Form As Thought

Éric Lapierre

ABSTRACT:

As former chief curator of the fifth Lisbon Triennial of architecture in 2019, I will first discuss about utility of such events to allow architecture to meet a wider audience as the academic or professional ones. This issue is also about form of such events in terms of overall organizations: didactic exhibitions conceived by curators vs. conceptual installations made by architects. I will explain why I chose the first option in Lisbon, and how this choice influenced the form of the exhibitions. Additionally, I will explore in which way the fact that I was an "intellectual practitioner" allowed me to give specific answers to a series of questions regarding architecture itself but as well the art of exhibition: in which way form can improve thought.

In qualità di chief curator della quinta Triennale di architettura di Lisbona nel 2019, discuterò innanzitutto dell'utilità di tali eventi per consentire all'architettura di incontrare un pubblico più ampio rispetto a quello accademico o professionale. La questione riguarda anche la forma di tali eventi in termini di organizzazione generale: mostre didattiche concepite dai curatori vs. installazioni concettuali realizzate dagli architetti. Spiegherò perché ho scelto la prima opzione a Lisbona e come questa scelta ha influenzato la forma delle mostre. Inoltre, esplorerò in che modo il fatto di essere un "intellectual practitioner" mi abbia permesso di dare risposte specifiche a una serie di domande riguardanti sia l'architettura stessa sia l'arte della mostra: in che modo la forma può migliorare il pensiero.

Éric Lapierre

(b. Tarbes, 1966) is architect, teacher, theoretician, writer, and curator. He is founder and principal of the office Experience, based in Paris, with his partners Tristan Chadney and Laurent Esmilaire. This award-winning firm has been recognized nationally and internationally for the quality of the tectonic objects it builds, but as well for the theoretical dimension of its production. Experience builds in France and Europe. The last buildings are Chris Marker student residence and buses amenity in Paris, urban logistics amenity in Toulouse, and an office building in Paris. Éric Lapierre is professor in École Polytechnique Fédérale in Lausanne (ÉPFL), in École d'architecture de la ville et des territoires Paris-Est, and guest professor at Harvard GSD. He teaches both project design and theory. He regularly publishes articles and books about the contemporary condition of architecture.

Opening Picture:

Fig. 01: Economy of Means - How Architecture Works, 2019, Lisbon, Fifth Lisbon Architecture Triennale, installation view.

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Through its social dimension which consists in constructing the buildings and structures necessary to the correct functioning of communal life, the ultimate object of architecture is the definition of space. Whether this is achieved through construction in the broadest sense of the term, through signs written on facades, or even through the transformation of entire buildings into immense signs, it is always present in one way or another. At a moment in time where the historical conditions for the emergence and continuity of a common architectural language have disappeared since almost two centuries and where architecture, like all of reality, has entered into a world strongly shaped by digital media, our practice is interested in how architecture can continue to be the culturally sophisticated medium which it has always been. This work depends upon an in-depth study of the characteristics of space which

we attempt to put into practice by seeking to produce objects in which it does not appear constrained, where the projects depend upon a poetics born of simplicity from which paradoxically a form of resultant complexity emerges, from a rationality which produces projects whose inexplicability is proportionate to their intelligibility.

The scenography of an exhibition is a pure spatial exercise, freed from many of the heavy technical constraints associated with the realization of buildings. Seen in this way it represents, for us architects, a laboratory in which to carry out very direct experiments on space.

Furthermore, everyone will have noticed that the scenography of an exhibition can often be in contradiction with its content, and this because scenography is often consi-

Fig. 02
Economy of Means - How Architecture Works, 2019, Lisbon, Fifth Lisbon Architecture Triennale, installation view.

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dered as a simple and somewhat decorative way of arranging things. In fact, in the scenographies which we have devised we have always sought to consider scenography not as the cherry on the cake but as an integral part of the cake itself. The act of showing things - objects, ideas - in space is not separate from what those objects or ideas are or represent. So we always consider scenography itself, the spatial realization of an exhibition, as a distinct medium and not as a simple neutral technique, which is to suppose that technique can ever be truly neutral. As a medium it influences the meaning of what is shown. Indeed, scenography considered in this way is also on display, in a certain sense, just as much as the contents of the exhibition in as much as it is an integral part of it. And if the spatial lay-out is not neutral, if it influences meaning, or at any rate if it can, this is because space itself is, of course, not neutral. It has its own language, its own specific way of functioning, and will not allow itself to be manipulated with impunity. In as much as our work is directly based on an exploration of these ways of functioning in order to uncover them but also to exploit them for the execution of our projects, one understands why we consider scenography as an entirely separate architectural act.

