Display Rooms

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This paper argues that the role of the exhibition has begun to impact contemporary architecture's concept of room; a result of conflating the room of the project with the room of the exhibition. For both the home and the exhibition the room can be recognized as a space constructed by its content. Understood in the broadest sense as an enclosure for inhabitation, the domestic room contrasts with the exhibition room, whose content is disseminated, produced, and received through a much wider set of 'channels' and media. Yet, in a moment in which our media and information platforms give architects access to everything at once, practices have begun to use the room as both a container of an occupant's life, and a container of architectural histories. Within this "atemporal" moment, contemporary architecture has sought to display its referential production just as much as the individual has sought to display theirs. As a result, the rooms of both the exhibition and the architectural project have begun to assimilate, often bringing about a denial of open space with room agglomerations. The paper thus seeks to unfold an analysis of the contemporary exhibition room through the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial and its family tree.

INTRODUCTION

When the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial asked the architectural discipline to "Make New History," a specific temporal reconfiguration was on the mind of the curators, Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee of Johnston Marklee (JML). As Lee underlined, the Biennial attempted to explore a precise form of history; a landscape from which the grand historical narrative could be replaced with something that was open, accessible, and had several points of entry and exit.[1] The theme called into question architecture's incessant necessity for the new and, instead, proffered historical integration through a flattening of referents (images, narratives, techniques, and styles) now freely accessible. In a Biennial that opened up this expansive plane of architecture as ahistorical or atemporal,[2] the classifications of space and time (past, present, and future) blurred, and so did architecture's.

The Chicago Cultural Center itself coerced not simply a curatorial response, but a design approach that, as Lee says, was grounded in a "new taxonomy of space—a collection of rooms—that for us had inherent ideas about how work might be curated and displayed in each."[3] In such an atemporal moment, individual narratives must be explicit less any distortion be inadvertently perceived. Perhaps a reaction to

the diverse position (or lack thereof) of the 2015 version, the 2017 Biennial made explicit its propositional debate. Yet, any universal tactic towards the histories of over 100 participants presented a problem. The building, originally constructed as a library and a war memorial, offered a sporadic array of both form and finish. Large high ceiling spaces, awkward wide corridors, and expansive low ceiling areas, were adorned with 21st century painted plasterboard, 20th century renovations of historical embellishment, and intricate 19th century decoration, material, and ornament. The context, constructed itself by way of grand historical narrative, dictated a form of spatial division to address the adequate display of the Biennial's horizontal proposal.

