



ESSAY/EXHIBITION
DESIGN
BY ABBOTT MILLER

Exhibitions blend the complexities of architectural space with the narrative concerns of book design

From object to observer



MARITIME PAINTING

1. A permanent exhibition of paintings installed at Stockholm's *Maritime Museum* by designers Per Bornstein and Mattias Lind of the Swedish firm *White Architects*. Visitors standing at the gallery's centre point, marked by a red light on the floor, are surrounded by a 360-degree expanse of sea and ships. Photograph: Johan Fowelin, courtesy of *White Architects*.

Exhibition design deals with the disposition of objects in space: their conceptual and physical relationship to one another and to the observer. Coordinating this complex interaction makes the *exhibition* designer a choreographer- of objects, images, texts and people. How we behave in an exhibition, what we feel permitted to do, and how we interact with what is on display are all aspects of design. Exhibitions blend the complex factors of architectural space with the narrative concerns of book and magazine design

From early cabinets of curiosity to the modern museum, techniques for presenting objects and images - frames, pedestals, vitrines and dioramas - have developed into a codified repertoire. In the 1920S, the European avant-garde reinvigorated the language of exhibitions by shifting the emphasis from staging the object to staging the observer. Whereas traditional exhibitions had assumed an idealised and disembodied viewer, avant-garde designers were captivated by the idea of a dynamic observer. A drawing by Herbert Bayer represented a figure in an exhibition as a big eyeball resting on a body. Positioned on a platform and enveloped by angled planes, the eye-body is a vivid illustration of the Modernist desire to both expand the field of vision and situate the body in space and time. Both Bayer and Walter Gropius would employ these techniques in their work on exhibitions in Europe and the us, establishing the angled, floating graphic planes as one of the dominant tropes of modern exhibition design.

Among avant-garde designers, new attitudes

Artefacts
Narrative
Modernism
Museums
Spatial design
Touch-screens



2. Works at Stockholm's Maritime Museum are hung on individual supports to form a consistent horizon line of sea and sky.

3 (opposite). This diagram shows how the paintings form a faceted perimeter encircling the viewer. Photographs: Ake E:son Lindman, courtesy of White Architects.

and forms in exhibition design followed directly from developments in painting, sculpture, graphics, film and architecture. In the groundbreaking work of El Lissitzky - who considered exhibition design to be his most important contribution - the viewer is both subject and object. In 1927, the visionary museum director Alexander Dorner invited Lissitzky to create a contemporary art room at the Landesmuseum in Hanover, Germany. Lissitzky covered the walls with coloured wooden strips, creating different effects on visitors as they moved through the gallery, while sliding panels revealed different examples of de Stijl and Constructivist art. Lissitzky's 1928 'Pressa' exhibition brought photomontage techniques to exhibition design, dissolving the boundaries between the physical space and the more abstract space of photography and mass media.

Frederick Kiesler's landmark 'Exhibition of New Theatre Techniques' (1924) in Vienna allowed visitors to adjust the height and viewing angle of works on display. Kiesler named the system the 'L and T' based on its modular, typographic construction; it helped inaugurate the constructive language of present-day exhibition design. What made it both radical and influential was the way it treated the exhibition system as an entity independent of its architectural setting - an abstract sculptural event in space. The project, with its responsiveness to the observer's manipulation, marked an early, radical rethinking of the relationship between object and observer, making that relationship reciprocal and malleable.

In today's context, the heritage of both 'conventional' techniques and Modernist strategies coexist. Designers must stay attuned to the importance of staging the object, but the ambition to 'stage the observer' demands a wider frame of reference, one concerned with the total experience of the viewer / reader, and a broader context of interpretation. These strategies can engage visitors and dramatise their encounter with original artefacts, or they can create a context for ideas in the absence of compelling artefacts.

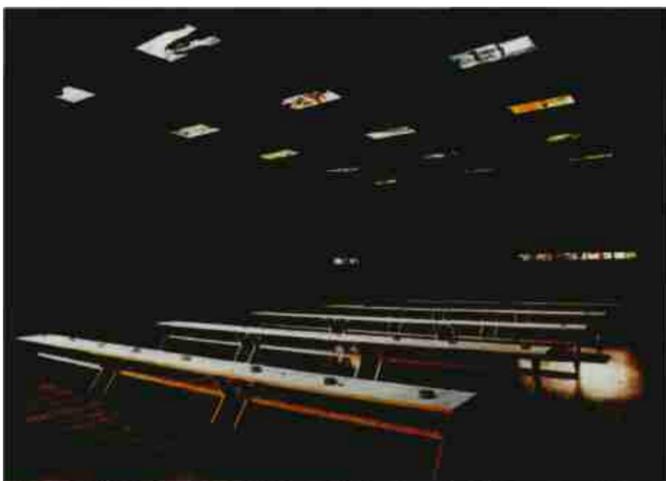
Collections of objects present special challenges for exhibitions. In the case of

collections based on a typology (costumes or genre painting, for instance), the repetition of similar artefacts can be problematic. By contrast, a collection based on the identity of the collector or of an institution can be distractingly heterogeneous. Two permanent exhibitions on view in European museums manage to animate collections of repetitive artefacts, orchestrating the similarity of parts into a powerful statement about the whole.

