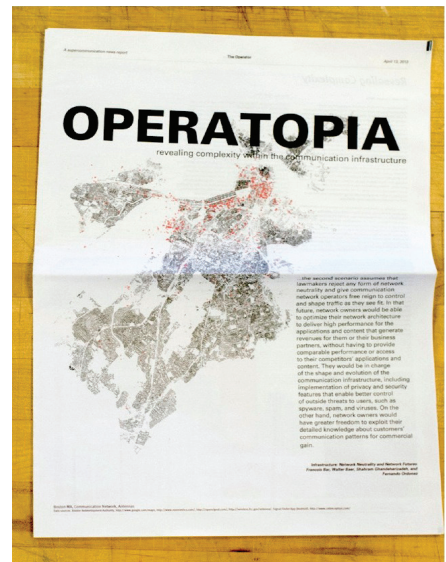


Figure 2: *Operatopia*, JT White, 2013.

and *dissemination*. These established the four parts of the exhibition, each documented in one poster and a take-away-pamphlet that were displayed in the four walls of the exhibition /“crit” room.<sup>9</sup> (Figure 3)



*Installation* poster/pamphlet features a series of installations and ephemeral spaces that explore innovative structures and physical elements along with immaterial elements of space. The compelling atmospheres have been experienced collectively every Thursday in the typical architectural “crit” room (used for “pinups” and reviews). By bringing art and museum “techniques” in the architectural studio, where the “crit” room transformed into an experimental “white cube” room, exhibition acted as a way for students to experience, experiment, learn, and reflect upon a series of matters. The artistic method allowed creators to both, focus on particular qualities of space and matters of concerns, but also provided the necessary data to shape the design based on the subjective experience of the visitor/user. For example, one of the projects questioned how surveillance methods and equipment could be intertwined with architecture to promote positive human interaction. Through a series of installations that play between on and off camera, using also tape lines to define the borders of the surveillance cones, and therefore to allow the user to select how to approach the “surveillance space,” Richard Pignataro explored architectural interventions that change the dynamics between those who survey and those who are being surveyed from a ratio of 1–99, to a desired 50-50.

*Experimentation* poster/pamphlet focuses more on the fun and play aspects of architecture through the creation of transformable models, and kinetic structures designed as temporary pavilions to be experienced by curious visitors of architecture’s for-ever playgrounds; parks and mostly expos. The enjoyable experience of playing (with these models) in the exhibition raises questions on the permanence of architecture while requesting more room for fantasy, imagination, and dreams to affect the current environments. In a similar manner to aforementioned models of *Act II: Reactive Arrangements* the kinetic element that materializes the change, often allowing for a tactile experience, is catalytic in exhibitions of play.

*Intervention* poster/pamphlet requests a more social architecture. By borrowing the methods of art of civic scale, this approach examines agency of interventions, small-scale structures, infrastructural elements, and bottom-up strategies to actively alter “problematic” situations in the city, as well as ways to empower community through participation and public voice. This participatory exhibition tests the ideas and designs through participatory events and interactive structures that collect stories and concerns by the community. The exhibition becomes a platform of learning and exchange.

Finally, *dissemination* poster/pamphlet features a series of experiments-experiences of *guerilla* tactics. Pat Brady and Tom McCormack, have been installing impromptu spatial experiments on a regular basis, without permission, to provoke their peers in joining them

Figure 3: *Thesis Lab 2014* exhibition/publication poster in collaboration with Kaitlyn Payne

into a larger, more collaborative architectural experiment. They aimed to create space through publications and events that would critique the institution. The process of “making, writing, and talking ideas” was named *The Garage*. In this case, the *guerilla* exhibition offered a medium of clear and provocative expression (without being “bastardized” by processes of bureaucracy) to instigate dialogue in the community that would now question the framework they were working in through this spatial experimentation. As a response to a faculty request to tear-down the spontaneous *Impulse* installation, the two students who created it retransformed it into a new installation, *Impulse Dead*, which looked more like a textual sculpture communicating the word “dead.” (Figure 4). Following a new similar request, they expanded this concept to a bigger provocative installation in which they created a “crime” scene in front of the entrance of the architectural department with all the “disturbing” installations as “dead bodies” with marks of white chalk around them along with poems and other messages. (Figure 5) Publishing about this experimentation, offered to the students a platform to contextualize and critically present and discuss these works. These experiments created the need to rethink how public space is shared and used by various individuals and groups of academia.

