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Source: *Log*, No. 20, Curating Architecture (Fall 2010), pp. 39-43

Published by: [Anyone Corporation](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41765365>

Accessed: 15/06/2014 19:54

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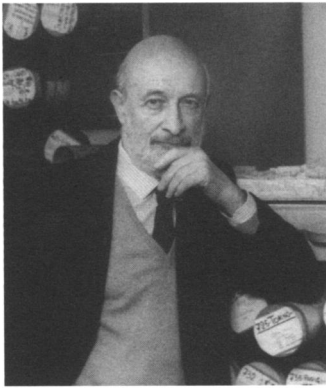
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A Conversation with Vittorio Gregotti



VITTORIO GREGOTTI IN HIS STUDIO.
PHOTO: LEONARDO CÉNDAMO.
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In the more than 100-year history of the Venice Biennale, the quadrennial 1975 to 1978 was particularly crucial for the institution's development. During those years, under the leadership of Biennale President Carlo Ripa di Meana, the Biennale entered a new phase of its exhibitions. In 1979, architecture became an independent section, and in 1980 the First International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale was held under the directorship of Paolo Portoghesi. Still, for many people, the real point of departure for the Venice Architecture Biennale had occurred four years earlier, in 1976, which leaves the exact inception of what we now call the Architecture Biennale blurred and controversial.

In a 2008 interview, Vittorio Gregotti, the Italian architect, professor, and former editor of Casabella, discussed the Venice Architecture Biennale's complex history and origins. From this conversation (translated and edited from the Italian), it is clear that the introduction of the Venice Architecture Biennale was a re-sponse to an institutional crisis that arose circa 1968, followed by a period of instability in the 1970s.

LÉA-CATHERINE SZACKA: *From the end of the 1970s on, a number of institutions, landmark exhibitions, and events related to architecture started to appear around the globe. Within this context, what is generally considered to be the first Venice Architecture Biennale was organized in 1980. However, you organized some architecture exhibitions at the Venice Biennale prior to this date. Could you tell us how and why an institution that had displayed only paintings and sculptures since its inception in 1895 suddenly decided, in 1980, to organize its first architecture biennale?*

VITTORIO GREGOTTI: The first architecture biennale was not in 1980. I organized the first architecture biennale in 1976. The 1980 Architecture Biennale was only the first one with an independent section dedicated to architecture. In 1979, the head of the Venice Biennale decided to separate art and architecture because there was no director equally competent in both fields. I was a bit of an exception, and that is why, in 1974, when I took on the role of director of the visual arts section of the Venice Biennale, I transformed it into the visual arts and architecture sections. Yet the architecture biennale

was born mainly because there was an interruption of the art biennale after 1968. Like many other institutions, the Venice Biennale suffered a major crisis in 1968 followed by a state of high instability within the institution. At the same moment, the Milan Triennale lost much of its importance for the exhibition of design and architecture in Italy. That's why architecture exhibitions started to happen in Venice. After 1968, the entire basis of the Venice Biennale was restructured; the administration of the institution was modified and the people who worked on the Biennale were chosen differently. From this moment on, the four different sections – art, theater, cinema, and music – became more institutionalized and a different director was chosen for each section. There was also a decision to organize some events outside the Biennale's garden, in other areas of Venice, and to introduce architecture and design within the Biennale. With this restructuring, the so-called “new” Biennale started in 1973, but it was only in 1974 that an important exhibition was held. Of course, since I am an architect, in 1976 I decided to do a Biennale on the theme of “art and environment.” I asked Germano Celant to be in charge of that exhibition, and for the first time we managed to have the entire international section focused on the same theme¹ as we decided to invite artists who were interested in both art and architecture. It was after that, in 1979, that the decision was made to separate architecture from art, and in 1980, part of the Arsenale was dedicated to the architecture exhibition. After 1976, no effort was made to display art and architecture in parallel.

L-CS: *Can you say more about the three architectural exhibitions that were presented at the 1976 Biennale?*

VG: The first one was called “Il razionalismo e l'architettura durante il fascismo” and was an exhibition about Italian architecture from the 1930s. It presented not only fascist architecture but was also a sort of analysis of the period. It was significant because it was something that had never been done before, and that's why I really insisted on doing it. A few of the fascist era architects were still alive at the time, so it was interesting in a documentary way to hear what they had to say. There was a second section dedicated to the Werkbund. This exhibition was important not only because the Werkbund had played such an influential role in the development of modern architecture, but also because the Werkbund was not really known in Italy at the time since no exhibition on the subject had ever been done in this country. The third exhibition, called “Europa-America,” was dedicated to contemporary architecture. It was a series of monographic presentations showing the work of some of the most interesting architects in Europe and America. In order to choose the architects, there was a small committee similar to the one for the visual arts section, and we deliberately made the decision to place these two groups of architects, the Americans and the Europeans, in confrontation.