JML's liquid definition of sections (Building Histories, Material Histories, Civic Histories, and Images Histories) allowed categorization away from singular conglomerates, and, instead, enforced a dispersal throughout the whole building that forced projects to utilize the various attributes of the building to its full potential, atomizing each category and each space. For visitors sifting through each level for works of interest, the Cultural Center was the smooth expanded field of compilation; a visitor was not directed but searched through space. The tall tower models of *Vertical City*—the third installment of the Chicago Tribune Tower competition—were placed in the high ceiling Sidney R. Yates Hall; two-dimensional representation was displayed along corridors resurrected by Paul Anderson and Paul Preissner's *5 Rooms*, and Agenda's *Mies Understandings*;[4] and the two largest pieces of the Biennial, baukuh and Stefano Graziani's (*Study for) Chapel for Scenes of Public Life* and Sylvia Lavin's *Super Models,* produced with Norman Kelley and Erin Besler, were both placed in the Exhibit Hall. Each piece utilized its space's size and scale, with the last four projects acting as smaller exhibition rooms within themselves and showing a distinct mistrust of open space. To some extent, these informational tactics of heterogeneous rooms pervaded the whole Biennial. From curatorial taxonomy, to exhibition design, to projects and their intellectual content, there was a definitive focus on the room as the frame of display and as the content: an integration of the medium and the message, or subject and object. With much of the consideration of the Biennial directed towards the image as a conflator of architecture's ahistorical moment,[5] this accumulation pointed to a separate (a)history of the Biennial; the room.
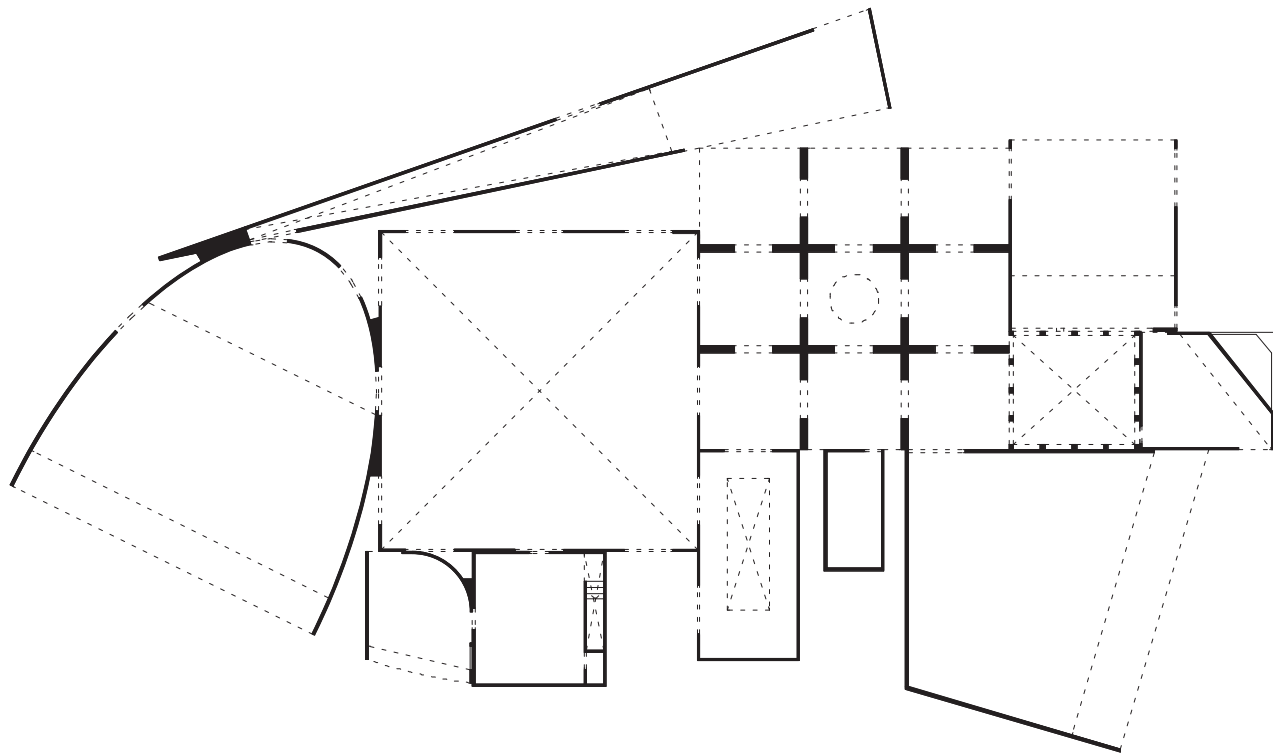
Figure 1: Ground Plan of OFFICE 197 (Lisbon Triennale). OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, 2015 - 2016.

EXHIBITION ROOMS

While distinct from the room of the art gallery which attempts to provide a frame for the artist, the room of the architectural exhibition is forever muddied under the duality of displaying itself and others. Yet, similar to its art counterpart, the room of the architectural exhibition acts in a specific temporal setting, providing a short term form of communication while simultaneously being spatially experienced. As Brian O'Doherty has noted in "Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space", the room of the gallery "gives the illusion that time is standing still, as if on a pedestal."[6] It shuts down the concatenations of the world around and builds itself up as its own little empire, reducing spatial interpenetration from surrounding space. Its aim, to establish clear communication or communicate itself, is provided by its visual and physical frame from which the messages are expanded out into the larger world. Whether an architectural proposal—*a la* Mies Van Der Rohe and Lily Reich's *Glasraum* at the *Werkbund Austellung: Die Wohnung* of 1927, which simultaneously exhibited new glass products of the Association of German Plate-Glass 55 Manufacturers and Mies'own concept of planar space—or a container for representational proposal—*a la* Superstudio's *Supersurface: An Alternate Model of Life on Earth* at *The New Domestic Landscape* Exhibition of 1972, which constructed an image of the infinite in an enclosed room of mirrors—the room of the exhibition operates as a space to dwell and as a representational device.[7] As O'Doherty put it, "the frame of the easel picture is as much a psychological container for the artist as

