

Paolo Portoghesi

Calcata

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Paolo Portoghesi directed the first and second architecture exhibitions at the Venice Biennale. The first, 'The Presence of the Past', in 1980 in the Corderie dell'Arsenale, encompassed a variety of exhibition practices, including exhibitions about twentieth-century architectural masters; the Strada Novissima installation, which staged a lively debate around postmodern approaches to architecture; and the construction of Aldo Rossi's Teatro del Mondo. The second, 'Architecture in Islamic Countries', in 1982 in the Padiglione Italia at the Giardini, explored the influence of Islamic architectural culture in modernity and the role of architecture in providing a meeting point between western and eastern cultures.

Aaron Levy and William Menking: We're interested in the history of your *Strada Novissima* exhibit. When we spoke with Gregotti regarding his Molino Stucky exhibition of 1975, he seemed to anticipate its future impact. Did you understand at the time how important your exhibition would be, not only giving the architecture biennale a greater visibility internationally, but also offering a model for the display of architecture?

Paolo Portoghesi: Gregotti was the director of the two exhibitions that preceded mine, and he certainly made exhibitions dedicated to architecture, but after Gregotti the biennale wanted to create something new – a new section parallel to the exhibitions of visual arts. So I was the director of the first international architecture exhibition, and it was pretty successful because it travelled to Paris and San Francisco. The idea was not to show images of architecture, but to show real architecture. My idea was to make something close to reality that accommodated the various interpretations of symbolic architecture set out by the architects. At the same time, I put in a request to use the Corderie dell'Arsenale as a space for the biennale. When I visited the place it was still full of tanks and armaments. It was very difficult to persuade the Italian military to move them, but in the end we were successful. This was a very important step, because without the space of the Corderie it would have been impossible to create an exhibition featuring three-dimensional architecture.

AL: Did you think of the renovation of the Corderie as part of the ideology of your exhibition, or as just a necessary first step?

PP: I considered the Arsenale to be the only really useful space for my biennale. Because it's

very close to the Giardini, it was also a natural expansion of the exhibition towards the centre of the city. In addition to the Corderie, many other parts of Venice were used as well. As you know, the biennale is separated from Venice, and there has often been a conflict between the Venetians and the biennales, which is very strange. So I tried to create a new situation of cooperation between institutions, and I thought it was very important to locate the biennale more centrally in the city.

WM: One of the things Gregotti said was that there was not much of a public at the biennale when he started – it was just him and people he knew. The architectural world was very small at that point, and those who attended were people who were already interested in the biennale. In your opinion, did you feel that it was popular with the public or not? Was it a closed world like that?

PP: I think Gregotti's view of the biennale was somewhat elitist – I wanted to create something popular. With architecture there is always the possibility of direct communication between people and architects. Architecture for architects, accordingly, is wrong, and it breaks the continuity of architectural history. Architecture is not for architects – it's for the public. I believe that modern architecture has lost the capacity to speak to the citizens, the common people.

For example, Gregotti curated an exhibition on *macchine celibi* (singular machines) – a show that I consider totally inappropriate. I think architecture is not like the visual arts. A picture can simply be shown, but architecture is something that imposes its presence on people. The fact that my exhibition was in a certain sense connected to postmodernism has led it to be misinterpreted. The idea of postmodernism, in relation to the exhibition, was generated by Charles Jencks, who was present in the commission. He was a friend, but his approach was very different. In Europe postmodernism is associated with the spectacular, the superficial. I was more interested in the Venturi experience.

WM: Main Street, as we call it.

PP: Yes. I consider Venturi to be a kindred spirit. There is something similar in my own approach to architecture. He was in Rome in the 1950s, and to me the lesson of Rome is a lesson of humility. Venturi very sensibly recognised this. This is quite different to Rome as understood by Le Corbusier and others.

WM: What else was in your biennale besides the *Strada Novissima*? Was anything exhibited in the Italian pavilion? And what was 'The Exhibition of Critics'?

PP: In the Arsenale, at the end of the Via Novissima, there was this space in which Jencks installed a big pencil and Norberg-Schulz made a diorama dedicated to architecture history.

