

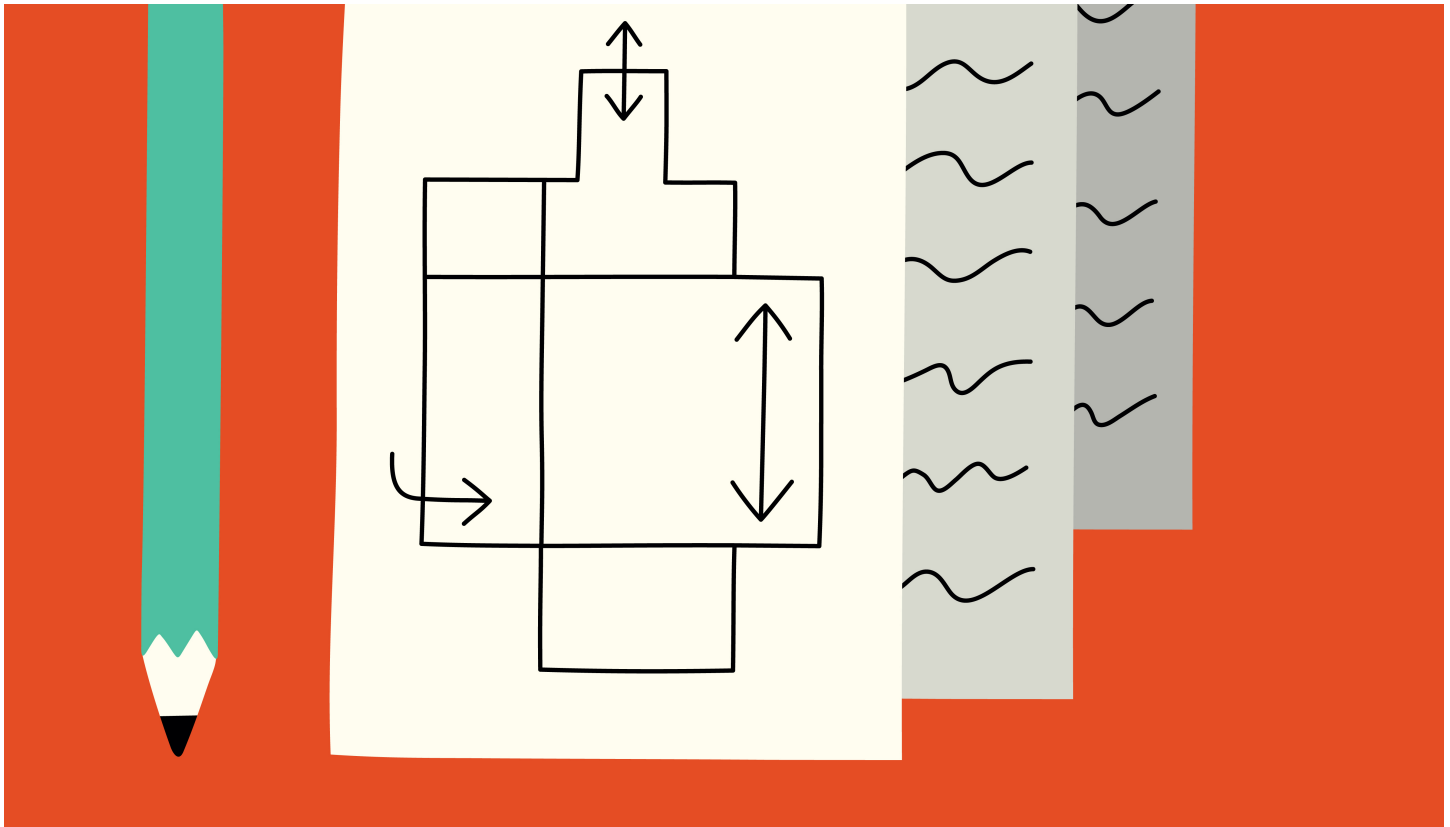
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The Brief

The brief, a specific genre of architectural writing, constitutes one of the necessary starting points for any architectural project, defining its objectives and expectations in words. Indeed, it could be argued that all architecture is based on a brief in one way or another. At the same time, a design brief can also be a foundational element for a particular kind of architecture exhibition, one that is methodologically distant from a retrospective, thematic, or monographic approach. Architecture exhibitions that depart from a design brief aim not to present contents, projects, or spaces that exist outside the context of the exhibition, but rather find their *raison d'être* in creating the occasion to produce new architecture.

The kind of brief devised for an architecture exhibition is very different from a competition brief. On one hand, it excludes the possibility of a “winner.” On the other, it places itself outside the necessity of fulfilling the “tasks” that are normally demanded of architecture. It can therefore provide a refuge for ideological dissent.<sup>1</sup> It is also different to a brief for a direct commission, involving a plurality of answers to the same question. The architecture exhibition design brief directs the thought process inherent to architectural design, but leaves singular degrees of freedom, and opens the possibility of unexpected answers. The design brief for architecture exhibitions is a way to proactively determine—to *design*—architecture without making formal choices. It is a form of “critique” that precedes architecture.