the room in which the viewer stands is for him or her."[8] The room of the exhibition is thus never a neutral canvas, but a medium operating between simulation and reality, or form and representation; consistently dealing with the limitations of media within a spatial envelope.

Giovanna Borasi, curator for the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), proposes a different form of exhibitionism, explaining that "architecture will always be somewhere else: in the city, in the landscape, but never in an exhibition. In the exhibition there is only room for its surrogate."[9] This sibling, replica, or copy is a stand in. Removing any notion of reality, Borasi says exhibitions are produced "for architecture," not "of, about, or on architecture."[10] Biased towards "built" forms, its directive seeks to engender movements, questions, and discussions through the medium of the exhibition, in turn stirring up something deeper than the original and surrogate dichotomy; something of a discipline unto itself. Tina Di Carlo would agree, but opines this extension of knowledge through exhibitionism remains architecture, "[a]s a theory of curatorial praxis, exhibitionism proposes just this: an agent and instrumental form of display. Exhibitionism looks at and thinks through the productive forces of display that go beyond mere knowledge production, although that remains an essential component. It proposes that the exhibition is a work of architecture, and as such, produces a disciplinarity tied to practice."[11] From both contemporary understandings, the exhibition shifts degrees of importance and with it architecture's relationship to it. As the Cameo noted soon after

the 2015 Chicago Biennial, "[e]xhibitions, which had previously served as the form or medium through which architects would convey projects and positions, have now become the content themselves."[12] In this regard, architecture's position becomes a platform for exhibitionism, and its construction is formed by the requirements of its mediation.

As a precursor to Chicago's conversation on history's temporal conflation, JML's participation at the Lisbon Triennale of 2016 exemplifies the room as an agent of display. Choosing to use the open exterior space at the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology in Lisbon, JML, Office KGDVS and Nuno Brandão Costa designed an exhibition space by combining an array of rooms from mostly residential projects of the three practices (fig. 1). Assembling them together in bare white painted plasterboard to express each room internally and expose their steel frames externally, they questioned the difference between the construction of form as display and display as form. The accumulation of these rooms brought to the fore concerns of exhibition and architectural authorship, in sum insinuating a cross pollination of referents that emphasized the room as a representational device whose extension now reached further through new media. In this construct, the rooms were associations across time but formed in space. Like billboards, they replaced any notion of simulation with the explicit reality of reference and reduced domestic architecture to a shell.

In Lisbon, rooms established distinction, expressing themselves as citations that broke down open space to produce a field of difference for content which was self-similar.[13] Medium specific, they intertwined the architects' own histories within the exhibition as separate elements, a formalized body of work. In Chicago the remnants of influence were apparent. Where Lisbon used agglomeration, Chicago used individuation, atomizing open space on the east side of the ground level at the Cultural Center with rooms of distinct character. Filling in these large spaces with disconnected grey and blue boxes of asymmetrical entry architraves, squashed archways, and irregular room enfilades—all reminiscent of JML's idiosyncratic Vault House sectional figure—the procession of these small enclosures controlled the presentation of each project. The Vault House (2013), reminiscent of a shotgun house, combines rooms of varying scales across three levels to privilege a view towards the beach. The house's conceptual model shows open space filled in by individual rooms of the same sectional figure, in turn constructing spatial depth through an indirect enfilade of views. In this way, the house preempts Chicago to deny open space and expose the room as a machine of display. In Lisbon and Chicago, these qualities are exacerbated, with atomized rooms both ensuring the presentation of the content while simultaneously being the content; each room is an exhibition in its own right. In this curatorial model, the room is not simply a trope of exhibitionism, but a confluence between exhibition

architecture's representational function and architecture's own construction through representation.

