When architecture becomes object

The title *Curating Architecture* already enounces this research project’s inherent but productive difficulty. Its formulation implies an architecture that is object, the grammatical object acted upon. Paradoxically, in most forms of architectural exhibitions, architecture itself is not what is on display. What is curated is not there as object. As a result, the curatorial tends to compensate for this absence in two ways. On the one hand, curating itself, i.e., the strategies deployed to convey the architecture that is not there, will come to occupy this gap. Curating gets propped up by architecture’s absence so that the action - the verb curating - plays itself out in the form of an event or a visible deferral. On the other hand, curating will transform whatever is present into objects in and of themselves. It either turns the exhibited documents into finished products or stages the dramatic reveal of the architecture that surrounds the display - an old illusionist trick to distract from what is really missing. This is the problem with curating architecture. Instead of finding its object, the curatorial must retreat without resorting to a deferral in order to allow for the signification of an absence or missing, which is not a void.

Ironically, this necessary absence is most architectural exhibition strategies’ curatorial blind-spot. During the *Curating Architecture* seminars, several display models were discussed as a means to clarify the questions and politics at stake in the project, which will ultimately generate four artistic or architectural commissions. These curatorial strategies were: the immersive environment (often characterized by an excess of data), the open-house, the public consultation display, the starchitect monographic show and the pavilion.

Out of these different modes of display, the pavilion emerged as a particularly compelling model because of its presence as an object. As such, it circumvents the false dichotomy of building versus architecture that often gets translated into an opposition between concrete material and idea. The pavilion is architecture as exemplary object, as prototype. It is architecture on display, without a program or brief, which exists temporarily to be contemplated. It is a 1:1 model, a representation of something that is scaled to its own size and presents itself without the need for an institutional framework. It is an object that is also architecture but that isn’t a building.

Historically, pavilions were built to be the object of conversations: the installation in the park that strollers could think, read, interpret from a distance, but also, simultaneously, the place where the latter could stop in and entertain this discussion. Thus, the pavilion is at once an object of contemplation and a site that contains public conversation.

Given that pavilions are an architecture without program, they often acquire a subsequent brief by default. For instance, during the Venice Biennale, the Giardini pavilions are used to host national exhibitions. Another example is the annual Serpentine Gallery’s commissioned pavilions in Hyde Park, London. Serving as café or auditorium, they are temporary surrogate spaces for the kind of social gatherings that the original teahouse pavilion, now permanent construction, can no longer accommodate due to its own brief - the current use of its interior space.
So if curating recognizes the pavilion as its object, then what is left to be curated beyond the commissioning process is the program, because it is that which is significantly absent from the given architecture. Within the pavilion, there is no brief, no division of space accompanied by a designation of each partitioned space’s use. The pavilion is whole as object and as such can be animated, can be programmed temporally and temporarily. Thus, curating within the context of the pavilion becomes the orchestration of events.

As an alternative space to the institution, the pavilion becomes a stage for something else. It is presented as a unique contained and temporary space where events/experiments can happen, take shape and be framed. It is seen as a place which is opened to be occupied. However, this vision stems from the same framework that ascribes potentiality to public space in opposition to the impenetrability of private space. The idea that the mere fact of gathering people together in a shared accessible place to participate in a communal event without an object or product at its center might somehow create something different, and that this something is politics in the making.

This suggests that for there to be a privileged form of action, there needs to be a particular space that triggers and houses these actions. By contrast to other marginal spaces of play, like the sideshow circus tent, the pavilion’s architecture lends authority to the events that happen within its given space, framing them as more than artifice, as something real and thus political.

In so doing, the pavilion seems to bypass a second problematic dichotomy that emerged during the seminars: the reality of architecture versus the fiction/play of art. However, the price of the event-program is a loss of distance with regards to the object-pavilion. This distance is a necessary condition for individuals to interpret something and it affirms their equal capacity to do so. In his essay “The Emancipated Spectator”, which explores the notions of distance versus participation within the context of the theatre, Jacques Ranciere writes: “The collective power that is common to these spectators is not the status of members of a collective body. Nor is it a peculiar kind of interactivity. It is the power to translate in their own way what they are looking at.”

The response that the curatorial event-program elicits is no longer centered on the architecture itself. It focuses on the subjects or users and how they can act within the designated space. Occupied by the curatorial program, the object-architecture’s role is to assemble viewers under an alternative roof, a designated space to act out: a meeting place or out-house. The pavilion becomes a beacon that draws people together inside an object as opposed to around an object.

By contrast to the pavilion, i.e. the architecture wholly given as the (re)presentation of itself utilized to position the user/viewer at the center of a curatorial discourse, the orthodox model of the public consultation display involves putting a model in the middle

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1 Ranciere, Jacques; “The Emancipated Spectator”; In *Artforum*; March 2006; pp. 278.
of an audience of individuals that possess an equal capacity to give their opinion with
regards to a project’s future materialization.

