

The temporality of style in exposition architecture

Raimondo d'Aronco in context and comparison

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Abstract: Since the early twentieth century “style” has been particularly suspect in relation to architecture. A tendency to cross out the word “style” in architecture continues today in the self-presentation of many younger architects.

Speaking generally, the crossing out of “style” was at first a reaction to the pre-1914 modernists. In this regard the work of Italian architect Raimondo d'Aronco is instructive. This paper argues that his stylistic inventions at the 1902 Decorative Arts Exposition in Turin, in which ephemeral construction methods and a unique program associated with modern decorative art led him to devise a hybrid that only existed in built form for six months. Critical responses were mixed, but this isn't a sign of failure, given that the buildings were both evidence of and containers for very current debates about the meaning of “modern” design in Italy.

D'Aronco's work suggests the validity of an approach to modern styles drawn from actor-network theory. Instead of concentrating on a defining set of formal principles or visual ticks, “style” is understood here as a material stabilization of controversies, as a set of visual traits that increase the density of connections between materials, technologies, and stories about social groupings. To further explore this idea, the paper looks briefly at two much more famous modernist examples, Mies' German Pavilion and Le Corbusier's Philips Pavilion, each of which shows a different approach to the architect's role as an actor within the networked context of a large exposition.

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In the recently published monograph of their work, SHoP Architects begin one of their chapters with the question of style. Their answer should sound familiar to any student of modernist architectural theory: “Style is the mannered repetition of an aesthetic theme; it is the inverse of innovation.” After a sentence that directs the point specifically to the firm's work, they conclude, “In the wake of countless architectural –isms, there is no need for another short-lived style.” (Holden 2012, 65) While the target here is clearly the theory-driven –isms of the '80s and '90s, the sentiment could easily have come from the 1920s, in which the targets were both eclecticism and the modernist ornamental styles of the pre-1914 period. The similarity is reinforced in the SHoP book by placing the denunciation of “style” opposite a film still of a flirtatious couple in eighteenth-century costumes, thereby repeating the graphic argument of Le Corbusier's *The Decorative Art of Today*, in which the eclectic “styles” are ridiculed as artifacts of bourgeois efforts to ape the discernment of the aristocracy. The durability of the theoretical stance taken by SHoP is noteworthy, but so is the stubbornness of the word “style.” In spite of the best efforts of several generations of architects and critics, it fails to wither away in popular and critical usage.

“Style” is a frustrating term, and it's not only practicing architects who often want to excise it. It also bedevils historians and critics, who nevertheless can't write much of anything without citing styles or christening new ones. Sarah Williams Goldhagen has explored this problem with reference to modernist architecture, cataloging the ways in which the definition of modernism as a style has impeded our understanding of key designers and aided the preservation of the narrow cannon of modernism presented in survey courses. She proposes

to replace the historical category of “style” with “discourse,” treating modernism as “A heterologous array of individual positions and formal practices within a loosely structured field.” (Goldhagen 2005, 145) This valuable contribution to historical method nevertheless has to leave “style” crossed out, rather than erased. As Goldhagen explains, modernism was defined as a set of aesthetic traits by its early propagandists, who translated their idealist views about the relationship between form and history into a formula that would support the acceptance of modernism as *the style of the industrial age*.¹

It is this implied relationship to history that makes the stylistic definition of modernism a different historiographical problem from the stylistic definition of rococo or Greek revival. For that reason, the key to understanding SHoP’s denunciation of “style” may be the words “short-lived.” If we consider the possibility that a short-lived style is not necessarily a deficient, inauthentic style, we can begin to understand comparative durations within the cannon-broadening modernist discourse that Goldhagen proposes. Working under the assumption that all stylistic formations eventually “wear out,” we can perhaps learn to understand their moments of validity as significant products of temporary circumstances. This is where expositions come into the argument.

The organizers and designers of an exposition—like the 1925 one for which Corbusier published *Decorative Art of Today*—must necessarily emphasize architecture as communication. The goal of most exposition buildings is not to speak to the ages, but to participate in a highly concentrated field of signs for about six months. The ideological and commercial success of the many expositions staged between 1890 and 1970 depended partly on the creation of a stabilized semantic field generated through the creative and open-ended combination of built forms, made and natural objects, and groupings of bodies. This required the work of many actors with disparate views on words like “modern” and “modernism,” not all of whom were conversant with specialized debates around design. It is perhaps not surprising that the organizers and planners of many of these fairs defined a signature collection of visual traits, as with the short-lived but important style named after the 1925 *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs Modernes*.

