

# The Scope of Architectural Contemporaneity

## Reference on Display at the First Architecture Biennale in Venice<sup>1</sup>

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The first Venice Architecture Biennale offers a particular lens through which to examine how architectural reference shapes contemporaneity, demonstrating how exhibitions can reconstitute the discipline both in its practice and theoretical discourse. The works displayed within the institutional framework of the exhibition create an architectural presence that draws upon historical references to define contemporary practice. Reference operates through the discipline's accumulated theoretical and practical knowledge—yet these are traditions that architecture must continually reinterpret and surpass. This inherent drive toward self-renewal thus defines architectural contemporaneity. Through the case of the first Venice Architecture Biennale, this text examines the methodological relationship between the architectural discipline, reference, and temporality.

## Exhibiting Architecture: From Collection to Contemporary Event

The practice of exhibiting architecture has its origins in the collection of ancient printed objects, relics, and architectural souvenirs, which began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> It only gained full formative

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2 Stephan Trüby, "Architecture in the Age of Curating," in *The Architecture of Exhibition: How to Expose the Spectator to the Audience?*, ed. Marko Todorović (Belgrade: Polygon, 2009), 21–22. See, for example, John Soane, *Description of the House and Museum on*

importance in response to the demands of architectural contemporaneity during the modern period. Architectural exhibitions (Weimar 1923, Paris 1923, Stuttgart 1927, Barcelona 1929, New York 1932) became the constitutive spaces where modern architecture appeared, especially in connection with the emergence of historical avant-gardes.<sup>3</sup> These exhibitions created sites of rupture—moments of paradigm formation—where the exhibition as event established architecture’s relationship to “the time before” and “the time after.”<sup>4</sup>

This temporal division created by the exhibition as event turns it into a means of structuring “historical time.” The exhibition generates temporal distinctions between past, present, and future. Within this temporal framework, contemporaneity emerges as an ontological awareness of the present. Philosopher Peter Osborne characterizes contemporaneity more specifically, arguing that “the contemporary is an operative fiction: It regulates the division between the present and the past (the ‘non-contemporaneous’) within the present.” He notes that “[e]pistemologically, one might say, the contemporary marks that point of indifference between historical and fictional narrative.”<sup>5</sup> Reflecting on the implications of the exhibition format, Osborne views museum exhibition spaces as places where continuity over time is emphasized and change is understood as modification within an evolutionary narrative.<sup>6</sup> Biennials, by contrast, play a different role, as art historian Terry Smith observes:

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the North Side of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, the Residence of Sir John Soane (London: Levey, Robson, and Franklyn, 1835).

- 3 On the notion of time in modernity, see Sanford Kwinter, “Beat Science,” in *Paradoxes of Appearing: Essays on Art, Architecture and Philosophy*, ed. Michael Asgaard Andersen and Henrik Oxvig (Baden: Lars Müller, 2009), 150; Peter Osborne, “Modernity: A Different Time,” in *The Politics of Time, Modernity and Avant-garde* (London: Verso, 1995), 1–29; and Beatriz Colomina, “Museum,” in *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 201–32.
- 4 Thordis Arrhenius, “Discourse,” in *Place and Displacement: Exhibiting Architecture*, ed. Thordis Arrhenius et al., (Zürich: Lars Müller, 2014), 15–20.
- 5 Peter Osborne, “Global Modernity and the Contemporary: Two Categories of the Philosophy of Historical Time,” in *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders Between Present, Past and Future*, ed. Berber Bevernage and Chris Lorenz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 81.
- 6 Peter Osborne, “Existential Urgency: Contemporaneity, Biennials and Social Form,” in *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 49–50 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.7146/nja.v24i49-50.23321>.

Biennials are, crucially, exhibitionary events, as distinct from displays of the kind exemplified most clearly in the permanent collection rooms of a modern art museum . . . , and from temporary exhibitions in such museums . . . . Being events, rather than primarily an assembly of art objects on display, is what makes biennials contemporary.<sup>7</sup>

The Venice Biennale as an exhibitory institution offers a “visible” reflection of complex multiplicity, “of unity and disjunction of social space as well as the disjunctive unity of present times.”<sup>8</sup> It can hence be seen as an operational and epistemic discourse on temporality. This viewpoint provides a fruitful framework that promises wider possibilities for interpreting architecture’s relationship to contemporary conditions.

## The Venice Biennale and The Prehistory of “The Presence of The Past”

The Venice Biennale (*La Biennale di Venezia*) is an international event founded in 1895 as a biannual exhibition, making it the longest-running exhibition of its kind. Emerging from the tradition of nineteenth-century world’s fairs, the Venice Biennale became the most prominent exhibition phenomenon of the twentieth century, establishing itself as a platform for new developments across various art forms. However, it was not until 1979—after several years in which art and architecture coexisted—that the Venice Biennale programmed and created a dedicated architecture section<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 33).

The prehistory of the Architectural Biennale is extensive. Architecture was first shown alongside the visual arts at the 1968 Biennale.<sup>10</sup> However,

7 Terry Smith, “Biennials Within the Contemporary Composition,” *Stages 6* (April 2017): 4f., [https://www.biennial.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/stages-6-the-biennial-condition\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.biennial.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/stages-6-the-biennial-condition_compressed.pdf) (accessed February 29, 2024).

8 Osborne, “Global Modernity and the Contemporary,” 81.

9 Marco De Michelis and Alta L. Price, “Architecture Meets in Venice,” in *Log 20* (2010); Léa-Catherine Szacka, *Biennials/Triennials: Conversations on the Geography of Itinerant Display* (New York: Columbia University, 2019), 16.

10 Léa-Catherine Szacka, “Exhibiting Ideologies: Architecture at the Venice Biennale 1968-1980,” in *Exhibiting Architecture, A Paradox?*, ed. Carson Chan, David Andrew Tasman, and Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen (New Haven: Yale School of Architecture,

it was not until 1975 that architecture was formally included, initially as a subset of the visual arts and later within its own section. Architect Vittorio Gregotti, as director of the Visual Arts section, organized an exhibition on urban regeneration proposals titled “A proposito del Mulino Stucky” at the Magazzini del Sale in 1975, followed by other architecture exhibitions in 1976 and 1978 that “provided a critical perspective on the historical and ideological origins of the modern movement.”<sup>11</sup> The 1976 exhibition was “Europa-America. Centro storico-suburbio. 25 architetti contemporanei.” This was particularly significant for its focus on the relationship between Europe and America’s contemporary architectural scenes. The 1976 Venice Biennale also provided an occasion for “the production of architectural discourse: . . . stormy discussion took place between approximately twenty of Europe and America’s most eminent architects.”<sup>12</sup> These events established a new field for the architectural discipline that engaged with contemporary conditions while simultaneously creating a new position for architectural practice within the Biennale institution.

