Architecture "Out of the Box"
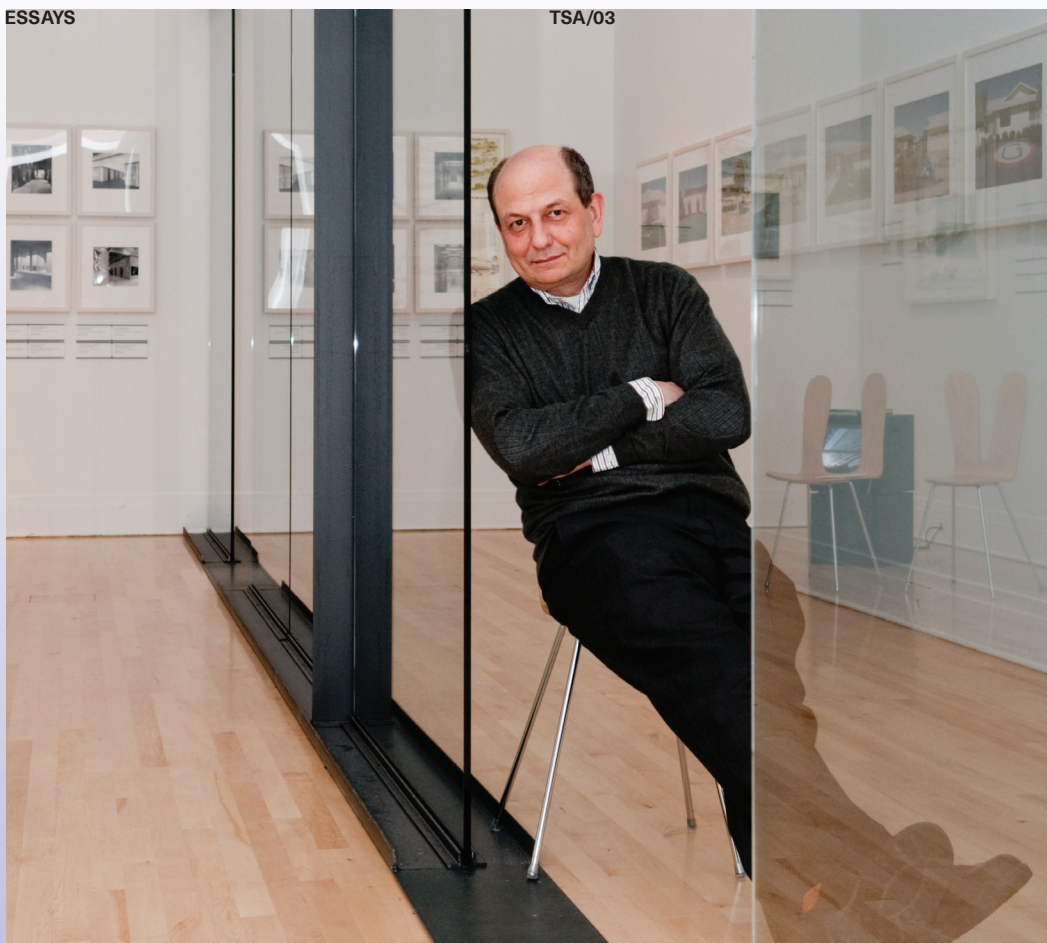
The Canadian Centre for Architecture & Mirko Zardini

By IPEK TÜRELI

fig. 1

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A Brief History of the Canadian Centre for Architecture

Under the direction of Mirko Zardini since 2005, the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal, Canada, has been mounting exhibitions that encourage an understanding of architecture that is inherently political.

Despite what its name may evoke at first hearing, the CCA is not a nation-state-focused institution; it is the Canadian Centre for Architecture, and not the Centre for Canadian Architecture. It was founded in 1979 by celebrated Canadian public figure, architect, patron and philanthropist Phyllis Lambert. Lambert is one of the heirs of the Bronfman family and was key in the recruitment, in the late 1950s, of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as the architect of the iconic Seagram Building in New York, owned by her father Samuel Bronfman, founder of the Canadian distillery dynasty Seagram[1] and influential in the acceptance of architectural modernism of the Miesian kind as the American corporate architectural idiom. At its

moment of founding two decades later, the CCA, Lambert's creation and the fruit of her many years' of dedication and work, was part of an international movement to create specialized, distinctive institutions for architecture. It is no coincidence that also in 1979 the International Council of Architecture Museums (ICAM), of which the CCA is a member, was founded.

