

Representation and installation: Curating architectural exhibitions

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ABSTRACT: In the past decade, there has been a dramatic increase in the number and profile of exhibitions about architecture that has rendered curating architecture a distinct field in the profession. In the current practice, architectural curation has become a creative process of representing and displaying architecture with the specific aim of generating an encounter for the viewer – whether professionals or members of the general public. New trajectories of curation extend the traditional presentation of architectural simulacra, to include development artifacts of architectural design, process based installations and full scale constructions, allowing exhibitions to explore ideas and issues that are otherwise difficult to express and examine. The multidisciplinary facets of contemporary architecture – with its complex relationship to culture, politics and other fields such as art, history and engineering – can now be investigated and discussed in a more generative fashion and the latent layers revealed and activated.

Unlike the artist, the architect does not treat the exhibition as just an end product; rather it is a tool for disseminating designs to the public, discussing issues among disciplines and experimenting with ideas. This paper reviews two projects that seek to establish new ways of connecting architecture to the public consciousness through curation by identifying and assessing the practices, techniques and challenges of curating and creating the premise for architectural exhibitions. Also, through these projects, the paper explores the potential of exhibitions as places of mediation, interaction, education, conversation, deliberation, inspiration and experimentation, as well as an act to enrich the cultural intensity of a community. Overall, this paper endeavours to give an expansive view on the theory and practice of curating contemporary architectural exhibitions, as well as expose the prospective ability exhibitions have for communication and development of architectural research in the cultural community.

KEYWORDS: Architectural Research, Curating, Exhibitions, Installations, Dissemination

INTRODUCTION

Curating architecture exhibitions is becoming an intensively engaged practice that strives to expand and enrich the discipline, open it to the public and ground it within a larger social and cultural context. For architectural exhibitions, the curatorial approach, the choice of venue (galleries, conferences and installations), the method of display varies widely and influences greatly the effect of research projects and the perception of ideas for the audience. Following are two personal accounts of curatorial projects conducted to understand how methods of curating exhibitions can affect architectural research and its communication to the community: Building Waterloo Region – No Small Plans and BRIDGE Waterloo Architecture. No Small Plans, installed in a gallery in the traditional format of exhibitions, was an exhibition that told the stories of Canadian Governor General Award-winning buildings in Waterloo Region. It applied contemporary practices of curation in the design of the display to interact with the viewer and effectively communicate ideas. Alternatively, BRIDGE Waterloo Architecture is a student-initiated association that aims to create a public platform where the students of the Waterloo School of Architecture are given the freedom to investigate new ways to curate exhibitions, publications and programs of architectural research.

1.0 BUILDING WATERLOO REGION: NO SMALL PLANS

1.1. No small plans: award-winning buildings in Waterloo Region 1984-2014

The *No Small Plans* exhibition was hosted by the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo from July 5th to August 31st, 2014, and was curated by Rick Haldenby, Esther E. Shipman and the author. The exhibit celebrated the rich concentration of design culture that is present in Waterloo Region by featuring eight buildings in the region that have received Governor General Awards. Waterloo Region is preceded only by Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal – the three largest metropolitan centres – as the municipality having the most major award-winning buildings in Canada. Four of the eight buildings, including the Clay and Glass Gallery where the show was held, are situated around the intersection of Erb and Caroline streets, making it the most architecturally significant intersection in the country.

Waterloo Region is a culturally vibrant community that is concerned about design, quality of life and the development of the urban environment. The *No Small Plans* exhibition was only one part of the larger *Building Waterloo Region* program that is “a festival of exhibitions and related events exploring and celebrating the past, present and future of progressive architecture and design excellence in Waterloo Region.” (Building Waterloo Region 2014) Other exhibitions that were a part of this project include: *On the Line*, a virtual exhibition that is a transit oriented cultural guide exploring key areas on the 200 iExpress line; *ReMade*, an exhibition on Post War era buildings in the Region; *Ex-industria*, an exhibition framing industry as the foundation of the region and modern architecture as the vernacular style; *First Builders*; *Street Style*; *Finding Ways*; and *Evolving Urban Landscapes*.