Architecture officially became an independent section during Giuseppe Galasso’s four-year presidency (1979–1982). Galasso appointed architect and historian Paolo Portoghesi as artistic director<sup>13</sup> with four architect-theoreticians as co-curators: Charles Jenks, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Vincent Scully, and Kenneth Frampton.<sup>14</sup> After attending three meetings of the advisory board in Venice (September and November 1979, and February 1980), Frampton decided to resign in April 1980, a mere three months before the exhibition opened. Among other reasons, Frampton later recalled feeling that the

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2015), 159–67. Anne Kockelkorn, „Der Ausstellungskatalog. Der Katalog der 1. Architektubiennale in Venedig „Presence of the Past“, 1980, in Dietrich Erben ed., *Das Buch als Entwurf. Textgattungen in der Geschichte der Architekturtheorie. Ein Handbuch* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2019), 344–367.

11 Léa-Catherine Szacka, “Debate on Display at the 1976 Venice Biennale,” in *Place and Displacement*, ed. Arrhenius et al., 98.

12 *Ibid.*, 99.

13 “The first Exhibitions curated by Vittorio Gregotti,” <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history-biennale-architettura> (accessed February 29, 2024).

14 Maria Cristiana Costanzo, “The 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale,” in *The Disquieted Muses: When La Biennale di Venezia meets History*, ed. Cecilia Alemani et al. (Venezia: La Biennale di Venezia, 2020), 228.

Biennale promoted “not so much a postmodern as an anti-modern polemic.”<sup>15</sup> He developed the concept of “critical regionalism” following his decision to withdraw from the Biennale organization committee.

Jürgen Habermas responded to the Beinnale exhibition in his 1981 lecture “Modernity versus Postmodernity,”<sup>16</sup> observing: “I would describe it by saying that those who exhibited in Venice formed an avant-garde of reversed fronts. . . . It is a diagnosis of our times: ‘Post-modernity definitely presents itself as Antimodernity.’ This statement describes an emotional current of our times.”<sup>17</sup> Hal Foster’s collected *Postmodern Culture* (1983) later printed Habermas’s article under the title “Modernity: An Incomplete Project.” Foster similarly addressed modernity as “an unfinished project,” calling for the “modern project . . . to be saved.” He stated:

Originally oppositional, modernism defied the cultural order of the bourgeoisie and the “false normativity” (Habermas) of its history; today, however, it is the official culture. As Jameson notes, we entertain it: its once scandalous productions are in the university, in the museum, in the street. In short, modernism, as even Habermas writes, seems “dominant but dead.”<sup>18</sup>

15 Léa-Catherine Szacka, “Criticism From Within: Kenneth Frampton and the Retreat from Postmodernism,” *OASE* 97 (2016): 113.

16 Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” essay delivered as James Lecture at the New York Institute for the Humanities, New York University, March 5, 1981; first delivered in German, September 1980. Later published as “Modernity: An Incomplete Project,” trans. Seyla Ben-Habib, in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Bay Press, 1983), 3–15.

17 In full: “Last year, architects were admitted to the Biennial in Venice, following painters and filmmakers. The note sounded at this first Architecture Biennial was one of disappointment. I would describe it by saying that those who exhibited in Venice formed an avant-garde of reversed fronts. I mean that they sacrificed the tradition of modernity in order to make room for a new historicism. Upon this occasion, a critic of the German newspaper, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, advanced a thesis whose significance reaches beyond this particular event; it is a diagnosis of our times: ‘Post-modernity definitely presents itself as Antimodernity.’ This statement describes an emotional current of our times which has penetrated all spheres of intellectual life. It has placed on the agenda theories of post-enlightenment, postmodernity, even of posthistory.” Habermas, “Modernity: An Incomplete Project,” 3.

18 Hal Foster, preface to *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), ix.

Foster's remark that the "scandalous productions are in the university, in the museum, in the street" is particularly emblematic of the 1980 Biennale exhibition's approach.

These intense polemics between Modernists and the "avant-garde of reversed fronts" was a critical component of the discourse around the 1980 exhibition, in which "the disagreement arose not only from the outside but was present within the organisation committee."<sup>19</sup> The exhibition, titled "La Presenza del Passato" ('The Presence of the Past'), thus offers many possibilities for examining the relationship between the construction of architectural contemporaneity of the early 1980s and its engagement with historical reference. This is especially significant given postmodernism's embrace of diversity through historical references, its return to past architectural experience, and its calls for reinventing architectural practice.

To ensure that the selection of exhibitors and the viewpoints would encompass "a range of different and at times divergent interpretations,"<sup>20</sup> a committee of critics with distinct theoretical positions was included in the process of creating the exhibition's content. Portoghesi conceived the Biennale as an opportunity for participants to "play" with the past and its forms. In his catalog text, Portoghesi suggested that the exhibition should help the audience (both professionals and non-professionals) grasp "the whole system of architecture with its finite but inexhaustible sum of experiences connected or connectable by a society which has refused a monocentric culture, a main tradition with no competition."<sup>21</sup>

The exhibition itself was housed in the halls of the restored Venetian medieval industrial complex of the Corderie dell'Arsenale (the Venetian Arsenal). It was structured around various "breaks from Modernism"<sup>22</sup> across seven zones: the exhibition "Dedicated to Gardella, Johnson, Ridolfi," the exhibition space "The Presence of the Past" featuring the "Strada Novissima" (an simulated street created inside the Arsenale), the "Critics' Corner" space, the exhibition "Ernesto Basile: Architect", the exhibition "The Banal Object," and the exhibition "The Drawings of Aldo Rossi."

19 Szacka, "Criticism From Within," 118.

20 Paolo Portoghesi, "The End of Prohibitionism" in *The Presence of the Past: First International Exhibition of Architecture* (Milan: Electa; Venice: Edizioni la Biennale di Venezia, 1980), 9.

21 Portoghesi, "The End of Prohibitionism," 11.

22 Ibid.

## The Arsenale: Reference and the Creation of Contemporaneity

To fully understand how the exhibition was structured to create a sense of contemporaneity, we must broaden our analytical scope. In this particular case, we should examine the specific role of reference in shaping the presentation of architecture. Beyond oral and written testimony, images, and subsequent interpretations, we must question whether more reliable methods exist to capture the elusive nature of the exhibition's ephemeral theoretical and physical structure. This approach should reveal the complex relationship between content, space, time, and participants, exposing both what the exhibition aimed to accomplish and how it sought to do so. Regarding the ephemeral nature of exhibition architecture, it is important to note that contemporary testimonies are always difficult to assess from our present vantage point. In this case, participants' accounts typically lack the necessary critical distance for proper evaluation.