IMAGE ROOMS

For JML's Lisbon collaborators, Office KGDVS, the conception of a room is something to be questioned, as Enrique Walker explicitly underscored for their 2008 exhibition,"*Seven Rooms* articulates the trajectory of a decision, a problem deliberately self-imposed and relentlessly addressed: the definition of a room."[14] For that exhibition, much like Paul and Paul's *5 Rooms* at the Chicago Biennial, an enfilade is inserted into an existing wide corridor. Both enfilades exhibit fault lines of recognition between context, frame, and content, and in the case of *5 Rooms*, evokes the convergence between "fine arts and public works."[15] Office are happy to exacerbate this indistinction quoting Pier Vittorio Aureli that their work exhibits "the literal discourse of the minimalists from the 1970s (not the contemporary ephemeral design minimalism, but 'literal art'), be it in a slightly contaminated version."[16] In cases such as Office's Weekend Home (2012) (fig.2 & 3), the contamination is referential as each room is theatricized as one of the house's referents from its conceptual collage. Mies Van der Rohe's cruciform columns, David Hockney's pool, Superstudio's inexhaustible white square module, and Henri Rousseau's jungle, all become their own room, transferring two-dimensional layer into three-dimensional image in the enfilade. In this role, the occupant is both subject of each scene and object of each room. The act of display extends into the spatial composition of the house to blur frame and content. The art critic Michael Fried disparaged literalist art whose espousal of objecthood amounted to a similar marriage. As he noted, "the concept of a room is, most clandestinely, important to literalist art and theory" because the work's significance relies on the beholder: the work itself cannot stand on its own, and "is basically a theatrical effect or quality—a kind of stage presence."[17] In Office's contaminated version, the theatrics of each room seek an audience outside the spatial enclosure.[18] These domestic rooms are then more at place as images than as spaces. They are containers or conflators of history and elucidate their isomorphism with the room of the exhibition.

In Chicago, the models of *Horizontal City* also look to three dimensionalize the image. As to nod to 1980's *La Strada Novissima* which impressed the importance of public space through the construction of a street of facades, JML reconstitute Mies Van der Rohe IIT's campus plan by asking participants to reconstruct specific images of rooms as models in the place of campus buildings. Several projects, such as Urbanlab's *A Room Enclosed by Hills and Mountains,* Karamuk* Kuo Architects' *Infinitely Intimate*, and Bureau Spectacular's *Another Raumplan* internalize their images further, using the medium of the model to construct an image literally. Explained through the several eye holes, light switches, and viewing frames, the architects control

chosen perspectives to restage rooms of choice, utilizing the original image in a machinic manner. These small projects, adding to the accumulation of rooms at the Biennial, are both autonomous and exhibitions in their own right. They are not necessarily spatially experienced, but spatially ingested as informational tactics, displaying the narratives of their formulation and reference; somewhere between didactic display and Thorn miniature room. If *La Strada Novissima* emphasized the importance of public space through house facade that resulted in the self-representational images of architects,[19] *Horizontal Cit*y emphasized the urban plan that resulted in the image of a room; an exposition of the widening polarities of scale architecture now deals with. If we take Portughesi's request that the facades of *La Strada Novissima* be representative of houses, the public image of domesticity was in direct relationship to its physical public. Today, the new public facade of space has emerged as an interiorized monad, and its development has exposed a shift from the individuality of the public skin to the publicity of the individual('s) space.

In all platforms, the Chicago Architecture Biennial illuminated a current stream of conscience within architecture. The room, as an informational tactic, displays its content distinctively in seclusion from contamination, spatially constructing the images which mediate architecture beyond its confines. Huddling together or on their own, rooms remain distinct in their atomization of space to provide for the perfect scenic frame for deeper imagery and containable referential narratives. Its use at the Chicago Biennial emphasizes its relation to the presentation of a distinct form of visual history. As Phillip Denny noted soon after its opening, "architects are now addressing the image, without deference to, nor any connection with, the so-called real. They are experimentally inhabiting the *mise en abyme* of architecture's image culture: pictures passed around on Instagram, posted to blogs and websites, displayed in lectures, found in books and circulated in emails and text messages have seemingly become materials to build with."[20] However, it may be contended that architecture is being constructed for the circulation of these image, with the room as their creator and medium. The image may be the basis of much of the work at the Biennial, but its translation, presentation, or reconceptualization into the physical world appears to have taken shape in the room; *the* agent of instrumental display.

