

# On Planting and Deconstruction: The Architecture Exhibition as Radical Medium

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**This presentation reviews Rotor's strategic use of the exhibition medium in the light of radical practices in architecture and design since the 1960's. To interrogate these radical manifestations two architecture exhibitions will be examined as case studies. The first exhibition was curated by Emilio Ambasz and titled, "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape" in 1972 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the second one was staged at the Venice Biennale in Italy in 2010 by Rotor titled "Usus/Usures". The selected exhibitions will be reviewed to explore the current and past debate of radical practices when associated with ecology, sustainability, and environmental protection and the potential discourse that aims to inspire a radical redesign of the discipline.**

## THE ARCHITECTURAL EXHIBITION AS RADICAL MEDIUM

Architecture exhibitions have continued to play a major role in architecture. It is difficult bringing architecture into the space of galleries, museums or multinational biennales because once built it is always on display. Architecture exhibitions are almost always representations of architecture works or products.

The architecture exhibition since the twentieth century has allowed architects to take speculative positions and use exhibitions as laboratories for architectural ideas. This ethos was particularly captured by a number of exhibitions in the 1960s and 1970s, such as group shows like The Trigon Biennale 1967 (Ambience/Environment) and 1969 (Architecture/Freedom) in Graz (Austria). These kinds of experimental installation-based environments demonstrate that architectural exhibitions have not only played a role in canonizing architects and buildings but also can affect architecture's social role by radically rethinking architectural practice and education.

In Italy, architects' collaboratives – such as Superstudio (one of the participants of the Trigon 69 an exhibition titled Architecture/Freedom in the Künstlerhaus Graz); Archizoom; Global Tools; Gruppo 9999<sup>1</sup>; and U.F.O. – expanded their role in society to shape the contemporary political and cultural

agenda through 'radical architecture' without the intervention of a building. 'Radical' architects rejected the various mediums of architecture in favor of other, non-tectonic modes, such as: montages; models; films and exhibitions; installations and magazines; to promote radically shifts of conceptualizations of design practices; that are viewing ecological problems as rooted primarily in socio-political notions of nature.

## ITALY: THE NEW DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE EXHIBITION

These groups participated 1972 in an important exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art that was curated by Emilio Ambasz and titled, "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape" The "Casa Orto" – Vegetable Garden House" by 9999 was one of the exhibition's feature items and later became an important example in the early ecology movement.

Lettuces and cabbages were presented against the backdrop of the museum and used as the raw material for a collage of the Home Garden a concept the group developed for a house in which vegetables were grown on the floor, creating a close connection between the inhabitants and nature. According to Elettra Fiumi, the daughter of Fabrizio Fiumi who was one of the co-founders of Gruppo 9999, they called the Bedroom for the Vegetable Garden House an "eco-survival device... (that) makes use of very simple elements: a vegetable garden, water, and an air bed."<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1)

Environmentally-conscious and communally-oriented design approaches like "Casa Orto" promoted a globalist perspective predicated on the belief in a common culture for human survival and evolution and for serving a 'global commons' imagined as 'open work'<sup>3</sup> rather than as 'owned' resources.

During the Space Mondial Festival No 1 in 1971 titled Life, Death and Miracles of Architecture; a discotheque "Space electronic" was transformed for a week into a Separate School for Expanded Conceptual Architecture. This nightclub served as a multimedia cultural space with happenings, jam sessions, architectural shows, and festival events such as the Mondial Festival, experimental theater, and concerts. The Space Electronic decor was largely composed of recycled objects such as washing machine drums and empty refrigerator encasements. (Figure 2)



Figure 1. Gruppo 9999: Space Electronic: *Bedroom for the Vegetable Garden House*, Florence, 1971, Photo: unknown

The design objects and installations displayed in “Italy: The New Domestic Landscape” are not simply a series of stylistic operations but instead conveyed a more fundamental, a more encompassing understanding of relations and interactions between humans and the world.

As stated in the exhibition catalogue by Emilio Ambasz: “The purpose of this exhibition, therefore, is not only to report on the current developments in Italian design, but to use these as a concrete frame of reference for a number of issues of concern to designers all over the world”<sup>4</sup>. The exhibition had a political agenda and addressed the ever more pressing global challenges concerning consumption, poverty and pollution and was accompanied by a symposium titled “Institutions for a Post-Technological Society” at Moma from the 8-9th of January 1972.<sup>5</sup>

The design groups Superstudio, Archizoom, 9999 opposed the act of design: the world did not need more objects, and all three design groups participated in the exhibition with radical anti-design. The journalist Norma Skurka concluded her review in the New York Times about the exhibition with the following remark: “The environments on display are meant to shock us into changing outmode ideas about the way we live. Their message? Our very lives depend on curbing

consumption and limiting expansion in order to preserve our ultimate environment, the planet earth.”<sup>6</sup>

The ‘radical movement’ presaged some of the urgent social and development concerns that the world is now contending with including globalization, technology, social justice, and environmental protection. The world of ‘radical’ architects is now being represented and projected by younger contemporaries. These younger advocates include: ‘Rotor’ that have curated and executed exhibitions about the built environment such as (“Usus/Usures”, Venice Biennale, 2010 and “Behind the Green Door”, Oslo Architecture Triennale, 2014) and many more.