Exhibiting architecture despite the impossibility of doing so

Here I would like to make reference to the exhibition *Economy of Means - How Architecture Works* of which I was the curator and the scenographer and which formed part of the 2019 Lisbon Triennal. As always with an exhibition dedicated to architecture I found myself

Fig. 03
Economy of Means - How Architecture Works, 2019, Lisbon, Fifth Lisbon Architecture Triennale, installation view.

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confronted with the impossibility of exposing architecture itself. An exhibition of painting shows the painting themselves. Indeed, the immediacy of the presence of the medium is one of the primary interests and pleasures that the visitors experience. Architecture, however, is considered to be impossible to represent owing to the fact that it is embodied in buildings which are impossible to move. Hence it must always be mediatized in the form of different documents - drawings, photographs, models, collages, texts etc. An exhibition of architecture is thus an exhibition of the representation of architecture but not directly an exhibition of architecture itself: an exhibition *about* architecture but not *of* architecture. The primary object of an exhibition of architecture is hence always at one remove.

Despite these difficulties I opted for a strategy that refused to accept this form of pre-announced defeat and tried to find a way to make an exhibition *of* architecture. And this exhibition was an exhibition of architecture in two different senses. On the one hand because it proposed a real architectural experience in as much as it was working on and from space. On the other because, in its essence, it was indirectly proposing a definition of architecture which does not limit itself solely to the built world but also includes, on separate and equal terms, that of ideas. Which is to say that this exhibition corresponded to the definition of architecture which I put into practice with my colleagues in my office or when teaching, writing or designing exhibitions: as soon as one talks about architectural forms

and their reasons for existing one is doing architecture. It does not manifest itself solely in constructions but also in projects or in discussions or representations on and about form. It is in the field of theory that all these ways of operating meet because it constitutes the gravitational centre of architecture considered as an operational concept. And within this conceptual space there are a good number of projects that were never built that are of far greater importance than finished ones, certain images and texts that carry more weight than the majority of constructed buildings.

The exhibition *Economy of Means - How Architecture Works* was first and foremost an exhibition of architecture since it was consecrated to its theory, and more precisely to the economy of means considered as the condition for the possibility of an architecture that is at the same time signifying, rational and poetic. But it was also an exhibition of architecture in the sense that I attempted, via its lay-out, to offer the spectators "real life" spatial experiences which truly belong to the field of architecture. But a simple spatial demonstration whose only purpose was its own existence would not have constituted an authentic architectural experience. So space was actively used in order to reinforce the meaning of what was shown, as a specific medium for the display and explanation of the contents of the exhibition. It is in this sense that the exhibition was a real architectural project since the form of space was used to serve meaning and to reinforce understanding.

Showing books

Architectural theory is found, for the most part, in books. We are thus obliged to exhibit books. But how? Often one shows the cover or a two-page spread. But this is hardly sufficient. The need to explain the notion of typology in the first of the six rooms that made up the exhibition was the occasion for us to lay down certain principles about exhibiting books which we have also made use of elsewhere. Firstly, in order to understand our choices, it is important to understand that typology depends upon the notion of repetition since an architectural typology can be defined as a family of elements possessing common formal characteristics. Next one needs to know that the budget for this exhibition was very limited and only allowed us to exhibit a small number of original documents. In accordance with the theme of the exhibition this limitation of our means was very welcome in pushing us to find more efficient solutions; we came to the decision that we would not expose any original works and instead use either reproductions or original documents that we ourselves had produced. In the end we showed three books, one from the 17th and two from the 19th Centuries. One was consecrated to typology in general, the two others to two specific types. They all utilized a repetitive page lay-out which allowed us to draw attention to the necessarily repetitive and comparative nature of any typological proposal. There is not much text in these books, since typology manifests itself through formal comparison, and they are primarily composed of images. Ex-