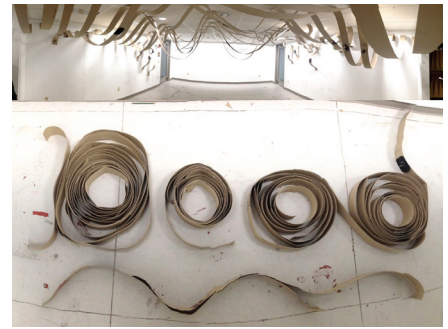
*Thesis Lab 2014* explored the dissemination of architectural ideas through the design and presentation of exhibitions, publications, participation in blogs, social media, and other platforms. It examined the engagement of architecture’s multiple publics in the design process, production, and criticism. It sought new formats for a non-“cannibalistic” architectural practice, which is beyond the model of service and clients, and allows collaboration without eliminating the individual voice. Participants explored collective non-hierarchical groups or actions that may offer to individual creators the opportunity to instigate a series of interventions: the design and production of their own architectures that improve their surroundings and environments.

#### CONCLUSION: EDUCATING THE CIVIC-MINDED ARCHITECT

This essay presented the integration of artistic and experimental pedagogies, relying on installations, exhibitions, and participatory platforms, as part of architectural education. The art paradigm helps students to work with freedom, to be creative, and to risk without the fear of failure. On one hand, installations, being tangible and large scale, help students to challenge themselves, as they realize and test their ideas, and therefore approach the reality of architecture and built environment, and frees them from the burden of permanence, as they only last ephemerally. On the other hand, exhibitions work with the public by bringing it in the classroom, engaging the spectator in the art installation or event, and eventually by engaging users of architecture to architectural work; and also reinforce the collaborative component.

The experimental exhibitions are rooted to the need to rethink the architecture profession through education. The idea is to change competition (and final outcomes) with collaboration (and experiments); and to break the polarity between the single, privileged individual who (seemingly) has the knowledge, and the broader mass public that is going to accept it. The intimidating model of the review (as well as that of competition) is now replaced by exhibitions and collaborative platforms, created by students, instructors, and guest participants. It is through the collaborative initiatives that everyone gets to both test and express their own ideas, and at the same time help ideas of others to flourish as well. There is a shifting of hierarchies among different groups of participants and less of a division between leaders and workers, elites and masses, as well as high and low tasks. Wodiczko’s *inner public* is the body of students themselves, but also the “reviewers-guests” who participate in the process as well.

Through the experimental and experiential turn, architecture is enhanced by hybrid structures that merge hardware and software, tangible and intangible, material and immaterial,



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Figure 4: *Impulse and Impulse Dead*, Pat Brady and Tom McCormack, 2014.

Figure 5: *Awakening the Beast (April Fools' Installation)*, Pat Brady and Tom McCormack, 2014.

## ENDNOTES

1. Kazys Varnelis, "Pedro Gadanho: Curating is the New Criticism," *Domus*, Last accessed January 4, 2016, <http://www.domusweb.it/en/interviews/2012/05/14/pedro-gadanho-curating-is-the-new-criticism.html>
2. Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Installations Are the Answer, What Is the Question?" *Oxford Art Journal* 24.2 (2001): 95–101.
3. Peter Sloterdijk, "Foreword to the Theory of the Spheres", in *Cosmograms*, ed. by Melik Ohanian and Jean-Christophe Royoux, (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2005), 223–240.
4. Bruno Latour, "Atmosphère, Atmosphère," in *Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project*, ed. by Susan May (London: Tate Publishing, 2003).
5. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).
6. Ibid.
7. Jacques Rancière, *The emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2012).
8. Krzysztof Wodiczko, "The Inner Public," *Field*, Last accessed January 4, 2016, <http://field-journal.com/issue-1/wodiczko>
9. The exhibition/publication was created in collaboration with Kaitlyn Payne.

the functional and the choreographical, the natural and the artificial, while establishing and inventing new relationships between the objects and their ever-changing surroundings. Through these procedures it creates opportunities for responsive design, ephemeral interventions, and participatory events that are collective experiences to serve the commons. Experiential exhibitions give the opportunity to students to find site, program, partnerships, allowances and permissions to test their ideas in front of the audience, who may act temporarily as users. The freeing of architectural education that favors experimentation, experiential learning, and creativity may allow the occurrence of new architectural practices, perhaps more relevant, hopefully more playful and inspirational, and definitely more social and public.

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