Exhibiting Construction: Expo Design Center and the Discourse of Cultural Display

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One of the fertile paradoxes of architecture is that it can provide a stage for the display of culture while at the same time being itself an object of cultural display. This tendency is most marked in our cultural institutions, such as museums, symphonies, or courthouses; but it can also be an object of anthropological interest in our everyday settings, in our places of production, consumption, and recreation. One modern institution where this role of architecture as both the container and contents of cultural exhibits has been most pronounced is the series of world expositions since London in 1851. These international extravaganzas have united architecture and commodities in displays of technological progress, cultural fashion, and nationalistic pride. On the humbler side, in a commercial setting, I would like to point in the direction of the popular home improvement centers that dot our suburban landscapes, ones such as Home Depot and its upscale descendant, Expo Design Center, as contemporary exemplars of this intertwining of exhibition and construction.[1] I would like to argue that Expo, too, in its display of home appointments, kitchens, and bathrooms is a modern extension of what author Tony Bennett has called an "exhibitionary complex," a series of institutions emanating from the nineteenth century aimed at disciplining the urbanizing masses through the display of culture and cultural propriety.[2]

TROPING "EXPO": WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Before we even enter the space or the topic of the Expo Design Center, we have to contend with the name. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to ferret out the test marketing and corporate positioning that accompanied the establishment of the store name, it is certain that by that choice a whole range of historical precedents is invoked. Whether the connotative force of "expo" was deliberate or accidental, and whether the influence of that name is explicit, subliminal, or non-existent in the minds of the customers, cannot be gauged here. What we can explore is the extent to which the traits observed and theorized by various scholars from their examinations of historic national and international expositions over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries might offer some critical frames within which the store's name can be tested against its contents and its strategies of cultural display.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1991) suggests that our modern sense of exposition as exhibition came into English usage at about the time of the 1867 Paris Universal Exposition. Besides obscure senses of the word tied to notions of expulsion and exposure, the dual senses of exposition as both a form of logical argumentation and as a mode of public display are retained today in our understanding the phenomenon of the national and universal expositions that commenced mid-19th century. Critical work of late – such as Tony Bennett's thesis on the exhibitionary complex linking a whole range of public institutions through agendas both explicit and virtual in the disciplining of the working class through mechanisms of cultural display – attempts to reassert the *discursive* intents and effects of an exhibitionary form otherwise obscured by the diversions of mass entertainment and mercantilism.[3] *Webster's* (1987) records, but without attributions, that the abbreviated form, *expo*, comes into usage in 1913, while the *OED* links this form directly to the name of Expo '67 held in Montreal. In his theoretical reflections upon Expo '67, author Umberto Eco projects a future for that form "beyond the conception of an exposition as a [mere] collection of goods." Eco proposes the harnessing of diverse modes and techniques of communications in order to foreground the symbolic dimension of the goods: in order to advance an "avant-garde didactics, in a developing pedagogy, a revolutionary way of teaching"; and finally as a laboratory for unfettered and unself-conscious experimentation, of all sorts. In this way, Eco suggests a critical role for the exposition as a form of pedagogy in the reform of society.[4]

Regardless of the particular etymologies, however, it is certain that the *ideal* of exposition as we understand it, in its combined senses of discourse, didactics, and display, commences with

modernity, with the emergence of the nation state and the growth of mass markets and all that entails. Bennett suggests that "expositions tick to the international time of modernity itself. They mark the passage of progress, a time without frontiers, while the inventories they organize are, at least ideally, ones which mark the achievements of the nationally undifferentiated subject of humanity."[5] It is important to note in this context, however, that the idealized subject of humanity to which Bennett refers has typically been "universalized" through means of cultural contrast with provincial and primitivized "others."[6] If the "expositionary discourse of progress" succeeds by its spatialization of a temporal (evolutionary) proposition, then by syllogism, evolutionary time can also be conceived (and exhibited) as being geographically dispersed. The exposition was able to evoke the universality and a-temporality of modernity through the manipulation of spatial and temporal registers, thus conflating the attributes of natural and cultural change.[7]