hibiting one double-page spread from such a book would be of no interest beyond the purely fetishist. So we decided to scan the entirety of all three books and to reprint them at the same scale as the originals. We then glued hundreds of images directly onto the wall in the shape of three series of six meter high grills. In this way, as soon as one entered the room, one experienced a feeling of mass. With one glimpse of the
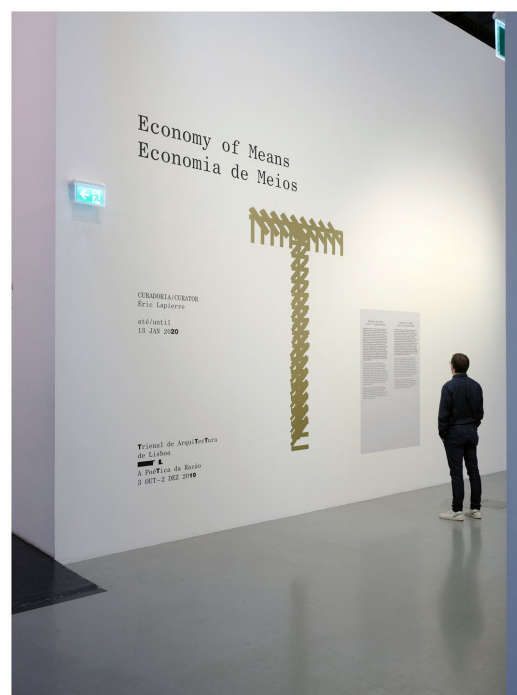
eye one took in a large amount of information and one grasped the typological resemblance between the elements in each of the three series. So, before even having time to look at things in detail, one had already grasped the essential. This also gave the impression of physically entering into books which, through this lay-out, suddenly became much bigger than us. And in addition, the use of regular grids evoked the whole serial aesthetic developed over the course of the 20th Century, from Steve Reich to Sol LeWitt or to Bernd and Hilla Becher, and suggested

Fig. 04
Economy of Means - How Architecture Works, 2019, Lisbon, Fifth Lisbon Architecture Triennale, installation view.

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that these works from the Classical era carried within them the seed of these future developments. And all this without explaining anything explicitly, beyond the fact that physical books were made available to visitors on a bookshelf occupying the entire length of the opposite wall of this same room. Finally, this total saturation of a wall six meters high and over ten meters long also evoked the typical way in which works were exhibited in the 19th Century, without becoming a mere post-modern reference to this form of display, since its principal meaning was to be found elsewhere.

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The opposite wall, other than the shelf of books, was used to present a mixture of typological series and reproductions of historical documents which also engaged with the question of typology. The series were made up of plans - latin crosses, courtyards etc. - which we had redrawn at identical scale and using identical graphic design so as to highlight their pure characteristics

without disturbing this perception with varied graphic design. Here too, the documents saturated the wall, once again bringing to the fore the abundant character of the very notion of typology.

On one of the two smaller screens that separated this room from the next one in the order of the visit we reproduced a 30x enlargement of a sketch by the German architect Schinkel relating to the question of type. This total lack of scale was the first thing one noticed when entering the room but also took positive advantage of the fact that we were unable to exhibit any originals. That is to say that if one reproduces documents on the same scale as the originals this tends to draw attention to the fact that one was unable to procure them for one reason or another. But if one manipulates the scale one can render them more meaningful and draw attention, as in this case, to the importance one accords them. Moreover, such an enlargement allows for the production of a drawing which tends towards abstraction when it is seen up close and which presents, in and of itself, an unusual form of perception which creates a small shock and keeps the spectator alert.

Experiencing scale through the body

Keeping the spectator alert is of capital importance, since their attention will absorb information better that way, and since they have presumably not come along in order to be bored. So they must be surprised. In

Fig. 05
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our case, this surprise was based, in large part, on the fact that the way in which we presented our discourse varied considerably from one room to the next. Indeed, since each room was dedicated to a theme we always sought the most appropriate way in which to expose this theme, by putting into play a specific spatial relation, as we have just seen with the first room.