“Style” in this context may or may not take the form of a definitive code or design guideline. The stylistic unity of the 1925 exposition, for example, was mostly enforced by four strategically placed pavilions, and the actual stylistic range of the buildings was much larger than in what has come to be identified as “Art Deco.”² Nevertheless, “style” is useful and unavoidable because discourses are never as completely heterologous as Goldhagen suggests. While the participants in them are best understood as actors in a proliferating network composed of texts, images, institutions etc.,³ the work that goes into keeping that network active requires—and wears out—more or less stable and bounded semantic capacitors. In the context of an exposition, architectural style is particularly suited to play this role, as it hybridizes the ideological and physical components of the exposition, combining messages about technical progress, national identity, and political and economic power.

Perhaps the clearest example of “style” as a semantic capacitor is Raimondo D’Aronco’s work as master planner and chief designer of the 1902 Decorative Arts Exposition in Turin. This exposition was unlike the larger universal expositions of the period in that its explicit purpose was to explore a style for modern life. This is stated clearly by Ernesto Thovez, one of the exposition’s chief propagandists, in a 1902 article, in which he writes that international exhibitors were essential:

So that the displays would assume the shape for visitors and Italian artisans of a teaching a prodding to towards a more decisive and enlightened activity, directed toward the complete renewal of decorative trends and of the material environment, both domestic and public.(quoted in Garuzzo 1999, 11)

Behind this intention is the often-repeated complaint of young Italian architects of this period that Italian design was behind Paris, Brussels, and Vienna in emerging from academicism and coming to terms with a stifling historical legacy. As Richard Etlin has documented, this was a primary concern of the architects coming out of the polytechnics of Turin and Milan in the

1890s, and their debates around the problem framed the proposal for the 1902 exposition, as well as critical responses to it. (Etlin, 1991)

Given this background, it's pretty clear that no design for the exposition was going to fully satisfy people like Thovez. In this context, D'Aronco's victory in the competition for it is both surprising and fortuitous, as he was something of an outsider to the debates of his Italian contemporaries, having followed them from a distance in Istanbul, where he was fully employed on projects for the Sultan and for private clients. These projects involved a very different set of stylistic investigations from those of the younger Italians. While they were attempting to derive distinctly Italian lessons from Franco-Belgian art nouveau, D'Aronco was creating virtuosic fusions of "western" elements with the powerful Turkish and Byzantine traditions of Istanbul. Manfredi Nicoletti argues that D'Aronco's training in Austria—outside of the romantic eclecticism of the Italian schools—helped him to develop solutions based on study of the tectonic and typological bases of the traditions of Istanbul. (in Quargnal, 1982)

What D'Aronco created for Turin was arguably a less comfortable mixture, combining simplified massing inspired by the Wagnerschule and Olbrich, floral patterning borrowed from art nouveau, and applied color in bright hues that clearly owed much to "the east." In all of this, there was no direct reference to Italian tradition. Instead the exposition marked the debut (and the farewell) of a whole new stylistic hybrid. This is best known from the centerpiece Rotonda d'Onore, with its dome inspired by Hagia Sophia and mural imagery suggesting a *Torinese* version of the Viennese sacred spring. But the style is more audacious in some of the less central buildings, particularly the photography and automobile pavilions; their interpenetrating volumes show careful study of Olbrich, whose work in Darmstadt D'Aronco had toured in preparation for his designs for Turin.

This brief description says nothing about D'Aronco's work that can't be explained, clumsily, using traditional art historical tools, but it fails to address the most noteworthy aspect of D'Aronco's exposition work, that it was visibly ephemeral. Partly for reasons of cost and time, the exposition was not built after the manner of fairs. Instead of covering frames with monumentalizing plaster, D'Aronco made buildings with canvas and wood skins, more like elaborate tents than the "palaces" typical of Chicago and Paris. In order to signify the themes and provide visual stimulation, he relied on color, a bizarre range of antennae, heraldic banners, and electric lighting.⁴ The result was a group of buildings defined by visual characteristics that were at best accessory to the real stuff of architecture, both as defined by the academy and by the rationalist tradition that celebrated the iron and glass buildings of nineteenth-century expositions.

Freni and Varnier stress this in their monograph on D'Aronco, seeing his appreciation of the ephemeral building as the most truly modern and even functionalist aspect of his work:

Therefore the most revolutionary innovation, as well as the least understood, is that of having made evident the provisional nature of the pavilions."

