

## Space Oddity: Exercises in Art and Philosophy

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# Space in Mediations. Re-Situating Architectural Experience in the Exhibition

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**Abstract** The production of space experiences has embodied a permanent concern for the curatorial praxis and the theoretical reflection of architecture exhibition. With the analysis of two relevant examples of curatorial strategy applied to architecture – namely, cast collections and virtual architecture simulations – this paper proposes an investigation of the development of the ideological and cultural substratum of the techniques of spatial experience reproduction in the architecture exhibition. The aim is not only to contextualise the efforts of space production operated by the architecture exhibition but also, more radically, to re-situate and re-define the traditional concept of spatial experience achievable through architecture display.

**Keywords** Architecture exhibition. Exhibition theory. Curatorial theory. Architecture curation. Architecture representations.

**Summary** 1 The Status of Experience Production in the Architecture Exhibition. – 2 Mediate the Mediators: Re-Thinking the Relevance of Cast Collections. – 3 The Perils of Immediacy: A Reflection on Exhibiting Architecture Through Virtual Reality. – 4 Re-Situating the Idea of Experience.

## **1 The Status of Experience Production in the Architecture Exhibition**

Representations of space within a space of display, spatialised in a spatial narration: within these premises, the exhibition of architecture is a curatorial issue of often contradictory solutions. The attitude towards the use, benefits and limitations of using architecture representations to visualise and represent space has characterised the tone of the curatorial debate about the possibility and potentiality (as well as the comprehension) of architecture exhibition. At this point, after a long parenthesis of theoretical elaboration, the factual necessity of displaying architecture through its translation into surrogate objects has become an almost rhetorical issue and a mundane reflection for architecture curators. Currently, the praxis of architectural display is instead expanding its focus on issues different from the most suitable strategies for dealing with architectural representations.

In the current theoretical speculation, questions concerning the mediation strategies for architecture exhibitions and their efficacy, as well as attempts to develop a specific curatorial attitude towards architecture, are consistently gaining attention (Gigliotti 2015; Watson 2021). These issues stem from a more calculated concern for the communicative dimension of architecture exhibitions as instruments and catalysts helpful in fostering an updated discussion about architecture culture – the capacity of the architecture exhibition to ‘speak’, visualise, mediate, and represent for the broadest possible array of audiences is the current responsibility that architecture curators necessarily have to consider. Consequently, the current interest in the reception of architecture exhibitions, in combination with a revival of the attention dedicated to how architecture is mediated through display, is reframing the discourse around the ‘language’ performed by architecture exhibitions and the effectiveness of its accessibility.

The interest in providing a more profound understanding of architectural culture – as well as of its social dimension and political impact – to the broadest possible public, the necessity of reconciling the different sets of knowledge of these expanded audiences holistically, along with concerns for making architecture accessible and readable through exhibitions, are the theoretical concerns that are contributing to re-focalise the debate on display techniques and strategies on a renovated involvement with the idea of producing experience and spatial events as curatorial responses for mediating architecture.

From a historical point of view, the reflection on the possibility of reconstructing the experience of architecture and space in an exhibition format or, more generally, on how to reproduce the performative aspects of architecture in a display is not, in its essence, *new*. The problem of how to evoke the idea of space through the use of architectural reproductions and the reconstruction of architectural

experience through display has characterised architecture curation since its beginning. In this respect, it is even possible to affirm that architecture exhibitions also originated from the ambition of reproducing a particular experience of architecture for the publics unable to visit, study and experience it first-hand.<sup>1</sup>

However, the purposes supporting this current interest are what differs today in the contemporary discourse around producing an architectural experience. At the moment, it appears that the focus on ‘experience-ability’ in architecture exhibitions follows a similar pattern already observed in a specific type of production of art exhibitions, where the increasing attention devoted to experience, immersivity, and interactivity appears to be inspired not by carefully-developed educational or mediating strategies but, instead, by perfunctory and exploited concepts of spectacularisation, and a severe misconstruction, as well of misuse, of the concept of participation, of its prerequisites and its objectives.<sup>2</sup> The idea of resolving the complex construction of the mediating efforts of the display into the simple proposal of an experience, left for the publics to consume and metabolise without the intermission of ‘distracting’ intermediary apparatus, is a tempting one, relating to the assumption of the primacy of experiential apprehension as an effective knowledge-production approach. Hazardously, curatorial strategies can, in some events, equate experience consumption with immediacy of comprehension in the publics.

