Few historical investigations have accomplished the dual task of writing the history of a significant postmodern architectural moment while simultaneously unpacking its defining theoretical concepts. Maybe that historical period is still too close to our own. Or perhaps documenting an ourbouric movement such as postmodernism, one that centered on history and the revival of architectural styles, is itself the problem.

Among the first books to confront the history of postmodern architecture were Reinhold Martin’s Utopia’s Ghost, Michael Hays’s Architecture’s Desire, and Emmanuel Petit’s Irony; or, The Self-Critical Opacity of Postmodern Architecture.1 These, however, were more concerned with revisiting themes of postmodern theory than with filling significant historical gaps. In Architecture’s Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern, Jorge Otero-Pailos accomplishes the goal of filling such gaps by tackling the postmodern approach toward history and the injection of phenomenology into the discipline of architecture, although his book is unusual in this regard.2

In Exhibiting the Postmodern: The 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale, Léa-Catherine Szacka meets the challenge of writing about postmodern architectural history while teasing out its theoretical concepts through an investigation of a pivotal moment: the founding of the first Venice Architecture Biennale in 1980.3 Szacka’s selection of this event, description of its political origins, and formidable analysis of the inaugural Biennale reframe this occasion as the perfect vehicle through which to study critical themes of postmodern architecture and architectural exhibitions.

For Szacka, the first Venice Architecture Biennale, directed and curated by the Italian architect and educator Paolo Portoghesi, was the most significant international architecture exhibition since the Werkhund Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart in 1927 or the Modern Architecture: International Exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1932. Titled The Presence of the Past, the exhibition was held in the restored Venetian industrial complex of the Corderie dell’Arsenale and featured the work of more than eighty participants from across Europe and the United States. A key section contained the iconic Strada Novissima, an indoor, “theatrical” street with twenty multicolored façades designed by an international cohort of architects and constructed, ironically, by set designers and technicians recruited from Rome’s Cinecittà film studios. The Biennale, according to Szacka, responded to the mute architecture of the modern movement, demonstrating how architecture could return to the past and regain its social function as a means of communication—as language. Also, the event used a theatrical, urban apparatus, inspired by the pedestrian street, to signal a return to collective urban space and its sense of place. The Biennale’s curator and exhibition committee sought to create a show that would instigate intellectual debates within the discipline while also serving as a media event focused on architecture, one that would encourage public participation.

Szacka’s historical examination of the Biennale grows from her meticulous culling of archival materials and her use of oral history—in particular, a series of thirty-seven interviews with Biennale committee members and exhibition participants. The textual narrative is accompanied by original photographs that range from marketing and publicity images to behind-the-scenes views.

Léa-Catherine Szacka
Exhibiting the Postmodern: The 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale
Venice: Marsilio Editore, 2016, 264 pp., 64 color and 71 b/w illus. $28.76/€30 (paper), ISBN 9788831726726
The book is organized into three parts. The first section, “The Biennale Is Dead, Long Live the Biennale,” guides the reader through the complicated Italian political background of the anni di piombo and the subsequent rise, and long-standing rule, of an Italian socialist government that helped form the conditions from which the Biennale emerged. The second part, “Addressing the Exhibition Paradox,” contains the core chapters explaining the Biennale’s development, its design intentions, and the internal politics of its organizational committee. Here Szacka successfully unveils some of the personal and political mechanisms that operated behind the scenes and the challenges that arose.

As Szacka notes, postmodern architecture relied on a strategy of personalities and gatekeepers rather than on a defined singular style. Architects were selected for the exhibition according to their association with certain players within the postmodern architecture movement, rather than merit. This is evidenced by the ambiguous criteria used to decide which architects were ultimately selected and invited to participate in the exhibition. Indeed, the final aesthetic outcome of the show suggests that decisions were not based solely on the work exhibited or on a coherent definition of postmodern architecture; rather, each individual architect’s cult of personality and connection to committee members played a role in the exhibition’s curation.

Media was a key instrument in promoting this order of things, and museums performed as the ultimate platform for the movement. Postmodern architecture depended on their existence, as the exhibitions and requisite discussion panels, posters, and catalogues promoting key architects were all orchestrated by these cultural institutions. The Biennale architectural exhibition—part media, part actual construction—further supported this order, epitomizing postmodern architecture insofar as it transformed the exhibition into an interpretive project consisting of both media and critique.