Around those years, at the height of postmodernism, architectural history enjoyed a special place in defining architectural discourse, guiding both practice and education. And the CCA was initially focused on collecting, opening to the public only in 1989. The building's architectural design (1985-89) by Peter Rose and in collaboration with Lambert and Erol Argun reflects the idioms and sensibilities of architectural postmodernism. The C-shaped plan gently wraps around the Shaughnessy House mansion, which Lambert saved from demolition, and remains arguably the only object at the Centre on permanent exhibit—talks are held on its publicly accessible floor. Complementing the

1   Phyllis Lambert, *Building Seagam*, (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2013)

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work of the CCA, Lambert also encouraged McGill University to create a graduate programme option in History and Theory, at the School of Architecture, which launched in 1987 under the direction of Alberto Perez-Gomez. The PhD Program in Architecture at McGill was the first (1987), and remained the only one, in Canada until recently, training specialists in history and theory. These specialists would become active users of the CCA's collection.

Today, the CCA features a collection (with over 100,000 prints, more than 60,000 photographs, 150 archives, and 215,000 publications), research programmes, a bookstore, a publishing programme encompassing print and electronic books, online presence, and perhaps most importantly, an exhibition gallery with a dynamic programme of shows, guided tours, talks, and other related public activities.

Zardini Enters Scene

Architectural history is no longer as revered in architectural thinking, in theory or practice, as it used to be back in the late 1970s and much of the 1980s. How has an institution like the CCA responded? Recruiting Mirko Zardini, the CCA found a curator that matched its evolving ambitions. Notably, Zardini views exhibitions as a way of exploring contemporary, and emerging social and environmental issues.

Back in 2005, Zardini was perhaps recognized more as a practicing Italian architect, a professor of architecture (at ETH, Harvard GSD, the University of Lausanne), as author (*Annahernd perfekte Peripherie* /An almost perfect periphery, 2001; *Paesaggi ibridi: Un viaggio nella citt contemporanea*, 1996), and architectural magazine editor (*Casabella* from 1983 to 1988, and *Lotus International* between 1988 and 1999). Participation in earlier exhibitions included *"Il centro altrove"* (Centre Elsewhere) at the Milan Triennial (1995) and *"Parking Plus Picturesque"* at the EPFL, Lausanne (2000). His first large scale curatorial commission, together with Giovanna Borasi, with whom he would go on to collaborate on subsequent exhibitions at the CCA, was for the Triennial of Milan,

and entitled *Asfalto* (Asphalt: The Character of the Cities, 2003).

Before being appointed to the CCA, as Director and Chief Curator, Zardini had been working with the CCA for over two years and acting as Visiting Curator for the exhibitions *Out of the Box: Price, Rossi, Stirling + Matta-Clark* (2004), *Learning From... Ruscha and Venturi Scott Brown - 1962-1977* (2004), and *Sense of the City* (2005). The *Out of the Box* exhibition was based on the then recently acquired archives of these seminal figures of art and architecture—"out of the box" referred to the nature of the exhibition, as the "first look" into the archives of these coeval figures, arranged in the exhibition,

according to press statements, in an "unstable" condition, open to future arrangements and changes. This curatorial strategy, juxtaposing dissimilar figures, seems to have worked well with the CCA's acquisition policy of collecting multi-media material and complete or comprehensive archives.