In this case, the scale model in the center of the room is not a given object, nor a mimetic
representation - a scaled copy of something that already exists. It is a proposal. It is the
presentation through a mode of direct address of something that may or may not be built.
The “real” object (not the model in the room but it’s finished stage) is not there to be
contemplated, nor is it present elsewhere: it is missing. It does not yet exist and there is a
measure of doubt as to its future construction, no matter how small this doubt may be.
This situation stimulates the imagination not through ephemeral experiments in social
gathering, nor through the interpretation of a given object, but through the projection of a
probable future reality.

Within this exhibition mode, the curatorial plays a passive role. Its function is to insure
that the documents and scale models present the architectural proposal as directly and
objectively as possible without generating or staging an accompanying critical discourse.
The public consultation model differs from other types of architectural exhibition
strategies because it is the only one that truly problematizes the curatorial’s
interventionist propensity.

While starchitect monographic shows present similar material as the public consultation
display, their ultimate aim of showing a particular architectural practice does not pose the
same challenge to curating. Even if the documents and scale models exhibited index
specific sites outside what can be physically displayed, the curatorial (specifically within
the context of art institutions) will often stage monographic exhibitions in a self-
referential manner: as examples of architecture’s architecturateness, located through the
formal specificity of a particular practice. In other words, curating tends to transform the
documents and models present in the exhibition into objects or installations that address
the characteristics of architecture as a medium.

Whether the projects represented in the context of a monographic show have actually
been realized is secondary. Curating objectifies and by extension fetishizes the
representations and models exhibited, infusing them with an auratic quality that nulls the
importance of a direct relationship with something outside of themselves. The curatorial
process also works in a similar way with regards to the open-house. In the latter, what is
curated is the architecture’s presence rather than its representations or scale models. The
built building becomes the object of contemplation, isolated from its greater urban
context.

Another exhibition strategy which first appears to problematize the curatorial is the
immersive architecture show. It presents a surplus of object that is meant to replicate the
experience of architecture and thus side step the curatorial. However, the curatorial’s
retreat within the context of these shows necessarily turns into a partial deferral. This is
apparent with exhibitions such as the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale. The latter
presented a purely abstract object: data. It simulated the experience of architecture or the
urban environment: the continuous perception and filtration of data, here abstract data
rather than sensorial data, through the display of an excess of factual information about global cities. This surplus of direct address became a means to differ part of the curatorial onto viewers, obliging them to edit the show for themselves and incurring a forced participation.

Curating, as an action, seeks to be generative, to produce discourse and to intervene but also to make visible. When the object is present, as with the open-house and the pavilion, then the curatorial animates the architecture as object. It compensates for the pavilion’s missing program and stages the open-house building’s pure self-display. When the object, the architecture, isn’t given, as is the case with most institutional exhibitions, then either the documents present become objectified or the curatorial action gets problematized at the heart of its own display.

In sum, the paradox of curating architecture is the imperative to curate an incomplete object. While this may seem like a truism, it poses an interesting challenge to the curatorial. If the latter is to take up this challenge seriously without using it opportunistically as a platform for itself, then it must do away with the presentness of objects without replacing it with an event. It has to allow for viewers to translate and interpret something that is essentially an absence instead of presenting an object for contemplation. So the question becomes: how do you signify something that is missing from the exhibition without staging the curatorial by default and without reverting to a dry and orthodox form of direct address? How do you present something that at once informs but also allows for viewers’ imaginative capacity, their ability to formulate an opinion and effect potential change without channeling this participation into the physical enactment of a community? How can the curatorial signify the absence of its own real object, allowing for a spectator participation, which is neither physical nor communal, but is rather a series of individual generative translations that are, in their effect, a form of direct action? How do you signify absence through presentation?

This is a curatorial problem but it is also one that is architectural in nature. For architecture is a structure that is both perceived and imagined. The experience of architecture is at once cognitive and sensorial. It is both the phenomenological translation of sensorial data about space through direct contact, and the cognitive operation of filling in the gaps or blind-spots constituted by that which is not directly perceived. The experience of architecture is an imaginative exercise, a projection that is an interplay between what is perceived and what is abstractly known: how one wall or one room fits into the larger structure of a building, how one bit of architecture fits into a larger urban domain, how an urban environment fits into the global network, etc. This is the place where curating and architecture intersect and the lesson that curating might draw from its object.

So how can curating stage an absence from which it retreats, an absence that is neither a void nor an indexing of something outside itself that exists and can complete it (a missing part that could form the perfect whole, the full desired object)? How can curating signify a missing: not a missing in the past, of something that what lost or has been forgotten, but a missing that projects itself into the future, that allows for a translation that is not the
translation of an object, but rather the translation of a non-object, of a non-present - something that is not there, nor wholly graspable: something amiss that beckons for its imaginative conception, for the generative impossibility of its being fulfilled rather than its being filled or completed.

Perhaps the key to this lies in the proposition offered up by the public consultation display, which presents information and documents in the form of a direct address with no contentions to being autonomous objects. Perhaps the given of pure mimesis, the representation of things to come that have not yet been realized, is a means to cause a conscious Oedipal blindness that may generate an imperative to react and formulate.