In architecture exhibitions, the idea that “space requires a 1:1 perception-construction through subjective involvement” (Kuehn 2015, 73) to be conveyed appropriately or, to paraphrase, that it needs to be manifested as an un-mediated phenomenon to be *correctly* communicated with its qualities and features produces, in some cases, the conviction that the ‘plain’ tridimensional presentation of space, be it real or virtual, could be sufficient in itself to communicate with efficacy not only the functioning of architecture but also architectural ideas.<sup>3</sup>

**1** Historically, the use of architectural reproductions (prints, drawings, models, and casts) in the first architectural collections was not limited to the diffusion of architectural ideas regarding forms and style. Architectural visualisation instruments also played a crucial role in transmitting a specific understanding of the experience of architecture to architectural experts, *connoisseurs*, scholars and curious audiences unable to visit and encounter them directly. To further the reasoning on the connection between the flourishing industry of architectural representations and the increasing interest in experiencing ‘distant’ architecture through surrogates, see Szambien 1988, 17-22 and 32-40.

**2** For an investigation of the increasing relationship between culture and mass entertainment, see Pine, Gilmore 1999, as well as Rifkin 2000, especially for the entanglement of pervasive capitalistic mentality with contemporary cultural production.

**3** This idea opens up a series of paradoxical questions on the necessity of architecture exhibition (if architecture can only expose itself by itself, then isn’t the architecture exhibition a superfluous operation?); on the distinction between exhibiting and building (if architecture needs to be displayed as 1:1 experience, then is the exhibition just the building of architecture, and therefore not an act of display but an act of construction?);

This idea that the most immediate way of access to architecture understanding primarily occurs through the presentation of an un-filtered and un-mediated sensorial experience of space develops a series of stimulating yet conflicting problematics when considered from a curatorial approach. To some extent, the focus on experience and the senses as privileged systems of access to architecture apprehension ‘mimic’ the status-quo condition of routinely architecture perception already performed in the everyday. In terms of display strategies and theoretical elaborations around exhibited architecture, it provides little more than the attempt to replicate the natural system for encountering architectural experience in our daily life.

In addition, even if it is evident that architecture is primarily an experiential and performative object, it can nevertheless be debated if direct experience equates immediately to an understanding of architecture or to the comprehension of how a built environment is structured, organised and developed from a theoretical and a functional point of view – to experience, to understand and, ultimately, to know, are not often synonyms, or a consequential and straightforward process.

To this outline, it is also relevant to add that *reproducing* architecture in the exhibition context might be a fairly complex operation. If we are to propose alternatives to the idea of *constructing* a specific space for only display purposes – a solution today not always economically or environmentally sustainable –, the instruments at our disposition are theatrical stage-up of more theoretical than pragmatic nature, spectacular immersive environments or the temporary evocation of architectural atmospheres.

Especially from the perspective of architecture exhibition functioning, display is not just a matter of re-producing and re-presenting architecture but the construction of a relational and narrative context in which architecture can be ‘verbalised’, translated and mediated to create a discourse not only of architecture, but for and about architecture (Borasi 2015, 32). The reduction of the complexity of exhibited architecture to its experiential dimension, as well as the restriction of the architecture exhibition’s potential to a space that replicates the exact same mechanism of architectural encounter of the ordinary everyday, seems a relatively limiting horizon for the expression and development of curatorial action and theorisation. To some extent, singularly concentrating on *experience* can also be interpreted as a curatorial defeat, as the admission that an architecture exhibition, when it doesn’t operate a literal construction of ‘re-

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as well as on the sustainability and affordability of displaying architecture ideas as actual work of construction (if exhibiting is making space, what economic restrictions, sustainable regulations and collective benefit this idea of display needs to conform to?).

al architecture' is a superfluous instrument. In the end, the effort of translating architecture into a curatorial display is an ineffective endeavour since the direct experience of constructed architectural objects will always be preferable to the mediated engagement with architecture when displayed. If "architecture is not only about building or about space making but also about the narration and perception of reality" (Kuehn 2015, 85), then that architecture exhibition should primarily strive to offer the re-proposition of an experience as a potential contradiction of considering the moment of display as