Dante, in the *Inferno* (XXI.7–21), gives a detailed description of the production process within the Venetian Arsenale as part of a simile describing the scene of misty, boiling pitch where corrupt officials are punished.<sup>23</sup> Yet this elaborate catalog of shipbuilding activities has often distracted readers from understanding the deeper symbolic purpose of the comparison.<sup>24</sup> As John Ruskin observed of Dante's admirers, if we were to pick an "honestly studious three or four" from every hundred, "we should rarely find one, who

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23 "As in the arsenal of the Venetians, all winter long a stew of sticky pitch boils up to patch their sick and tattered ships that cannot sail instead of voyaging, some build new keels, some tow and tar the ribs of hulls worn out by too much journeying; some hammer at the prow, some at the stern, and some make oars, and some braid ropes and cords; one mends the jib, another, the mainsail): so, not by fire but by the art of God, below there boiled a thick and tarry mass that covered all the banks with clamminess. I saw it, but I could not see within it; no thing was visible but boiling bubbles, the swelling of the pitch; and then it settled." Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), *Inferno*, XXI. The *Inferno* explains the material flow of the Arsenal of Venice, which was the largest industrial site in Europe and possibly in the world during its time. See Christoph Roser, "Material Flow in the Arsenal of Venice 1797" (2017), <https://www.allaboutlean.com/material-flow-arsenal-of-venice/> (accessed June 20, 2025).

24 Eliot Davila argues that Dante uses the Arsenale as a symbol of how collaborative work should function (specialized, coordinated, aimed at a worthy goal) to contrast with

knew why the Venetian Arsenal was described.”<sup>25</sup> A similar interpretive problem (“I saw it, but I could not see within it”) affects “The Presence of the Past”: Subsequent critics have focused on the exhibition’s spectacle rather than examining how it used historical references to construct architectural contemporaneity. This oversight is captured in critical notes on the very idea of the exhibition, which also served as a means of criticizing its exhibitors, such as: “The generic redundancy of classicism along with a kitschy and hedonistic atmosphere acts as the trigger to identify the presence of a ‘false friend’.”<sup>26</sup> But besides its simple appearance, there’s much more to “see” and to understand. Like Dante’s Arsenale passage, the Biennale’s elaborate surface effects have obscured its underlying production method. The exhibition sought to produce fresh architectural content through strategic engagement with the past, but this mechanism has become mythologized over time, leading interpreters to focus on recreating the experience and focusing on the clashes of supremacy rather than understanding the processes. Ruskin concludes his discussion of Dante’s Arsenale space with a similar point:

Doubtless, you consider, all this extremely absurd, and are of opinion that such things are not likely to happen in the next world. Perhaps not; nor is it clear that Dante believed they would; but I should be glad if you could tell me what you think is likely to happen there. In the meantime, please to observe Dante’s figurative meaning, which is by no means absurd. Every one of his scenes has symbolic purpose, down to the least detail.<sup>27</sup>

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how these corrupt officials disturbed collaborative governance by pursuing selfish ends. See Eliot Davila, “The Venetian Arsenal and Dante’s Poetic Purpose,” in *Augsburg Honors Review* 4, no. 5 (2011).

25 John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, vol. 1 (London: George Allen, 1902), 359.

26 Boris Hamzeian and Olmo Martellacci, “Biennale 80: False Friends. La Strada Novissima and OMA between Establishment and Overcoming of the Last STYLISM,” [https://www.academia.edu/26953482/Biennale\\_80\\_False\\_Friends\\_La\\_strada\\_Novissima\\_and\\_OMA\\_between\\_establishment\\_and\\_overcoming\\_of\\_the\\_last\\_STYLISM](https://www.academia.edu/26953482/Biennale_80_False_Friends_La_strada_Novissima_and_OMA_between_establishment_and_overcoming_of_the_last_STYLISM) (accessed July 12, 2025).

27 Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, 360.

Indeed, just as Dante's *Inferno* "captures both the symbolism of the Arsenal and the excitement of its production process by cataloging seven different tasks being performed by seven different craftsmen,"<sup>28</sup> the seven different Biennale exhibitions portrayed a variety of postmodern architectural approaches and pursued an internal logic of reference.

Let us begin with the *Arsenale* space itself. Portoghesi's acquisition of the restored Venetian medieval industrial complex represents perhaps the most lasting contribution of the first official architecture exhibition to the Biennale institution.<sup>29</sup> As the official exhibition guide, "La tana riaperta" ("The reopened den"), explained, before hosting the "Presence of the Past" exhibition the space "was used as a sort of warehouse for old, unusable material." The guide emphasized that the Venetian *Arsenale* "is made up of a complex that is very precisely divided up into places and spaces that have followed the passage of time and the events which accompanied the development and decline of the Venetian Republic."<sup>30</sup> In describing the space this way, the exhibition organizers acknowledged both the physical architecture and the historical duration through which the *Arsenale* had been shaped.<sup>31</sup> They recognized duration as the decisive factor conditioning architecture

28 Davila, "The Venetian Arsenal and Dante's Poetic Purpose," 81.

29 The acquisition was also significant because the Biennale leadership saw architecture as a way out of the crisis triggered by 1968, which had exposed the Biennale as a reactionary, market-drive institution lacking connection to Venice's urban context. See *The Disquieted Muses: When La Biennale di Venezia meets History*, ed. Cecilia Alemani et al., (Venezia: La Biennale di Venezia, 2020).

30 Manlio Brusatin, "The reopened den," in *Guidebook for 'The Presence of the Past' (Venice: Prima Mostra Internazionale di Architettura, 1980)*, <https://www.thecosmichouse.org/explore/image> (accessed February 29, 2024).

31 In his 1982 observation on the Venice Architectural Biennale, Kyle A. Thayer discussed the differentiation between *fabrica* and *machina*. He noted, "This is the debate, central to 15th- and 16th-century views of culture and construction, between *fabrica* and *machina*; *fabrica* is the external appearance of something as well as the process of building, and *machina* is its internal and inherent functioning." Thayer emphasizes the historical significance of the *Arsenale* as a space of production, connecting its space to broader questions of architectural discipline and building practices. He points out that "Production inside the *Arsenale* went on at a furious pace, especially when compared with the timetables for construction of buildings, which often employed entire generations of workers and architects." In Kyle A. Thayer, "Landfall, Anchorage, Disembarkment: 'The Presence of the Past' Gets Off the Boat," in *Archetype III*, no. 1 (Spring 1982), 3.

as a building practice over time, concluding that the Arsenale “is one of the many places in Venice of great historical importance, and certainly one of the most complex; its analysis is decisive for understanding the city, [and] the given, or attempted solutions to the problems which were gradually caused by time.”<sup>32</sup> The unique configuration of the Arsenale space,<sup>33</sup> combined with the exhibition as a new mode of representation, compelled the architectural discipline to develop fresh approaches to production and self-presentation beyond the conventional frameworks of museums and galleries.