And they even go so far as to describe them in quasi-futurist terms:

"The buildings of D'Aronco are realized in original form by means of two fundamental and little used instruments: color and movement. (Freni 1983, 51)

This aspect of D'Aronco's work made a great impression, and there is no reason to see the buildings as unsuccessful. In previewing them, a writer for the Turin newspaper *La Stampa* caught the novelty in D'Aronco's temporarily constituted style and celebrated its capacity for pure visual stimulation:

Our eye, habituated to the monotonous grey and white of common construction, finds recreation in that pleasant polychromy, in the brilliance of gold and in pure colors against the clear background of the sky. (La Stampa 1902)

While this writer was clearly doing PR, his words speak to something important in the architecture, a something largely missing from reactions by professional critics, who interpreted the architecture not as a *style* for a particular event but as a claimant to be *the* style of modern Italy. While more conservative critics decried D'Aronco's work for lacking a clear continuity with Italy's best traditions, even a relatively sympathetic critic like the young architect Vittorio Pica, in his book length resume of the exposition, could only offer this in D'Aronco's defense:

Raimondo D'Aronco, at the next occasion, being able to work with greater consideration, will, I am persuaded, do much more and much better: he will know how to be more balanced in construction and more sober in ornamentation and, still doing his part for the spirit of cosmopolitanism, he will strive to be more original, remaining within the most Italian conception and workmanship.¹(Pica 1902, 24)

Pica makes nearly impossible demands for the semantic performance of an architecture that is at once Italian and modern. In a sense these are inverted in recent historical writing. Where Pica seeks the style that does everything at once, historical accounts of D'Aronco try to situate him in an increasingly profligate lexicon of stylistic labels. In a highly sophisticated example, Rossana Bossaglia's brief essay on "Il rapporto di D'Aronco con il Liberty Italiano," expertly explores all the usual avenues of influence and resemblance, only to conclude that it is more useful to situate D'Aronco's work in something like Goldhagen's discursive field.

D'Aronco's appearance in Turin is framed then within a broad and vital panorama of Italian modernist efforts. (Bossaglia 1982, 12)

This conclusion is based both on the geographic range of D'Aronco's work and his absence from Italy during the beginnings of "stile Liberty," "stile floreale," or "arte nova," but also on the unique characteristics of his exposition buildings, which Bossaglia (though less positively than Freni and Varnier) attributes partly to their ephemeral character.

[D'Aronco's work] presents a peculiar character and is marked by a fresh extravagance that was in direct ratio of the specific use for these paper mache constructions. (in Quargnal 1982, 12)

D'Aronco's work not only failed to meet the stylistic expectations of its professional audience, it also tends to confound stylistic categorization today. One might reasonably conclude from this that "style" is simply the wrong word to use in interpreting it, and yet D'Aronco's buildings most definitely exhibit a coherent set of visual traits. In fact, given that one architect did the master plan and the majority of the buildings, the Turin Decorative Arts exposition showed a high degree of visual consistency. If this isn't a style, what is? And if it is a style, then what does a style actually do that is not captured in the term's conventional use? A clue may come from the discussion of the exposition in the second volume of Terry Kirk's *The Architecture of Modern Italy*, in which he concludes:

The clamorous debut of Art Nouveau in Italy triggered a seminal debate in which at least one thing was clear: innovative international modernism and classical national tradition were set in tense opposition. (Kirk 2005, 18)

He suggests that D'Aronco's buildings had no influence except to set a precedent of "extreme liberty." It might be more useful, however, to reflect on them as the setting for the debate itself. Going back to the discussion that started with Goldhagen and SHoP above, we could see the Italian design scene in 1902 as a kind of network of actors that included not only a couple of generations of practicing architects and their students, but also educational institutions, local and foreign publications, and collectors and potential patrons. Energized by a number of "tense oppositions," the actors within this network could come together among D'Aronco's buildings, using them to advance their positions or rally their teams. Identifying D'Aronco's as not-the-right-style seems to have been an important part of this process, but it could not happen if it didn't have the semantic stability that we associate with a style.

In this context “style” is understood as a material stabilization of controversies, as a set of visual traits that increase the density of connections between objects, technologies, and stories about social groupings. D’Aronco’s work may not have been durable or imitable, and it may have had only a negative relationship to his contemporaries’ efforts to construct a narrative about authenticity to the modern, but it served to provide a stable basis for those efforts for a few months in physical form and maybe a year or two in the press. It may be that what D’Aronco found by “having made evident the provisional nature of the pavilions” is actually structural to the work of creating semantic capacity that styles do, particularly in the exposition context.

It should be said that the 1902 exposition was relatively small and had an unusually restricted group of participants. The more common situation for an architect acting within the exposition context has been a commission for a single building to be inserted in a rapidly evolving master plan, a sort of fast-forward version of what architects face when designing “permanent” buildings. It might be helpful, then, to look very briefly at exposition buildings by two architects far more famous than D’Aronco, Le Corbusier’ Philips Pavilion for Expo 58 in Brussels and Mies’ Barcelona Pavilion of 1929.