The pedagogical and disciplining dimensions of Bennett's exhibitionary complex are suggested in precursory forms as well. Following Roland Barthes, I would like to suggest that one forerunner of the universal exposition can be located in the form of Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopedia* from the mid-to-late-18th century, especially its illustrative plates published beginning in 1762.[8] The aspiration to both inventory and explain the sciences, liberal arts, and mechanical arts of pre-Revolutionary, Enlightenment France through engraved representations was an extension and complement to the philosophers' intellectual project, not a mere supplement.[9] I would argue that those graphic plates, over 2500 of them, comprise a virtual cultural display of a sort that was finally actualized in the 19th century developments of the museum and exposition form. As suggested by Roland Barthes:

> . . . the imagery of the *Encyclopedia* can best be compared with one of those Great Expositions held the world over in the last century or so, and of which, in its period, the Encyclopedic illustration was a kind of ancestor: in both cases, we are concerned with a census and a spectacle: we consult the plates of the *Encyclopedia* as we would visit today's World's Fair in Brussels or New York.[10]

With the plates of the *Encyclopedia*, the private display of knowledge, culture, and production reserved on the one hand to the salons and cabinets of curiosities of an aristocratic elite and on the other hand to the practices of the toiling masses are here exposed to public scrutiny and debate, even if not far from the most privileged circles.

Barthes' 1964 essay, "The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*," offers an analytical model, grounded in semiotics, that is at once suggestive and useful as a beginning point for interpreting the poetics and politics of the exposition form. In analyzing the illustrations accompanying the *Encyclopedia*, Barthes proposes what he calls "a certain philosophy of the object" issuing from the manner by which the whole gamut of everyday life is presented to us. The *Encyclopedia* catalogs the variety of practices of craft and material production of eighteenth-century France, and in so doing it suggests the social fabric within which those practices are embedded. Those illustrations tend to essentialize their objects even while reflecting upon their origins and trajectories of use.

Barthes analyzes the structural dialectic of the graphic plates themselves, wherein objects are portrayed in split frames – on the one hand isolated, represented a-contextually, and on the other hand situated within the venue of their manufacture or use. The tension between these two representations, Barthes claims, initiates a process of meaning production, as enigmatic as it is explicative. When viewed from the perspective of the present, the graphic plates reverberate with a depth of meaning that suggests the moment of transition from the world of artisanal to that of industrial production.[11]

Barthes' analysis of the juxtaposition of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic poles in the Diderot plates provides a useful critical frame for assessing the implications of various contemporary discourses surrounding exhibition design and display. For example, debates concerning the relative merits of aesthetic versus ethnographic displays in museum exhibits can be restated in terms of the interactions among objects, contexts, and meanings.[12] While no context can be said to definitively *fix* meaning, and whereas the pretense of *a*-contextuality can always be revealed as the collapse of critical consciousness, the interaction of objects and their contexts, whether framed through mere situatedness or through theoretical construction, *can* be said to sway the process by which subjects engage objects in the production of understanding and meaning.[13] Now, as may be seen at Expo/Depot, the oscillating strategies of isolation and integration of objects in relation to their contexts both illuminates and mystifies subjects' understandings of these consumer commodities.

A VISIT TO EXPO/DEPOT

Navigating Home Depot can be an experiential challenge, though each store is laid out in similar fashion, if sometimes reversed. The cavernous warehouse space is perhaps 25 feet tall; the exposed structure of the roof is painted white and provides a unifying canopy throughout the store. The lighting level of the space is even throughout thanks to a regularly spaced pattern of industrial strength lights augmented by natural daylight through a grid of square skylights. The exposed concrete floor too provides an overall experiential continuity to the space while emphasizing the utilitarian ethic of the store.

The merchandise in the store is displayed in row upon row of heavy-duty shelving units which are painted in the same hue of

bright orange adorning the building's exterior as well as the company logo and the numerous signs and displays punctuating the store interior. This sea of orange unifies the space and establishes the perceptual realm of the Home Depot identity for customers and employees alike. Moving from front to back, the store is organized in several spatial "layers" demarcated by two wide and continuous aisles running the length of the building. At one end, in a separate area, is the garden center. The front-most layer, through which one enters, contains the cashiers and checkout counters as well as an in-store fast-service restaurant. Miscellaneous sales items are interspersed along perimeters, checkouts, and ends of aisles. The two "deep" layers stretching toward the back of the store contain the great bulk of the Home Depot inventory. Each of these areas is further articulated in terms of numerous sub-categories whose relation to the broader category is generally linked through either constructional or functional affinities – for example, floor adhesives are in close proximity to carpeting and vinyl flooring while bath fixtures, plumbing supplies, and vanity sinks are grouped closely together. The Depot order loosely conforms to the Uniform Construction Index (UCI), the standard classification system for the construction industry used to coordinate product data, specifications, and bids.