1.2. Analysis

As curators of *No Small Plans*, we had the role of developing the thesis of the show, formulating the narrative and the strategy for how materials were presented to support the message, and making connections and comparisons across the exhibited work. Beyond presenting the work of the architects who created the award-winning buildings, we were careful in considering the format of the exhibition and how that would work with the venue. We also considered what media would be included to reach audiences on multiple levels of engagement. Based on our research findings, we selected material and developed a design scheme that would effectively achieve our thesis for the exhibit. (Figure 1)



Figure 1: Signage detail.



Figure 2: Genealogy graphic.

In schematic design phase, we decided that the objective was to tell the story surrounding each Governor General Award-winning building, showcasing not just striking shots of the final built form but the inspirations, challenges and architects' philosophies behind the design including the decisions involved in the making of the building. To give presence to each distinct narrative, we envisioned clusters of artifacts that would form an assemblage and become what we called pavilions for each building. Like country pavilions at the World Expos, we presented issues that were prevalent to the respective projects, such as institutional vision, social purpose, public space and civic life. In addition to drawings and models, the curators installed videos of interviews with the architects to give life to the stories being told at each display. Although each individual project had its own characteristics, we discovered an intricate connection in the genealogy of the architects who were involved in the making of these buildings, which translated into a designed graphic at the far end of the exhibit. (Figure 2) The Rotunda at the gallery became a shrine to the eight projects while banners of OAA award-winning buildings lined the back wall of the exhibit, celebrating the Region's design excellence. (Figure 3)



Figure 3: OAA Award Wall

The exhibition acted as a dissemination ground for the architecture and design profession to communicate ideas to the public, promoting the design culture existing in the Region. For example, the Kitchener City Hall pavilion explored the significant local design competition that brought about the city’s magnificent civic building. The display highlighted not only the winning entry, but also some of the alternate proposals from the finalists in the competition who would later design other award-winning buildings in the Region. Behind this story is the message that the Region is not only a design-conscious community but also a launch pad for creative practices and innovative ideas.

As with many similar cultural endeavours, a major challenge was to amass enough funding to prepare an effective event. In conjunction with developing the concepts and designs of the show, we placed a tremendous amount of effort on public relations and promoting the festival in order to acquire funding sponsors and in-kind support from partners to produce a successful exhibition. Timing was also difficult to manage because the desired undertakings usually surpassed the amount of time and resources (both human and material) we had available.

We were very fortunate to have the collaboration of *The Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery* for providing the site. (Figure 4) Being one of the eight Governor General Award-winning buildings, the choice was obvious and provided interesting working conditions. The unique architecture of the gallery was designed for displaying three-dimensional objects, so the exhibition hall was large and had few walls, allowing for plenty of daylight. These circumstances worked in advantage with the pavilion scheme that the curators eventually decided on, and the displays were designed to resonate with the materials used in the architecture of the gallery. Since the Clay and Glass gallery is a public venue usually geared towards a different group of people, holding an architecture exhibition there introduced an alternate audience to the field, which helped to disseminate architectural ideas to a wider population.



Figure 4: Panorama of No Small Plans exhibition, Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, Waterloo, 2014.

1.3. Reflections

No Small Plans was well visited by a variety of people, generating interest in the local public about architectural design and also exposing visitors interested in architecture to the clay and glass that are featured at the gallery. Each constructed display with an interview video and a collection of artifacts told a unique story, filling the vast space of the gallery with a murmur of conversations. The wood and black-painted surfaces of the pavilions complemented the butterfly roof made of similar materials. (Figure 5) At the far end of the exhibit, a genealogy graphic helped to tie all the narratives together, creating a comprehensive review of outstanding architecture in Waterloo Region.



Figure 5: Butterfly roof of the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery.