The final section of Exhibiting the Postmodern, “The Beginning of the End and the End of the Beginning,” traces the critical reception of the Biennale and questions whether it was the exhibition or its media that helped to solidify postmodern architecture’s primacy. Szacka argues that the Biennale functioned as a pivotal event, signaling a move to spectacle in the exhibition of architecture. While intended as a backdrop to theatrical performances, Aldo Rossi’s Teatro del Mondo—the iconic theater stage that floated through the Venetian canals during the Biennale—became a focal point itself, dramatizing the scenario of architecture performing as spectacle.

The importance of media to this movement is further evidenced by one particular installation. As a sort of visual finale, Portoghesi placed an iconic photograph of the façade of the Vanna Venturi House at the end of the Strada Novissima. However, the organizers ran into technical difficulties when they attempted to enlarge the photograph to the scale of the show’s scenography. They ultimately resolved the problem by assigning Cinécià artists to paint an enlarged replica of the photograph on the wall. It is the illustration of such seemingly absurd and trivial, yet nonetheless meaningful, historical episodes that makes this book so rich and fascinating.

Szacka addresses all of the objectives she sets out in her book’s introduction. However, one question persists for this reviewer. Although it is not part of the author’s stated aims, a clear explanation of the relationship between postmodernism and Italian architecture is lacking here: Was the potency of this moment for postmodernism and exhibition design due to the fact that the exhibition took place in Italy or, more specifically, in Venice? If the Biennale serves as a strategic site for unpacking characteristics and theories of postmodernism, how might its location within an important, historic Italian city contribute to our understanding of the postmodern movement?

Some of postmodernism’s most notable proponents were American architects like Robert A. M. Stern, a figure prominently featured in this volume. Stern was an exhibition committee member and a contributor, and his archives were a key source for the book. He routinely referred to Italian architecture as a guide for his theory of historic revivalism. Indeed, Italy always had a special resonance within postmodern architecture—consider Robert Venturi’s canonical Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, Peter Eisenman’s obsession with Giuseppe Terragni’s Casa del Fascio in Como, and Charles Moore’s 1978 Piazza d’Italia in New Orleans. Did Stern and other American contributors to the exhibition—including Philip Johnson, Vincent Scully, and Venturi—seek to borrow Italy’s historical and cultural capital? Why did the Venice Architecture Biennale—which, as Szacka claims, emerged from Italian political and social conditions dating back to 1968—adopt as its first theme one that was so conducive to promotion, theorization, and practice by American architects and historians? These questions, complicated by postmodernism’s inability or unwillingness to define itself coherently, highlight the challenges of writing a history of postmodern architecture. A thorough response to these questions perhaps warrants another volume. Still, Szacka’s exemplary contribution to the historiography of postmodernism fills a gap in current scholarship, offering insights into the complex relationships among architecture, exhibition design, and media.

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Notes
2. Jorge Otero-Pailos, Architecture’s Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
4. The term anni di piombo (years of lead) refers to a tumultuous period of violent political unrest in Italy from 1968 to the early 1980s. The phrase references the bullets fired in multiple shootings and assassinations, which were followed by terrorist bombings conducted by both right- and left-wing political groups. See Paul Ginsborg, A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943–1988 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 348–405.
Gentrification has been one of the most controversial and problematic urban developments of the past fifty years. It has benefited cash-strapped central-city governments in need of wealthier taxpayers and higher assessed property values but has proved a bane to lower-income residents who can no longer afford the rent in their gentrifying neighborhoods and feel increasingly out of place among the invading hordes of young professionals. Nowhere has this dilemma of gain and loss been more evident than in New York City. During the 1970s commentators bewailed New York’s impending bankruptcy and rampant housing abandonment; the South Bronx was a burned-out ruin eliciting comparisons with Berlin at the close of World War II. Thirty years later, reporters told of the transformation of once-empty shells into upscale town houses, of hyperinflated housing values, and of an unabated influx of the rich and hip to Gotham’s inner city. New York had seemingly quick-changed from a basket case to a treasure chest, with accompanying gains to city coffers and real estate moguls and losses to the displaced poor.