In 2014 Casa Orto by Gruppo 9999 was part of the exhibition “Behind the Green Door, a critical look at sustainable architecture through 600 Objects” by Rotor, at the Oslo Architecture Triennale. “Behind the Green Door” was accompanied by a publication for which Carlo Caldiini, the architect and co-founder of Gruppo 9999 quoted a statement from the beginning of the 1970’s and (also) commended on the exhibition curated by Rotor as such: “We should better love our planet”, and that man and working in harmony with his environment, between progress in science and nature, should be placed at the centre of humanity’s quest. (1970’s)



Figure 2. Gruppo 9999: Space Electronic, Florence, 1971, part nightclub, part architecture school Photo: unknown

In “Behind the Green Door” we see numerous examples where this is achieved. Therefore, I can now say that we can, and should, love our planet more.”<sup>7</sup>

Rotor is a non-profit cooperative architecture design practice for a radical (re)organization of the material environment based in Brussels (Belgium) that represents a new design approach in which various disciplines such as (Law, material, environmental and social Sciences etc.) – from research and exhibition-making to material studies and reuse strategies – are combined to serve the offsite reuse purposes. Transcending the disciplinary limits of architecture by pioneering new methods in the field of salvaging materials this new practice by Rotor undertakes their research and design work in response to industrial production, consumption, and waste fabrication.

Building architecture requires materials that do not necessarily have to be new. Offsite re-use as a design approach is not commonly applied in the education and practice of architects.

In the general architectural practice, the customary thinking about the utilization of building materials usually entails the design of “new objects” and the procurement of novel materials specified and ordered from various product catalogs. As a counterpoint to this new-material procurement approach,

Rotor developed guidelines or protocols and regulatory work for the reclamation of reusable “waste” materials for new building processes.

#### **USUS/USURES—THE ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT FOR RE-USE STRATEGIES<sup>8</sup>**

Rotor is interested in material flows in industry and construction, particularly in relation to resources (waste, use and reuse) that challenge historical conceptualization of building culture, heritage, and social value. They deconstruct buildings into elements (construction, materials) and reassemble them in new ways. This is an approach that values used material and knowledge of past practices of crafting buildings and interiors for reassembly.

The Rotor preoccupation with off-site re-use is intended to question the standard use of demolition as a way to create a tabula rasa for new building projects. Rotor seeks to save condemned or “waste” materials while introducing a conservational social perspective into the architectural design process. The Rotor architectural practice entails building resources and their re-use in ways that challenge the historical and cultural conceptualization of buildings as well as their heritage and social value.



Figure 3. Rotor: Usus/Usures, Venice Biennale 2010, Photo: Eric Mairiaux

This distinct interdisciplinary approach of Rotor—which can be described as deconstruction, relocation, and assemblage—has been at the center of their exhibition *Usus/Usures* for the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2010. At the international architecture exhibition, they displayed mundane materials and products salvaged from Belgian social housing projects as abstract art. The selection and framing of used materials and architectural elements of a social housing complex is not a purely aesthetic or neutral act, but points to the growing problem of unavailable low-income housing in Belgium and other Western countries.

(Figure 3) *Usus/Usures* was entirely made from salvaged building components that are usually overlooked and treated as waste (deconstruction), such as carpet, stairs, railings, etc. These are then exhibited in a reassembled manner (assemblage) in the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (relocation).

(Figure 4) A red carpet, for example, was taken from an apartment in a social housing block (relocation) and mounted on the wall of the exhibition as the apartment's floor plan (assemblage). The caption for this piece merely noted: "Acrylic fiber carpet in a living room adjacent to an entryway, a hallway, a bedroom and a kitchen." The red industrial carpet is represented as a diagram of the wear and tear created by the

occupants through the processes of habit and inhabitation. Thus, this carpet, already condemned as "waste" becomes a kind of manual for re-use and instead of being a deficiency, the traces of wear-and-tear lead to critical reflections on use, users, and construction practices through the new context of the art exhibition.

Rotor's intention for *Usus/Usures* "was to bring the subject of materiality into the arena of the Venice Biennale opposing the glorification of 'the New' that is implicit in this kind of exhibition format." They intended the subject of wear-and-tear to draw attention to the reaction of buildings to longtime use while challenging architects to critically anticipate this depreciating process. Thus, looking at buildings through the wear-and-tear lens leads to reflections on use, users, and construction practices. Rotor encourages the public to change their attitude towards building materials, and more broadly towards all objects around us.