A distinction that sets the CCA apart and precedes the arrival of Zardini, and one which both staff and administrators at the CCA often mention is that CCA collects all sorts of material connected

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to the built environment, from children's toys to photography albums to trade magazines; and during acquisitions of individual's archives, all types of production rather than solely the "best drawings" that could lend themselves better to monographic or biographic exhibitions to which some of the other more traditional museum and library archives are drawn to. Since 2005, the CCA's collections of architects' archives are donated to the CCA, rather than being purchased or actively solicited. The collection proudly features the archives of Ábalos & Herreros, Foreign Office Architects, Peter Eisenman, Arthur Erickson, John Quentin Hejduk, Gordon Matta-Clark, Cedric Price, Aldo Rossi,

James Stirling, Álvaro Siza among others.[2]

Zardini is interested in an expanded understanding of architecture, in particular, in the city. One of the most successful and influential exhibitions Zardini put together, *Sense of the City* challenged the predominance of the visual in interpreting the urban, paying attention to sensory conditions, perceptions, and phenomena typically ignored or repressed. The focus on the city has continued. Moreover, innovative exhibitions such as *Actions: What You Can Do With the City* (2009) and *ABC: MTL, A Self-Portrait of Montreal* (2012) were curated following

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2   For an account of the CCA's institutional strategies from Lambert, see: "The Architectural Museum: A Founder's Perspective," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, No. 3, Architectural History 1999/2000 (September 1999): 308-315

fig. 7

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open calls, instigating a participatory approach to curation.

More than a decade and many exhibitions later under the directorship of Zardini, the current exhibition *The Other Architect* curated by Giovanna Borasi brings together a large number (23 to be precise) of different case studies from the 1960s to today, to show how architects, often working collectively, have invented ways of working outside the conventional design practice, and as explained in the press release by the curatorial team, cases that "emphasize[d] the potential for architecture to identify the urgent issues of our time." Central is the idea is that architecture is "more than building," that it is the production of ideas. The exhibition material, ranging from books, posters, manifestoes, letters, reports, surveys, meeting notes, to TV shows, is presented on tables, evoking a working (atelier/research) environment without any directionality or chronology. The viewer temporarily assumes the subject position of the researcher looking at the bits or "first looks" "out of the box" and can potentially form his/her narrative, and decide to dig deeper by going into the archival collections.

Choosing Exhibition Themes

"We don't do an exhibition because we want people to come to the CCA," Zardini declares. "We do an exhibition because we think an exhibition is really a tool to think in a different way, to develop a certain kind of discourse." Zardini emphasizes that the CCA has abandoned the monographic shows of architecture or architects in favour of exhibitions about architecture. "To do a monographic show is too much connected to a self-promotion marketing strategy," explains Zardini. "That is very strong in contemporary architecture. So we deliberately avoid any monographic show. And when we do shows on contemporary architects, we always have two of them around a theme as a critical discourse, the important thing is not the architect but the theme that is emerging from the confrontation of the two of them." At the CCA's 2014 exhibition *Rooms You May Have Missed: Bijoy Jain, Umberto Riva*, two architects from different generations (Riva born in 1928 while Jain in 1965) and parts of the world (Italy and India respectively) were juxtaposed for their treatment of the room as the elemental unit of architecture

in residential designs. Similarly paired architects were featured in *Some Ideas on Living in London and Tokyo by Stephen Taylor and Ryue Nishizawa* (2008), and *Environment: Approaches for Tomorrow – Gilles Clément, Phillipe Rahm* (2006).

To explain the uniqueness of this curatorial vision by comparison, for example, North America's other prominent establishment in the realm of architecture, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) tends to do shows that present exemplary buildings in their absence. Indeed MoMA's *Latin American Architecture in Construction* (2015) refers back to MoMA's 1955 survey exhibition *Latin American Architecture since 1945* promoting not only Latin American Architecture but also MoMA's visionary history in having mounted the former exhibition 60 years ago. The main difference between more established institutions which focus on the work of seminal architects and their experimental, exemplary designs, and the much younger CCA is that the latter tends to explore how architecture is imbricated in societal, cultural and political issues. The names of some of the past CCA exhibitions that do not focus on architects are especially telling: *Journeys: How travelling fruit, ideas and buildings rearrange our environment* (2011), *1973: Sorry, Out of Gas* (2007-8), *Imperfect Health: The Medicalization of Architecture* (2011-2). These relate and respond to contemporary, immediate public debates.