Not merely an objective *per se* but rather a strategic tool, [...] for fostering ideas, challenging positions, introducing new themes, questioning current topics and, ultimately, for advancing new theories and changing current practices. (Borasi 2015, 33)

In addition, from a pedagogical perspective, focussing uniquely on the primacy of experience is also a curatorial strategy that, with the idea of privileging immediacy, averts a direct confrontation with the issue of increasing architectural understanding in the publics. Presenting un-mediated (thus also un-problematised, or un-contextualised) experience and so avoiding the challenge of addressing the intellectual construction of architecture critically, the 'experiential approach' could incidentally support deprivation of knowledge tools for interpreting, reading and understanding architecture, limiting thus the possibility for the publics of a critical encounter with architectural ideas in the name of a non-specified and pretended 'democratic' accessibility of the content of the exhibition. If the architecture exhibition abstains from the attempt to illustrate and interpret the mechanism and functioning of architecture, it thus refuses to cultivate architecture understanding, while the idea that experience alone can fill by itself the inadequacies of the average level of architectural education is a wishful oversimplification of an issue of extreme contemporary relevance for architectural discipline. Going beyond the intent of delivering an experience can expand the relevancy of architecture exhibitions as knowledge-production instruments.

To the pedagogical aspect of the question of whether the idea of experience is truly beneficial to the publics, it is also essential to add that the current enthusiasm surrounding the intention of creating experiences at the site of the display is deeply connected to the idea of cultural commodification linked to the pervasiveness of the 'logic' of entertainment and leisure currently corroding the cultural programme of many cultural institutions.<sup>4</sup> The link between experi-

<sup>4</sup> See the reflection on entertainment logic applied to cultural production of De Cecco 2015, 122-3.

ence production and mass entertainment cannot be overlooked, especially in the impact of how this challenges and impoverishes the *actual* cognitive experience of the publics of architecture exhibitions.

Despite these problematic premises, the exploration of curatorial strategies interested in producing experience in the architecture exhibition is developing steadily. The ambition in architecture exhibitions to materialise a space, or, alternatively, to reach for the construction of an architecture that may be somehow inhabited, is reinforced by the current inclination for bringing the latest technological development of virtual space in museums and galleries, in order to provide audiences with complex architectural contexts to explore and interact with, at least *immaterially*.

However, computer-generated virtual simulations of architecture are but the most recent addition to the curatorial instruments employed to create a spatial experience in the architecture exhibition. The history of architecture display has witnessed, through the epochs, the emergence and the fall, the deconstruction and the re-interpretation of diverse methodologies for 'manufacturing' space-experience, struggling to develop and perfect representational media that could manifest not only an image of architecture but an 'architectural visualisation' with the power of additionally embody an experiential component. Retracing the history of these 'experiential devices' is also reconstructing how the encounter with space has been attempted through display and, even more relevantly, how different exhibiting practices contribute to producing, influencing, and shaping different perceptions and understandings of space. If favouring a specific medium or representation tool to display architecture reveals how the exhibition defines, interprets and expresses space - thus influencing the development of architectural knowledge in the publics -, then it is possible to affirm that this choice is a conceptual operation of epistemological construction. In this perspective, producing space experiences has an ideological quality that should not be overlooked if we are to illustrate how curatorial strategies are responsible for the production of architectural culture.

In order to explore the impact of architecture display techniques on the creation and reception of space-related ideas and experience, it is interesting to analyse two examples of exhibition practices that might seem somewhat antithetical: casts and architectural fragment display, and tridimensional space simulations through Virtual Reality (VR). The choice to compare two different options situated at the polar opposites of the chronological development of architecture exhibitions is proposed not solely to highlight the systemic metamorphosis encountered by architecture exhibitions in the methodologies of space reproduction. Capitalising on their respective popularity as mass-medium of architectural representation, the intention of culturally contextualising their functioning and conceptual structure is

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grounded in the perspective of manifesting how curatorial approaches can become, in their own right, objects of acts of mediation.