L-CS: *In 1975 you also organized an event related to an important building on the Giudecca, the Mulino Stucky, or the old flour mill. Can you tell me a little bit more about this event? Was it an exhibition similar to those in 1976?*

VG: The 1975 exhibition about the Mulino Stucky was not really important. It was more local. It was a series of manifestations made in order to find a popular basis on which to rebuild the Venice Biennale. In fact, after the post-1968 break, the Venice Biennale had a lot of local and

1. The national pavilions in the Giardini di Castello all focused on the theme of the environment.

national political problems. That's why the manifestations were directed toward local places and buildings, like the Mulino Stucky, or other important issues faced by the city of Venice. For example, in 1974 I organized a festival on the relationship between architecture and cinema. But those were episodic events.

L-CS: *When was the Arsenale first used as an exhibition space for the Venice Biennale?*

VG: In 1980, Paolo Portoghesi used the Corderie dell'Arsenale as an exhibition space for the International Architecture Exhibition. Yet in 1975 and 1976 we used the Magazzini del Sale on the Zattere for both the Mulino Stucky exhibition and "Europa-America." And that was also a first.

L-CS: *What role did Carlo Ripa Di Meana, the Biennale president, play in the creation of an architecture section inside the Venice Biennale, and why was Paolo Portoghesi appointed director of the new architecture section?*

VG: When Ripa di Meana came to ask me if I would agree to be the director of the visual arts section, I said I would accept only if there was also an architectural exhibition *within* the International Art Exhibition. Ripa di Meana had no particular objection to this idea. As for Portoghesi, the answer is really simple. There was a political reason. The president of the council was Bettino Craxi.² And Craxi was a really good friend of Portoghesi, who was also a friend of Ripa di Meana. So the cycle was really simple, it was political. But this does not diminish the quality of Ripa di Meana's and Portoghesi's work: Ripa Di Meana was a really good president and Portoghesi is a brilliant critic.

L-CS: *Can you comment on the significance of the biennales of the 1970s, or on the importance of the 1980 International Architecture Exhibition, in comparison to the latest editions of the Venice Architecture Biennale?*

VG: The 1976 Biennale "Ambient-Art" was really international. The only difference between this Biennale and those pre-1976 was that in 1976, for the first time, the exhibition followed a general theme throughout. At the time there was a big debate on whether the exhibitions of the Venice Biennale should be thematic or informative, whether it should have a critical point of view or if it was better to have an instructive event. My opinion is that with all the informative instruments that we have today it is not possible to inform people anymore, even if they are interested. There are tons of manifestations in the visual arts field; there is the Internet and all the other means of communication. So if one does an informative biennale it is going to be an event that is likely to be of little interest. So, as I said, "Ambient-Art" was the first thematic Biennale. There were some previous intentions to do a thematic Italian Pavilion, but this was never the case for the whole Biennale. Later the idea of a general theme was abandoned and we went back to the "informative" biennale. Here I am excluding the 1980 Biennale, where the rise of postmodern architecture was the theme. I have always been against the 1980 Architecture Biennale because I think that postmodernism was really a negative

2. Bettino Craxi was president of the Council of Ministers of Italy from 1983 to 1987. This doesn't exclude the fact that, because of his position in the Italian Socialist Party (Craxi was head of the party from 1976 to 1993), he may have pushed forward the nomination of Portoghesi as director of the architecture section of the Venice Biennale.

thing for architecture. But at least in that Biennale there was a position. Portoghesi and his team were trying to say: “This is what we think about architecture.” And after Portoghesi no one attempted to do this kind of demonstrative operation. Now biennales are events that hold little or no interest. They have titles, but again it is really difficult to inform people. For example, if you take the 2006 Architecture Biennale “Città. Architettura e società”³ you can see that since the informative instruments on the city are already so complete it is really difficult to say something more in an exhibition. And I repeat: I think that the real problem of biennales today is their inability to compete with all the other informative instruments. These events do not open a discussion and therefore are slowly losing their relevance. Now they are more and more like big market fairs, like art fairs that already exist in the world of contemporary art. In the architecture world the participation in the Biennale is now a way of increasing one’s own media fame. All the other curators presented surveys or collections of items. For example, a few years ago, the Cité de l’architecture et du patrimoine opened in Paris. This museum is a disaster. Nothing is clear, there are things without any interest, while the most important things are missing. It looks like the collection actually depends on the material they found. Architecture is a complex thing due to many factors that coincide at a particular moment. And the political situation today has become really fragmentary. There are no clear positions from architects. The fact that architecture became so popular at the end of the 1970s is only due to the rise of mass communication.