THE DIGITAL EXTERIOR

The atomization of the room at Chicago was best illustrated by the factors driving the Biennial. Any turn towards a flattened cultural, is, to some extent, a reaction to the growing access to information and content. Mario Carpo was first to point out this lack of categorization, yet for formal and engineering capacities. His "search, don't sort"[21] critique is evidence of the destabilization of previous hierarchies. In Chicago, the smooth field of the exhibition cultivated this scenario across its floors, as the transference between

media (as history) into space obscured spatial structures with media structures. Christopher Hight's 2006 article, "Inertia and interiority: as a case study of the televisual metropolis," investigated such transference in his assessment of the television program *24*. Looking at the program through the media's deterritorializing effect on domestic subjectivity, Hight postulated that in the program "the oikos no longer possesses a formal organic unity; instead, domesticities are continually divided into smaller pockets of space orchestrated by the interaction between various members."[22] Heightened by the simultaneity of communication technologies and their visual segregation of the individual from the community, the interior locales of each character existed without evident relation to an exterior, pointing towards relationships defined by mediatory hierarchies that overrode spatial ones. As Charles Rice notes on Hight's work, "it offers material by which to reconceptualize the relations between spatial configurations of domesticity and the effects of electronic, and specifically montage, media."[23] Emphatically, Rice claims that media is effectively prefiguring the construction of space. In Chicago, the emphasis on the reconstruction from history (ie. its recent accessibility through contemporary mediums) highlights Rice's point. The room maintains autonomy without overall categorization, and architecture connects via a referential network not necessarily present in the physical manifestation of the Biennial.

This was most evident at a level of project content, where the Biennial exposes the room as an extension of the individual. Fosbury Architect's *J'ai pris l'amour*, an updated studiolo of Federico da Montefeltro, covered an awkward transitory space in printed cardboard to depict the room of a hypothetical blogger. Revealing the permeability of the digital public in our physical private realm, the objects of the blogger's life designated personality, and elucidated the composition of her existence confined to a bedroom whose technological extension expands beyond its physical extents. Here, the drawings represented both the girl's space (bedroom and place of work), and her totality (objects and a digital social life); the room was associated with the construction of the individual herself, as if hybridic cyborg. DOGMA's *The Room of One's Own: The Architecture of the Private Room* played a similar game. As the most direct example of the room's presence in the Biennial, the project focused on the concept of the individual and their room. Basing their studies off Gilbert Simondon's concept of individuation as a constant process, they purported the individual room as a requirement equal to collective space. Exhibited in a multiplicity of line drawings of famous thinkers' rooms, along with three books that tracked the development of the private room from prehistoric settlement to contemporary urbanity, the project relies upon the existence of a room specifically for the individual without notion of the room's exterior. Evident in both, technological communication now forms a digital exterior that allows each room to be distinctly separate. As Hight notes about