The emphasis on topicality must bring added pressure to the curatorial team in terms of scheduling. Zardini explains that many different projects are developed simultaneously; and not all of them get to see light in the form of an exhibition. When a topic is selected, the CCA has a relatively short time frame—roughly a year— to mount the exhibition, and to bring out the printed accompanying book and online content. The relatively intimate scale of the institution, and its relative financial autonomy enables such rapid production: "We are very careful not to get any money that could limit our freedom," says Zardini. In addition, the installations, exhibition designs, appear to be quiet low-cost operations, potentially enabling for intellectual freedom. For example, usually a tabletop display

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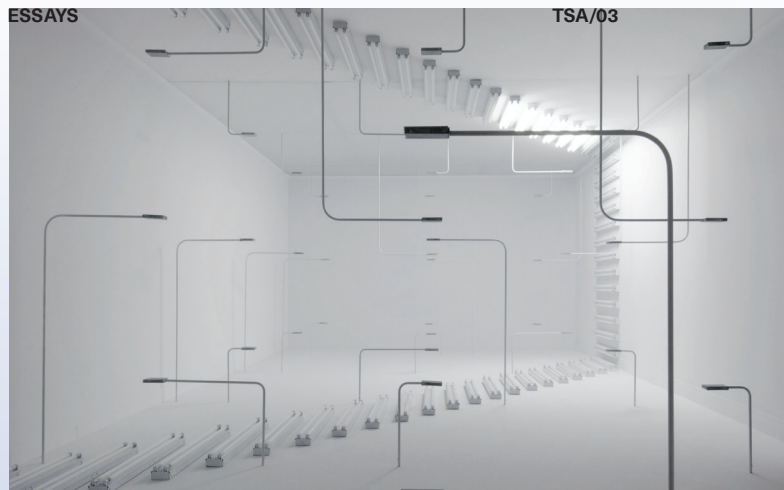
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format is adapted with limited use of conventional wall-mounted frames and infrequent audiovisual displays. While the CCA pays attention to its web portal, and while Zardini emphasizes in various interviews the importance of digital presence, technological innovations, such as augmented reality, interactive gaming and mobile apps, eagerly adopted in other museums of international stature, are not a strategic priority in most of the physical exhibitions of the CCA.

The result of the short span in which the CCA exhibitions are prepared is that some of the exhibitions are timely, registered by the appearance of exhibitions, books, research initiatives, with analogous themes or strategies at other institutions as well as numerous reviews soon after, while others are too early, making them look less successful. Such a "timely" exhibition was *Imperfect Health*, which took issue with the valorization of the category of "health" with its categories of "sick" and "healthy" in everyday life and politics rather than focusing on the obvious building type,

the hospital. It questioned the environmentally deterministic tendency to propose to cure health issues with design solutions in architecture and planning disciplines and practices, and instead, sought to unravel the complexity of the problem. The most well-timed of past exhibitions was arguably *1973: Sorry, Out of Gas* (2007-8) which studied the architectural experiments spurred by the oil crisis of 1973: This exhibition coincided with and spoke directly to concerns arising from the burst in 2008 of the housing bubble in the US, and the resulting economic meltdown, which had ripple effects around the world. In contrast to *Imperfect Health* and *1973: Sorry, Out of Gas*, *Journeys* examined the impact on the built environment of mobility and hybridization taking departure of the social reality and discussions on migration: "*Journeys* was a way to address, in a more provocative and

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positive way, the negative critique that we have today towards immigration and cultural differences; a way to say that the migration of ideas, objects, situations is inevitable ... producing more interesting result in some cases." It was possibly too early, Zardini ruminates: Had our current mediatized awareness of the global refugee crisis existed back five years ago, that exhibition could have enjoyed better or more extensive reception.

"Collection is not an Objective; It is a Tool."

At the CCA, there is a fluid relationship between the archive/collections, print and online publications, exhibitions, and events. The particular approach varies greatly according to a project's theme. Some exhibitions are based on loans, others on material already held in the CCA's collection, and others still on material that may be acquired during the design of the exhibition (as was the case with work from Bijoy Jain and Umberto Riva following *Rooms You May Have Missed: Bijoy Jain, Umberto Riva*). Material is also occasionally produced by the CCA or other authors for a specific project, or simply purchased on eBay. Once an exhibition is over, selected objects, case studies collected for the exhibition, events and activities organized around the exhibition become part of the permanent collection. In parallel, a wide

range curatorial opportunities, including the emerging curator programme, enables architects and architectural historians to use the collection and the exhibition format to pursue new ideas.