The ‘emblematic’ qualities of these two display methods make them particularly suitable case studies. On the one hand, plaster casts and virtual reality have managed to create impressively complex curatorial dimensions particularly illustrative of the state of the reflection around architecture exhibition in their respective historical moments. On the other hand, both have shaped, with the meta-physical influence of their experience, two diverse and definite interpretations of space expressive of the ideological systems surrounding them. In addition, plaster casts and virtual reality also express evidently the problematics, limitations and potentialities of the technologies generating them, highlighting the necessity of contextualising and mediating, in the architecture exhibition, as much what is exposed as how it is exposed.

The analysis of these two examples can, in the end, also present a particularly intriguing outcome: the possibility to re-situate and reformulate our traditional and standard definition of architectural experience produced and achievable through architecture display. To reexamine architectural experience, making it develop from an idea of merely reproducing sensorial simulation towards, instead, an idea of encountering through display cultural and disciplinary problematics around architecture, could be a favourable process to shape architecture exhibitions capable of producing critical thinking around architecture culture.

## 2 Mediate the Mediators: Re-Thinking the Relevance of Cast Collections

Casts of architecture monuments enjoyed short yet intense popularity in architecture exhibitions.<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, they are, in most cases, regarded as obsolete forms of architectural representations, as well as “relics of a bygone museum paradigm” (Lending 2017, 4): pragmatically, their size makes them impractical display devices for a vast majority of exhibition spaces, and their maintenance and restoration are often exceedingly expensive; conceptually, their potentiality as producers of space experience is put into question, and the cultural paradigm they represent is disputed as anachronistic and deceptive. The prolific cast culture that colonised with monumental reproductions museums and architecture academies all

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<sup>5</sup> For an extensive study on plaster cast culture and how casts were ‘invented’, presented, documented, preserved, circulated, traded and exhibited from the nineteenth century to contemporaneity, see Lending 2017.

over the West during the nineteenth century is an outdated memory suited primarily for historical explorations. The museums and galleries that did not discard their casts and models collection after the first half of the twentieth century are rare, and their 'intellectual embarrassment' in dealing with these cumbersome fossils of historicism is evident.

Touring a cast gallery is indeed a potentially *unheimlich* experience, sometimes better comparable with the encounters with the exhibits of wax museums or archaeological sites than with contemporary architecture collections. Casts and fragments at various stages of ruination populate the space with their phantasmatic presences; they climb and grip walls as parasitic plants, layering the exhibition space as an additional architectural wallpaper, or stand in the middle of the gallery as imposing, threatening funereal monuments. The alienating impression of displacement and decontextualisation generated by the multitude of heterogeneous (both chronologically and geographically) architectures crowded together in spaces dwarfed by their sizes is disorienting - the suspicion of being placed inside particularly elaborated virtual architecture *capriccio* is not easy to discard. The sequence and the progression of architectural history are, in addition, not so easily deciphered:<sup>6</sup> the assembly of ectoplasmic monuments instead conjures the idea of a chaotically disposed yet meticulously-detailed cataloguing of architectural specimens. In cast collections, we encounter space as a fragmented and eclectic "condensed historical panorama" (Lending 2017, 1).

Nevertheless, the hypnotic charm and even the sensuous seduction of these architectural representations still exercise an enticing influence. The idea of space they evoke is subtly captivating - it relies on atmosphere, artifice and 'cosmetical appeal' to persuade the audiences to suspend their disbelief in confronting this virtual Grand Tour of displaced architectures.<sup>7</sup> The theatricality that emerges from this typology of collections is alluring: one has the sensation of pacing through an abandoned movie set or being on the stage of a historical play of particularly baroque complexity. Paradoxically, casts heavily rely on emotionally-charged narration to communicate their objectives, despite their mimetic qualities.

**6** The limitations of display spaces, the sizes of the model and casts and the complexity of the necessary rearrangements of the collections have deemed the efforts to maintain a coherent organisation of their narration in space unsustainable.

**7** It is not surprising, for example, that this type of collection is so often linked with the idea of time travel and space travel in a sort of 'virtual tourism' *ante-litteram*: their spatial narratives were indeed a method to allow the visit and the study of distant, hardly accessible or poorly maintained architectural sites to the broadest public possible. For the link between plaster culture, Grand Tour, and the Voyage Pittoresque, see Lending 2017, 30-5 and 40-6, as well as Szambien 1988, 17-40.