The second room was consecrated to the fact that, over the course of history, one can trace a tendency to try and cover the largest stretch of space without intermediary load-bearing structures, that is to say without columns or posts, and the impact this has had and may have had on the definition of architecture. This was therefore a question of very large scale. We opted for a spatialization that reproduced, to a certain degree, the kinesthesia of a real architectural experience. On the floor we printed plans of the dozen buildings from all different eras that constituted the body of this section, all redrawn by us on an identical scale which enabled comparison between them. Above these plans, at a height of approximately 3.5 meters which allowed for a sufficiently good view of the details, we redrew in perspective seen from below the systems for covering these various different buildings. These ceiling perspectives were, of course, aligned above their respective plans with the result that one had to lift one's head, as in a real building, in order to establish the relationship between the plan and the view from below. Thus the way of perceiving the content of the room was analogous to real perception and to the

movements one must make to perceive the covering system of a real building.
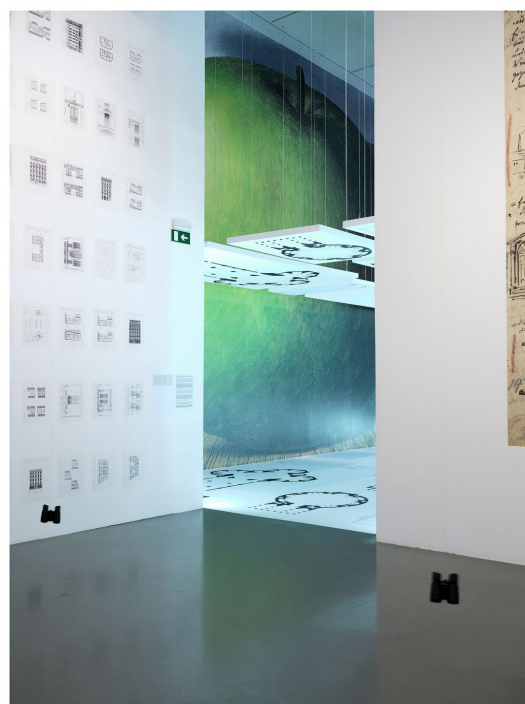
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Combined with this analogous experience, we introduced another theme. As architects our primary work tool consists of plans which are generally printed in black on white paper. The plans on the floor and the ceiling perspectives were also printed in black on a white background, in conformity with the conventions of architectural representation. This meant that the room was entirely white, as if the public was moving through the space of the paper that forms the day-to-day business of an architects' practice, but suddenly enlarged. Which meant that the public tended to appear as somehow shrunken in this space of abstracted images and profoundly altered scale. The surrealist nature of this manipulation of space was underscored by the fact that the apple from Réné Magritte's painting *The Son of Man,* which represents

Fig. 06
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an apple enlarged until it occupies all the available space, was reproduced by a computerized procedure on one of the walls of the room. In itself, it formed a riddle whose answer would only become clear in the following room, but it already participated in this generalized disordering of scale in a room dedicated to systems for covering buildings of very large scale.

Experiencing scale through space

The next room, the smallest in the exhibition and also the only one situated on the upper floor, was dedicated to the interest that architects have always have had for the study of very small buildings, and to the influence that thinking about very small scale has had on architecture and its theory. In some senses a diametrically opposite question to the one posed in the previous room. After having climbed a staircase the visitors arrived in a room whose dimensions were small compared to the previous ones. First their attention was drawn to a series of white maquettes, all of the same scale, of a series of a dozen projects which composed the body of this theme: buildings from all times and of all different purposes united by the fact that their small dimensions constituted a determining element of their form and meaning. The maquettes were shown side by side on a shelf so as to aid with comparison. To each of them corresponded a plan which was stuck on the wall above the shelf. In order to draw attention as clearly as possible to the small dimensions of these buildings, a plan of the space of the room it-

self, on the same scale as the others, was presented on an adjacent wall; its positioning drew one's attention and showed that it was different from the others. One could thus see, and above all perceive in a very immediate fashion, that all the buildings presented could fit completely in the room in which one was standing, and this despite its relatively modest proportions. Thus the very simple way in which things were shown allowed, via the traditional tools for the representation of architecture, for the creation of a direct and perceptual link - as opposed to a purely intellectual one - between real space and its representation.

