

**GSAPP, Architecture**

**Columbia University**

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Events in Modern Architecture, 1850–Present: Exhibitions

The premise of this seminar is that certain “events” in architecture have changed architecture and ideas about modernity both within and outside of the field. In this context, “event” refers to those occasions in which both old values or modes of practice are challenged and eroded, and new possibilities or unforeseen avenues of creation emerge. Events can thus be seen as inviting a new sequence of thinking and action, one whose results might yet remain open or unknown. In architecture, these occasions have involved different aspects of the discipline, whether it be materials and technology, composition, program, social objectives, clients, or institutional parameters. The mode or form of events varies, as does the scale of the change or transformation. It might involve a seminal building or urban plan, but also a manifesto, a book, a competition, or exhibition.

This seminar focuses on architecture exhibitions, a subject that has received less attention in recent architecture history surveys (in contrast to Sigfried Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture*, 1941), as well as in other classes in GSAPP. (In the future, I hope to give course on architecture competitions, as possibly one on seminal buildings or books.) The range of topics includes world’s fairs, museum exhibitions of architecture, model housing settlements, and smaller avant-garde gallery shows, such as the 1923 de Stijl exhibition in Paris or El Lissitzky and Dorner’s *Abstrakt Kabinett* in Hanover—all of which might be seen as important to expanding or rethinking the parameters of architecture. The “open” nature of many exhibitions lends itself to experimentation and invention and thus offers the possibility of challenging or extending existing forms of knowledge and practice. However, in contrast to what might be seen as major epistemological or historical turning points such as 1789 (the French Revolution), 1917 (the Russian revolution), 1968 (wide-scale protests about social values and inequities), and 1989 (the collapse of the Eastern bloc and questioning of socialism), these transformations in architecture are obviously more circumscribed and of a less encompassing nature. Depending on the situation, the words “moment,” “turning point,” “flashpoint,” “break,” “threshold,” or even “micro-event” might better

describe those exhibitions or competitions that have generated new possibilities in architecture.

The methodological approach is chronological, and takes as its fundamental assumption that what is “modern architecture”—or more broadly, what is “modernity” within architecture—changes over time, and that descriptive terms or characterizations such as functionalism, technological innovation, formal autonomy, mechanical reproduction, while useful for explaining certain aspects of modern architecture, cannot encapsulate or elucidate the complex, rich, and changing notions of what is modern in architecture across the past century and a half. This chronological, if episodic, approach also assumes that transformations in architecture relate to other historical, social and cultural transformations of the period, if in varying ways and to varying degrees. However, this reliance on chronology is not intended to be teleological, or necessarily as “progressive.” Dispensing with traditional narrative versions of history, the course seeks more modestly to investigate the consequences of exhibitions—their reception and impact—acknowledging that their influence will vary over time, and not always be immediate or in any way predicative.

The course begins with the Great Exhibition of 1851 (the Crystal Palace) and concludes with a consideration of recent exhibitions (to be selected by the students). Beginning dates of historical surveys of modern architecture are always debatable; however, the political revolutions of 1848, utopian experiments by followers of Charles Fourier and Saint-Simon, technological innovations and widespread industrialization, colonial expansion, and major urban transformations (such as Haussmann’s Paris), all suggest that the mid-nineteenth century might be seen as a critical turning point—an “event” in the larger sense—in the emergence of what Charles Baudelaire called “modern life.” In architecture, the Great Exhibition represents and embodies many of the transformations that occurred during this period, and thus serves as useful starting point. We will then investigate a series of other exhibitions taking place in Europe, the Americas, and Japan, concluding with recent exhibitions in other regions as well. In the last class we will consider the question of whether architecture exhibitions continue to have a major influence on architecture or whether their very proliferation has mitigated their impact, challenging the very notion of “event” itself.

Class meeting time and location:

Tuesday, 11:00–1:00, Room 300 Buell South

Class size:

The class is open to students in all programs of the school as well as from other fields. Total enrollment is limited to 15.