Figure 2: Early conceptual collage for OFFICE 56 WEEKEND HOUSE, Merchtem, Belgium. OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, 2009-2012.
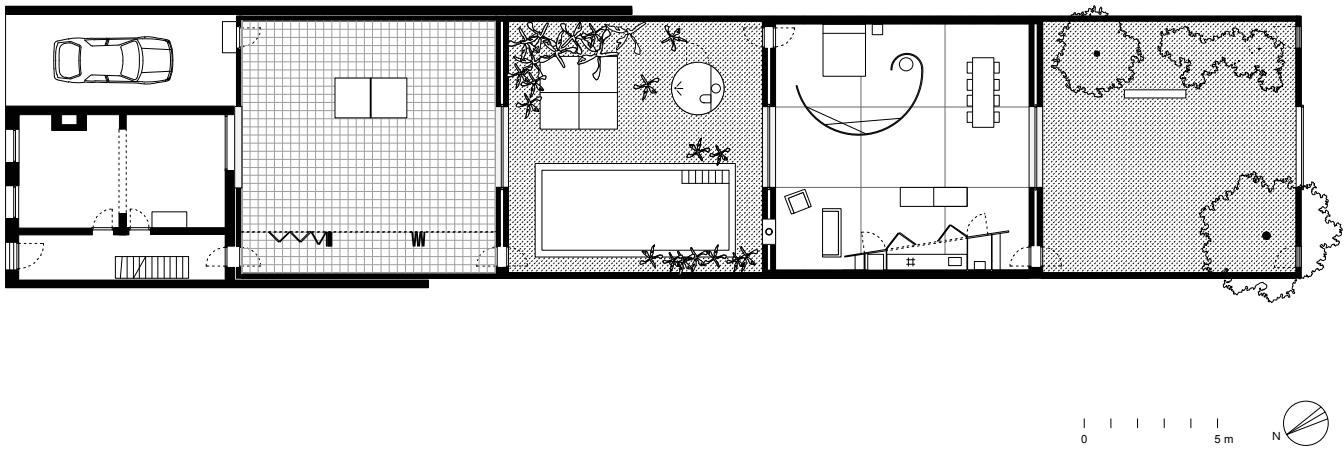

Figure 3: Ground plan of OFFICE 56 WEEKEND HOUSE, Merchtem, Belgium.   OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, 2009-2012.

Figure 4: Caruso St. John with Thomas Demand and Hélène Binet, Constructions and References, 2017. Photo courtesy of Laurian Ghinitoiu.

via co-valent bonds of electronic infrastructures...unlink propinquity, propriety, and proximity from territoriality."[24] Emphasized in Chicago, the room of the individual has begun to operate as a molecularized totality, dissolving the notion of a formal construction of homogeneous exterior;[25] they do not act like cells that conglomerate a collective but agglomerate as private entities. Much like Robin Evan's analysis of Robert Adam's circuit plans, spatial considerations are not present because spatial interpenetrations are non-existent. Both DOGMA's and Fosbury's rooms are thus experienced in temporal series and communicate at a level of information tied to their temporal construction in representation.

CONCLUSION

The prevalence of the room and its resultant atomization of space is, without doubt, related to JML's form of history. While it is a specific one, the accessibility and depth of material is apparently stimulating for many contemporary architects. Within this heterogeneous plane of information, the enclosure of the room maintains a form of autonomy to remove contamination, consistently reworking the limits of architecture's mediation. JML's distributed categorization benefits from both the reconceptualization of history and its

tion of medium and content leads to an exhibition in which confluence and atemporality can become matter. Where Fried saw ill-distinction, contemporary architects have found new fields. Perhaps the best example of "Make New History" is Thomas Demand's wallpaper (fig. 4); an artist well versed in the reciprocity between space and image, and the mediation of both. Covering the walls of the northern Chicago Room with a repeated image of a folded piece of paper entitled *The Fold*, the whole room becomes one of his models. *The Fold* is the image of the Biennial—a room—that explicates its atemporality and association across time by conflating itself. Both stage and scene, the room is filled by installing itself in both the world of the Chicago Cultural Center, and its momentary historical extension. Once the wallpaper is destroyed, only the image will be left; a history room with no time and no space.

ENDNOTES

1. Mark Lee, *Make New History* ed. Sarah Herda, Sharon Johnston, Mark Lee & Letizia Garzoli (Zurich: Lars Muller Publishing, 2017), 20.

