

ENERGY. OIL AND POST-OIL ARCHITECTURE AND GRIDS

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Energetic Cure

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The first exhibitions held at the MAXXI, at the start of the last decade, were mounted in the old barracks, when the new building was still just a huge and promising construction site, a direct offshoot of the Ministry and not an independent body. In these past ten years, apart from the shift from Museum to Foundation, there have been myriad exhibitions, but there has, above all, been an unpredictable phenomenon that has witnessed a change in the very concept of curatorship.

Until the late 20th century, the curator was still a rather undefined figure, poised somewhere between a scholar, a museum director, a conservator and a critic, whose profile was gradually determined by way of the exhibitions he or she

realized. The contemporary art world was obviously more evolved, thanks especially to the *practice* of certain charismatic figures who, in the second part of the past century, bestowed (some of them still do) importance to the role.

In architecture, we were still stuck at Arthur Drexler (and a few others) and the felicitous forays of figures from other professional fields. The exhibitions we can recall, in Italy and elsewhere, were the work of Johnson, Gregotti, De Carlo,

Portoghesi, Nicolini, Tafuri, Rossi, Wigley and others, according to a line of “non-specialists” that comes all the way up to the most recent Biennials. These were all people who were not particularly interested in the development of the professional figure of the “curator of architectural exhibitions,” but that considered such exhibitions to be an instrument that could be used to further the development of their investigation and communicate their viewpoint.

Suddenly, in recent years, the situation has changed radically: *curating*, from being a practice, has become a discipline with hypothetical scientific assumptions (?), at the heart of an infinite multitude of educational projects, this time not limited to the theme of art, but rather always also addressed to the area of architecture and related disciplines. In other words, all of a sudden we realized that when we work on an exhibition we are not just trying to organize a sequence of materials and ideas that are functional to the communication of some concept; we are also making a specific critical contribution to the “theory” of *curating* and to the definition of the ideal architecture curator. Within this picture, the presentation of a show of a curatorial nature such as *ENERGY. Oil and Post-Oil Architecture and Grids* seems to be an important opportunity to make even clearer the “MAXXI approach” to the curatorial obsession that shakes up museums, universities, magazines and public lectures (including the ones we ourselves organize).

From this viewpoint, an exhibition such as *ENERGY* reveals its ambivalent nature. On the one hand, it aims to consolidate the idea that in a museum like the MAXXI, which by definition is not just for people who work in the area of architecture, each exhibition must be the fruit of careful curatorial thinking, and it must breathe life into a many-voiced dialogue with the public. This must occur by finding constant links with the other disciplines and the other arts, with current issues, science and other languages. On the other hand, the manner itself in which the theme is chosen and the exhibition sequence conceived above all serve to clarify that our range of action is not so much the history of *curating*, but that of architecture and therefore of the way and the values that we communicate through drawings, projects, buildings, models, images, words and many other things.

We are certainly interested in the way we conceive our display sequences. The meaning that we try to produce through exhibition plans and displays must come to terms each and every time with the thinking that is evolving constantly in regard to display spaces and the vibrant role of the museum in the city’s physical space and in the immaterial space of the history of ideas. Even more than this, however, also in view of the current condition of architecture in Italy and the world, we are interested in playing an active role in the definition of tools and goals that designers can pursue in a global scenario that generally tends to confine them to an area that is closer to that of communication and art than building—it seems that no more than 3% of buildings in the world are designed by architects. We are fully aware, as clearly shown by the exhibition, that to prepare well for the future we must continue to consider and investigate the closer roots of contemporary architectural thinking, enriching the archives, turning them into accessible and knowledge-rich sources, thus subtracting them as far as possible from the isolation of history, to instead get them to react with the contemporary context. Which is precisely the case with this exhibition.

Hence, with our work, more than nurturing a sort of paradoxical (disciplinary) autonomy of curatorship, which seems to be taking shape quickly—perhaps at the same pace as the number of “new museums” growing in China—we seek to recuperate the active role that architectural thinking and its above-mentioned exponents once held in the activity of the great Italian exhibition venues up until the 1980s.

The way in which this reasoning is reflected in the exhibition program for *ENERGY* is rather immediate. First of all, the exhibition starts from a series of projects linked to the topicality of the issue of the environment and the specific contribution that can be made to this field by architectural thinking. The exhibition comes after *RE-CYCLE* and it will be followed by other projects of use to framing the possible ebbs and flows in the relationship between architecture and the world.

The starting idea for this investigation is a rather simple one. After two or three decades of economic abundance and expressive happiness, architecture today is in search of new ideas and possible answers (and new “masters” as well). It is doing so by coming to terms with art, with politics, with science; it is forced to do so—perhaps rather reluctantly—by entering the discussion that has to do with the environment, lifestyles, the future of the planet and its inhabitants. Until now this dialogue has been hegemonized by technological issues, with results that are no doubt interesting, but with the effect of making the contribution of creativity and thinking to the space of such an important area for the everyday lives of people appear even more useless. Among other things, the technological answer tends to make us think that we can forever behave in the same way (i.e. the environment, the resources, etc.), only if we use more sophisticated and efficient technology, even if it is more costly in terms of planning and realization.

Now is the time to clarify that the environmental issue is an “aesthetic imperative” (Lance Hosey in *Design Observer*), that we cannot reconsider earth and resource consumption without a new lifestyle, and that there is no new lifestyle without an aesthetic form. Our task (or at least one of the tasks of the curator and of the museum) is to contribute to the research into that aesthetic form and the promotion of spatial, expressive urban studies that head in that direction.

