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EXHIBITION ARCHITECTURE. HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

ARCHITEKTURA WYSTAWIENNICZA. KONTEKSTY HISTORYCZNE

Abstract

The article analyses exhibition architecture in the context of museums and World Expos, showing its transformations, relationship with history, and the importance of spatial narrative. Using a review method, selected examples and trends influencing the contemporary approach to exhibition space design are presented.

Keywords: museums, World Expos, exhibition, exhibit

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje architekturę ekspozycyjną w kontekście muzeów i Wystaw Światowych, ukazując jej przemiany, relację z historią oraz znaczenie narracji przestrzennej. Wykorzystując metodę przeglądowną, przedstawiono wybrane przykłady i tendencje wpływające na współczesne podejście do projektowania przestrzeni wystawienniczych.

Słowa kluczowe: muzea, Wystawy Światowe, ekspozycja, eksponat

1. INTRODUCTION

Exhibitions and displays are inherently fleeting and impermanent – in principle, only permanent exhibitions in museums can be studied and contemplated over time. Exhibition buildings are of a different nature: museum buildings are permanent, they fit into the context of the place, contributing to its spirit. However, there are also ephemeral forms, such as World Exhibition pavilions, whose programme is designed to be of limited duration. Exhibition architecture was and is created to present history as a story, an achievement, a memory and an experience of past generations – a record of events and changes. At the same time, history was also treated as a source of models and canons.

The organisation of exhibitions accessible to the general public and the construction of buildings and the arrangement of spaces dedicated exclusively to the presentation of collections have been considered typical of museums and galleries since the first half of the 19th century. The full spectrum of diverse exhibitions only appeared in the second half of that century, while the 20th century brought the development of many new forms of exhibition and the adaptation of spaces that went beyond the classical understanding of exhibition venues.

The development of museum ideas in the contemporary understanding of the institution dates back to the last 200 years, but various types of collections – initially private, and later institutional – were created much earlier and were inextricably linked to the development of European culture. They were presented in temple spaces, palace halls, and aristocratic and bourgeois residences. The first museum buildings show strong influences of historical styles of architecture and interior design, which were the accepted norm for many decades. This approach applied not only to architectural form, but also to the way collections were presented, the selection of works, and the role assigned to the viewer. Changes in this area led to a fundamental redefinition of the museum model.

The period of intensive construction of museum buildings, defining them as institutions and shaping the rules of conduct towards exhibits in the second half of the 19th century, coincided with an equally intense period of organising new events, such as World Exhibitions.

Organised systematically since 1851, they were an example of planning, architectural and exhibition activities aimed at creating an attractive form of thematic communication. Unlike museums, which focus on preserving heritage and presenting collections, World Exhibition displays created a new presentation space, combining experiences from various fields – often absent from traditional museum institutions. The first World Exhibition in London is considered the beginning of a new specialisation: exhibition design. At that time, attention was drawn to the relationship between the attractiveness of the arrangement and the engagement of visitors. However, it took decades before designers began to receive commissions not for buildings, but for the exhibition itself – such as Friedrich Kiesler and Mies van der Rohe.

This article analyses selected aspects of two different forms of presentation: museum and exhibition. Although they represent different traditions and experiences, they share a common goal of showcasing cultural values. Museums belong to an elite circle of institutions presenting scientifically verified collections, while World Exhibitions are more often associated with entertainment events promoting ideas of the future and progress.

A review of the experiences of both forms allows us to draw the following conclusions:

- Diverse forms of exhibition, established principles, and new technological experiences have enabled the development of both types of presentation.
- Programmatic references to history influenced the exhibition architecture and arrangements, slowing down their development for many decades; breaking with these patterns paved the way for modern solutions and recognition of the role of the viewer as an active participant in the exhibition.
- Transience versus permanence – this is the fundamental difference between the two forms. It translates into aesthetics, the level of creative risk, and the way in which space is shaped. It is only thanks to architecture museums and historical research that the experience of World Exhibitions can be preserved and documented.

2. PERMANENCE AND TRANSIENCY

London's Crystal Palace, erected for the World Exhibition opened on 1 May 1851 under the title "The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations", was located in Hyde Park. This iconic building is discussed in almost every review of 19th-century architecture. Its innovative design concept, the idea of an exhibition space with transparent walls, and its impressive scale distinguished the pavilion from other buildings of its time. The exhibition

was visited by six million people, who viewed around ten thousand exhibits¹. It is worth noting that from the outset, the building was designed as a temporary structure – it was to disappear from the original landscape like a circus tent and was dismantled after the exhibition ended. This temporary nature influenced the character of World Exhibition architecture, determining the choice of materials and formal solutions. This often led to the technical degradation of buildings, as in the case of the plaster stucco of the Chicago exhibition or the insufficiently durable solutions used in the pavilion of the World Exhibition in New York in 1939, which already required constant repairs during the event².