In The Lofts of SoHo and The Roots of Urban Renaissance, Aaron Shkuda and Brian D. Goldstein explore the origins of this flux of the rich and hip to Gotham state moguls and losses to the displaced poor.

As Shkuda notes, SoHo thus preserved a built environment that clashed against the reign of Queen Victoria than to the ages of Le Corbusier or Rem Koolhaas. Yet by the 1970s the architectural world had developed a new appreciation of these detailed façades. Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd enthusiastically invested in buildings that defied the modernist axiom of less is more. The interiors of the artists’ lofts were appropriately white walled and stark in the modernist mode, but the minimalist interiors were encased in exteriors from an earlier, less restrained age.

In 1950s and 1960s, SoHo was a district of aging factory lofts that accommodated small manufacturing concerns employing many minority workers. Its multisistory late nineteenth-century buildings on narrow congested streets had become obsolete in an age of sprawling single-story industrial plants serviced by fleets of trucks. Although ill suited for modern manufacturing, SoHo’s large loft spaces and cheap rents attracted a growing number of artists, who converted the former factories into studios and residences. Their loft homes, however, violated New York City’s zoning ordinances and often failed to meet housing code requirements. Troubled by the loss of manufacturing jobs in the city, New York planners hoped to preserve the district as a site for industry. Yet in defiance of the authorities, the outlaw artists were transforming what some deemed an industrial slum into the new creative hub of one of the world’s great art capitals.

The artists who pioneered loft living not only defied zoning and housing codes but also fought proponents of urban renewal and highway construction. As the city shielded away from urban renewal in the 1960s, a proposed middle-income housing project that would have cleared thirty-one acres of SoHo never advanced beyond the drawing board. The battle over the Lower Manhattan Expressway, a project powerfully promoted by Robert Moses, was more intense. The projected superhighway would have cut a swath through the heart of SoHo, a prospect that not only aroused the ire of the resident artists but also stirred the wrath of planning rebel Jane Jacobs. After many years of hot debate, the city shelved the scheme, leaving the physical fabric of the SoHo district intact.

The social fabric of the community, however, would not remain unchanged. Manufacturing concerns closed their doors, and minority workers no longer commuted to the lofts of SoHo. Instead, the influx of artists gave rise in the late 1960s and early 1970s to the opening of numerous art galleries. SoHo became the place both to produce art and to sell it. As such, the neighborhood attracted an increasing number of affluent visitors who patronized the galleries and enjoyed the bohemian environment of the increasingly fashionable art district. Other retailers and numerous restaurants opened to service the well-to-do visitors. Moreover, studio tours as well as newspaper and magazine articles about the artists’ homes introduced loft living to these outsiders. Attracted by the ample living spaces of the lofts, the proximity to their jobs in the Lower Manhattan financial district, and the hip ambience of an artistic community, nonartists with ample funds began moving into the neighborhood, accelerating the pace of gentrification. Boutique hotels followed. By 1980 SoHo was becoming the new “in” neighborhood of New York City.

Accompanying this transformation was a change in architectural fashion. Located just south of an urban renewal site of soaring middle-income apartment towers, Washington Square Village (built in the late 1950s and the 1960s), SoHo was the antithesis of this neighboring exemplar of modernist planning. It was a district of tightly packed five- to seven-story buildings with no open spaces other than narrow streets ill suited to the auto age. SoHo’s cast-iron façades boasted ornamental columns and capitals more appropriate to the reign of Queen Victoria than to the ages of Le Corbusier or Rem Koolhaas. Yet by the 1970s the architectural world had developed a new appreciation of these detailed façades. Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd enthusiastically invested in buildings that defied the modernist axiom of less is more. The interiors of the artists’ lofts were appropriately white walled and stark in the modernist mode, but the minimalist interiors were encased in exteriors from an earlier, less restrained age.

As Shkuda notes, SoHo thus preserved the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century past while rebelling against more recent mid-twentieth-century fashion. The district’s artists defied the planning and housing codes developed by twentieth-century reformers, creating an openly illegal community. They successfully thwarted the best-laid plans of urban renewal advocates and expert highway engineers. And they saved a built environment that clashed with orthodox modernism. The heirs of this legacy of defiance and insurrection were the wealthy Wall Streeters who occupied the district beginning in the 1980s. In the 1950s and 1960s, SoHo’s chief asset was...
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