Dialogue with the ocean

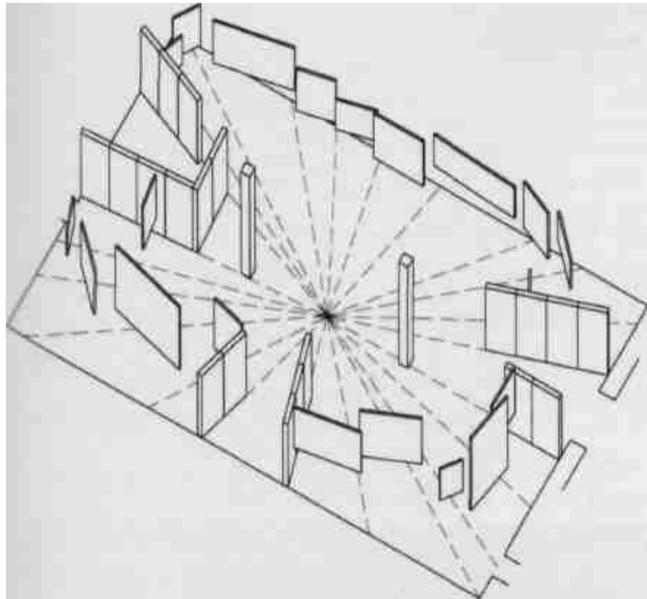
An exhibition of paintings installed at the Maritime Museum in Stockholm, by designers Per Bornstein and Mattias Lind of the Swedish firm White Architects, arranges a gallery of maritime paintings to form a consistent horizon line. Visitors standing at the centre of the gallery are enveloped by a 360-degree expanse of sea and ships. As they stray from that central point, the composition splinters into an array of facets. The paintings float in an expanse of blackness, hung on freestanding supports that paradoxically foreground their materiality as objects while heightening the illusion of a panoramic vista. The installation dramatises the continuity of sea and sky, rendering individual works as part of a greater dialogue with the ocean. As observers move in closer to the paintings and stray from the centre point (marked by a red light beamed on to the floor) the singular impression of the collection gives way to the impact of individual paintings. The installation modulates between object and observer, providing moments when individual objects move to the foreground and other times when the 'story' is all about the observer's perspective within the gallery.

A similar transformation is evident in a permanent exhibition by the artist Barbara Bloom at the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) in Vienna. The museum invited a group of artists to work with curators at MAK to create a series of permanent installations. Bloom's subject consisted of an array of fin-de-siecle bentwood furniture from the Thonet company. Her installation lines a long gallery with a parade of Thonet pieces - a visual essay on the profusion of stylistic effects of the bentwood technique. The beauty of the installation consists in the way



HERZOG & DEMEURON FOR MoMA

4. 'Herzog & de Meuron, Perception Restrained' is an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York by the Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron. The show restages aspects of the museum's collection of painting, sculpture, design and photography. The project is a repudiation of the sanctity of MoMA's 'white cube' aesthetic. Photograph: Matthu Placek, © 2006 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Bloom positions the furniture behind two long scrims, showing us the cast shadows of the objects. The installation gives us diagram and silhouette first, with the full three-dimensional experience available only after walking behind the scrim. It is a powerful example of how design can foreground aspects of a collection and create a narrative sequence through the act of disclosure. The shadow view has the effect of heightening the experience, making the observer focus on its most salient properties, by withholding information.

The use of design as an instrument of 'withholding' information is taken to an extreme in a recent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York by the Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron. Their installation, 'Herzog & de Meuron, Perception Restrained', restages aspects of the museum's collection of painting, sculpture, design and photography. Visitors enter a dimly lit room filled with simple benches in several long rows. Mounted on the ceiling above is a grid of LCD screens playing silent scenes from MOMA'S film collection that feature