Cast collections originated from a late-nineteenth sensibility where the historicist and positivist obsession for the classification, systematisation and categorisation of knowledge flirted with a fascination for the wonder-inducing and sublime aspects of History and the 'Exotic'.<sup>8</sup> Even if casts and models were praised for their exactitude, precision and adherence to their originals and "advocated by scholarly elites as a medium par excellence for teaching and disseminating historical architecture" (Lending 2017, 6), it could not be denied that it was also their evocative potential that made them a privileged instrument of architecture representation – especially when architecture needed to be mediated and presented not only to a public of experts in the discipline but opened up to the curious 'masses'.<sup>9</sup>

However, is atmosphere enough to produce architectural knowledge and spatial apprehension? Indeed, the mesmerising evocation of architectural space produced by casts and life-size models is not enough to create a discourse around architecture, let alone an updated one, especially for a contemporaneity that has since long discarded and deconstructed the historicist paradigm as a productive epistemological instrument. The normative criteria of chronology and typology that inspire these collections to be exhaustive pedagogical instruments for comparison of architecture as a phenomenon of styles, orders and proportions are now considered conservative even in the more traditional architectural curricula. To be even more precise, what contemporaneity has dismissed is the very idea, represented by the cast collection, of the past as a cohesive, linearly-readable, typologically-ordered evolutionary continuum, which:

Sprang from a worldview based on the presumption that History could be conceived of as a systematic whole, constituted by distinct and homogenous epochs, each with a particular character and a distinct style. (Lending 2017, 5)

In the end, the spatial experience conveyed by casts progressively decayed once the metaphysical imagination surrounding and justifying its premises started to be undermined.

Furthermore, the pedagogical potential of the space experience produced by cast collections is also put into question precisely due to the suspicions surrounding the excessive 'scenographic' quality of their *mise-en-scene*. The aptitude for stupefaction of the atmospheric

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<sup>8</sup> For the colonialist implications of cast collection and cast production, see Lending 2017, 140-51.

<sup>9</sup> Plaster cast monuments can be considered by all means 'mass media' of architectural reproduction, as well as the first architectural representations specifically imagined primarily for exhibition.

artificial theatricality of cast display makes the type and quality of knowledge derived from it challenging to evaluate. Despite the unquestionably powerful emotional response produced by the recreation of space operated by casts, it is complex to determine if their sensuous and Romantically 'melodramatic' appeal also carries a certain amount of pedagogical consequences for understanding architecture and its functioning. In addition, from a certain perspective, it is not only the highly theatrical impression of this type of collection that could appear misleading; but also the *ideality* produced by the systematic project to organise and illustrate architecture as an orderly, harmonic trajectory between epochs and style carries a threatening interpretative bias that contemporary architecture history education engaged in re-contextualise.

However, can the whole dimension and impact of the space experience produced by casts be so easily dismissed by contemporaneity? Couldn't there be strategies to re-purpose it and make it relevant once again? Even if it is challenging for us to reconnect with the original space experience evoked by casts display, since we do not share the same value system anymore, it is possible to argue that they can be used to produce a different declination of space and architecture experience.

If we consider the cast collections as an accurate "time capsule containing the reminiscing present of a historicist culture, ordering, elaborating, and presenting the past" (Lending 2017, 4), then this type of display can be interpreted as a strikingly exact embodiment and visualisation of the cultural system that produced it. Instead of a mere re-creation of space, cast displays can provide us with a comprehensive experience of an idea of space literally embodied in an actual display and curatorial manifestation.

Suppose we study casts and their display system as *cultural artefacts* in themselves; they can serve as vantage points from which to apprehend curation and display as profoundly historical phenomena, thus generating awareness around the development of representation strategies, helping us understand them as epoch-bound and site-specific production related to the cultural ideologies substantiating them. While manifesting historical and cultural structures now obsolete in the form of a display mechanism, cast collection can assist in visualising and, concurrently, problematising the apparatus of past historical structures and therefore supporting us in the exploration and study of specific ideas of architectural history. The space experience produced by cast collections can thus become the mediation of a system of mediation, embodying the possibility of presenting a whole historical, cultural system connected with architecture display as an exhibit in itself and discussing a historical idea of architecture curation through a still-existing spatial representation – *de facto* allowing the publics to make the experience of a curatorial system for

architecture and, in general, of cultural ideas surrounding architecture in a spatialised and visualised way.