Exhibition sites were not usually permanently linked to a location. They were often made available temporarily, combining their exhibition function with revitalisation processes. An example of this is the marshy area of Flushing Meadows in Queens, New York, which was once a landfill site but was drained and prepared for the 1939 World's Fair³. Today, the area is an integral part of the city. The most enduring location-based connections were in Paris, where four consecutive World Expos were held on the Champ de Mars and the banks of the Seine between 1867 and 1937. A characteristic feature of these events is that the first exhibition was held on military training grounds located outside the city centre of Paris, while subsequent editions, organised in the same place, were gradually surrounded by an increasingly dense urban fabric⁴.

The World Expos left behind lasting symbols that are permanently inscribed in the urban landscape: the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Atomium in Brussels, the Space Needle in Seattle, the Sun Tower in Osaka, Habitat and the Biosphere in Montreal. These structures are testimonies to the past, but without the context of the event, they do not fully reflect its scale and diversity.

The history of museums developed differently. Initially, private collections were established, which eventually took on an institutional form. Private spaces were adapted for the purpose of displaying these collections, creating, among other things, cabinets of curiosities (Kunstkammern), considered pre-museum forms. The first museum exhibitions were created in adapted interiors, which quickly proved insufficient for the growing collections. Buildings for exhibition, storage and research purposes were often erected many years after the establishment of the institution itself – an example of this is the British Museum, which received a suitable building almost a century after its foundation.

The initial stage of museum development focused on building collections and crystallising the specialisation and structure of the institution. It was also a period of numerous donations of private collections. From the point of view of architecture and exhibition practices, it was a time of adapting earlier spatial models to new functions.

¹ K. Pomian, *Zakotwiczenie w Europie: 1789–1850, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Fundacja Terytoria Książki, Gdańsk 2023, pp. 451–452.

² B. Cotter, *The 1939–1940 New York World's Fair: The World of Tomorrow*, Arcadia Publishing Chicago 2018, pp. 17–18.

³ A.K. Olszewski, *Wystawa nowojorska w 1939 roku. Program i realizacja* [in:] J. Sosnowska (ed.), *Wystawa nowojorska 1939*, Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warszawa 2012, pp. 15–24.

⁴ The historical context is not directly related to the Exhibition, but to another event – the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Paris in 2024, which took place along the banks of the Seine. The Petit Palais and Grand Palais buildings, which hosted the exhibition in 1900, will become the arena for Olympic competitions in 2024.

The decision to build the Imperial Museum in Berlin was a turning point for museum architecture. Initially, it was planned to be located in the adapted Academy of Fine Arts, but on 8 January 1823, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, a member of the design team, presented a concept for a new building in the Neo-Greek style, situated in a prestigious location opposite the royal palace, between the cathedral and the arsenal. This building set new standards in both architecture and the arrangement of exhibition spaces. The style, which referred to antiquity, and the way the interior was organised became a model for subsequent projects⁵. The location was also of key importance, establishing the museum among the city's most important institutions and ensuring its permanence as a fundamental feature.

The Berlin museum became an architectural milestone. In the following decades, museum buildings were constructed throughout Europe. In his three-volume study *Muzeum. Historia świata (Museum: A History of the World)*, Krzysztof Pomian distinguishes three key periods in the history of museums: in terms of scope, collections, architecture, exhibitions, and staff. He considers the 1851 World Exhibition in London to be the first turning point – an event that marked the beginning of the globalisation of the idea of the museum. Until then, there were three basic types of museums: art, natural history, and a few historical museums. The second half of the 19th century saw the development of museums of decorative arts, crafts, and technology. Pomian associates the second turning point with 1914 – a time of colonial expansion and the rise of nationalism, which brought a new approach to art, including the inclusion of prehistoric art and Far Eastern cultures in the art canon⁶.

The conservative approach to museum architecture and exhibition design should be linked to the institution's strong position in the social structure and the widespread recognition of its style⁷. The permanence of these forms has consolidated the position of museums as important elements of the urban fabric. Over time, museums began to open up to new forms of expression. This was influenced by social changes, new trends in art and architecture, the emergence of institutions presenting contemporary art, and the appearance of new themes such as technology, design, film, and photography. As early as the 1930s, museum architecture began to draw on the language of modernism, while the second half of the 20th century and the present day have brought avant-garde projects (Ill. 1–2).

Museums also became places for the preservation and reinterpretation of spaces previously not associated with exhibition activities. Industrial heritage, machines, and technical objects were incorporated into the museum circuit. Today, we are seeing the opposite process – museums are adapting former industrial buildings for the needs of contemporary exhibitions, as exemplified by the Silesian Museum in Katowice, located on the site of the former Katowice Coal Mine⁸.

A new chapter in the development of museum architecture is the opening of storage facilities to the public. An example is the Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, opened in 2021, which houses 150,000 works of art, as well as conservation workshops, exhibition

⁵ K. Pomian, *Zakotwiczenie...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 384–385.

⁶ K. Pomian, *Od skarbcza do muzeum, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Fundacja Terytoria Książki Gdańsk 2023, pp. 384–385.

⁷ A. Monestiroli, *Tryglif i metopa. Dziewięć wykładów o architekturze*, Wydawnictwo PK, Kraków 2009, pp. 107–122.