An inventive practice is the involvement of architects in the design and even curation of exhibitions. To give some examples, *1973: Sorry, Out of Gas* was designed by Montréal-based architect Gilles Saucier of Saucier + Perrotte Architectes; *The Other Architect* was designed by MOS Architects (principals Hilary Sample and Michael Meredith); *How architects, experts, politicians, international agencies and citizens negotiate modern planning: Casablanca Chandigarh* (2013-4) curated by Maristella Casciato and Tom Avermaete was designed by Japan-based Atelier Bow-Wow—rather than using, in-house staff specializing in exhibition design.

More remarkable than architects designing exhibitions perhaps is that they are invited to curate and reflect on their own trajectory and work. The 2013 exhibition *Archaeology of the Digital* and its follow-up in 2014, *Media and Machines*, were guest-curated by Greg Lynn whose own work was at the forefront of the digital turn from the 1980s; hence the show had an autobiographic element. After this, three exhibitions were organized in the

10 — *Environment: Approaches for Tomorrow,* 2006. Concept: Gilles Clément & Philippe Rahm. Graphic Design: Zab Design & Typography. Photograph: © Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal
11 — *1973: Sorry, Out of Gas,* 2008. Installation Design: Saucier + Perrotte Architectes. Graphic Design: Zab Design & Typography. Photograph: © Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal
12 — *Imperfect Health: The Medicalization of Architecture,* 2011. Installation Design: OFFICE. Graphic Design: Jonathan Hares. Photograph: © Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal

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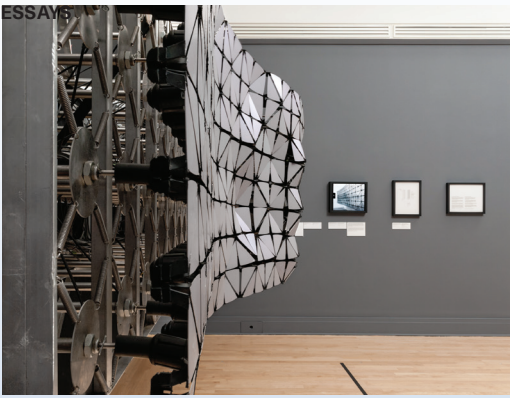
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13 — *Archaeology of the Digital: Media and Machines*, 2014. Design and Graphic Conception: Jonathan Hares. Photograph: © Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal

14 — *Industrial Architecture: Ábalos & Herreros selected by OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen*, 2015 Installation Design: OFFICE. Graphic Design: Jonathan Hares. Photograph: © Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal

Octagonal Gallery based on the Ábalos & Herreros archives; specifically, former apprentices—OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen (Brussels), Juan José Castellón González (Zurich) and SO-IL (principals Florian Idenburg and Jing Liu, New York)—were asked to go in the recently acquired archive, to open boxes, select the material they would exhibit, and to design the display. Asking these architects to look back at their own training, the CCA animated once again an autobiographic self-reflective process. At the same time, these single room exhibitions resulted in three different takes on the same collection exposing most vividly the creative and interpretative process behind any curation.

Why is the CCA bothering to involve practicing architects in curation? Zardini's own multifarious background, having combined private practice, teaching, editorship, authorship, and curation, may give a clue. He suggests his background is representative of a European profile where the architect is seen more as an intellectual, rather than a member of a profession or part of an industry. Involving practitioners is thus an effort, to re-invigorate intellectual debate.

The institution itself is also in a process of perpetual self-critique. The CCA has deliberately tried to combine all the different parts of the institution—the library, archive, study centre, exhibition programme—to dissolve the barriers while benefiting from the know-how each distinct entity possesses; in the words of Zardini, in order "to work in a more horizontal way, more like an architectural office than an institution."

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THE Singapore Architect

Curating and Collecting Architecture

Architecture

Building the M+ Architecture Collection

Colour

"If one says "Red" (the name of a color) and there are 50 people listening, it can be expected that there will be 50 reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different." —Josef Albers

Curating Architecture