With an awareness of the structure of the Uniform Construction Index, an analogical reading of the tactics of Home Depot display is possible, one that might be framed within an understanding of the temporal, sequential nature of the construction process, the order of construction. From one end of the building to the other, from the lumber and building materials area to the garden center, it is possible to pose a virtual timeline of an imaginary construction project from beginning to end, from the rough to the finished, from the raw to the cooked. Beginning with the concrete, masonry, and framing of the structure and enclosure; to the installation of doors and windows; plumbing and wiring; bath and kitchen fixtures and cabinets; flooring and finishes; light fixtures and fans; and finally ending with the landscaping of yard and garden – these divisions of the store spatialize the temporal sequence of the building process. But while the building materials are arranged along a chronological axis, the customer tends to experience these contents across the grain, weaving back and forth along the aisles, navigating the labyrinth of construction time, in search of means to intervene within their own domestic sphere.

Besides the customer service personnel who serve as guides in the various departments, Home Depot also staffs several Pro-Desks throughout the store to assist customers with specific questions related to specialized trades such as plumbing and electrical. Home Depot's service in the provision of expertise is taken to another level however in the store's design center, where the diachronic time of construction is collapsed into the synchronic time of the project, where the new bathroom or kitchen can be contemplated, not as the assembly of so many components over time but rather as a reality complete in some idealized a-temporal future. The "custom design" service offered in-house fosters the selection of the *standard* items inventoried in the store. Located near the center of the store – in a space linking departments of kitchens & baths, flooring, paints, and window treatments & wallpapers – the design center disrupts the spatial flow of the store while bringing it to its apotheosis. In this section of the store, the ubiquitous orange shelving units give way to white ones, allowing selections from samples of paint, carpet, ceramic, and fabric to be made against a neutral background. Deeper within the store, but within this same zone, vignettes of bathrooms and kitchens are rotated diagonally relative to the orthogonal order of the rows of shelving. These assemblages of cabinets, fixtures, appliances, and wall and floor treatments allow customers to verify the images in their minds' eyes and on the designers' computer screens, to see the stacks of repetitive commodities now assembled into realistic displays. In the terms Barthes uses to describe Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, we can thus distinguish three levels or modes of presentation of the merchandise in the store: 1) anthological – "the object presented . . . *in itself*" as items organized on a shelf; 2) genetic – a sequence of transformation from raw material to finished product, this both in the overall organization of the store and in the numerous "how-to" demonstrations exhibited and enacted throughout the store; and 3) anecdotic – the object inserted into a context as in a *tableau vivant* or vignette, for example in the kitchen and bath displays and in the designs facilitated by the staff.[14] It is this last category of display, and the differentiated space that it occupies – white walls and finished floors, separating it from the rawness of primer orange and gray concrete – that suggests the key providing access from Home Depot to Expo Design Center.

Entering Expo Design Center through a small vestibule, one arrives in a gallery-like space. The finishes and scale of the space suggest the foyer of grand home. The colonnaded walls open on the left into two complete kitchen vignettes, one outfitted with a French provincial charm and the other with a cool modernist minimalism; on the right, bathrooms are outfitted in analogous ways. A table in this gallery, decorated with fresh flowers, holds a display offering maps of the store.

Proceeding to the left between the two kitchens, one enters a space occupied by a consultant and a wall display of synthetic counter surfaces. The double-loaded corridor continues for some distance regularly punctuated by doorways surmounted by names such as Paris, Quaker Maid, Arbor Cliff – all kitchen cabinet manufacturers. Through each doorway is a new kitchen, each one evoking a totally different style and feeling. Unlike the partial vignettes of Depot, these tableaux are complete: the kitchen tables are set with coordinating china and linens; the counters hold realistically simulated cakes and pies; pots and pans hang on their wall and ceiling racks. Tiny spotlights on ceiling tracks add a theatrical aura to otherwise quotidian

scenes, intensifying the overall effect to the level of hyper-reality. The appliances are all among the world's finest and most expensive brands and are sometimes hidden behind the false fronts of coordinating cabinetry. At each threshold between kitchen displays, the floor surfaces change: quarry tile, slate, granite. Each space is a coordinated aesthetic assemblage of household technology and taste. Formatted texts on the walls within some of the model spaces recount the romanticized histories of kitchen cabinet manufacturers and add a dimension of social context to the otherwise decontextualized displays.

