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Past and Present Trajectories of Experimental Architectures

As architects compete on the world stage through the very diversity and disparateness of their expression, how might it be possible to develop an experimental approach that has value and credibility at a local level? Guest-Editors **Michael Hensel and Christian Hermansen Cordua** explore the possibilities for locally specific experimental architecture – past and present.

Joseph Paxton,
The Crystal Palace,
Hyde Park, London,
1851

The Crystal Palace
from the northeast,
from *Dickinsons'*
*Comprehensive Pictures
of the Great Exhibition
of 1851*, published
in 1854.

Difference, which used to be ensured by the co-existence of ... autonomous regions of culture, now depends largely on two other phenomena: individualism and the nation-state.

— Alan Colquhoun, 'The Concept of Regionalism', 1997¹



Gustave Eiffel,
Eiffel Tower,
Paris, France,
1889

Tableau of the
Exposition Universelle
by Georges Garen.

How can the question of difference in local architectures be addressed in a climate of global homogenisation of the built environment and a concurrent wave of proliferating individualism in architectural design? What could be a promising approach? And could experimental architectures play a role in this, instead of resorting to either fatalism or conservatism? Experimental works span a wide range from paper architectures that illustrate utopian or dystopian visions, which may not necessarily be intended for realisation or to even be realisable, to works that are clearly intended for implementation and demonstrate the application of novel ideas and approaches in full scale with all the associated risks and consequences. But which of these works may feasibly provide an inroad to contemporary locally specific architectures? To gain an understanding it is necessary to differentiate between the trajectories of experimental architectures that pursue varying objectives.

The first and more universal trajectory has come into full command over a century and a half, in the wake of the broad industrialisation of all production sectors, by way of an increasing range of high-profile international events such as world's fairs and expos that have yielded many exceptional experimental projects. These include vast iconic structures such as Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace in London (1851) or Gustave Eiffel's Tower in Paris (1889), as well as individual exemplary pavilions. Both types of project frequently profited in their architectural expression from materials and elements produced through new industrial processes. The world's fairs were paralleled by similar events including the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts in Paris (1925),² and the Deutscher Werkbund exhibitions.



Bruno Taut,
Glasshouse
Pavilion,
Deutscher Werkbund
exhibition,
Cologne,
1914



Peter Behrens,
Poster design
for the Deutscher
Werkbund
exhibition,
Cologne,
1914



Le Corbusier,
Semi-detached
house,
Deutscher
Werkbund
exhibition,
Weissenhof
Siedlung,
Stuttgart,
1927

Founded in 1907
by Hermann
Muthesius, the
Deutscher Werkbund
resulted in a
series of landmark
exhibitions, most
notably in 1914 in
Cologne, and the
1927 exhibition in
Stuttgart.

The Deutscher Werkbund was an association of architects, artists, designers and industrialists, founded in 1907 that sought to engage designers and manufacturers in a close productive partnership.

The Deutscher Werkbund was an association of architects, artists, designers and industrialists, founded in 1907 that sought to engage designers and manufacturers in a close productive partnership. Notable exhibitions that showcased seminal works took place in Cologne in 1914 and Stuttgart in 1927. Related to this was the development of the Bauhaus with its initial endeavour to educate students by way of engagement in construction. There was also an explicit trajectory of individual research-oriented experimental architectures that included notable projects such as Richard Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House (1930), the works of Jean Prouvé such as Maison Tropicale (1949), his prefabricated petrol stations (1953) and Plastic House (1965), and Matti Suuronen's Futuro Houses (late 1960s). Occasionally, individual efforts were part of larger frameworks, for example the Case Study Houses programme sponsored by *Arts & Architecture* magazine, which ran from 1945 to 1966.

In a similar way to the world's fairs, frequent garden and horticultural expos also attracted architectural experimentation. Originating from 18th-century English and French garden and landscape design, the folly, a building type mainly for decorative purposes, was repurposed in a contemporary manner by cities and regions that sought to profile themselves through idiosyncratic architectures by 'star' architects. In the early 1990s, numerous follies appeared, most notably in the Netherlands and at the International Garden and Greenery Expo in Osaka.³ A decade later, in 2000, a new series of prominent architectural experiments was launched in the format of the annual pavilions at, for instance, the Serpentine Gallery in London. Such events promoted wider trends and developments such as idiosyncratic architectural design, which gradually became a form of branding in which to some extent the element of the experimental shifted out of focus and made way for what might be more appropriately termed styling. Another dominant aspect of architectures generated for the events and fairs discussed above is an obvious habitual foregrounding of what is possible, rather than addressing the local.

Jean Prouvé,
Prefabricated
petrol station,
1953

One of the original petrol stations is currently located at the Vitra complex in Weil am Rhein, Germany. The use of aluminium in the shell of the small building is typical of Prouvé's utilisation of industrial fabricated materials, semi-finished and purpose-made products.





**Bernard Tschumi,
Glass Video
Gallery,
Groningen,
The Netherlands,
1990**

Although originally constructed as a temporary structure for a music and video festival in Groningen in 1990, the small iconic building was kept on site.



Coop Himmelb(l)au,
Video Clip Folly,
Groningen,
The Netherlands,
1990

Numerous experimental
follies and pavilions were
commissioned in the
Netherlands during the
1990s.

Within this context, what can be gleaned is a gradual shift in experimental works from promoting technological advances to addressing pressing contemporary questions of architectural provisions on a mass scale, and eventually to individual expression for the main purpose of branding and styling. The experimental aspect is clearly present here, but to what end when recognisable 'style' is required and thus turns into constraint?

