

TAKING POSITIONS AN INCOMPLETE HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN EXHIBITIONS

ZOË RYAN

Quiet, please. I am analyzing.

—Robby the Robot, *This Is Tomorrow*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1956¹

Exhibitions have long played a vital role in making and remaking architecture and design history. They bring together key figures and bodies of work, position ideas and present arguments, shed light on current concerns, suggest future directions, and draw connections with larger theoretical, political, and cultural conversations. They accomplish these goals through the choice of works to display, the exhibition design, the interpretive materials, the associated programming, and the catalogue. Moreover, within the fields of architecture and design, exhibitions have been critical to advancing ideas. It is impossible to gain a thorough understanding of these fields without evaluating them. It is therefore surprising how little has been written on these exhibitions and their significance and influence.

This publication studies eleven exhibitions—all organized between 1956 and 2006—that have proven to be watershed moments in the history of architecture and design. It explores how they positioned ideas through the aforementioned strategies; how they are remembered; and how their legacies have affected subsequent practice. The focus is exclusively on group exhibitions that treat contemporary architecture and design and its future. They were selected for the perspectives and ideas they presented and the range of issues they examined. A rich sampling, it is by no means exhaustive. Rather, the selection presents a snapshot of how past exhibitions have shaped moments in history and become part of the collective memory of practitioners in the field.² The first exhibition, staged in 1956, reflects the intense social and cultural transformations of the post-World War II period; its architects and designers rethought the potential and direction of their fields and their relationship to everyday life. The last exhibition included is from 2006. The more than ten years that have passed since this show allows the distance necessary for reflection, even as the ideas and content of the exhibition still comprise a fresh and active part of contemporary discourse, and its legacy is still in the making. In their totality, the eleven exhibitions provide fifty years of influence and impact for study.

Five primary themes thread through these exhibitions: the generative potential of interdisciplinarity and collaboration, evident above all in *This Is Tomorrow* (1956); the complex relationship between the corporate world and the world of ideas, as displayed in the IBM Pavilion (1964) and Expo '70 (1970); the interrogation of design as a specialized, discrete discipline, especially in *Matter Materials in Contemporary Design* (1990) and *Massive Change: The Future of Global Design* (2005); the appropriation, reinterpretation, and re-presentation of cultural objects and motifs, as in *MAN TRANSFORMS* (1974), *Morphis* (1980), *Droog* (1991), and *Super Normal: Sensations of the Ordinary* (2006); and the necessity of thinking about architecture and design as the fabrication of not only individual objects but also holistic, multisensory environments, as in *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* (1971) and *Sense of the City: An Alternative Approach to Urbanism* (2005).

¹ Robby the Robot at the Whitechapel Art Gallery (www.whitechapelgallery.com, 1956).

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