Even opponents could not deny the major qualities of this temporary architectural event: accessibility, publicness, and openness. Vittorio Gregotti, one of the exhibition’s harshest critics, acknowledged: “Visiting an unknown monument remains the most important experience of this exhibition.”<sup>34</sup> While Gregotti undoubtedly intended to diminish the exhibition’s broader ambitions, he nonetheless highlighted how the choice of the Arsenale as a site revealed the nuanced, multilayered relationship between reference and contemporaneity. Reference operated through the exhibition’s design—in its architectural language, its spatial setting, its urban context, and its engagement with disciplinary knowledge. Most importantly, reference served here as the primary means of declaring a new architectural contemporaneity that could revitalize its practice.

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32 Manlio Brusatin, “The reopened den,” in *Guidebook for ‘The Presence of the Past’* (Venice: Prima Mostra Internazionale di Architettura, 1980), <https://www.thecosmichouse.org/explore/image/guide-booklet-for-the-presence-of-the-past> (accessed February 29, 2024).

33 “Stretched on the south side of the Arsenale, built in 1303 and then rebuilt between 1579 and 1585 on a project by Antonio Da Ponte—the sculptor and architect of the Rialto Bridge—the Corderie were once used to build mooring ropes, cables and ropes used on ships. The large building (measuring 317 meters in length, 21 in width with a height of 12.10 meters at the eaves) is characterized by an imposing wooden roofing in the palladium style. Two rows of large columns in masonry (6 meters of height for an average diameter of 1 meter) divide the space into three aisles and support two lofts rebuilt in 1916 in reinforced concrete to replace the original wood.” *La Biennale di Venezia*, “Arsenale,” <https://www.labiennale.org/en/venues/arsenale> (accessed February 29, 2024).

34 Quoted in Léa-Catherine Szacka, “The 1980 Architecture Biennale: The Street as a Spatial and Representational Curating Device,” in *OASE* 88 (2012), 18.

## Reference, Post-Production, and Architectural Ephemerality

Broadening our analysis to include temporality reveals a tension between the quasi-“permanent” nature of built architecture and the fact that buildings in exhibitions serve only as ephemeral displays.<sup>35</sup> As I have noted elsewhere, “Observing the complex disciplinary nature of architecture in relation to the format of the exhibition as a multi-layered temporal structure, architectural appearance always synthesizes the correlations between architectural practice and knowledge as an inevitable epistemological component of the architectural present (and presence).”<sup>36</sup> Consequently, our approach necessitates navigating the interplay between the ephemeral quality of architecture on display and the enduring nature of architectural objects. This entails presenting architectural projects via drawings and models, exhibiting architectural objects through temporary structures, and concurrently proposing novel modes of thought to advance a theoretical framework. To understand these temporal relationships within “The Presence of the Past,” we must distinguish between exhibition design and architectural objects themselves. Ephemerality clearly dominated the exhibition as an architectural strategy, reflecting not merely design choices but a new, more open approach to architectural production—one that expressed the discipline’s desire for contemporary relevance.

The exhibition’s strategy went beyond mere theatrical display—ephemerality served as deliberate architectural tactic. The exhibition’s pivotal ephemeral installations were created neither as full-scale prototype houses (as at the 1927 Stuttgart Weissenhof exhibition) nor as small-scale models (as at the 1932 New York MOMA exhibition). Here, ephemerality functioned as a strategy of architectural production, not simply “a series of Potemkin-like façades: a highly theatrical display, which produced a new and very impressive type of exhibition space”<sup>37</sup>— though this remains the dominant interpretation. The principle of collaboration was crucial to this production model,

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35 Eva-Liisa Pelkonen, “Mining the Paradox,” in *Exhibiting Architecture: A Paradox?*, ed. Eva-Liisa Pelkonen, Carson Chan, and David Andrew Tasman (New Haven: Yale School of Architecture, 2015), 9–10.

36 Davor Ereš, “The Influence of Temporality: Exhibiting Architecture and the Prospect of Immediacy of Discipline at the Venice Biennale,” in *AM Journal* 31 (2023), 20.

37 Szacka, “The 1980 Architecture Biennale,” 14.

which required on-site construction and assembly through cooperation between architects, curators, and technical staff. This approach differed from the standardized exhibition practices of the time, which typically involved simply “hanging” pre-prepared artifacts (Fig. 34, Fig. 35).

Through this changed approach to architectural presentation, “The Presence of the Past” returned directly to the fundamental relationship between architecture and time. The exhibition architecture was intended to demonstrate not only new aesthetics but also new production methods that engaged with the heritage of the Venice Arsenale. As Alessandro Mosetti notes, this showcased a deliberate shift away from the attempts of modernist “architectural ideology . . . to diminish the significance of time and history”; by contrast, ephemerality was meant to bring a spatial temporal sensitivity to Venice’s material qualities: By recognizing Venice’s scenic character, ephemeral architecture served as an instrument to evoke “urban memories”.<sup>38</sup> The Venice Arsenale and its spaces functioned as a historical reference point for the discipline. Here, ephemerality operated not only a strategy to protect and replicate the existing site, but an architectural practice that sought to connect with, overlap, and enhance the existing fabric through a lighter and more open approach to space and time.

Aldo Rossi’s Arsenale entrance portal, which he designed and built, exemplifies this approach to architectural practice, seeking to change the discourse of exhibition presentation. The wooden gate, constructed in the public street in front of the Arsenale complex, marked a “new space”—a portal that formed a passage and vestibule for entering the Arsenale complex. Rossi presented his project within the exhibition.<sup>39</sup> He created the portal as an ephemeral structure using scaffolding covered with narrow wooden planks (coated with varnish that gave them a dominant yellowish color and wood texture) while accentuating certain surfaces with white and blue paint. The portal, with four narrow passages and three towers topped with emblematic flags, embodied the neo-rationalist language of reduced forms.

This ephemeral structure served as an “extension” of Rossi’s “Teatro del Mondo,” which had been constructed in November 1979 as part of the archi-

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38 Alessandro Mosetti, “Recognizing the Scenic Value of the City: Ephemeral Architecture as a Medium to Evoke Urban Memories,” in *CPCL* 3, no. 1 (2020), 34–52.