2. Both Sarah Herda and Phillip Denny referred to the contemporary architectural situation as "ahistorical" and "atemporal." As Denny comments, "the science fiction writer William Gibson coined the term atemporality to refer to the status of historical knowledge in what he calls the "endless digital now." His argument goes that informational abundance and simultaneity

prompt cultural modes of information processing that are fundamentally different from those of previous eras." For more information refer to Sarah Herda, *Make New History* ed. Sarah Herda, Sharon Johnston, Mark Lee & Letizia Garzoli (Zurich:Lars Muller Publishing, 2017), 20, and Phillip Denny, *The Images of History*, Volume, accessed on December 08, 2017, http://volumeproject.org/the-images-of-history/

3.   Mark Lee, *Make New History*, 23.

4.   The full attribution title should read "AGENdA with Camilo Echavarria and Camilo Echeverri."

5.   One scan of the reviews of the Biennial will find a general disappointment with the use of images, or simple precedents. There are exceptions, of course, however many of the critiques took this as empty or obscuring the reality of other politics situations. For further information refer to, Nicholas Korody, *The Amnesias of "Make New History"*, Archinect, accessed on December 09 2017, https://archinect.com/features/article/150030298/the-amnesias-of-make-new-history?utm_source=Archinect+Daily&utm_campaign=98f8c11258-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_09_27&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8f7bd1b167-98f8c11258-375373, Matt Shaw, Five Fundamental Problems with the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial, The Architect's Newspaper, accessed on December 09, 2017, https://archpaper.com/2017/09/5-problems-chicago-architecture-Biennial, and Phillip Denny, The Images of History, Volume, accessed on December 08, 2017, http://volumeproject.org/the-images-of-history/.

6.   Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999, 1976), 8.

7.   Gianni Ottolini has put it well, "[i]n its practical use, architecture is made to dwell in. In its aesthetic utility, it is made to communicate. It is these two things that have seen the room become the representational enclosure for domestic life and cultural institutions." Gianni Ottolini, "Manifesto Rooms" in *Stanze/Rooms: Model Living Quarters*, ed.Beppe Finessi (Venezia:Marsillio, 2017), 28.

8.   O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 18.

9.   Giovanna Borasi, "For Architecture" in *Displayed Spaces: New Means of Architecture Presentation Through Exhibitions*, ed. Roberto Gigliotti (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2015), 45.

10.   ibid., 44.

11.   Tina DiCarlo, "Exhibitionism as Inquiry?", *OASE* (88), 39.

12.   Anonymous, "The Cameo: Easier Done Than Said", *Flat Out* (01), 71.

13.   All the exhibitions pieces inside these rooms were presented on A4 paper in portrait format. Each piece was equally spaced from the other and hung at eye level.

14.   The full quote continues, "inside or outside a given architecture (a room within a room: sometimes a room inscribed in an existing room, sometimes a room circumscribed about an existing room), and against which the room is formulated as a mathematical correction; a problem whose resolution (the demarcation of limits, the positioning of thresholds, the reduction of leftovers) is met once this room, and its delineation, seems as if it had actually preceded rather than followed the given architecture–a project as an erratum." Enrique Walker, "Erratum" in *OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen - SEVEN ROOMS* (Antwerp: deSingel International Arts Campus, 2009), 3.

15.   Refer to project description on Chicago Architecture Biennial website. Accessed on December:20, 2017, http://chicagoarchitectureBiennial.org/participants/paul-andersen-paul-preissner.

16.   Quoted in, Exhibition Catalogue for Tentoonstelling 35m3 jonge architectuur, OFFICE KGDVS (Antwerp: deSingel International Arts Campus & VAi, 2005), 57.

17.   Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in Minimal Art: An Anthology, 134.

18.   It should be noted OFFICE KGDVS staged a David Hockney like splash in their photographing of Weekend House.

19.   Léa-Catherine Szacka, *Exhibiting the Postmodern: the 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2016), 128.

20.   Denny, *The Images of History*.

21.   Mario Carpo, *The Second Digital Turn: Design Beyond Intelligence* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 23.

22.   Christopher Hight, "Inertia and interiority: as a case study of the televisual metropolis," *Journal of Architecture*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2004.

23.   Charles Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 117.

24.   Hight, *Inertia and interiority*.

25.   DOGMA even went to the extent to fabricate the exterior suburban world of Jobs' room in their depiction of it, in contrast to the original Time Magazine photograph which shows total darkness. For further information refer to Lev Grossman and Harry Mccracken, *The Inventor of the Future,* TIME Magazine, October 17, 2011.