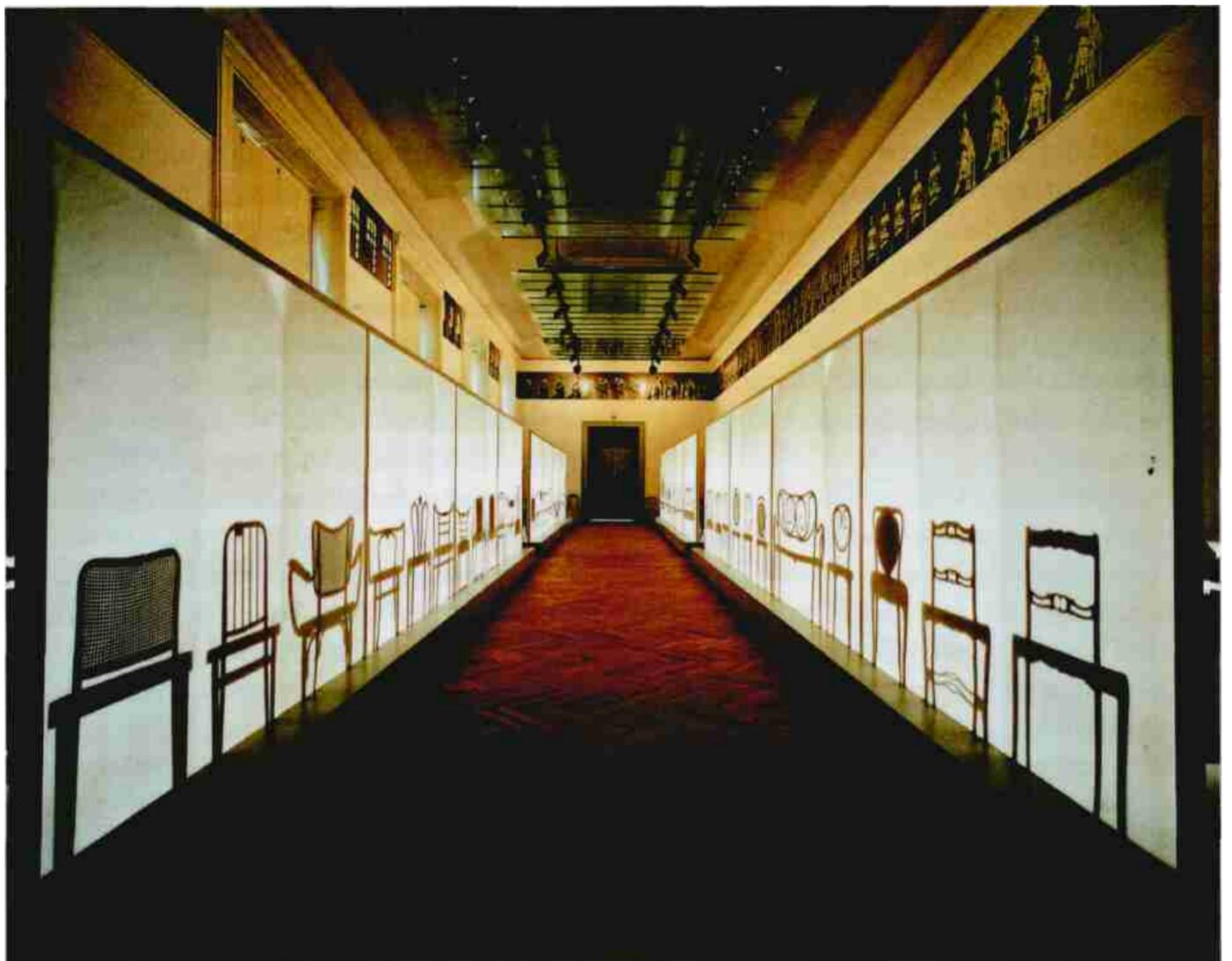
violent and sexually explicit imagery: in the interpretive texts, the architects state that the selections indicate 'the undeniable shift in imagery that has taken place in recent years'.

Along three of the gallery's black walls there are wide slots, not quite big enough to put your head in, but large enough to see into. Peering into these deep slots, reminiscent of gun turrets, one glimpses an array of pieces from the museum's collection arranged in shallow dioramas. Through one slot is an orgy of classics from MOMA'S architecture and design holdings, arranged without any sense of hierarchy or purpose; through another is a dense array of photographs, extending up the wall, stretching left and right beyond the viewer's visual field; in the last slot there is a jam-packed presentation of painting and sculpture. Framed by the slender slot in the wall, set back from the viewer and diminished in scale and impact by their surroundings, they can only be apprehended as a random accumulation.

The architectural projects of Herzog and de Meuron provide complex pleasures: their new

THONET AT MAK

5. An installation of Thonet bentwood furniture for the exhibition room 'Historicism, Art Nouveau' at the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) in Vienna by designing artist Barbara Bloom. The furniture is positioned behind two long scrims: carefully positioned lights create cast shadows of the objects. The full three-dimensional experience of the objects is available only after walking behind the scrim. Photo: Gerald Zugmann / MAK.



CHURCHILL MUSEUM, CABINET WAR ROOMS

6-8. For the Winston Churchill Museum at the Cabinet War Rooms in London, Casson Mann deploys a range of well integrated media elements, including a massive interactive table called the 'Churchill Lifeline'. The software and interaction design was developed by David Small. Multiple users can work independently, simultaneously activating its touch-screen surface, but their actions can also set off effects that animate the entire display surface. Photographs: John Maclean. Exhibition design and lead consultant: Casson Mann. Exhibition graphics: Nick Bell Design. Lighting design: DHA. Lifeline Table software: Small Design Firm.



de Young Museum in San Francisco achieves incredibly rich optical and spatial experiences. However the slots in MOMA'S walls are simple barriers that encumber viewing, and the groupings offer no meaningful or rewarding juxtapositions of objects. The project reads as a repudiation of the sanctity of MOMA'S 'white cube' aesthetic, but the narrowness of this agenda makes the project feel like a one-liner.

Exhibition designers and curators often describe their work as storytelling. Fair enough, but some stories can be told through objects and images more easily than others. The British design firm Casson Mann, led by Roger Mann and Dinah Casson, has created several ambitious narrative exhibitions that have set a new standard for the way artefacts, texts and interactivity can be woven into a complex whole. Because exhibitions are such a hybrid form, involving architecture, industrial design, graphics and interaction design, it is easy to lose the physical and editorial continuity of a story, as visitors encounter so much information delivered through so many different media.

One aspect that sets Casson Mann's work apart is a synthetic integration of these elements - all the more noteworthy because it collaborates with different disciplinary specialists. Graphic designer Nick Bell has worked with Casson Mann on its Winston Churchill Museum at the Cabinet War Rooms in London, as well as on its Sellafield Visitors' Centre. In these projects, Bell is given a stage for doing excellent typography and media work, which is itself remarkable in the context of exhibitions, but in Casson Mann's work there is a deeper acknowledgement of graphic design in the density of information presented, often

employing the compositional strategies of books and magazines. Objects and images are tightly edited and then given space to breathe.