## CONCLUSION

The reviewed exhibitions by "Gruppo 9999" and "Rotor" deploy the techniques, materials, processes, and the spaces of the art world (museum, galleries, Biennale) as realms for political commentary that are critical of the past and current global political-economic system.





Figure 4. Rotor: *Usus/Usures*, Acrylic fibre carpet in a living room adjacent to an entryway, a hallway, a bedroom and a kitchen, Venice Biennale 2010, Photo: Eric Mairiaux

They both deconstruct existing value systems in art and architecture and seek to create opportunities for architecture exhibitions as environments that can initiate or foster a radical redesign of the built environment and architecture education.

Rotor is referencing and recharging the critical aspect of curating and exhibiting architecture that was already present in the 1960s and 1970s with architect collectives like Superstudio, Archizoom, UFO and Gruppo 9999, Global Tools.

Gruppo 9999 and Rotor are multidisciplinary design cooperatives with a collective sense of work and radical attitudes that are challenging conventional architectural and design practices by raising questions of ecology, globalization, and humanity's relationship to the environment reflected through the medium of the architecture exhibition.

In addition, Rotor's distinct analytical approaches entail urgent questions of sustainability, re-use and appropriation and suggest a different perspective on the established modes of heritage preservation and historical production of the built environment.

The question of re-using existing buildings along with their history and archival strategies has also a literal dimension;

this entails how the historical buildings could be taken apart into elements (construction, materials) and re-assembled in new ways. Material reuse encourages the consideration of buildings as cultural repositories, not just of their material essence but also of the knowledge and past practices of crafting buildings.

These past building practices are also presented as inputs and raw material—in this case, of the knowledge and skill—that might find new applications and contribute to new value systems. A reassessment of the conventional understanding of our architectural heritage would be well served by considering buildings as an assemblage of elements that could be dismantled and later reassembled, possibly into totally new configurations or possibilities.

Not only does Rotor's distinct yet comparable approaches entail urgent questions of sustainability, re-use, and appropriation, they also imply a need for a different view on history and the historical production: they recharge the critical aspect of exhibiting, curating and design practice in architecture and expand it to the problem of re-use: the re-use of materials and of building elements, but also the re-use of ideas, the re-use of knowledge, of archives and memory.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. Fiumi, Elettra, "9999: Florentine Memoirs (The story of the 9999 Group)", Fiumi Studio, 2017 <https://vimeo.com/240190803?fbclid=IwAR2DABTMD8EqB8cbqEYoDzm8FiZAYQha7w8dnLVFxKIGwxyacVRnHEW3jJ8>
2. "Radical Utopias: An exhibition on the radical Movement in Florence in the 60's and 70's", 2017, An Interview on the occasion of the exhibition titled: "Utopias Radicali", in Florence with Elettra Fiumi the daughter of Fabrizio Fiumi one of the co-founders of Gruppo 9999. <https://girlinflorence.com/2017/10/20/radical-utopias-an-exhibition-on-the-radical-movement-in-florence-in-the-60s-and-70s/>
3. Ecco, Umberto. *The open work*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1989
4. Ambasz, Emilio, (editor), *Italy: the new domestic landscape achievements and problems of Italian design*, Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.) 1972, P.19
5. For research on the exhibition see: Scott, Felicity D. E., 2004, "Italian Design and the New Political Landscape." Analyzing Ambasz. Edited by Jerrilynn D. Dodds, Emilio Ambasz, and Michael Sorkin. New York: Montacelli Press, pp. 109-156. As described by Scott: The Advisory Board for the conference, who also functioned as the peer-review committee, included Stanford Anderson, Rosalind Krauss, Carl Schorske, Peter Eisenman, Joseph Rykwert, Abraham Moles, Suzanne Keller and Emilio Ambasz. Conference participants were Henri Lefebvre, Alain Touraine, Michel Foucault, Martin Pawley, Octavio Paz, Tomás Maldonado, Umberto Eco, Hannah Arendt, Jean Baudrillard, Christopher Alexander, Gyorgy Kepes, Manuel Castells, Gillo Dorfles, Ronald Dworkin, Meyer Schapiro, Sheldon Wolin, Anatol Rapoport, Richard L. Meier. Those who reluctantly declined the invitation on account of other commitments included Louis Althusser, Roman Jakobsen, and Roland Barthes.
6. Skurka, Norma, "Home was never like this" New York Times, May 21, 1972, Section SM, Page 80, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/05/21/archives/home-was-never-like-this.html>
7. Rotor, *Behind the Green Door: A Critical Look at Sustainable Architecture through 600 Objects*, Oslo, Oslo Architecture Triennale, 2014, p.181
8. Greub, Charlott, "Making architecture public", in *Research Culture in Architecture, Cross-Disciplinary Collaborations*, Birkhäuser, Basel-Boston, 2020. pp. 155-157.