AL: Francesco Dal Co and current biennale president Paolo Baratta have spoken of the importance of using the space of the Corderie theatrically. Baratta in particular spoke of the importance of the curator creating tableaux. Were you attempting something similar with your *Strada Novissima*? Were you trying to formulate or advocate a spectacular, theatrical or perhaps even cinematic manner of displaying architecture?

PP: Many critics have spoken of the cinematic quality of the *Strada Novissima*. My idea, originally, was to make a real model of a street – to replicate the condition of all Italian cities, and of competition between architects, in order to create a social space, one that allowed for the harmony of different architectural practices. Certainly, the result was cinematic. For the architects, it was perhaps a gallery of self-portraits, and this is probably also the reason for its success. But I consider it positive in this respect, because cinematography is useful in reconnecting citizens with architecture. So for me this critique was a kind of compliment. For me the Via Novissima was an illusion, but at the same time a big success.

AL: Did you envision the *Strada Novissima*, insofar as it sought to reconnect citizens with architecture, as a prototype for subsequent biennales?

PP: You know that the director who came directly after me was Aldo Rossi, and Rossi was a protagonist in my biennale – I made an effort to demonstrate to him the possibilities of the exhibition just as Gregotti had done for me. The biennale provided me with an opportunity to present a different way of connecting modern architecture with history, and gradually Rossi accepted my invitation to participate. He didn't want to design a facade on the *Strada Novissima*, but he did design the entrance to the entire exhibition. This was typical of Aldo. In the Teatro del Mondo that we constructed for the 1980 biennale there was also an exhibition of Aldo's works. We made this space together with Maurizio Scaparro, director of the theatrical section of the biennale. After my exhibitions of 1980 and 1982 Rossi accepted the directorship, but there was a battle inside the biennale. I had become president by then and I wanted to give the directorship to Rossi because he made exhibitions that invited architects to give something back to Venice through projects, photo-assignments and various services, but many other people in the administration wanted to make Renzo Piano the next director. So the idea to create

architecture that would outlast the exhibition was common both to Rossi and Dal Co, and it has given the biennale a closer relationship with Venice. It should also be noted that Dal Co did something very important, strengthening the connection between the structures of the art and architecture biennales by involving foreign states and official commissions.

AL: Was the participation of the national pavilions something you hoped to achieve in 1980, or was that not what you were interested in?

PP: We organised this exhibition in a very short time, so it just wasn't possible. I was nominated director in January, by March we had already made Rossi's Teatro del Mondo, and in August or September the biennale opened.

WM: We have been told that you brought workers from Cinecittà in Rome to build the *Strada Novissima*. Is this true?

PP: It was the only way to create it in such a short time! All of the workers had made moulds and structures, so they were able very rapidly to create the illusion we were seeking.

WM: And it then travelled to San Francisco?

PP: We brought it to San Francisco because

there was a fantastic lady who was very motivated and who loved the exhibition and wanted it there. Philip Johnson was the sponsor. It was in Fort Mason, a site that is very similar to the Arsenale in a way.

AL: But Johnson was also in the biennale? Was it true that you made the *Presence of the Past* in homage to Johnson, as well as Mario Ridolfi and Ignazio Gardella?

PP: In homage to Johnson, yes, but also to Ridolfi and Gardella who were for me exemplary architects of modernity. I was very interested in their connection with history and their respect for place, for a kind of popular culture. This was the real ideological basis for the exhibition. The idea was that they were outside critics who were inside the modern movement and not connected with the traditionalism that typified most Italian culture. They were courageous figures who created a rationalist architecture that was connected to local traditions. Gardella's *Dispensario Antitubercolare* in Alessandria, for instance, was rationalist but at the same time connected with popular, humble traditions.

WM: Where did you study architecture? Who were your professors?

PP: In Rome. As a teacher I went to Milan, during the period of unrest. I was suspended for my solidarity with the students, along with Aldo Rossi, Franco Albini and Guido Canella among others. We were suspended from teaching for three years!

AL: What was the 'Banal Object', the show that was also part of your biennale in 1980?