Beyond executing a thoughtful show, the complementary lectures, walking tours and Kids-Build-Waterloo activities were just as important to the success of the exhibition. These programs and events helped to engage different audiences and attracted them to learn more about the exhibition, as well as encouraged them to ask questions. Similarly, the design and arrangement of artifacts on the various surfaces of the pavilions promoted the discovery of an interactive story instead of a linear reading of it. (Figure 6) We designed elements, such as the light table, kid's table and sliders to create an interactive display for the visitors' participation.



Figure 1: No Small Plan Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery Pavilion.

Eric Haldenby, one of the executive curators of the show, was directly involved in the stories of several of the award-winning buildings. We started our research based on some of his experiences and, through his connections we scheduled office visits in Toronto to speak to architects about the projects, as well as to gather artifacts pertinent to the narrative. After much deliberation based on what materials we could attain or create, the curators developed the scheme for the design of the pavilions, which was composed of a core that would house the interview video and building model with horizontal and vertical elements that would hold plans and elevations, respectively. From there, we formed the stories we wanted to tell about each building and selected the pieces to position on the display. Although each pavilion was its own entity, we saw from our research that the pavilions were interconnected in many ways, so we were careful about the

relationship between each display and their respective position in the gallery. We considered many ways of showing these connections, including using accent lines that would link the pavilions in physical space; ultimately, due to time constraints, we settled on a graphic wall at the far end of the exhibition.

The construction period of the actually displays was short, just over two weeks; a prototype made from foam core was tested only a week in advance to check that the dimensions of the pavilions would work with the designs. In the month leading up to the opening, students and friends of the School of Architecture provided a lot of support and manpower to realize the overwhelming ambitions of this exhibition. Many variables affect the development of these projects, so it would be good practice to allot extra time for delays, as well as to acquire support and buy-in from people who were invested in the undertaking. It was also crucial to our success to communicate and connect with other cultural foundations, to create a comprehensive website, and to generate a strong presence on social media platforms. The completion of an effective exhibition depends not only on the development of a strong thesis but also sound preparations in all aspects of organizing the event.

Although the format of *No Small Plans* was similar to a traditional exhibition, our role as curators had become more engaged in practice beyond the collection of artifacts. The consideration all aspects of the exhibition including the design, the choice of display materials, the supplementary programs and even the promotional items created a comprehensive show that appealed to audiences beyond the architectural field. The integrated design process we used in the creation of this exhibition effectively made a show that was a site of conversation and education that revealed facts about the culture of community to the public that attended the show.

2.0 BRIDGE WATERLOO ARCHITECTURE

BRIDGE is the physical and digital manifestation of the University of Waterloo Architecture student initiatives. It is a community that celebrates and inspires students to not just learn about architecture but to live it. BRIDGE is the medium that provides students with the space and the voice to identify the student body and our critical view of architecture and design. It is our dedication and founding mission that BRIDGE will continue to provide opportunities for students to experiment, collaborate, and communicate all aspects of architectural design.

Our goal is to become the communal hub for students in the dialogue of all things architectural and to engage the immediate community of Galt Ontario and the University of Waterloo with our collective curation and discussion of architecture and design. Our efforts are to set an identity for the students in which to continue our contribution to the greater global dialogue of architectural discourse.

Currently in the planning stages, BRIDGE Storefront will be a multipurpose space for lectures, workshops, meetings, gallery shows, and various other events. BRIDGE Storefront will create a public presence for the UWSA, activating downtown Cambridge through student and community interest in architecture and design.

2.1. Engi-tecture art show and pecha kucha: creativepProjects

The first official BRIDGE exhibition was the Engi-tecture Art Show that was set up at 60 Main St. in Cambridge, Ontario during July 2014. It showcased artworks by eighteen students and faculty from the University of Waterloo's engineering, architecture and urban design programs in a collaborative art exhibition. Aligned with our mission to offer a platform for students to express their interest in and perspectives on design, the art show was initiated by a fourth year architecture student who was inspired by a similar project she encountered while on an internship and who wanted to use the space as a platform to discover and present the hidden talents of creative engineers and architects. Similarly, the Pecha Kucha that was organized as the closing event for the Engi-tecture Art Show focused on presentations about creative projects that students at the school are involved in. The Pecha Kucha Night was a joint venture between the University of Waterloo Graduate Student Association and the Society of Waterloo Architecture Graduates, with BRIDGE as the host of the space for the first of a series of Pecha Kucha Nights for the Waterloo City Chapter. (Figure 8) These events were published in the Cambridge Times to be promoted to the community.