Though there are noteworthy exceptions of architectures at such events that engage local specificity or at least point towards ways of doing so, experimental works that consider the local generally tend to occur outside of high-profile international fairs. Instead they are often part of long-term accumulative projects that make no claim to universal applicability, for example the Open City in Ritoque, Chile (see pp 34–9), the works of Rural Studio in Alabama (pp 40–47), the initial works at Hooke Park in Dorset conceived as a forest campus previously owned by the Parnham Trust's School for Woodland Industries, and perhaps also the Norwegian National Tourist Routes scheme with its distributed projects (pp 64–75). Locally specific design criteria may vary between projects within and also between such larger schemes. The Open City projects continually seek an updated architecture of Pacific South America that takes into consideration the local landscape and culture. Rural Studio addresses questions of local social problems and the specific situation of the particular people it makes provisions for. The initial projects for the woodland campus of Hooke Park evolved around questions of combined woodland preservation and industrial forestry, as well as the use of low-construction-grade timber in architecture. The

Norwegian National Tourist Routes projects aim to accentuate the specific local landscape conditions and in so doing promote promising Norwegian practices through works that display a distinctly Norwegian flavour. In general, this trajectory of experimental architecture is currently not discussed in broader terms, although it points towards an interesting possibility and is becoming increasingly widespread.

How may we then define the 'local'? Needless to say, the intent is not to revive outdated notions of contextualism or regionalism. However, in order to set out an argument it is useful to briefly look back. Interestingly, Kenneth Frampton pointed out that:

Two interrelated factors are of ultimate importance when we consider the idea of region from an institutional standpoint. The first of these may be subsumed under the notion of discourse; the second addresses itself to the cultivation of the client in a profound sense. By *discourse* I mean first and foremost the coming into being of a 'school' of local culture, although my use of the term 'school' has wider connotations as well. Nonetheless, this idea returns us to the critical importance of the architectural school as a pedagogical *and* cultural institution. By 'client', I intend only to remind you of the obvious – namely, that a culturally significant work can hardly be achieved without a committed client.⁴



Zaha Hadid,
Video Pavilion,
Appingedam,
The Netherlands,
1990, rebuilt
2008

The original pavilion from 1990 was demolished and reconstructed in 2008.



Boris Ivelic,
Entrance Lodge
and Wind Harp
installation,
Hospedería de La
Entrada y Arpa
Eólica, Open
City, Ritoque,
Chile,
1985

The works at the Open City are diverse in their individual expression while at the same time cohering to a shared spatial sensibility and material articulation. This innate coherent yet open-ended pluralism constitutes a recognisable school of thought in the search for a Chilean Pacific coastal architecture.



Local specificity does not entail uniformity in design. Different schools of thought can coexist and compete to prevent homogenisation and stagnation.

Ahrends, Burton,
Koralek (ABK),
Frei Otto and
Buro Happold,
Workshop,
Hooke Park,
Dorset, England,
1989

The workshop design is based on wooden arches that are pre-stressed through bending.

Notes

1. Alan Colquhoun, 'The Concept of Regionalism', in Vincent B Canizaro (ed), *Architectural Regionalism: Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity, and Tradition*, Princeton Architectural Press (New York), 2007 [1997], p 152.
2. Notable projects at the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts in 1925 included Le Corbusier's *Esprit Nouveau*, as well as Konstantin Melnikov's Soviet Pavilion and Alexander Rodchenko's Workers' Club. The contributions of the latter two represented the most prominent participation at this type of event of faculty from Vkhutemas, the Russian State Art and Technical School in Moscow founded in 1920 and the centre of development of Russian avant-garde Rationalism, Constructivism and Suprematism.
3. For a well-illustrated account see *Osaka Follies*, Architectural Association (London), 1991.
4. Kenneth Frampton, 'Ten Points on an Architecture of Regionalism: A Provisional Polemic', in Vincent B Canizaro, op cit, p 380.

Ahrends, Burton, Koralek (ABK), Frei Otto and Büro Happold, Refectory, Hooke Park, Dorset, England, 1987

The refectory was the first building of the Hooke Park campus. Round-wood thinnings are used in the roof, utilising their tensile strength.

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A number of the frameworks within which the work discussed in this issue of Δ is produced are directly related to, or literally part of, schools of architecture: the Open City, Rural Studio, Scarcity and Creativity Studio (see pp 48–57) and Koshirakura Landscape Workshop (pp 58–63). In these contexts, the joint aspects of 'pedagogical and cultural' are foregrounded in different ways. However, these are not schools in the regional sense, as discussed by Frampton. Instead they are 'schools of thought' in architectural design that address the question of the local in different ways, for different purposes and with different consequences. They can benefit from operating in an experimental modus in two ways: first by avoiding traditionalist tendencies in favour of continually rethinking local specificity, and second by opening up the project brief in a manner that changes their stakeholder status.

Thus, local specificity does not entail uniformity in design. Different schools of thought can coexist and compete to prevent homogenisation and stagnation. The driver of differences in local architectures may therefore be shifted from that of individual expression and style to one of a pluralism of schools of thought and design languages.

This may also present a way of reinvigorating some of the increasingly moribund events by carefully analysing and engaging individual efforts in architectural experimentation within sets of shared objectives, while at the same time looking out for unusual traits in different approaches to the question of the local. This may well involve the question again of technical advances as some of the examples in this issue of Δ highlight, such as the Informed Non-Standard approach discussed by Søren S Sørensen (see pp 110–15), the Nested Catenaries project by Defne Sunguroğlu Hensel and Guillem Baraut Bover (pp 120–27) and the Endesa Pavilion by the Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia (IAAC) (pp 128–31).

All of these approaches seem to follow what one might consider particular schools of thought in addressing locality in architectural design. It is this productive pluralism that mediates between shared agendas and individual expression. If this is the case we may well be at the doorstep of a reinvigorated and well-equipped regeneration of local specificity in architectural design. Δ