Bedrock of detail

Interactive elements are also skilfully woven into the fabric of Casson Mann's exhibitions. In the Churchill Museum, various tablet-like screens are dispersed throughout, featuring simple, short exercises that attract children and adults. Less expected is an enormous touch-screen table, developed in collaboration with Bell and Mit-trained designer David Small. The table is given a commanding central space within the museum, cutting a dramatic diagonal through the exhibitions. It presents a series of virtual files that, when touched, open to reveal texts and photographs that move deeper into the history of World War II. Several visitors can work independently at the table, but occasionally the entire surface of the table is affected by the opening of one of the 'files'. In these moments the individual activities of visitors are disrupted by a communal experience, such as a rocket that blasts from one end of the table to the other. The table effectively hints at the depth that the exhibition itself cannot hope to present. The table becomes a kind of bedrock of detail, the very elements that typically overwhelm curators and exhibition designers who feel a responsibility to present an appropriate depth of material.

Casson Mann's 2002 design of the 'Sparking Reaction' exhibition at the Sellafield Visitors' Centre in Cumbria is on the site of a controversial nuclear power plant operated by BNFL (British Nuclear Fuel Ltd.). Part public relations facility and part science museum, the project presented



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1888

1886-87

1884-85

Mr. Lord Randolph dies
Mr. James Lindsay (uncle)
Mr. Lord Randolph's 18th birthday
Mr. Lord Randolph's 19th birthday

Mr. Lord Randolph dies
Mr. Lord Randolph's 18th birthday
Mr. Lord Randolph's 19th birthday
Mr. Lord Randolph's 20th birthday

Jan '93: fails Sandhurst exam again
Feb '93: finally passes Sandhurst exam
Sep '93: starts at Sandhurst
Nov '93: 19th birthday
Family has money problems

Final year at Harrow School
Nov '92: 18th birthday

Jan '91: continues at Harrow School
Nov '91: 17th birthday

Jan '90: continues at Harrow School
Nov '90: sits exam for Sandhurst
Nov '90: 16th birthday

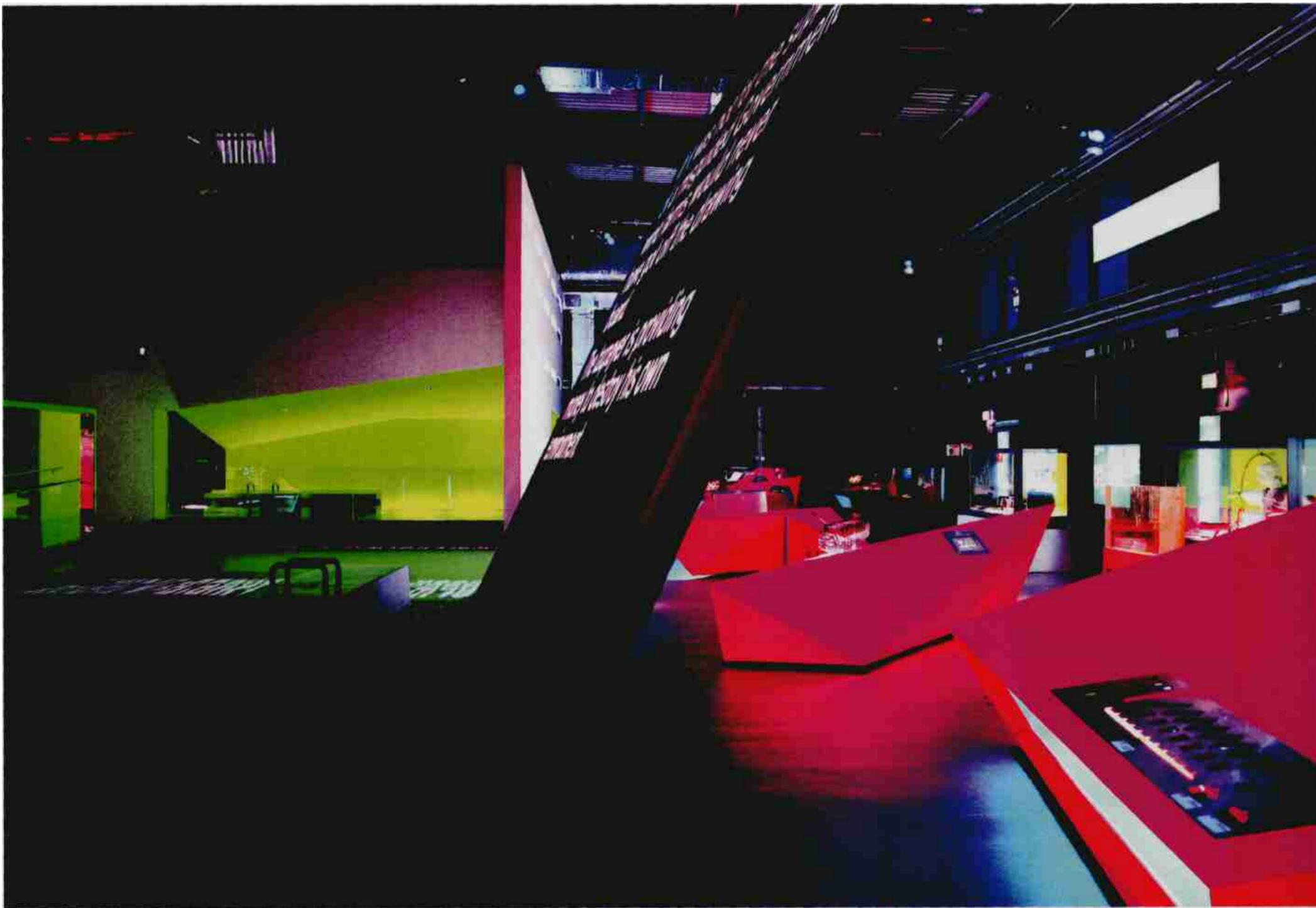
Jan '89: continues at Harrow School
Mar '89: Army career for Winston
Sep '89: joins Army class at Harrow
Nov '89: 15th birthday