Quite how all this converges into *ENERGY. Oil and Post-Oil Architecture and Grids* is equally simple. The exhibition is born out of the belief, a rather obvious one, that during the 20th century there was an indissoluble link between modernity and architecture, linked to the road and movement. In particular in Italy, *on the road* projects have always represented an avant-garde territory, a territory of particularly frank modernity, perhaps because of the virtuous relationship with industry, perhaps because of the “safety distance” from the historical centers and from the much-feared contamination of the heritage with “contemporary architectures,” perhaps because of the stimulating relationship with the landscape and the half-conscious legacy of the avant-gardes. On the one hand, this relationship produced an awesome repertoire of images and buildings, by now historicized, which the exhibition intends to in part bring back to light. On the other, it is inevitable to note how the product of this relationship has today somehow entered a “crisis,” or that it is in any case less interesting and progressive. Its raw material – oil – in fact stands accused from various viewpoints, and even its chief motive, “movement,” begins to be looked at with suspicion by the supporters of “zero kilometer” strategies. So we have decided to organize a series of coordinated exhibition actions that will allow us to re-evaluate the *legacy* of that golden age and make it available to those who approach these issues today, as well as to revive a collaboration between architecture, energy grids and movement on new and expanded grounds.

The result of this is a three-part exhibition, one in which we continually move from past to present to future, in which the different sections are constantly communicating in space (that of the museum) and in time. As for the legacy of the “age of highways,” the museum has chosen to serve as a junction between its own archive and those of some of the most important companies and institutions (eni, Autogrill, IUAV, etc.), and it has built a pathway made up of drawings and projects that bear witness to a remarkable wealth of material.

Drawings, models and reproductions of the projects of some of the most important Italian architects will be of use to the public to understand how the delicate and unstable balance between conservation and modernity was achieved in Italy also thanks to the quality of the contribution of companies and the designers who built the new landscape of movement. The essays by the curators and authors who have been invited will help us to reconstruct the premises and the coordinates of that landscape, but also to compare it with what has been taking place in the rest of Europe, and, most importantly, in North America, the real home of Autopia.

In spite of the limited amount of space and the limited budget we thought it would be impossible to go back to one of Italian architecture’s favorite ‘crime scenes’ – the road and everything that is connected to it – without paying tribute to those who before us grasped the importance of these landscapes in the construction of an aesthetic coherent with our time, that is to say, the photographers. Indeed, the photos taken by Luigi Ghirri, Gabriele Basilico and Olivo Barbieri forced Italian architects and scholars to stick their necks out of their

comfortable and rigorous studies and actually go see the strange spaces and the strange architectural creatures that their friends' pictures unexpectedly "beautified." Or at least made interesting and exciting.

The ordinariness of the road as the scene of post-urban life in Ghirri's work, the wide highway perspectives in that of Basilico, the frozen vision from the sky of streets and monumental ways in that of Barbieri, have indicated new fields of the essential application of knowledge to those who deal with design and urban planning. Or fields to venture across in order to find the material needed to renew their knowledge.

Even in the MAXXI's own specific history, work to record the landscape (*Atlante Italiano 003*) began with a photographic investigation at the heart of which lay precisely the themes that we are dealing with today with a different, newer spirit.

Now that ten years have passed we like to return to the subject with new concepts and a new generation of photographers who have been willing to discuss the same themes by framing them within a less heroic and more analytical and deconstructed vision. Pellegrin investigates the origin of grids; Cimmino studies the light that filters from its terminals; Di Bello comes into contact with the human varieties that mingle there and that in some way are aesthetically determined.

Visions, the section of the exhibition dedicated to architects and contemporary research, immediately embodies the curatorial choices we mentioned at the beginning. The project determines a theme that goes beyond the mere disciplinary sphere of architecture and instead invades the space of life and things. It then asks the architects to express a viewpoint and their proposals on what the *future form of grids* that distribute energy will be. This was asked of seven architects chosen on the grounds of geographical – five different continents – and generational – they do not belong to the group of *starchitects* who have dominated the scene for the past twenty years – criteria. This should guarantee variety and innovation in respect to what is already known about architecture. The exhibition then asked the architects – as it did the photographers – to carry out a specific task for the exhibition, to create an installation through which to communicate their ideas on the subject. This allows us, on the one hand, to skip over with a single step the tedious debate on "work and representation of the project," given that the representation *is* the project, and on the other, to conceive the exhibitions as a "dynamic cure" for the collection that is enriched with a small yet new, unpublished and inherently coherent acquisition.

Visions is also the most efficient device for breaking the disciplinary limits of the exhibition. Apart from the efforts of the individual architects who obviously ventured into the contemporary energy labyrinth, the section also welcomes several forays into the fields of art and scientific research, characterized by the great potential impact on network architecture.

We have thus decided to show the OMA AMO studio's research into the energy set-up Europa 2050, which tells us that we are not preparing to replace energy resources but to add to them.

We have then taken a step in that complicated direction where art and science meet, inviting an outside curator to collaborate with an Italian studio to tell the story of a virtuous highway from Berlin to Palermo. Naturally, no one can overlook the fact that many artists have for years been working with remarkable intelligence and sensitivity on the energy theme. Starting from the sublime and multi-purpose pages written by Pier Paolo Pasolini in *Petrolio*, to the work of artists like Simon Starling, capable of bestowing a perfect form to the energetic paradox.

The exhibition ends, symbolically, with a dizzying return to reality. In particular, the reality in question is a beautiful project just drawn up by the Morphosis studio for the last building of Metanopoli. The long horizontal skyscraper by the

Thom Mayne studio unfolds with energy and a yearning for the future in the Milanese outskirts, and it above all serves to underscore how the topic being examined at this exhibition is all but exhausted.

On the current architectural stage the capacity for dialogue between the most far-sighted designers and private partners is crucial, especially when we deal with questions like these, ones that involve the relationship between energy and space, so close to the heart of our times.