### 3 The Perils of Immediacy: A Reflection on Exhibiting Architecture Through Virtual Reality

Tridimensional virtual<sup>10</sup> simulations of architecture are among the production of digital technologies currently investigated (and promoted) as potential instruments to re-produce an experience of space in the architecture exhibition. It is not surprising that the possibility of 'building' *virtually* inhabitable spaces is an enticing prospect for architecture curators whose interests lie in presenting a reproduction of architectural space as attuned as possible to the conditions and qualities that sensory perception attributes to the close, real-life encounter with the built object. In this curatorial dimension, the intellectual operations of *exhibiting* and *displaying* express themselves within the limits of the concept of contiguous *presentation*. The opportunity to present architecture *by itself* through a virtual, immersive simulation, without having to recur to the often problematic paraphernalia of 'traditional' architectural representations or to conjure complex curatorial strategies, might seem a valuable and logical solution not only to evade the limitations of the paradoxical nature of architecture exhibitions momentarily but also to provide an accessible instrument to foster architectural understanding suitable for non-expert audiences. Interpreted as user-friendly and intellectually approachable experience providers, computer-generated immersive virtual spaces seem to present an immediacy of understanding and *potentiality* for performative interactivity that compete and surpass the qualities of all the more explored and traditional architecture representations with ease. As display facilitators, tridimensional virtual spaces are currently praised for their precision and definition, flexibility and adaptability, and potential to engage the contemporary publics in interactive, multimodal and manipulable participatory environments.

Un-mediated and immediate appears to be two frequently-used qualities to describe the experience of tridimensional virtual architectures. The virtual production of space experiences seems to grant a *democratic* point of access to the exhibition of architecture, on the one hand, satisfying the expectations and the need for comprehensibility of non-expert audiences; on the other hand, providing precision and accuracy to architecture representations for the necessities

<sup>10</sup> For the display problems attached to the devices necessary to sustain and produce tridimensional virtual space simulations, see Champion 2021, 209-27. For the specific problem of the technological obsolescence of virtual reality software and devices, see also 224-7.

and interests of expert publics. Conceived as suppliers of experiences seamlessly connecting, surrogating and even substituting the 'real', virtual spaces-simulations pose themselves as architectural representations that do not require either mediation or contextualisation precisely by virtue of their *proximity* with reality.

Despite its potential qualities in delivering space simulations, virtual architecture can also be interpreted as a problematic tool among the instruments of architectural curation – and not only for the factual difficulties in integrating it effectively in exhibitions.<sup>11</sup>

Primarily, the same quality of the experience of space currently being provided by immersive, virtual tridimensional architecture simulation could be questioned in its efficacy. The potentiality embedded in the simulation qualities and powers of virtual spaces is undoubtedly existing; nevertheless, the current state of the art of the technology is far from providing these possibilities in a sustainable and widely-available fashion.<sup>12</sup> Despite the constantly-evolving development of the technological instruments necessary to sustain the virtual simulation of space (both in terms of bodily devices and software), the capability of the virtual environment to produce a *realistic* experience of space is still lacking in many fundamental aspects.

It is difficult to ignore, for example, the permanence of an emphasis on vision and visual qualities in virtual reality.<sup>13</sup> Despite the pretences of the efficacy of tridimensionality, VR still “has not focused on what people do in place but what people can view of place” (Champion 2021, 18). The still-present technological limitations of the devices presently in use and the legitimate complexity of integrating holistically sensory stimulations beyond articulated visual perception still make virtual architectural simulation mainly operate on a scopic domain. In this perspective, VR creates an experience that places the emphasis mostly only on visual stimulation, and so where the body is thus effectively redundant: the experience of architecture in virtual space then becomes a sort of disembodied experience, thus undermining any pretence of *realistic* of the space-experience produced by virtual simulation of architecture.<sup>14</sup> In addition, considered specifically from the perspective of architectural curation, this condition of scopic dominance contributes to the general problem of the tendency of architecture display to reduce architecture to an image

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the development of simulation technologies, as well as of their related potentialities and limitations, see Champion 2021, 3-24.

<sup>12</sup> For virtual reality as a primarily vision-focus device, see Champion 2021, 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> For the relationship between body and virtual architecture, see Grosz 2001, 77-86.