Jan '88: last term at school in Hove
Apr '88: starts Harrow School
Nov '88: 14th birthday

Jan '86: continues at school in Hove
Mar '86: seriously ill with pneumonia
Jul '86: Lord Randolph Chancellor
Nov '86: 12th birthday
Dec '86: Lord Randolph resigns
Jan '87: continues at school in Hove

Apr '84: leaves St George's School
Sep '84: starts new school in Hove
Nov '84: 10th birthday
Jan '85: continues at school in Hove
Apr '85: Lord Randolph India Secretary

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SPARKING REACTION

9 and 10. Casson Mann's 2002 design of the 'Sparking Reaction' a Science Museum exhibition at the Sellafield Visitors' Centre in Cumbria was on the site of a controversial nuclear power plant. The design staged large amounts of text through projection screens on the walls and floor with typographic transformations designed by Nick Bell. Photographs: Andreas Schmidt. Exhibition design and lead consultant: Casson Mann. Exhibition graphics: Nick Bell Design. Lighting design: DHA.

positions for and against the use of nuclear power, explained how nuclear power is generated and surveyed energy use. The content was developed by the Science Museum of London but only on condition that it was given editorial autonomy by BNFL. The exhibition is no longer on display, but its strategies provide an example of how issue-based exhibitions contend with the absence of engaging or provocative artefacts.

Because there were very few artefacts in 'Sparking Reaction', the design focused upon staging a large amount of textual information in ways that would maintain the interest of visitors. The designers created a central arena called the Core that contained projection screens on the walls and floor with typographic transformations designed by Nick Bell that sequenced arguments for and against nuclear energy.

The observer/reader was staged as a figure immersed in words and images; the scale of the projections blurred the relationship between screen and viewer. Just as Lissitzky and other avant-garde designers appropriated photomontage for the purposes of exhibition design, Casson Mann has employed the saturated colours, motion graphics and luminous imagery of contemporary media and advertising.

When exhibitions take on the subject of

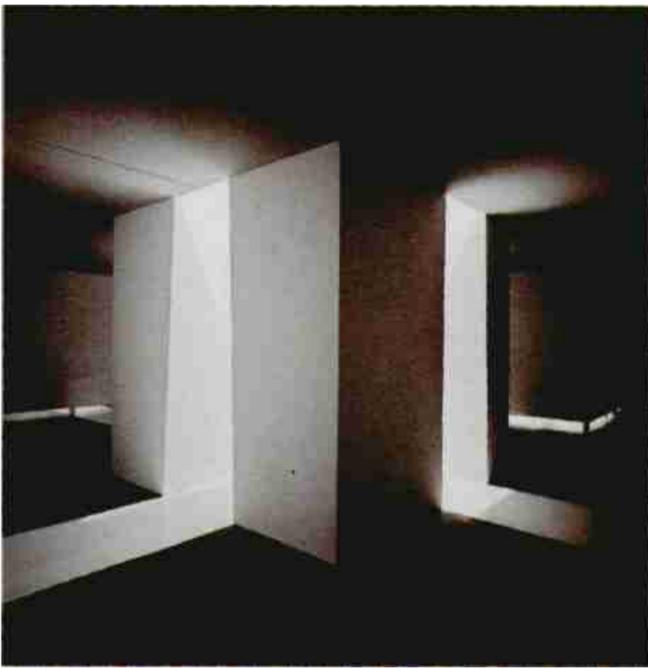


architecture, they are often beset by the problem of scale. Most rely on scale models, photographs and drawings, but the conventions of architectural drawings are often abstract for visitors, and models can only convey a very partial sense of design thinking. Two recent exhibitions about the work of architects - presentations that were also designed by the architects in question - dramatise issues around how design strategies engage audiences in difficult material.

'Barefoot on White Hot Walls', a 2006 retrospective of Peter Eisenman at Vienna's Museum of Applied Arts (MAK), featured models, drawings, photographs, video and partial

PETER EISENMAN

11 and 12. A 2006 retrospective of Peter Eisenman at Vienna's Museum of Applied Arts (MAK), featured models, drawings, photographs, video and partial reconstructions. Staged in an immense double-height space at MAK, the exhibition was both a representation of Eisenman's work, as well as an example of his particular, theory-driven work. Photographs: Wolfgang Woessner, courtesy of Eisenman Architects.