## Requirements:

Students are responsible for giving oral presentations (with images) of three exhibitions in the course of the term and for writing three short essays on the same subject as their presentations. These essays should be approximately 750 words, and include endnotes and a bibliography. These presentations and essays may vary in scale, focusing either on one or two building in an exhibition; other times they may cover the exhibition more broadly. Besides providing a history of the exhibition, the presentation and paper should discuss why it is important—why an exhibition might be considered an “event”—and discuss its reception and impact. In other words, students should consider why their subject might be relevant to future developments in architecture, whether shortly after the exhibition was held or further in the future. The three presentations/papers should deal with different periods, the first an exhibition or competition before 1925; the second, between 1925 and 1970; and the third, between 1970 and the present.

## Class topics:

The specific subject matter of the seminar will depend in part on what topics students choose for their presentation: in other words, some weeks three or four exhibitions are listed but we may end up focusing on only one or two. Likewise, readings will relate to the exhibitions that students have chosen for their presentations (in other words, not all those listed will be required).

## Class schedule:

1. Introduction: Ideas of modernization, modernity, and modernism; the concept of “event”; exhibitions as embodiments of modernity (Benjamin, Giedion)
2. World’s fairs: 1851 (Paxton, Crystal Palace) and 1867 (Frederic Le Play, Eiffel). Visit to Avery Library rare book room to examine Dickinson’s volume and other exposition catalogues)
3. World’s fairs: 1889 (Eiffel tower, Galerie des Machines) and 1893 (Burham plan, Sullivan’s Transportation building, Japanese House, Women’s Building)

4. Secession exhibition, Darmstadt, 1898; Deutsche Werkbund exhibition (Taut's glass pavilion, Gropius's pavilion), Cologne, 1914; Città nuova (Sant'Elia Nuova Tendenza exhibition), Milan, 1914
5. Bauhaus exhibition, Weimar, 1923; Salon d'Automne (Le Corbusier, Ville contemporaine), Paris, 1923; Friedrichstrasse competition, 1922; Galerie d'effort moderne (de Stijl), Paris 1923; Exposition des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 1925 (Esprit Nouveau pavilion, Melnikov's Soviet pavilion, Kiesler's pavilion, Mallet-Stevens)
6. Weissenhof Siedlung, Werkbund exhibition, Stuttgart, 1927; El Lissitzky and Alexander Dorner, Abstrakt Kabinett, Hanover, 1927; Salon d'Automne (Le Corbusier, Jeanneret, and Perriand), Paris, 1929
7. Stockholm exhibition, 1930; Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, 1932; International Style Exhibition, New York, 1932; Mostra dell' Aeronautica Italiana (Persico and Nizzoli "Medaglie d'Oro"), Milan, 1934
8. Exposition des Arts et Techniques, Paris, 1937 (Le Corbusier's Temps Nouveau, Japanese, Finnish, Czech, Soviet, Spanish Pavilion, and German pavilions); New York World's Fair (Pennsylvania Pavilion, fireworks, Brazilian pavilion); Brazil Builds (curator Philip Goodwin), MoMA, New York, 1943; Ministry of Education, Health, and Welfare (installation design Oscar Niemeyer), Rio de Janeiro, 1943; Galeria Prestes Maia, Sao Paulo and other locations in the United States, Mexico, and Canada.
9. Milan Triennale (Measure of Man, Spontaneous Architecture), 1951; This is Tomorrow, London, 1956; Interbau, Hansavertiel, Berlin, 1957
10. World Design Conference and Exhibition (Tokyo Bay plan and Metabolist manifesto; Arata Isozaki, City in the Air), Tokyo, 1960; Architecture without Architects exhibition (Rudofsky curator), Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1964; Expo 1967 (Safdie's Habitat, Fuller's Biosphere, Van Ginkel's plan)

11. Architettura razionale exhibition (Aldo Rossi curator), XV Triennale, Milan, 1973; The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (Arthur Drexler curator), MoMA, New York, 1975; "Women in American Architecture" (Susana Torre curator), Brooklyn Museum, 1977
  
12. Strada novissima (Paolo Portoghesi curator), Biennale, Venice, 1980; Deconstructivist Architecture (Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley curators), MoMA, New York, 1988; Recent exhibitions (chosen by students)