Le Corbusier contributed to three expositions, and in each case he took a different approach to his role as an actor in the exposition network. In 1925 he built the Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau as an irritant but adopted the predominant mode of habitat display found in the displays of the major Parisian interior designers. For the 1937 Paris exposition, he took a page out of D’Aronco’s book and created an evidently ephemeral tent (the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux). In 1958, Corbusier appears as, of all things, a model collaborator, delegating substantially to Iannis Xenakis, Philips acoustics experts, and to composer Edgar Varèse, to produce a thin-shelled tensile structure with a geometry that has little precedent in Corbusier’s work. His most “authorial” contribution to the project was the montage projected inside the shell of the building and timed to Varèse’s *Poème Électronique*. The resulting building fits uncomfortably into a monographic view of Corbusier’s work.⁵ It fit rather well, however, into the Brussels Expo, in which it stood out as one of a handful of truly experimental buildings that spoke to the official theme “Building a World for Modern Man” in a way that might engage both the public and the design community, which was underwhelmed by the “atomic” style constituted by the expo organizers. (Devos 2005)

The Barcelona Pavilion is another case entirely. As the exposition structure that fits most centrally into the conventional stylistic narrative of modernism, it is usually presented as absolute architecture with no reference to its (very limited) program or to the exposition in which it briefly stood before going on to a rich afterlife in photography and theory. Its role as textbook example and theoretical *topos* allows it to transcend its ephemeral beginnings--Whatever style the Barcelona Pavilion is it cannot be called “short lived”--but only at the cost of doing so in splendid isolation.. To the degree that interpretations look beyond the pavilion as architecture about architecture, they relate it to the political and cultural situation in Berlin, where it was designed, not in Barcelona. All of this is understandable, given the limited program of the building and its seemingly complete lack of engagement with the architecture of the exposition or the urban planning intention behind it. In the context of this investigation, it is worth asking if Mies’ project can be understood differently, or at all, within the network of the Barcelona Exposition and the revivalist stylistic investments made by its organizers. However, it’s a difficult question to answer fully, given the state of the literature on the architecture of the Barcelona Exposition, which even in Spain is dominated by discussion of Mies’ pavilion. It may present a kind of limit case, in which the building is—partly by design and partly through the efforts of critics and historians—unable to participate in its surroundings. It allows us to say a great deal about the question of style in general, but perhaps very little about how styles provided semantic material for networked groupings in Barcelona in 1929.

Since this is only a preliminary exploration of a difficult problem in historiography and theory, it’s perhaps best to conclude with a few issues that require further study. While the case of D’Aronco seems to fit quite well with the idea of a style as a material stabilization of controversy, it remains to be seen if the same holds true in the larger expositions, in which

design is not the only controversy and in which the designed material is less homogeneous. A brief look at the Brussels examples suggests that, true to the body of actor-network theory that inspired this study, each case will generate its own variant set of rules and definitions. The case of the Barcelona Pavilion reminds us that any group of stylistic markers that can be identified in twentieth century architecture must also be interpreted in relation to the omnipresent question of modernism as *the* style of the age. While the relevant materials are, in the Turin example, sufficiently manageable to make those connections, this may not always be the case. Finally, there is no doubt a good deal of theoretical work to do be done to derive value from this way of looking at “style” for contemporary practitioners like SHoP, who feel an urgent need to cross the word out. A starting point might be, following D’Aronco, in the possibility of linking the technical exigencies of contemporary production to groupings of visual markers that create semantic capacity. Would there be significant possibilities for meaning and relevance in a more deliberate approach to this, one that accepted the limited half-life of the resulting stylistic formations?

¹ This sentence doesn’t do full justice either to Goldhagen’s argument or to the writers (Giedion, Pevsner, Gropius et. al.) she is summarizing. The main point is that most of them had considerable discomfort with calling the new architecture a “style,” yet each provided material for the definition of a modernist style in order both to speak the language of their audience and to satisfy the requirements a historicist definition of style as related to *Zeitgeist* which Goldhagen attributes primarily to Woelfflin. (Goldhagen 2005, 146)

² Like most expositions, the 1925 Art Deco exposition exhibits a considerable gap between the intentions of its organizers and the highly varied assemblage that appeared on the ground. It was a series of interior designers and their employers who organized the clearest expressions of a new luxury style in the octagonal pavilions of the department stores that anchored the corners of Esplanade des Invalides. (Troy 1991)

³ This is a gloss on the basic ideas of actor-network theory as articulated by Bruno Latour. This research derives from a larger project looking at the history of exposition architecture partly through this methodology. (Latour 2005)

⁴ D’Aronco’s approach to the ephemeral had no impact even on the next exposition in Turin, in 1911, which consisted of eclectic buildings surfaced in the plaster staff of the White City.

⁵ For example, William Curtis’ excellent monograph devotes only a few sentences to the Philips Pavilion, commenting on the technical investigation involved. (Curtis 1986, 214)

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