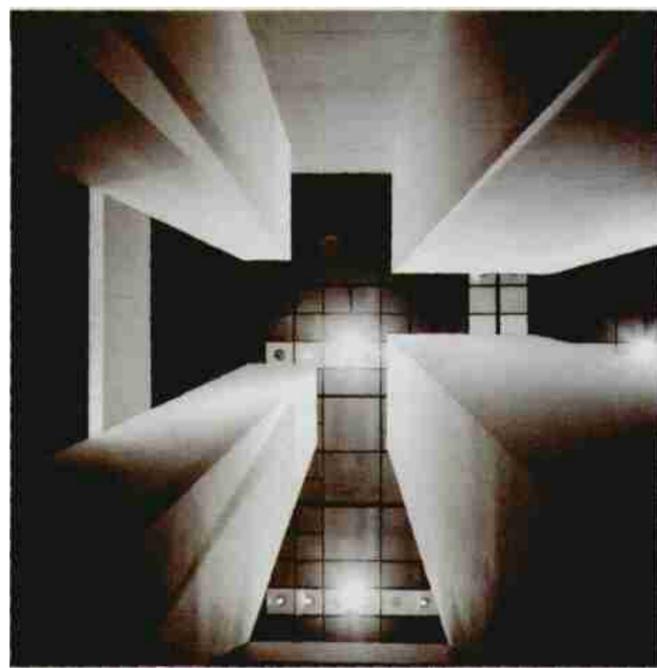


reconstructions. Staged in an immense double-height space, the exhibition was both a representation of - and an example of - Eisenman's theory-driven work.

Visitors to the exhibition entered a dark space populated by a series of boxy-volumes - all the same size - set on a regular grid. The space between the boxes was ample, suggesting a pedestrian boulevard through an enigmatic, featureless city. Light seeped into the exhibition hall from reveals at the bases of the boxes and the various slices, doorways and peepholes. Visitors were drawn to these light-filled spaces, sometimes filled entirely by a model that one could only peer into, other times offering a bench and a video monitor, and sometimes featuring architectural fragments from Eisenman projects. A false ceiling compressed the space of the gallery, but within these smaller volumes the space reached up to the original ceiling, illuminated by skylights. The effect was of a series of austere, Modernist chapels, each devoted to a particular project, a conference proceeding or an interview. Eisenman's work has always been preoccupied with the grid, and this exhibition heightened this diagrammatic approach by introducing the contrast between the lateral spread of the exhibition space, and the fantastic double-height voids of the 'chapels'.

Without hierarchical cues or predetermined procession, visitors make their own path through the exhibition. The various boxes were sometimes featureless on three sides with a small opening on the last surface. The 'fuck you' effect was heightened by the unpredictability of these openings: visitors frequently found themselves walking around the box, searching for its open aspect. Text panels were laid near the boxes, but frequently their orientation was at odds with openings, frustrating viewers who wished to read about the project in proximity to their view of the project. It was a 'difficult' exhibition in a way that paralleled the abstruse, aggressively formal character of Eisenman's architecture.

Yet with this lack of hierarchy also comes a kind of freedom for the visitor. The grid dispels the burden of a linear story: all routes through the space are equally valid, and the surprise of encounter is its own reward. The abstraction of the grid fosters a kind of independence for the observer. But this independence can also be alienating for visitors less prepared for - and tolerant of - the demanding subject of contemporary architecture. Ultimately what was missing from the exhibition, despite its considerable pleasures, was the dimension of editorial or curatorial interpretation. This was not necessarily an effect of the formal attributes of the show, but more a by-product of how the projects were contextualised. Extremely short text panels frustrated attempts to understand the significance of projects within Eisenman's oeuvre. For an architect for whom textual sources are so



important, it was a remarkably stripped-down presentation, as if the models and photographs were self-sufficient.

Articulating the aura

Where observers of the MAK exhibition entered a cerebral and hermetic space - almost liturgical in its tone - a small survey of the work of the Los Angeles-based architecture studio Morphosis at the Centre Pompidou in Paris felt more like a chic nightclub. Visitors were obliged to slip protective booties over their shoes before striding onto a glass ramp. Arrayed under the glass surface were models, photographs, drawings, monitors and text panels. Sceptical or uninterested visitors were drawn into its space by the seductive glow of white-blue light. The exhibition's Big Idea was the transformation of the angle of vision, the shift from wall to floor, and it succeeded in transforming the often prosaic and abstract elements of architectural exhibitions into an engaging, full-body experience.

All architectural exhibitions confront the problem of *scale*: the Morphosis survey met this dilemma with humour by making the visitor feel like Godzilla in Tokyo. Striding across Los Angeles, peering into little models, visitors were given an omniscient overview of the space, free to wander in and out of projects. Visitors walked over the face of Morphosis founder Thom Mayne as talking-head interviews played from beneath the glass, with his voice beamed down from above. The bird's-eye view was very effective for the work of Morphosis because its spectacular forms - as dense and attenuated as muscles and tendons - are best observed from above. Morphosis's attention to the urban context was well served by the perspective of this exhibition.

Walter Benjamin's classic 1936 text 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' discussed the erosion of the 'auratic' character of the original art object (which was seen to have an 'aura') in the modern age. Benjamin saw this process as an inevitable result of the rise of photography and film, expressions of a modern



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age in which 'exhibition value' supersedes the 'cult value' of magical and religious art. 'Originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult. We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual - first the magical, then the religious kind.'

Benjamin's term 'exhibition value' is a useful notion in the context of exhibition design: film and photography are, more than ever, the paradigmatic experiential media of our age. Many of the techniques of exhibition designers - from El Lissitzky to Charles and Ray Eames to the present - approximate the immersive character of film. One could argue that exhibition design is an ongoing struggle between the solitary form of the book and the communal form of film. Entertainment media are affecting exhibitions just as surely as they are affecting education, politics and the rest of contemporary culture. (In an interview about his practice's 'Perception Restrained' show, Herzog described the architect's overhead installation of sexually explicit and violent film episodes as a reference 'to the painted ceilings of Romanesque churches of the twelfth or thirteenth centuries... The blood and the sex on the ceiling are so much more closely related to our daily reality than the kind of art which we understand to be in the MOMA.')