The spectator's attention was then drawn to the other walls where, as in the first room, the entire contents of a book were displayed along with various other classical elements, all of which were of a small size. But among these different elements arranged like so many windows on the wall there was also a real one, a physical opening in the screen separating this room from the previous one. And from there one could see, on the opposite wall, Magritte's giant apple. And since the opening had the same proportions as the reproduction of the apple, the latter appeared, when one was at a suitable distance from the screen, as if it were a small painting, providing both a connection between the two rooms and also encouraging a reflection on the fundamentally relative and ambiguous nature of space in architecture.

Finally, in a tiny room next-door the spectator can see a box-in-a-valise by Marcel Duchamp, this trans-

portable museum which the artist made by reducing all of his works and which constitutes a new art work purely because of this reduction in scale. A way of showing that working with small scale produces such changes that the nature of the objects themselves is altered. Within this same order of ideas, opposite this installation was a screen pierced with holes a couple of centimeters in diameter. Placing their eye over the hole like a voyeur the spectator discovered a reproduction of the Co-op Interieur, this minimal space imagined by the functionalist architect, Hannes Meyer, in 1926. Only two black and white photos exist. The original was not a real space but rather an installation composed of two angled walls and a highly austere and minimal ensemble of the elements Meyer considered indispensable to modern life: a bed, two folding chairs, a phonograph, a small shelf. The whole was very

scrupulously reconstituted here, for the first time. Since the room was not whole but rather, as in the photos, only had two walls we could not allow spectators to enter the interior. It was a question of constructing an image in the real world. But it was also a question of reconstituting time, as if in some way we were unfolding the time contained in these mythical black and white photos in this space. Looking in this hole was like plunging one's gaze directly into the past; we had built a machine for traveling back in time. Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate*, which featured on a playlist Hannes Meyer drew up to describe his favorite music, was played in the room to add an experimental and retro-futurist touch to the ensemble. Also a way to use yet one more medium, music, to keep the spectators' attention alert. The aim of the hole in the screen was to direct the spectators' gaze, much like the hole in the gate

Fig. 07
Econmy of Means - How Architecture Works, 2019, Lisbon, Fifth Lisbon Architecture Triennale, installation view.

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of the garden of the Knights of Malta in Rome which enables one to see St Peter's Basilica at the end of an alley of trees. But it was also an evocation of the hole in the door of Marcel Duchamp's posthumous installation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Étant donnés,* which would have been obvious to those in the know because of the proximity to the box-in-a-valise. A way of densifying signification and overlapping levels of reading, which makes the thesis multidimensional. And this connection was deliberately not explained. It was kept "secret", an enigma to be solved by attentive and informed spectators. The central thesis must obviously be made explicit, it is the object of the exhibition, but one can also superimpose another discourse on top of it, less central and more allusive, but nevertheless meaningful, in order to increase the depth of meaning of the whole. And all this because space when it is attended to with care becomes meaningful in and of itself.

A spatio-temporal shortcut

The next room was given over to the presentation of buildings that cover a large area but with relatively small spans based on repetitive structures. As with all of the sections of the exhibition this covered a very large period of time so as to demonstrate the permanence, through constantly renewed forms, of the great architectural questions over time. This desire to situate the presentation within a long time frame was at the heart of the scenography here.

The dimension of buildings obtained in this way can be very large, as in the case of Crystal Pal-

Fig. 08
Economy of Means - How Architecture Works, 2019, Lisbon, Fifth Lisbon Architecture Triennale, installation view.

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ace or certain airports. So as to give an idea of size, the buildings were represented using axonometry and on the same scale. The drawings were done directly on the walls of the room using a system of transfers which, as well as allowing us to vary the media, also allowed us to sidestep questions such as the maximum size of paper which we would have been confronted with given the size of these images. Some of them did not totally fit on the height of the walls which were over six meters high. This impossibility to contain, this contradiction between the size of the room and the size of the drawings was used deliberately to underline with intensity the great dimensions of such buildings. In addition, a photo of each building, small so as not to compete with the drawings, was hung at eye-level and showed the concrete appearance of the buildings.

The presentation was arranged over two facing walls, moving from the smallest to the largest of the buildings. Since size was the theme of the room a chronological presentation would not have made sense, thus demonstrating that in the field of theory ideas and principles tend to matter more than chronology.