<sup>14</sup> For the problem of evaluating in an effective and scientific manner the cognitive and pedagogical outcome of interactivity in virtual architecture, see Champion 2017, 205-6.

to be consumed aesthetically and visually, rather than to manifest it as an experiential object to be performatively encountered.

Furthermore, the possibility of integrating a certain degree of user manipulation, modifiability and interactivity in the virtual space is still mostly under construction. As Champion states:

Virtual environments were historically designed for single uses and single users [...]. The related tools are likewise designed to look for singular interaction; two-dimensional processes and the 'surround' screens do not create a sense of place. Historically, VR has depicted images of place, but it does not transport us to or allow us to inhabit space (Champion 2021, 23)

This historical calibration of virtual experience to individuality, which additionally does not include any degree of inclusion of personalised inputs in the use of the space simulations, is still a limiting condition commonly present today, due to the difficulty of configuring virtual space as an open system able to react to multimodal and conflicting stimuli, originating at once by diverse operators. From this perspective, instead of recreating an accurate, realistic experience of space, virtually-generated architecture seems to museify the concept of experience and limit the user's experiential and performative agency of interaction with space.

As a corollary to this, just from a cognitive point of view, it is still much debated how (and if) interactivity and manipulation in virtual space could contribute to building architectural knowledge and apprehension, especially one that could be sustained, metabolised and capitalised upon outside of the virtual simulation.<sup>15</sup> As for now, doubts remain concerning the possibility of correctly evaluating how (and how much) users learn from the experience matured in virtual spaces.

In addition, the *gamification effect* that some examples of virtual spaces seem to encourage as an interpretation of participatory activity, despite its relevance concerning the central question of user engagement, might produce some contradictory outcomes. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is much debated if infusing virtual architecture with gaming qualities has the potential to be translated into actual educational value.<sup>16</sup> It is also important not to underestimate the potential issues in progressively and pervasively infusing

<sup>15</sup> For an exploration of the potential and the limit of diverse delineation of gamification and learning experiences in virtual spaces, see Champion 2017, 112-62.

<sup>16</sup> For an exhaustive summary of the research and practical examples on the specific case of the gamification of cultural heritage, its relevance in contemporary exhibition culture and its potential outcomes, see Champion 2011; 2015.

cultural productions with ‘entertainment ideology’, with all its related consequences in the (de)valuation of the cultural relevance of exhibition and display events.<sup>17</sup>

From a perspective strictly related to the curatorial approach to exhibited architecture, it is also possible to debate if using virtual simulation of architecture merely to reproduce space in *realistic terms* could be interpreted as a limitation of its technological potential. If the main objective of a virtual, immersive spatial experience is to simulate with exactitude the impression of real space in the exhibition, where is the added heuristical value of this operation? Moreover, more importantly, is a *literal* re-proposition of an experience of space in virtual terms an effective way to generate architectural knowledge? From a critical point of view, it is legitimate to question how a technology that aspires to create a virtual space so exact to be able to substitute our perception and experience of the real one could then contribute to raising a critical comprehension of the mechanics and strategies of space construction in its users. The question of whether virtual architecture is a suitable space to explore and collocate critically the conceptual and pragmatic aspects of architectural space is a problem that should not be overlooked just in the privilege of its apparent accessibility.

In particular, if the idea and the philosophy behind the virtual space are to create a simulation ‘more real than reality itself’, then its critical and analytical potential is already pragmatically restrained by this premise. In this perspective, it is essential to highlight how this limitation in the cognitive and heuristic contribution of virtual architectures happens not just due to the discrepancies mentioned above between the potential and the factual realisation of the production of a realistic space experience. More precisely, it is possible to affirm that the struggle for realism in virtual experience ingrained in the current approach to this technology is just the unconsciously constant, implicit reaffirmation of the primacy of the ‘original’ architectural experience rooted in the ‘Real’. Seeing from this perspective, virtual simulations of space understood and imagined in these terms represent another acceptance of a curatorial failure in architecture exhibition. Once again, no curatorial strategy or approach could substitute the relevancy of pristine experience with the built object, and space in the exhibition can only be *presented* in the display, which can only attempt to recreate it.