In tracing the shift from art's origins in its 'cult value' to its modern form of 'exhibition value', Benjamin describes aura as that 'which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction.' Exhibition design is an agent that works against that withering, using its techniques to reinvest objects and images with the aura that derives from seeing them in unique physical circumstances. What is exhibition design if not an attempt to stage objects and observers in ways that restore the experience of objects and images with what could be called 'aura' or 'authority' or - less exalted - 'relevance'? If, following Benjamin, 'exhibition value' is what surrounds us in contemporary media, then exhibition design represents ways to gain attention in a culture suffused by competing modes of entertainment. The promise of exhibitions is that a face-to-face encounter - with a painting, an object, a physical site - will provide something that cannot be captured otherwise in photographs or reproductions. ©

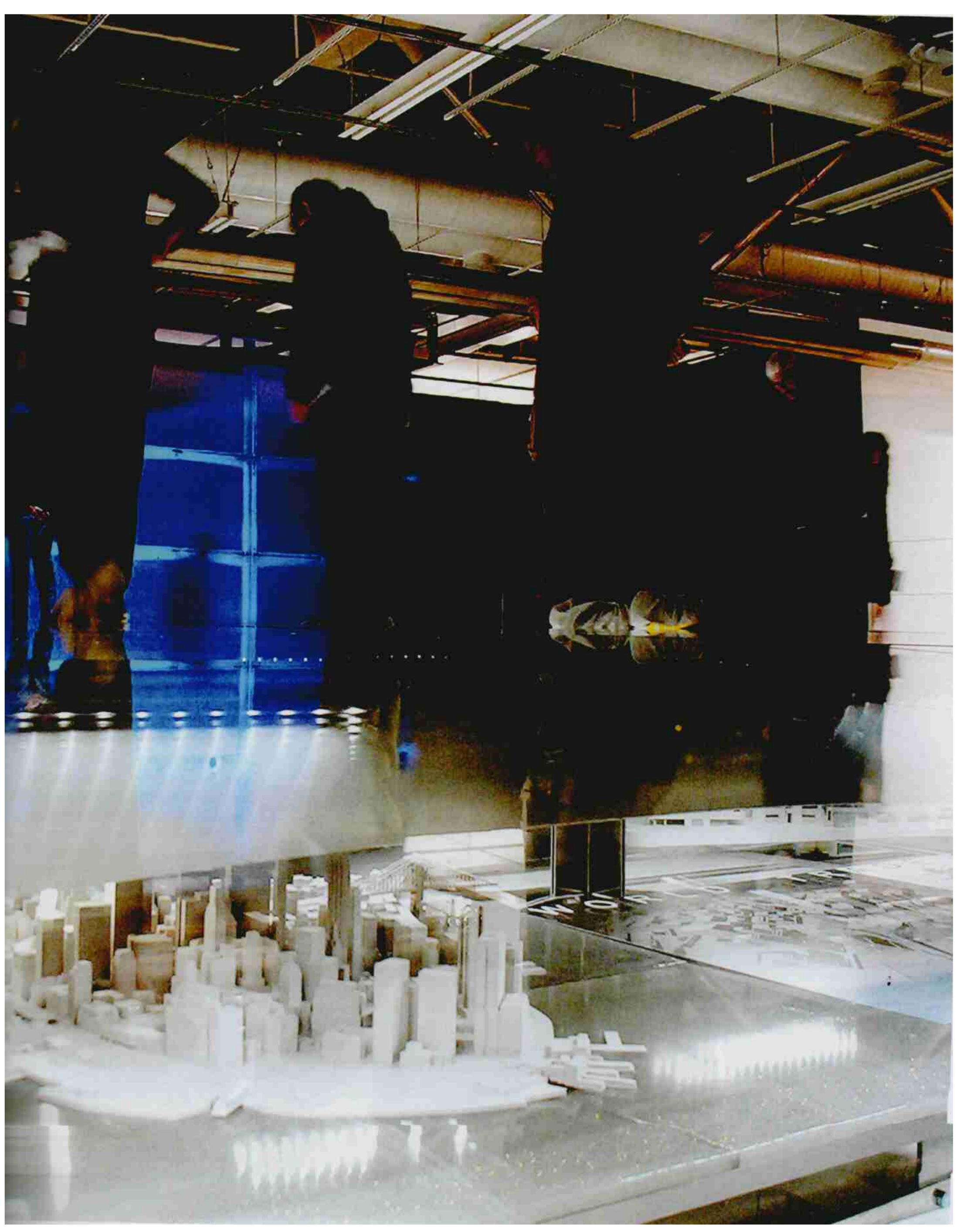
MORPHOSIS AT CENTRE POMPIDOU

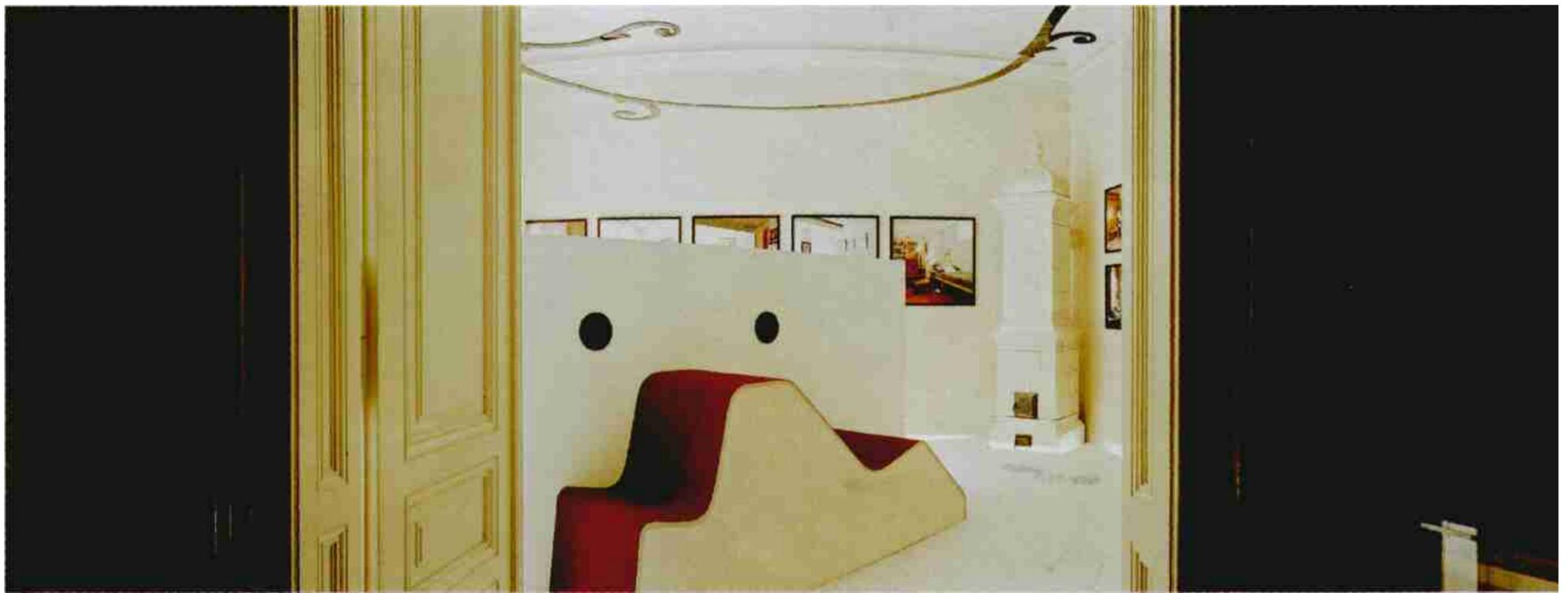
13. A 2006 survey of the work of the Los Angeles-based architecture studio Morphosis at the Centre Pompidou arrayed models and monitors under a glass ramp traversed by visitors. Photograph: Graham Ferrier.

14. The bird's-eye view of the survey was particularly effective because Morphosis's spectacular forms - as dense and attenuated as muscles and tendons - are best observed from above. Photograph: Novella D'Amico.



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THE COUCH

Abbott Miller's installation for the Freud Museum in Vienna puts exhibition design theory into practice

This Freud Museum installation has been set up in an apartment one flight above the one where Sigmund Freud had his revolutionary practice - a space that he and his wife, Martha, coveted for decades. While the show's inspiration is the place of the couch within the psychoanalytic encounter, it gestures toward a cultural history of reclining. Displays of artistic, consumer, historical and literary artefacts deepen the meaning of lying down, and situate Freud's famous 'divan' in its context. From sexual indiscretion to sloth, for *fin desiecle* Viennese society, the couch was to be feared as an accomplice to breakdowns in morality and self-control.