Figure 8: Presentation at the pecha kucha night (Photography by Zak Fish 2014).

2.2. BRIDGE foundation and development

The ambitions of BRIDGE began with the Rome Show of the 2012 Graduating class of architecture students. As a part of Waterloo's architecture program, the first term of fourth year is spent in Rome, and during following summer in Cambridge, the students are given the opportunity to curate an exhibition to share their experiences abroad. Traditionally, the exhibition was a one-night event shared amongst peers and professors, but the class wished to go beyond that and present their work to the greater Cambridge community. In the end, with the generous offer of a local developer, the show was held for a weekend in a vacant storefront on Main St. (Figure 9)



Figure 9: Rome Show 2012.

After the Rome Show, the developer saw the opportunity for similar events to activate the main street and proposed to provide the students of the School of Architecture with one of the many vacant spaces his company owns on Main Street to pursue such endeavours. In response to the offer, a group of students formed BRIDGE and developed the many aspects of creating the framework that would support the vision and the organization of the space. There were many delays and obstacles associated with the physical storefront space, but BRIDGE built a solid foundation with their website to kick off their aspirations for the group. Currently, we are approaching the final push into a permanent storefront space, while maintaining momentum through pop-up events in a temporary location. In collaboration with other associations, groups and community partners, BRIDGE continues to engage with different methods to enrich the cultural identity of the School of Architecture and the local community.

2.3. Potential

A storefront space holds great potential for alternative work in design and architecture because of the characteristics the space gains with its relationship to the street and the public realm. The space can be a workshop for students to develop ideas with research and experiments or a gallery where they can present their work to the public, also making it a useful educational tool. The ability to step outside the institution and work on projects of interest in the real world puts students' ventures into another dimension of professional practice. Furthermore, it is a place where synergy can occur because the flexible setting gives students the opportunity to engage with other people who may specialize in different areas. This arrangement allows individuals and groups to explore the expanding field of architecture with activities such as Pecha Kucha Nights, paint parties, collaborative art shows, movie screenings, workshops, interactive installations, etc.

The storefront presents a myriad of latent opportunities for curators and collaborators to develop. Beyond presenting work and putting on exhibitions, BRIDGE conducts strategic meetings to discuss future undertakings such as setting up e-commerce, generating content for the website, building community connections and attracting project partnership ideas. For the organization to flourish, it is important to keep the mission and goal alive through multiple streams of engagement. Currently, the association is gaining numerous local partners such as store/gallery owners, food bank, and private developers. These partners bring potential joint projects such as Night of Postcards, 100 notebooks, exhibitions, and design competitions. The Night of Postcards (Figure 10) and the subsequent 100 notebooks project was well engaged by the local community, putting design and architecture in the forefront of the cultural community.



Figure 10: Night of Postcards.

Unlike *No Small Plans*, BRIDGE enacts a different form of curation that allows for an exploration of architectural research in alternative ways. Instead of just collecting artifacts and bringing new perspectives to an existing topic, the association is involved in curating exhibitions and programs that generate original research and ways of communicating architecture to the community. This practice of curating architectural exhibition opens up a field of opportunities for development of architecture.

All in all, the potential benefits of curatorial practice for architecture are profound, allowing for dissemination of architecture and developing an expanded awareness of architecture and the city in the public who inhabit the built environment. Furthermore, it is also a way for students and architects to collaborate with practitioners from different fields to synthesize innovative designs and to learn diverse methods of practice from one another. In many ways, curating architecture is both a reflective and creative exercise that stages the prime conditions for engendering collective ambitions and mediating diverging perspectives through sharing opinions and initiating discourse.

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