L-CS: *Don’t you think it is strange that architecture entered the Venice Biennale so late, when the other arts, like cinema and theater, entered in the 1930s?*

VG: Architecture is not a really popular art. In a sense it is much easier to do a demonstrative exhibition about architecture than to attempt to do an informative one. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example, does some really nice exhibitions, showing drawings and models. But they don’t do biennales. They have never intended to. It is good that a modern art museum has an architecture department. But this sector is independent. So as an independent sector, they can do exhibitions on personalities or on certain issues. Yet in art exhibitions there is an important element, the art market. Now, this market also exists for architecture, and this means that today the problem of architecture has become a mediatic one. The fact that at the end of the 1970s architecture became more popular is essentially due to the rise of mass communication and to the fact that architecture became a secondary branch of design. In fact, it is through design – that is to say, through fashion – that architecture entered the Venice Biennale. But the problem is that it is not a market of objects but rather a market of people, or architects: it is the architects themselves and not their projects that became marketable. I think that today the Venice Biennale is useless. Museums are important because they are putting together archives. Only 30 or 40 years ago the material of the most important architects was not kept by anybody and a lot of archives were lost. Yet today we know how important it is to keep architects’ archives. For example, there is an institution in Parma that is collecting architects’ archival material. And then, from there, people are writing histories of architecture. I think that this is a really interesting operation and a lot more important than what is happening at the recent biennales.

3. “Città. Architettura e società” was the 10th Venice Architecture Biennale, held from September 10 to November 19, 2006. It was curated by Richard Burdett and attracted over 130,000 visitors.

L-CS: *Can you tell me more about architecture exhibitions in Italy? Historically, what are the important institutions in the country displaying architecture? And today, is the Venice Biennale truly important for the world of architecture?*

VG: The Milan Triennale was really important in the 1930s, especially in Italy. In the 1950s there were also a few important exhibitions at the Milan Triennale, but one of the reasons why, in the 1970s, we started doing architecture exhibitions at the Venice Biennale was because the Milan Triennale was in crisis. I had done a very important exhibition at the Milan Triennale in 1964, but after 1968, the Milan Triennale was unable to produce anything. It took many years to get out of this crisis. During those years, from 1970 onward, the Venice Biennale occupied a space that it did not fulfill before. At this time, outside of Italy, there were not so many important architecture exhibitions. In the 1950s there were a couple of important exhibitions in England, for example, the exhibition “This is Tomorrow,”⁴ and the magazine *The Plan* produced a series of exhibitions. In Germany there were the famous exhibitions of the Design Zentrum in Berlin. But today I don’t think that the Venice Biennale has a cultural impact. Maybe it’s more of a fashion effect. And now the Milan Triennale is organizing exhibitions again, but it is not as important as it used to be, and it is always in between design and the visual arts. On the other hand, some exhibitions, like the ones held at the Basilica Palladiana in Vicenza, are truly beautiful because they are monograph exhibitions. Monographic exhibitions are always useful because they leave a trace. They help one to understand what an architect is doing and how he or she works. Today, even art and architecture galleries are starting to do these kinds of exhibitions.

L-CS: *The Web site of Gregotti Associati lists about 20 exhibitions showing the work of the studio between 1980 and 2007. Is it important for an architect to exhibit his or her work? What was the real impact of exhibitions on your work as an architect?*

VG: For me, to do an exhibition is like producing a monographic book; it is a significant auto-critical act. It is an opportunity to understand and deal with one’s own work. It is important after a couple of years to look at what has been done over the past years.

L-CS: *Some people say that today the Venice Biennale has become an event more than an exhibition. What do you think about this transformation?*

VG: I agree with this. Now everything has become an event. And I think that *event* is a horrible word!

4. “This is Tomorrow” was a seminal art exhibition in August 1956 at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, curated by Bryan Robertson.