Le Corbusier's famous drawing of the Dom-Ino framework, created in 1914 to rebuild France using reinforced concrete structures, was exhibited on the third wall. It was presented in a very large format both as a primordial space and constructive system of the 20th Century, and also as a modernist avatar of the principles presented in this room. The fourth wall was pierced by an arch which formed the exit from this first series of four rooms. This arch reproduced the geometry of the wooden arch in the centre of

the room which was built using the principles of carpentry referred to as being in the style of Philibert de l'Orme, from the name of the 17th Century architect who invented a method for constructing large spans using only small pieces of wood. This historical structure served as an exit tunnel from the room. Inside, one found oneself in a perspective with a central convergence point which culminated in a view, also in perceptive, of a life-size enlargement of the utopian project, No Stop City, by the Italian architects Archizoom, an attempt from the end of the 1960s to cover very large areas with a continuous roofing and infrastructure which would allow one to live potentially anywhere. In this way it was implied that one Philibert de l'Orme could be considered as the father of prefabrication, something one tends to associate with modernity, and the initiator of the convergence line which would lead to No Stop City. The convergence lines of the real-life arch and the photo were aligned and gave the impression of walking across five centuries of time and space. The phrase "The precision of your means diminishes when their number increases", taken from Robert Bresson's *Notes on Cinematography*, was inscribed on the lower surface of the arch.

In this way, through spatial lay-out, a sort of meta-discourse was suggested which, rather than a scientific discourse, formed an interpretation of history that was at once theoretical and light-hearted, a sort of opening up of the meaning commonly given to these questions. An assemblage between a French architect and theoretician from the 16th Century,

a group of radical post-war Italian architects and a film-maker who defined a language specific to cinema which produced, like an appendix to this first series of four rooms, a form of diffuse and open knowledge through the exhibiting of multiple media - three-dimensional objects, life-scale photographs, texts. This was one of the most powerful scenographic moments.

Expressing a multitude of attitudes

On passing through the arch one arrived in a second gallery of the museum containing two rooms, respectively the biggest and the smallest of the exhibition. The biggest room contained approximately thirty maquettes of all sizes, scales and materials. They were made by contemporary architectural agencies from around the world whose work is founded, in one way or another, on the economy of means. While the bulk of the exhibition was given over to representations of buildings from all times and places which had been redrawn in a homogenous manner to render them comparable and at the same time unify them, this final room, on the contrary, showed products from one single epoch through the tools of representation used by these different architects with no attempt at homogenization of the contents but, on the contrary, a deliberately emphasis on the multiplicity of attitudes which characterizes this epoch. In order to ensure continuity with the rest of the exhibition and to avoid an impression of mere disorder, the maquettes were exposed on rectangular pedestals arranged

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in a grid. The rectangle's proportions were determined by the isolating panels of which they were composed using a simple stacking process: a material and geometric economy of means. All of identical height, the pedestals could not fail to evoke, for those in the know, Rem Koolhaas' famous project from the 1970s known as the City of the Captive Globe. More prosaically they allowed for the creation of an urban ambience which unified the multiplicity of different attitudes and scales while at the same time not erasing them. The whole was bathed in the voices of the architects themselves who had filmed selfies with their iPhones where, in a maximum of two minutes, they gave their definition of the economy of means and explained how this was put into practice in their work. A large plasma screen in the centre of the room diffused these images.

A cabinet of curiosities

Finally, the smallest room of the exhibition was covered from floor to ceiling with plans of buildings from all times and places, represented in a homogenous manner but not all at the same scale, unlike in the rest of the exhibition. Indeed, the idea here was not to make all these plans comparable but rather to appreciate them in themselves and for themselves as pure graphic artefacts in order to show the concept of an ontological plan, by which I mean the act of producing plans which go beyond their status as simple tools of communication or representation and attain instead the status of meaningful elements of a project.

For instance, the fact that the plan of a church takes the form of a Latin cross gives it a singular meaning which goes beyond the simple spatial effect of this form. Before leaving the exhibition the public was thus invited to enjoy a series of plans that saturated the space with abstract, but figuratively analogous, drawings which floated on the white surface of the paper, like a two-dimensional cabinet of curiosities, a way of suggesting that the whole exhibition was itself a large cabinet of curiosities.

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