39 “The drawings of Aldo Rossi,” in Guidebook for “The Presence of the Past.”

tektural Biennale's promotional carnival program.<sup>40</sup> Using materials later employed again in the Arsenale entrance portal, this floating project was, as Aldo Rossi put it, "a place where architecture ended and the world of the imagination began"<sup>41</sup> and "the theater, in which the architecture serves as a possible background, a setting, a building that can be calculated and transformed into the measurements and concrete materials of an often elusive feeling."<sup>42</sup> Creating elusive sensations through the architectural setting, Rossi's gateway fused historical forms with contemporary rationality, becoming something between a postmodern ephemeral triumphal arch and a crossing. Rossi used the "historical forms" of the carnival and passages as references to connect the building's functions with the present time and the architectural language of new rationality. In doing so, he emphasized architecture's dual nature as both "permanent" and "ephemeral."

## Distinctive Presence and Historiography as Reference

Paolo Portoghesi titled the exhibition "La Presenza del Passato" to establish a tension between architectural "presence" and historical "past" and setting up the exhibition's central framework through this playful and paradoxical

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40 La Biennale di Venezia, "Carnival Breaks Through the Fog" (1980), <https://www.labiennale.org/en/asac/carnival-breaks-through-fog-1980> (accessed February 29, 2024). Already in November 1979, the exhibition "Venezia e lo spazio scenico" (Venice and Scenic Space) had led the first important initiatives of the decade. It was commissioned by the Theater and Architecture divisions, respectively directed by Paolo Portoghesi and Maurizio Scaparro. Scaparro successfully linked the Biennale's activities to the Venice Carnival, while Portoghesi acquired the Arsenale to host the exhibition on postmodernism "La via novissima."

41 Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, trans. Lawrence Venuti (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 66.

42 See "Aldo Rossi: Architect of Tendenza and Teatro del Mondo," *The Collector*, <https://www.thecollector.com/aldo-rossi-architect-tendeza-teatro-del-mondo/> (accessed February 29, 2024). Aldo Rossi presented two concepts in his book *The Architecture of the City* (1966): the "Real City," which had a specific form and referred to a particular place and time, and the "Analogue City," which proposed a different reality. The Analogue City was the city of memory and experience, which could not exist in real space but only in representation. Rossi presented this concept in a 1976 collage that drew influences from the past; Carsten Ruhl, "Im Kopf des Architekten: Aldo Rossis La città analoga", in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 69 (2006), 67-98

connection of two disparate temporalities.<sup>43</sup> Portoghesi and the committee invited architects to participate in the exhibition by conceptualizing and fabricating designs that would express “the sense of the form” as “the relationship existing nowadays between the heritage from the past and projectual [sic] work.”<sup>44</sup> In this light, the primary objective of the first Biennale should be understood as what Jacob Lund calls “the contemporary contemporary”<sup>45</sup>—above all, an action in the present time that serves as the starting point for anachronistic or unforeseen interactions, and as the inevitable departure point and condition for any historical imagination.

Giorgio Agamben proposes a particular conception of the “contemporary” as an “untimely” subject or individual capable of forming a disjunctive or anachronistic connection with his or her own time.<sup>46</sup> In this context, the role of historiography and historicity as projective action becomes crucial.<sup>47</sup> Boris Groys observes that “[t]he present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future—of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, the self-reproducing presentness of the contemporary appears to have replaced modernity’s sense of transitoriness—of moving constantly forward through time. Archi-

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43 See Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 216.

44 Léa-Catherine Szacka, “1980 in Parallax: When Post-Modernisms Met in Venice” (2023), <https://www.thecosmichouse.org/explore/text/1980> (accessed February 29, 2024).

45 “The present ways of articulating past, present, and future therefore not only make our present, here and now, different from previous presents, but they also testify to a change in our experience of time itself; an experience of an ever-expanding, perpetual present, which in a certain sense can be seen as a time-relation that has no temporal horizon other than itself.” Jacob Lund, *Anachrony, Contemporaneity, and Historical Imagination* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 19.

46 Giorgio Agamben, “What Is the Contemporary?,” in *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 41.

47 As Terry Smith notes, Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* (1873–76) emphasized “above all his passionate insistence that overweening respect for the determinative power of History had reduced his contemporaries to servile subjects, incapable of making their own lives, let alone future history.” Terry Smith, “Agamben and Nancy on Contemporaneity and Art,” March 2012.

48 Boris Groys, “Comrades of Time,” in *Going Public* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 90.

tectural theorist Gevork Hartoonian asks: “In what ways, then, could today’s architecture engage with its time and yet resist becoming part of the current culture of spectacle?”<sup>49</sup> This question stresses the need to rethink architectural historiography as a tool for understanding architecture’s contemporary position.<sup>50</sup> Two main approaches emerged among early modernist historians: Nikolaus Pevsner’s “periodization” and Sigfried Giedion’s “Zeitgeist.” Both historiographers promoted concepts of period style that resisted change.<sup>51</sup> However, historiography’s full potential lies in providing a reflective framework that transcends simple periodization—it can help us understand architecture’s complex relationship with temporality.<sup>52</sup> The structure of the first Venice Biennale reveals these new aspirations in architectural theory, historiography, and practice—driven by the urge for difference and contemporaneity (Fig. 36, Fig. 37).

“Change” versus “closure” became the principle through which Portoghesi promoted new architectural tendencies within the discipline.<sup>53</sup> The diversity of these tendencies was concentrated in the exhibition section called “Critics’ Corner.” Situated at the end of the “Strada Novissima” corridor, and symbolically opposite Philip Johnson’s display, the Critics’ Corner was created as a smaller space for discussion. It was curated by three architectural thinkers: Charles Jencks, Christian Norberg-Schulz, and Vincent Scully. They “were asked to present their ideas in visual terms” and designed installations to offer visitors a clearer understanding of the broader conversations at play. Jencks used metaphor to express his ideas, symbolizing Post-Modern tendencies displaying a huge pencil and a book containing a riddle “all the

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49 Gevork Hartoonian, *Time, History and Architecture: Essays on Critical Historiography* (London: Routledge, 2018), 32.

50 See Panayotis Tournikiotis, “History in Search of Time Present,” in *The Historiography of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

51 See Gevork Hartoonian, *The Mental Life of the Architectural Historian* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

52 See Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

53 The approach of Hartoonian usage of term “closure” is better understood when considered alongside Michel Foucault’s concept of episteme, which suggests a state of temporality on the brink of transformation.

wasms have become isms”.<sup>54</sup> Norberg-Schulz used “a photographic diorama to illustrate modern and antique Architecture,” while Scully provided a television “lesson” on postmodern architecture “which [was] particularly clear and telling, broadcast by a television set [in] English and Italian.”<sup>55</sup> This section of the *Arsenale* exhibition attempted to encompass the current state of the discipline while simultaneously transcending it. Its methods addressed both visual and technological aspects, creating new forms of engagement. Ironically, this postmodern approach could also be characterized by Hartoonian’s observation regarding early modernist historians—that changes in architecture’s relationship to technology and the visual representation were central to their historiographies.<sup>56</sup> In the *Arsenale* exhibition, however, architectural theory assumed the role of historiography, rearranging the present and future of architecture by providing an overview of the past.