However, if architecture exhibitions confine themselves to the presentation of space, they renounce their crucial role in manifesting cultural ideas around architecture. By re-presenting the ‘literalism’

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<sup>17</sup> For an exploration of this issue in the current ideological modelling of technology concerning virtual, space simulations, see Grosz 2001, 74-90.

of reality without adding any critical or problematising layer, the architecture exhibition is thus not providing its audiences with any additional instrument to decipher, interpret and understand space and architecture. Instead, if the architecture exhibition strives to foster discourse around architecture, then its essential objectives should be to interpret, translate, and mediate ideas of space, not only to recreate its experiential dimension.

Therefore, unsuccessful realism should not be the problem, nor should experiential recreation be the main pretence of virtual space simulations. If we momentarily abandon in virtual reality the objective of constructing a perception of space as real-as-reality, we could find diverse definitions for the mediation and the presentation of architectural and spatial experience. Only to quote some possible applications, the virtual simulation of space, once surpassed the idea of presenting an autonomous, readable environment, could be used to produce an experience of architecture and space that could focus more on their production than on their presentation, highlighting the process of building space and its functioning – a central endeavour of the architectural discipline. In virtual reality, it could also be possible to interact and experience how architecture is currently using digital simulation to produce and imagine space, even allowing, in specific cases, the users to manipulate and experiment with the same tools as architects. Lastly, on a more conceptual level, virtual interactive space can also be used to visualise complex social, political and cultural aspects of building space and spatial experience in interactive ways, making them more accessible and decipherable for the audiences.

All these usage declinations of virtual simulation of space generate their own specific experience of space: an experience of space that is layered, mediated and contextualised and that empowers its users with heuristic and cognitive agency in the process of developing architectural knowledge. From this perspective, the efficacy of virtual reality in reproducing and problematising an experience of space could be re-evaluated and re-signified, shaping the technology into an updated tool for fostering a conscientious understanding of architecture that could be not only accessible but genuinely innovative in its approaches.

To conclude, it seems relevant to highlight how the current conceptual limitations of the use of virtual simulated space to produce architectural experiences appear to be connected more to the ideology embedded in the technology producing it than to the factual constraints and shortcomings of its programming.<sup>18</sup> If we redefine the premises

**18** For a historical, stylistic, typological and taxonomic analysis of the significance of 'virtual' and 'simulation' in virtual architecture and space, see Ettliger 2008.

of virtual simulation of spaces, making them not surrogate alternatives to reality but *expansions* of it, the redefinition of the architectural experience could bring new valuable perspectives for the expansion and the update of the curatorial approach for architecture exhibition.

#### 4 Re-Situating the Idea of Experience

Since its very beginning, the production of space experiences has embodied a permanent concern for the curatorial praxis and the theoretical reflection of architecture exhibition.

The exploration of the specific ideologies and cultural systems underlying the conceptual development of the display reflections born around the temporally-opposite display strategies of cast collections and computer-generated space simulations in virtual reality highlights how not only historical but also contemporary approaches to architecture curation constantly need to be analysed as contextual phenomena. Considered as cultural productions expressing specific worldviews and conceptual systems, they must be problematised in their ideological foundations to reflect and explore their efficacy and relevance. By exposing how these display methods bring the problem of spatial experience to the centre of the architecture exhibition, it was possible to demonstrate the necessity to reframe the current discussion around the interest in producing spatial experience in the architecture exhibition. In order to support an updated approach to experience production through display, it is essential to deconstruct its theoretical and pragmatic premises to consciously evaluate its potentialities and limitations for contemporary exhibition practice and experiment beyond standardised approaches to the significance of experience in the exhibition setting.

Ultimately, the focus on the importance of the contextualisation of curatorial methods indicated that updating and making relevant the spatial experience produced by casts or virtual reality is a matter of *mediation*: an essential operation necessary to reveal the potentialities of architectural reproductions as catalysts for constructing discourse around and about architecture.

The idea of the necessity of mediation additionally deconstructs the traditional ideas associated with the production of architectural experience in architecture exhibitions, especially reframing its objectives from the construction of accurate reproductions of realistic experiences to the idea of architectural experience as a performative encounter with ideas of space and architecture in the space of the display. From this perspective, the radical intention to resituate the meaning and definition of architectural experience in the exhibition is an urgent issue to reaffirm the agency and relevance of the operation of architecture mediation and curation through the act of display.



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