PP: To get into the Via Novissima you had to pass through the Banal Object, an exhibition on the work of the architect Antonio Basile. For me it was important for the biennale to show some historical exhibitions, and I considered Basile to be an important part of Italian history. This was very rich material that had never been exposed. Italy is a special part of Europe where modernity was accepted with conditions. Basile accepted it completely but within a Sicilian tradition. It was a biennale typical of the Italian contribution to modernity – which always has some condition attached. And that is the problem of Italy.

AL: Was there anything that you learned from the exhibition? I suppose I am thinking in particular of the *Strada Novissima*.

PP: Oh yes, I learned that it was difficult to be understood!

AL: Even with that one, which was perhaps the clearest of all the exhibitions on architecture?

PP: Yes. I also learned that when something is successful, there is something wrong with it.

AL: But you wanted to provoke with the exhibition, right? That was the very idea?

PP: I was against a certain type of conformity typical of the early 1980s, which adopted the form of a style without also absorbing its value and its quality. So this exhibition was a provocation related to that. Sometimes in Italy the idea is to imitate what is happening outside, and this imitation was being done badly.

AL: You became president of the biennale just after this?

PP: Yes, I became president due to the wave of success of the exhibition. The first four years were very interesting for me, and the second four were terrible. In the first four years the visual art exhibitions (in 1986 and 1988) were the best of the biennale. In the second four years there were many difficulties, because the financial resources of the biennale only stretched to paying for the salaries. So trying to organise in this position was completely dangerous.

AL: You also organised the biennale on Islamic architecture in 1982?

PP: This was the second exhibition that I undertook as director. I think it was important because it represented a spirit of cultural dialogue. The Islamic architects presented many interesting projects.

WM: Why did you choose that particular subject at that particular moment? Was it because of the richness of the work being done that was unknown in the West?

PP: I was very interested in having a dialogue with the Islamic people. I considered this very important for peace, for avoiding a war of religions. Bear in mind that I had just completed the competition for the Islamic mosque in Rome in 1974.

WM: One of the things we talked about with Gregotti and Dal Co was the degree to which a biennale should reflect contemporary culture or alternatively lead that culture. With the Islamic show you were really trying to direct the culture, to do something provocative. I imagine it wasn't a particularly popular subject in 1982.

PP: The exhibition of Islamic architecture was very interesting because there was no

modernist movement in Islamic countries – instead, modern architecture arrived through colonialism. Now it's finished, but that moment was very interesting to observe because the situation was so different from the one in Europe. The exhibition attracted many visitors, probably because the biennale had by then begun to reach international eyes. This international character has really expanded, and the biennale is now important for international architects. It is fantastic to see so many young people come. It is also a big responsibility.

AL: I don't know if you were thinking this way at the time, but did you think of the 1980 exhibition as a curatorial project or as an aesthetic project in itself?

PP: In my life I have only made exhibitions for the biennale. Making exhibitions is generally not my thing – my preferred work is to design. But I remember the biennale as being a very interesting point in my life, especially when I return to Venice.

AL: Do you continue to attend the biennales today?

PP: I think the last interesting biennale was the one directed by Hans Hollein. After that, I think the shows haven't offered any special contribution. Giving architects a statistical

idea of the role of the citizen in the world is not useful, it's not indicative of the beauty of the biennale, which is about artistic culture. Sejima's show will certainly be more interesting. It will be a return to the duty of the biennale, which is to manifest what is happening in the *culture* of the world.

AL: Was it easy to convince the architects to participate in the *Strada Novissima* and the *Presence of the Past*?

PP: It was not easy to convince Robert Venturi to be present. The same with Aldo Rossi. It was Scully especially who convinced Robert to participate. Gehry too was unsure about the project, and certainly against the idea. After he arrived in Venice he decided not to participate, for the reason that the facade was too simple. I convinced him to take part in the end, and his turned out to be one of the more interesting facades, and one that had a critical meaning. In a certain sense, his was more close to my idea. In the Gehry facade was the memory of American architecture, something original in the sense of an essence, a tradition.