“The Presence of the Past” was emblematic in that it “exhibited” architectural critical theory for the first time—not only through curatorial decisions about which architects to include or exclude, but as an autonomous component of the discipline that deserved its own exhibition space. In this way, the exhibition blurred the boundaries between theory, practice, built objects, and speculative proposals within architectural production. By merging present with past, treating the contemporary and the historical as both current and future possibilities, and making reference equivalent to actual objects, the exhibition introduced architectural post-production as the main agent of disciplinary change.

Portoghesi’s catalog essay “The End of Prohibitionism” proclaimed a new field of freedom. Unlike the academic eclecticism of earlier periods, his

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54 See: Charles Jencks, “All the Wasms have Become Isms,” booklet for Critics’ Corner, *The Presence of the Past*, First Architecture Biennale, Venice, 1980, <https://www.thecosmichouse.org/explore/image/all-the-wasms-have-become-isms-booklet> <https://www.thecosmichouse.org/explore/image/guide-booklet-for-the-presence-of-the-past> (accessed February 29, 2024). This booklet contained a short introduction to postmodern architecture and a list of 80 slides featured in Charles Jencks’s slideshow, which was projected onto the white “sinking” book featured in his installation.

55 From “Critics’ exhibition” in *Guidebook for “The Presence of the Past”* (Venice: Prima Mostra Internazionale di Architettura, 1980), <https://www.thecosmichouse.org/explore/image/guide-booklet-for-the-presence-of-the-past> (accessed February 29, 2024).

56 Hartoonian, *Time, History and Architecture*, 32.

principle of free collage marked an end to stylistic “restriction.” In this context reference served not merely an element of established authority but as a means of action for reaffirming difference—a way to position the new as a kind of return. Portoghesi promoted architecture’s “return of the repressed,” arguing that the exhibition’s approach was a reaction against years of stifled “instincts to use materials for the present”, claiming that his method was “without preconceived discrimination, to involve memory and imagination with the maximum effectiveness.”<sup>57</sup> For Portoghesi, the postmodern meant “getting away from the center in all possible directions.”<sup>58</sup> While Charles Jencks approached postmodern culture as an observer and theorist, Portoghesi worked as an architect, thinking concretely about how to realize buildings.<sup>59</sup>

This theoretical position informed the structure and content of the 1980 Venice Architectural Biennale, which Portoghesi directed. With its theme, “The Presence of the Past,” the exhibition was organized as a direct challenge to modernist conventionality, using installations like the “Strada Novissima” to physically manifest a blend of historical and modern references as a means of constructing a new contemporaneity. The first sector, at the entrance to the Arsenale complex, honored three established architects. This section, called “Omaggio a Gardella, Johnson, Ridolfi” (“Dedicated to Gardella, Johnson, Ridolfi”) featured different curators for each architect: Paolo Farina curated Ignazio Gardella, Massimo Vignelli designed the setup for Philip Johnson, and Claudio D’Amato curated Mario Ridolfi.<sup>60</sup> It is symbolic that the first architectural Biennale opened with a homage to Philip Johnson, who, together with Henry-Russell Hitchcock, organized the paradigmatic

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57 Paolo Portoghesi, “The End of Prohibitionism,” in *The Presence of the Past: First International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale* (Milan: Electa/La Biennale di Venezia, 1980), 10.

58 Portoghesi, quoted in Eva Branscome and Léa-Catherine Szacka, “Architectural Postmodernism and Its Midwives in Conversation with Charles Jencks and Paolo Portoghesi,” in *Arch+ Klotz Tapes*, 2014, 23.

59 *Ibid.*

60 “The Presence of the Past,” in *Guidebook for ‘The Presence of the Past’* (Venice: Prima Mostra Internazionale di Architettura, 1980), <https://www.thecosmichouse.org/explore/image/guide-booklet-for-the-presence-of-the-past> (accessed February 29, 2024).

“Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” at MoMA in 1932.<sup>61</sup> Johnson was presented as the architect who had once declared “you cannot not know history,”<sup>62</sup> but also as a prominent contemporary figure who combined modernism and postmodernism in his work, lending weight to what the exhibition described as “the explicit and vowed rediscovery of history’s decisive role today.”<sup>63</sup> Johnson’s recent projects were also displayed in this section, with the model of the AT&T building occupying the central position—a building that would become an icon of postmodern architecture in America and whose construction had just begun. The model served as material evidence of contemporary relevance, its presence signifying the “now” of architectural practice in relation to disciplinary reference, represented both as stylistic device (the building’s crowning pediment) and as Johnson’s current position relative to his paradigmatic 1932 exhibition.

The first architecture Biennale in Venice thus established architectural post-production as a primary tool of exhibition practice. What becomes evident here is the primacy of the exhibition structure over other (theoretical) discourses. Post-production as a means of embodying the present—articulated through the exhibition—can be seen as holding similar significance to history books, which had previously served as the primary medium for interpreting and presenting historical time. Both exhibitions and books produce and reproduce references to construct contemporaneity. The exhibition constructs a transitory contemporary/exposing moment, while books construct the discursive contemporaneity of a particular period (Fig. 38, Fig. 39, and Fig. 40).

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61 The exhibition introduced Americans to a new architecture, which Johnson, as the show’s director, termed the “International Style”—often described as the first fundamentally original and widespread style since the Gothic. See: Alfred H. Barr Jr., Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Philip Johnson, and Lewis Mumford, *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932).

62 The exhibition guide does not mention Johnson’s exhibition in New York, just the book: “A great connoisseur and mentor of modern art, Johnson has gone through the whole parabola, from the moment in ’31 he wrote the book with Hitchcock on the International Style.” “Philip Johnson,” in *Guidebook for “The Presence of the Past”* (Venice: Prima Mostra Internazionale di Architettura, 1980), <https://www.thecosmichouse.org/explore/image/guide-booklet-for-the-presence-of-the-past>, (accessed February 29, 2024).

63 “The Presence of the Past,” in *Guidebook for “The Presence of the Past”*.

Peter Osborne argues that “[i]f modernity projects a present of permanent transition, the contemporary fixes or enfolds such transitoriness within the actuality of spatially distributed conjunctures, or at its broadest, the envelopes of lives.”<sup>64</sup> For the curator-architect of the exhibition, this space of “envelopes of lives” also served as a space of communication to “regenerate and affirm life”: “For Portoghesi, architecture, and especially a façade (literally the ‘face’ of a building), could communicate their function and history to its users, and the best way to do so was by copying or emulating historical forms without restriction of time or place.”<sup>65</sup> This break from modernist “restriction” opened up a diversity of themes marked by a clear tendency to challenge the modernist canon.