The corridor in the opposite direction back across the entry hall leads past a similar number and array of model bathrooms. While the kitchen displays grant the observer the fantasy of stepping through the picture plane and of occupying the space of the diorama, the bathroom exhibit takes this illusion one step further. Due to the plethora of bathroom mirrors, the shoppers are not only able to enter the tableaux; they are also able at the same time to observe themselves inside. This double projection of the body – in terms of both subjective and objective consciousness – inside the space of the exhibit allows the illusion of spatial appropriation to be almost complete. The seriality of the exhibit, one bathroom after another, shatters the illusion, however, just as the surreality of a house full of mirrors causes one scene to melt jarringly from one to another. Likewise, contemplation of a house full of kitchens and a house full of bathrooms conjures up a Freudian universe of oral and anal fixations.

In the same manner as at Depot, analysis of the printed store directory helps at one level to decipher Expo's strategy of product organization. Beyond the front-most spatial layer just described, displaying a stylistic spectrum of domestic sanitation and production, the store is arranged in departments not unlike the Depot stores. Expo's marketing tactics continue to change at such a pace that web-based and print promotional materials do not necessarily correspond. Current newspaper advertising circulars list ten "showrooms" in Expo: kitchens; baths; lighting & lamps; appliances; carpets & rugs; tile, stone & wood flooring; decorative fabrics & window treatments; decorative accessories; outdoor living; custom closets & organization. Expo maintains only a small cash-and-carry business devoted primarily to the decorative accessories category. Other items are typically by order only.

The significant difference between the two stores, however, is that Expo excludes all lumber and building materials from its inventory, focusing instead upon the categories of finishes that in Home Depot are concentrated into its "Design Place." It is important to understand, however, that while in many ways the germ of Expo originates within Depot, Expo serves as a corporate testing-ground for new marketing approaches which then feed back into the Depot stores.[15] What I want to suggest is that what Expo feeds back into Depot is an understanding of the elements that contribute to a class-based constitution of domestic style. Style trickles down from Expo to Depot as the aspirations of the middle class bubbles up in reverse. A staff of designers – their individual photographs prominently displayed on the wall of the leather appointed design center – is available for consultation on every interior design need, and Expo offers complete construction management services by engaging a host of pre-certified construction, installation, and finishing sub-contractors. Thus Depot's ideology of customer education and empowerment is replaced with offers of professional service and design expertise. The designer's hand guides the customers in the cultivation of culture and taste. Adjacent to the design center is a coffee shop where one can sip a cappuccino while perusing glossy journals of home design and decorating styles chosen from a rack to the side – this in contrast to the "how-to" brochures and burgers that Depot deploys.

The appliance showroom is adjacent to the model kitchens. Each refrigerator, dishwasher, oven and range contains a phantom zero in its price, an Exponential premium over the appliances offered for sale at Depot. Elite model lines from American standards like Whirlpool and GE are interspersed with European brands with names like Bosch, Gaggenau, Miele. "Stainless steel" and "commercial quality" in the kitchen are 21st century icons of culinary affluence. The fixation upon quotidian objects of European design evinces a cultural deference and perhaps insecurity. But where in his *L'Esprit Nouveau* articles Le Corbusier rejected the old bourgeois taste of the European establishment, at Expo, "modern" is just another choice among many alternatives.

The role of architecture in staging the rhetoric of the exhibition, and the exposition of architecture through those same means, thus becomes a leitmotif in what Bennett has called the exhibitionary complex. In international exhibitions of the late-19th and early-20th centuries – for example London in 1851, Paris in 1889 and Chicago in 1893 – architecture served as one of the "props for exercising" the middle classes in the discipline of modernity even when, as in the latter case, architectural *modernism* seemed to be in retreat. So while exposition architecture itself served as a virtual exhibit intended to both display and inculcate an urban realm conducive to the rituals and practices of civil society and governmental authority, the exhibits *per se* within the exhibition halls reconfigured, among other things, public attitudes about the interior, domestic domain.[16] The Exposition des Arts Decoratifs à Paris held in 1925 was especially influential in this regard, as exemplified in the exquisitely crafted interior design installations such as those by architect Pierre Chareau. Furthermore, by extending the aesthetic discourse to the street-front shop windows in the rue des Boutiques, this Paris exposition fully intertwined modernism with marketing in the definition of a new style of life "thus establishing a visual connection between luxury commodity and city."[17] On the other hand, in a contrary stance meant to assert a new rationality in the mediation of urban and domestic realms, architect Le Corbusier argued both