The design brief as a curatorial strategy was extensively used during the first two decades of the existence of the International Architecture Biennale in Venice, from 1975 onwards. Take, for instance, Strada Novissima, the 1980 Venice Biennale curated by Paolo Portoghesi, which was guided by a “regolamento edilizio,” a building regulation that set the rules and defined the space of action for the exhibition’s street-like setting.<sup>2</sup> This document went so far as to imitate not only the process, but the very name and format of planning regulations that could be found in Italy at the time. The dimensions, circulation, “architectural requirements,” construction techniques, and materials were precisely defined for all of the twenty facades lined up in the Corderie.

The brief is a tool to reproduce, and therefore expose the process of making architecture. By explicitly articulating all the steps necessary to address an architectural question, the brief also becomes a tool to allow the public to understand the reasons for an architectural project beyond how it appears. Building exhibitions such as the Weissenhofsiedlung of 1927 and the subsequent series of International Building Exhibitions (IBA) held in Germany take this to a logical extreme, which by actually building the proposals, bridge the paradox of the architecture exhibition and the representation of architecture. Not only did the public have the chance to visit the buildings, but life itself was allowed into the exhibition when the buildings became part of the urban realm.



The Brief. Illustration: Andreas Samuelsson/Agent Molly &amp; Co.

The effectiveness of building real pieces of architecture was also highlighted by Paolo Portoghesi, who tried to distance his 1980 Biennale from previous “elitist” editions and insisted on the importance of building with the precise goal to reach the general public: “Architecture is not for architects—it’s for the public.”<sup>3</sup> An architecture exhibition rooted in a brief should render apparent the reasoning and choices that make architecture *before* the individual choices made by architects. What follows is a series of considerations about a non-comprehensive list of elements of the brief; a working blueprint for the scripting of a possible architecture exhibition.

### *Theme*

Working with a brief means choosing a design theme. The responsibility of proposing, or better *imposing*, the theme on both the participants and the public rests on curators’ shoulders. The choice of a design theme, a definition that is broader than the notion of program (which is immediately tied to the fulfilment of functional needs), implies a clear view on what is relevant to design today. Thematic categories are a frequently used strategy to display pre-existing content under a single banner. Yet, in a brief-based exhibition, the theme identifies a specific field of investigation waiting for new design responses, like the question of social housing in an evolving urban realm, or the appearance of tall buildings or interior

spaces.<sup>4</sup>

The choice of a theme does not imply the breadth of scope of a thematic exhibition, nor should it prevent digressions from the chosen theme. In the end, it is an effective strategy to create a common ground for dialogue. Enduring themes and questions that are not specific to a time and place can prompt different answers at different moments in history. Such was the case of the Chicago Tribune competition in 1922, whose brief posed the essential question of how a tall building should look like? Due to the continued public relevance of this question, what started out as a competition brief was reenacted twice as an exhibition, in 1980 and 2016.<sup>5</sup>

### *Site, Environment, Context*

The choice of a site complements the boundaries that are given to the designers by choosing a theme. While this concept is rather straightforward in architectural practice, being the presence of a limited portion of space (the plot) necessary for any building to exist, a site as such is not a requisite for an architecture exhibition, which can focus instead on ideal or theoretical propositions. The concept of site might therefore be too conceptually tight for an exhibition, and it might be necessary to work instead with concepts such as context or environment.

According to Vittorio Gregotti, curator of the “Proposte per il Molino Stucky,” the first architecture exhibition held at the Venice Biennale in 1975, a site for an exhibition project brief should be at the same time pretextual (incidental) and specific (not random): pretextual, as the chosen site should present an exemplary conditions and contemporary issues also found elsewhere, while specific, in that the site is able to bring questions to the table that it renders with precision and necessity.<sup>6</sup> But choosing an environment, or more generally a context for the brief, is a gesture that goes beyond the notion of site-specificity.

Acting within and in response to a given reality implies modification. To define a context makes it necessary to consider the geographical, social, and cultural consequences of such hypothesized modifications. Public reactions to the exhibition, in this sense, which may or may not coincide with the communities affected by the design speculation, are part of the context of the project itself. Tying an exhibition to a specific place, a condition, or an environment can appeal to a broad audience that can relate on different levels to these categories without being populist. It is a way to challenge the perception of architecture as a discipline devoted to formal speculation and to showcase how it can affect the public sphere.