The commission of the Venice Biennale, with the support of the Critics’ Committee, entrusted the planning of the “Strada Novissima” to twenty architects from “all over the world.”<sup>66</sup> The brief offered three options: “a. the architect’s dwelling, with the place where he works, or a personal museum, or a space for the exhibition and ‘sale’ of his own ideas; b. simply a ‘dwelling’, a place for everyday and private life; or c. a façade (maybe only partial) of a building destined for meetings (for work or study), gatherings, entertainment.”<sup>67</sup> The proposition also included production requirements covering: “1. Theme, 2. Size and the distribution of the space available, 3. Architectural characteristics required and, 4. Budget and building techniques.”<sup>68</sup> This “offer” constituted a kind of game within the architectural discipline, where the street, with its “contemporary language”, was supposed to “regenerate and affirm life.”<sup>69</sup>

This section of the exhibition operated on two levels. The ground floor (“piano terra”) presented works by twenty groups of architects from eight

64 Osborne, “Global Modernity and the Contemporary,” 81.

65 Szacka, “1980 in Parallax”.

66 As Léa-Catherine Szacka notes, “the Strada Novissima represented a variety of languages that were emerging mainly as responses to the orthodoxy of the Modern Movement. Yet, no representations from Africa, South America or the Middle East region were part of the official selection of 20 architects, and only one figure from Asia, the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, contributed to the Strada.” Szacka, “1980 in Parallax”.

67 Borsano et al., *The Presence of the Past*, 38.

68 Ibid.

69 Portoghesi, “The End of Prohibitionism,” 11.

countries, arranged from Johnson's exhibition in the following sequence: 70 20) Koolhaas, 19) Dardi, 18) Portoghesi, 17) Graves, 16) Bofill, 15) Gehry, 14) Moore, 13) Ungers, 12) Stern, 11) Venturi, 10) Putini, 9) Krier, 8) Tigerman, 7) Kleihues, 6) Grau, 5) Hollein, 4) Gordon Smith, 3) Scolari, 2) Isozaki, 1) Greenberg.<sup>71</sup> As a part of a two-tier system, the upper level housed a more conventional presentation of panels and models by fifty-five lesser-known and younger architects. The façade structures, combined with the Arsenale space, created "a real architectural space, not only a display, but as a space at real scale that could be physically experienced."<sup>72</sup> In this experience, reference to historical imagination played a pivotal role. Panayotis Tournikiotis concludes: "We should make architecture on the foundation of an awareness of its origins (that is, of history), but we should make architecture whose sights are set on the future, on the present which is not yet present and which will never be able to become present unless it first acknowledges the past."<sup>73</sup> The acknowledgment of the past in the exhibition context becomes "presence"—the display of architecture in time.

As Portoghesi elaborated in a television documentary presenting the exhibition: "Streets are like the corridors of a house: they are precisely spaces that facilitate encounter [sic] between people . . . I believe that this need for enclosed spaces is something that modern man has [recently] rediscovered, and therefore the return to the street is now a truly vital hypothesis."<sup>74</sup> This aspiration to reconfigure the space of the Arsenale aimed to achieve open "communication," or what Osborne describes as the unity and disjunction "of social space as well as the disjunctive unity of present times"<sup>75</sup>—a way to

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70 The order and naming are taken from the exhibition catalogue, listed according to the linear flow of the exhibition. See "The Presence of the Past," in Guidebook for "The Presence of the Past".

71 The participants were primarily men—a bias that Szacka argues resulted from "numerous compromises and . . . unforeseeable refusals to participate." Szacka, "1980 in Parallax".

72 Szacka, "The 1980 Architecture Biennale," 18.

73 Panayotis Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 268.

74 Translation from Szacka, "The 1980 Architecture Biennale," 16. See *La presenza del passato*, directed by Maurizio Casavilla (RAI, 1980), 32 min., <https://youtu.be/ALxNnR55sZA>.

75 Osborne, "Global Modernity and the Contemporary," 81.

establish change. This change was located in the perception of the architectural discipline's capacities and tools for articulating visual, spatial, and theoretical difference. Difference was the exhibition's key motivator, and this difference was meant to establish a sense of contemporaneity. As Osborne argues, "If the primary value of the modern is 'the new', in its distinction from 'the old' (which it produces), the primary value of the contemporary is its actuality, in distinction from the fading existential hold of what is still present but 'out-of-date'—that is, no longer articulating living relations between a multiplicity of spatially distributed standpoints."<sup>76</sup> For "distinction," as a cognitive apparatus of constant recognition of change, reference creates the key relation in which change occurs. In this case, the architectural discipline functions as reference to the past. In the context of the first Venice Architecture Biennale, "the concept of the contemporary projects into presence a temporal unity that is in principle futural or 'horizontal' and hence speculative."<sup>77</sup>

Marvin Trachtenberg's concept of "building in time" helps explain the structural and operational temporalities of architecture: "The House renders architecture's spatial function: the definition and separation of spaces, the production of inside and outside or, philosophically, the interiority of presence and the exteriority of representation."<sup>78</sup> The House (as opposed to the Edifice) always serves as an exemplar, as Mark Wigley argues:

Since Plato, the house has always been [the western] tradition's exemplar of presentation. The governing concept of Idea as presence, and of the visible world as informed matter, the material presentation of immaterial

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76 Osborne highlights the broader context in a footnote: "This emphasis on the value of actuality places the concept of the contemporary within the ambit of Foucault's idea of a 'critical ontology of the present'." Osborne, "Global Modernity and the Contemporary," 81. See also Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?" and John Rajchman, "The Contemporary: A New Idea?," in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, ed. Armen Avanesian and Luke Skrebowski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 125–44.

77 Osborne, "Global Modernity and the Contemporary," 80.

78 Marvin Trachtenberg, *Building-in-Time: From Giotto to Alberti and Modern Oblivion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 16.

ideas, is traditionally established with the metaphor of the house produced by an architect, the house as the presentation of an “idea.”<sup>79</sup>

For Portoghesi, the driving force behind “The Presence of the Past” and the “Strada Novissima” exhibition, the façades weren’t considered “real” buildings, but “new syntactic contexts” as he elaborated: “The return of architecture to the womb of history and its recycling in new syntactic contexts of the traditional forms is one of the symptoms that has produced a profound ‘difference’ [...]”.<sup>80</sup> Therefore his aim was more to leverage façades as “difference” and as a visual reference to produce a temporal sense of “presence”.