In a nod to consumer culture and design history, the exhibition begins



with a collection of couches from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It proceeds through displays of early psychotherapeutic methods, from alpine fresh-air treatments to sensory deprivation. In a reading / listening room, one can sample the therapeutic

literature and music of the time. The exhibition continues in the apartment's former bathroom, where both tub and sink are retrofitted to display electroshock therapy. A tall-legged white metal cage dominates another small room with a straitjacket dangling overhead. A screening room provides a reminder of psychoanalysis's impact on popular culture, with clips from films and television, including one of the cartoon character Homer Simpson playing analysand to his son, Bart.

Another room houses two carpeted plywood 'listening chaises'. These forms, more punitive than interactive, play recordings of Austrian psychoanalysts through built-in speakers at ear level. Photographs by Shellburne Thurber depict present-day consulting rooms in North and South America.

The exhibition space, a recent and unrenovated addition to the museum, conveys an apt 'in process' feel, a sense the installation magnifies with heavy use of plywood and unfinished lumber. The distraction of the pocked and stained surfaces is subdued by 'floating floors' lit from underneath, which snake through passages and fill rooms, producing an effect that is both dreamlike and diluvian. Overhead, the 'ceiling path ornament', sinuous black Plexiglas forms provide directional cues.

'The Couch' portrays innocuous domestic furnishing as a rich symbolic object. The effect is an informative visualisation of a famously opaque medical discourse

Will Temple

- 1-5. 'The Couch: Thinking in Repose.' Sigmund Freud Museum, Vienna, until 5 November 2006.
 Exhibition design: Abbott Miller, Kristen Spilman, Michelle Reeb, Pentagram.
 Photography: Philipp Horak.
 1. View (from the 'Freud' room) into the 'analyst' room, with its listening chaise in foreground and Shellburne Thurber photographs on walls.
 2. Detail of a 'ceiling path ornament', seen from below as it passes from one room to the next, seeming to slice through the walls.
 3. The bath, converted into a lightbox.
 4. View into the 'therapy' room with artefacts from the Purkersdorf Sanatorium.
 5. Sigmund Freud's desk chair.