in print and in space, both in his journal and in his freestanding Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, *against* what he called the "glitter" of bourgeois adornment, much in display there. Instead, he proposed a new approach to the modern interior embracing "the unadorned sheen of industrially produced, standardised objects, the 'sparkling taps' of a wash-basin, for example, 'artefacts that are polished and absolutely pure . . . products . . . shining clean'."[18]

THE DISCOURSE OF EXPO

Thus, by invoking through its moniker a whole history of expositions and cultural displays, Expo Design Center invites analysis of its representational role in both reflecting and illuminating the ideals, perceptions, and standards that shape the American domestic sphere across all classes. As in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with the advent of the great universal expositions, the question of consumption was connected then as now to virtually every frame of modern existence, and the theorizing of both the exterior realm of urban ritual (the street) and the interior realm of private experience (the psyche) were linked through the commodity form. The emerging awareness of mass culture, the ideological force of mechanical reproduction, and the immersion of the metropolitan subject within a sea of stimuli – while still experienced as strange by Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel in their day, these traits of modernity are today naturalized as the universal condition of modern human experience.

Expo Design Center resides within that same habituated territory of modernity. By appealing to an upscale market segment, Expo seeks to foster a sense of style among its consumers, one promoting the sale of fixtures, finishes, and appliances capable of transferring distinction to their owners through their acquisition and display. While sharing a common corporate philosophy of customer service, however, the Expo and Home Depot differ widely in the assumptions and didactic intentions of their display environments. The two stores are deliberately differentiated in terms of market segments, with Expo's target being characterized as "upscale" as differentiated from Depot's focus upon "mass appeal."[19] While the Depot "do-it-yourself" ethic delivers a populist message of home-owner empowerment,[20] Expo assumes a "finishing school" approach in which professional expertise and taste mediate in a process by which a rising elite accumulates cultural capital and personal pleasure.

The home improvement market is so significant as an indicator of social stratification because houses serve as units of communication as well as habitation, telegraphing in virtually seamless ways the hierarchies of social station and the nuances of cultural refinement. At one end of the spectrum, at Expo Design Center, standards of luxury established and once only attainable by cultural elites serve as exemplars of economic success to be emulated by a burgeoning middle class. Mass-constructed suburban simulacra of villas and chateaux provide signs of respectability for parvenu wealth, but in their ostentatious displays, they fail the test of authenticity and slide unwittingly close to the borderlands of kitsch. Further down the cultural food chain, at Home Depot, do-it-yourselfers and residential contractors utilize off-the-shelf building components for domestic renovations and additions. So many screen doors and storm windows, fireplace surrounds and shower stalls, these components are seldom mere utilitarian objects; rather, they possess visual, stylistic attributes derived from the pantheon of popular taste. These ornamental arches, mouldings, and medallions display an ideal of cultural propriety to which the general population can only aspire.

NOTES

1 The Home Depot and Expo Design Center stores described in this essay are located in Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

2 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

3 Ibid.

4 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1986) 303-7.

5 Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* 209.

6 Ibid. 189-94.

7 Ibid. 179-86.

8 Roland Barthes, "The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*," in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987).

9 Terrence M. Russell and Ann-Marie Ashworth, *Architecture in the Encyclopédie of Diderot and D'alembert: The Letterpress Articles and Selected Engravings* (Hants, England: Scolar Press, 1993), Stephen Werner, *Blueprint: A Study of Diderot and the Encyclopédie Plates* (Birmingham, Alabama: Summa Publications, Inc., 1993).

10 Barthes, "The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*," 219.

11 Ibid.

12 Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

13 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 19-21.

14 Barthes, "The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*," 219.

15 Chris Roush, *Inside Home Depot: How One Company Revolutionized an Industry through the Relentless Pursuit of Growth* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999) 188.

16 Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum.*

17 Tag Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity: Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998) 33-35.

18 Ibid. 37.

19 Roush, *Inside Home Depot* 184-6.

20 Annette Fierro, "Popular Construction: Handbooks for Home Fronts," *Journal of Architectural Education* 51, no. 1 (1997).