The temporal structure of the exhibition promised to expand the field of architecture by engaging viewers’ imaginative projection as a central feature. This opened new possibilities for interpreting the exhibition of architecture—namely, as a relational model of communication where architecture referred to itself by being exhibited. The act of exhibition creates the experience of being in time (or rather, of being in the present time); exhibiting content (architectural objects, models, paper projects, theoretical propositions, and other visual resources) exposes the experience of being-in-time, the presentness of time. This presentness involves not only spatial presence but temporal occurrence, since exhibitions use their episodic, ephemeral form to create an enduring experience of time that shapes both the immediate present and its consequences. With the acceleration of architectural presentness, “the object/project dichotomy is fading away with object and project blending into one another and equally navigating the boundaries between art and architecture.”<sup>81</sup>

Within this conceptual framework, the postmodern exhibition façades served not only as models for ideas but as embodiments of ideas themselves—a form of architectural thinking. A similar “architectural” process shapes the history of buildings. However, the main critiques of the exhibition focused on its “conception of architecture as fashion or scenography,”<sup>82</sup> ex-

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79 Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida’s Haunt* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 103.

80 Paolo Portoghesi, “The End of Prohibitionism”, 9.

81 Szacka, *Biennials/Triennials*, 35.

82 Kenneth Frampton criticized the exhibition strategy of *The Presence of the Past* as “stagecraft,” stating that “the conception of architecture as fashion or scenography”

posing what critics saw as a lack of critical thinking. Absolute involvement in the present—complete up-to-dateness—is, in Agamben's view, blindness. As Agamben writes: "Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it."<sup>83</sup> According to him, distance is therefore a necessary condition of truly contemporary being. But the question here is how we can achieve critical distance. Regarding architectural historiography, Hartonin defines "critical" in concrete terms:

The idea of the critical draws from a historiographic vision that is centred on a semiautonomous understanding of architecture. . . . Whereas architectural history could—following the conventions of traditional art history—narrate formal and stylistic transformations across history, critical historiography invests in the intersection between history and ontology.<sup>84</sup>

Ultimately, grasping critical distance requires architectural historiography to understand exhibitions as part of an expanding disciplinary scope. This means, as Hartoonian posits, moving beyond mere formal analysis and directly confronting the exhibition form's inherent ontological and temporal presentness, thus truly engaging with its contemporaneity.

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prompted his decision to withdraw as co-curator. He concluded: "The game, as far as I am concerned is the same; that is, in the name of populism, to reduce architecture to a commodity." Quoted in Szacka, "The 1980 Architecture Biennale," 14.

83 Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?", 40–41.

84 Hartoonian, *Time, History and Architecture*, 31.

## Conclusion

Reference, Rupture, and Architectural Contemporaneity Architectural theory's understanding of past, present, and future is profoundly shaped by the concept of temporal ruptures.<sup>85</sup> The first Architecture Biennale in Venice, both as program and space, represents a clear attempt to create such a rupture through a series of tactical approaches. These tactics employed traditional exhibition methods—displaying paper projects, architectural models, and built works—but the exhibition also introduced, for the first time, the production of ephemeral architectural structures that went beyond mere exhibition design. All these approaches were grounded in the active use of historical references to establish what the exhibition called “the presence of the past”—a new way of defining contemporaneity in the early 1980s.

From today's perspective, examining this earlier moment of contemporaneity should inform discussions not only about modes of architectural production but also about modes of presence in our current moment. The new way of experiencing architecture created within the exhibition—a form of architectural post-production—points toward greater disciplinary openness. This thoughtful awareness of temporalities aimed to create a more open form of architectural thinking that seeks new ways for the discipline to engage with time.

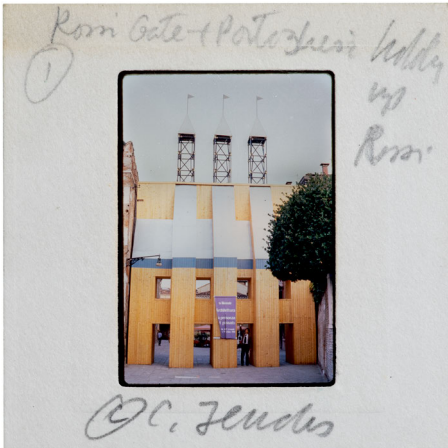
Reference in this context functions not primarily as a repository of knowledge and experience, but as a visual and textual marker of transformation. Such a dynamic use of historical reference, made manifest through innovative display methods, directly challenged linear notions of time, positioning temporality as a fluid and open-ended field for architectural inquiry and practice. By transcending the traditional exhibition format, the first Venice Architecture Biennale served as a crucial site for disciplinary reevaluation, transforming display into an active and critical tool. This allowed the exhibition to become a performative space where historical references weren't just shown, but actively re-staged, making temporality a tangible element of the architectural discourse itself.

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85 Lucian Hölscher, “Mysteries of Historical Order: Ruptures, Simultaneity and the Relationship of the Past, the Present and the Future,” in *Breaking up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, ed. Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 138–39.



**Fig. 33.**  
Fragment of façade by Hans Hollein, "Strada Novissima", first Venice Architecture Biennale, "The Presence of the Past," 1980. Photograph by Charles Jencks. Courtesy of the Jencks Foundation at The Cosmic House.



**Fig. 34. - Fig. 35.**  
Aldo Rossi's entrance gate to the Arsenale for the first Venice Architecture Biennale, "The Presence of the Past," 1980. Photograph: Charles Jencks. Courtesy of the Jencks Foundation at The Cosmic House.



Fig. 36. - Fig. 37.  
Charles Jencks, Critics' Corner installation, "All the Wasms have Become Isms", first Venice Architecture Biennale, "The Presence of the Past," 1980. Photograph: Charles Jencks. Courtesy of the Jencks Foundation at The Cosmic House.



Fig. 38.  
"Strada Novissima" installation inside the Arsenale, first Venice Architecture Biennale, "The Presence of the Past," 1980. Photograph by Charles Jencks. Courtesy of the Jencks Foundation at The Cosmic House.

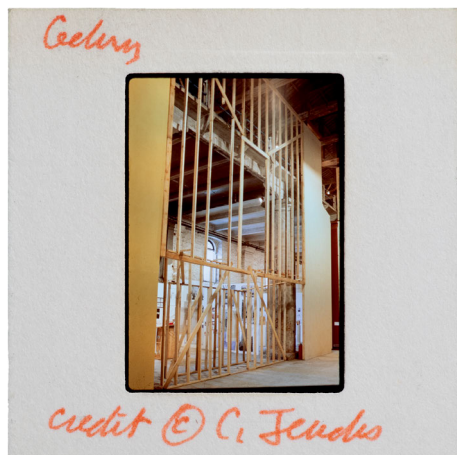


Fig. 39. - Fig. 40.  
Façades by Frank Gehry and OMA (Rem Koolhaas), "Strada Novissima," first Venice Architecture Biennale, "The Presence of the Past," 1980. Photograph by Charles Jencks. Courtesy of the Jencks Foundation at The Cosmic House.