### *Deliverables*

As with a scientific experiment, homogeneity is of crucial importance for success; not of the results, but of the ways they are measured. In the context of this specific kind of architecture exhibition, the issue of comparability between different proposals and approaches has value in itself. As Jean Louis Cohen remarks: “exhibitions rely generally on representations produced within the framework of the design process, and thus they rely on a very specific kind of approach to the use of documents often created without the idea of exhibition.”<sup>7</sup> Deliverables and their formats can be framed as a further field of shared experimentation to which the participants are called to respond. Like the project itself, its representation in the context of an exhibition is freed from the need to be exact and descriptive, and could rather illustrate it at a conceptual or evocative level. Mixed reality (MR) experiences can allow for a building exhibition without actually having to build anything.

### *Client*

What makes projects done within the context of an architecture exhibition different from other types or modes of producing architecture is that they are not done for a specific client understood in the traditional sense, as the final user or owner of the space. This means that they are at least partially freed from the constraints that usually determine the commissioning of projects and buildings: budget, planning regulations, the client’s taste, the

expectations of a public, dominant political narratives, performance standards, and so on. Not having a definite client, or choosing who the client is, means rethinking the idea of service that is inherent to the professional practice of architecture.

### *Timeline*

The timeline regulates the process of the exhibition, its production. It frames the dialogue between curators and participants and establishes a series of progressive responsibilities like confirmation of participants, questions and answers, and final delivery. Despite the appearance of an impersonal rigor, the timeline ends up being a malleable too. Imperative deadlines compose the virtual scaffolding that sustain the exhibition advancements, but at the same time articulates the continuous exchange between the parties. This exchange, which follows a self-determined pattern—continuous and regular or rare and radical—adds an unpredictable cadence to the timeline. Within this uncertain condition lies the occasion to question the brief, tamper with it, and eventually reposition oneself.

### *Attachments*

In favor of clarity, briefs tend to be concise and linear. Digression, however, is a fundamental tool to articulate discourse on a specific topic. Attachments serve as an unnecessary extension of the brief itself. Except for some fundamental documents, such as the site plan, these documents serve to build a shared context both in spatial and theoretical terms open to be criticized, embraced, or ignored. Attachments and addendums—documents like drawings, essays, photographs, and images—can provide additional information and facilitate unexpected paths of analogous thought.

### *Participants*

The brief of an exhibition is usually shared with a limited number of participants selected by curators. Even the supposed inclusiveness of an open call often means that the process of exclusion is only postponed. The relationship between the theme and the participants in the exhibition can take different forms and defines a margin of unpredictability that manifests in the final outputs. Putting together a relevant selection of participants is ultimately an aspect that is not specific to this kind of exhibition, but it can determine its success as a “place which accelerates communication” with the public and among the participants themselves, as well as its tone, from celebration to conflict.<sup>8</sup>

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*Solicited: Proposals* is a project initiated by **ArkDes** and e-flux Architecture.

1

Many are the exhibitions that sought to imagine an alternative to the consolidated development of a certain spatial phenomenon. A few examples touching different aspects of the field can give us an idea of the variety of occasions for reflection that this approach can offer. *Roma Interrotta*, organized by the then mayor of Rome Giulio Carlo Argan in 1978, worked at the urban scale, radically questioning the modern urban development of the capital of Italy. *Das Ideale Museum* curated by Heinrich Klotz at Documenta 8 in 1987 reflected on a specific building typology, the Museum, in the light of then “much-discussed decline of the utopian” and the relationship between art, the market and its containers (see Stefaan Vervoort, *Schizophrenia, Myth and Museum. Architecture at documenta 8 (1987)* in *OASE #88 Exhibitions - Showing and Producing Architecture*, 2012). *White House Redux*, curated by Joseph Grima at the Storefront for Art and Architecture during the presidential campaign of 2008, focused instead on a single building, calling for alternative designs for “the residence of the most powerful individual in the world” as stated in the brief.

2

“Strada Novissima” in *The Presence of the Past, First International Architecture Exhibition* (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1980).

3

Aaron Levy and William Menking in conversation with Paolo Portoghesi in *Architecture on Display: On the History of the Venice Biennale of Architecture* (London: AA Publications, 2010).

4

Social housing in an evolving urban realm was the theme of IBA exhibitions. Tall buildings was the theme of the Vertical City exhibition, and interior spaces was the theme of the Horizontal City exhibition, both at the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennale.

5

The Chicago Tribune competition of 1922 was reenacted first with *The Late Entries to the Chicago Tribune Competition*, curated by Stanley Tigerman, Stuart E. Cohen and Rhona Hoffman in 1980, then in the *Vertical City* exhibition at the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial, *Make New History*, curated by Sharon

Johnston and Mark Lee.

6

Vittorio Gregotti, from the catalog *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, Alfieri, Milan 1975.

7

Jean-Louis Cohen, *Exhibitionist Revisionism: Exposing Architectural History*, in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, 3 (Sept. 1999): 316–325.

8

Francesco Dal Co, “To Exhibit, to Display, and to Put on Show,” in Sergio Polano ed. *Mostrare: Exhibition Design in Italy from the Twenties to the Eighties* (Milan: Edizioni Lybria Immagine, 1988).