⁸ M. Gyurkovich et al., *Adaptation of the architectural and infrastructural post-industrial heritage of underground mines for museum functions in southern Poland*, "Muzeologia a kultúrne dedičstvo" 2024, no. 2, pp. 43–64. DOI: 10.46284/mkd.2024.12.2.3.



Ill. 1. BMW Museum in Munich, photo by M. Gyurkovich

Ill. 2. The exhibition of the BMW Museum in Munich, photo by M. Gyurkovich



Ill. 3. Rotterdam, the Netherlands, April 16, 2024: interior space of a museum with staircase and atrium complex shows art pieces in Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen, source: Shutterstock.com

Ill. 4. Rotterdam, the Netherlands, October 2022: Low angle view of The Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen with reflection of city in mirrors of this art storage facility, source: Shutterstock.com

spaces, and catering facilities. Despite its main function as a warehouse, the building is open to visitors, who can observe the interior through transparent walls. The form – a cylindrical, mirrored structure widening towards the top – is topped with a roof park. The MVRDV office, which designed the building, deliberately avoided classic entrance accents; the main gate and technical entrances are only visible when in use, otherwise they blend into the façade

cladding⁹ (Ill. 3–4). This is a new experience: a warehouse open to the public. This solution stems, among other things, from the need to consolidate the collections and make them available to the public in an attractive and modern way. Similar concepts are currently being implemented or planned by other museum institutions.

3. EXHIBITION

The museum building is a prominent feature of the city landscape, and institutions of this rank often become its symbols¹⁰. World Exhibition venues played a similar role until the Chicago exhibition in 1893 – a single building or complex of buildings formed the central point of the layout, and visitors could distinguish between “inside” and “outside” spaces. The Chicago exhibition was an extensive urban development consisting of pavilions, public spaces, and water channels. The architecture of the pavilions referred to the historical forms of European buildings. Decorative white facades created a staging of the so-called White City.¹¹ Contemporary critics considered this convention regressive, but it was attractive to the general public – for the first time, the exhibition went beyond the interior of the building and also included outdoor space. The vision of a spacious, bright city influenced the development of social movements calling for the aestheticisation of urban spaces. The division of the exhibition into smaller pavilions reflected its thematic division, also including entertainment areas. Elements of visual appeal, pleasure, and entertainment – natural for events of this type – did not find a place in institutional museum forms for a long time.

The opposite of the first exhibition was the second World Exhibition in Chicago (1933–1934), which consciously rejected historicism in favour of modern architecture, while retaining the function of public space and outdoor exhibition. The division into thematic pavilions became established at that time, and corporate and national pavilions began to play an important role. In the case of the latter, modern architecture, historical references and vernacular heritage became carriers of cultural codes, and visual identification of countries.

As spaces independent of institutional schemes and academic canons, World Expositions became laboratories for new ideas and technologies. At the same time, their involvement in political contexts cannot be overlooked – clearly visible, for example, in the pavilions of the Third Reich and the USSR at the 1937 Paris exhibition, as well as during the Cold War rivalry between the USA and the USSR at exhibitions in Montreal and Osaka, where achievements in the field of space exploration became the central theme.

⁹ A. Dżupina, *Pierwsze na świecie centrum przechowywania dzieł sztuki w pełni dostępne dla publiczności od MVRDV* [in:] *Architektura & Business*, 29.01.2025, https://www.architekturaibiznes.pl/boijmans-van-beuningen-mvrdv,37838.html?srsId=AfmBOoqTyKdOBm_qVTZ5eItL2S9nHjM-K6AmiBmeqvGUaQxHDTdO28QZD (access: 15.07.2025).

¹⁰ M. Gyurkovich, *Role of culture in revitalisation of the postindustrial heritage in Poland* [in:] *ReUSO. III Congreso Internacional sobre Documentación, Conservación, y Reutilización del Patrimonio Arquitectónico y Paisajístico*, Editorial Universitat Politècnica de València, València 2015, pp. 1294–1301; M. Gyurkovich (ed.), *Polskie przestrzenie kultury. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2019, p. 295.

¹¹ I. Sykta, *Synergy of World's Exhibition sites and spatial structures of host cities*, “Budownictwo i Architektura” 2017, no. 2, pp. 005–030. DOI: 10.24358/Bud-Arch_17-162_01.

The experience of the pavilion space and its exhibition is one of the key achievements of the World Exhibition format. The 1939 New York exhibition entitled “The World of Tomorrow”, architecturally set in the American Streamline Moderne style, was symbolic due to its historical and political context.¹² The centrepiece was the Trylon and Perisphere pavilion by Wallace Harrison and J. André Fouilhoux, with an interior designed by Henry Dreyfuss. The shapes of a cone and a sphere suspended above water created a visual dominant feature. Visitors passed through the 184-metre cone and then took a moving staircase to the interior of the Perisphere, where they observed a diorama of the future city of Democracy from a gallery. The whole experience was complemented by music and a narrator’s commentary. It was an integrated spatial and visual experience, designed as an immersive exhibition concept.¹³ Researchers see in this concept an ideological affinity with 18th-century architecture – the work of Boullée and Ledoux¹⁴ – and the concept of architecture parlante, which assumes that architecture should speak through form.¹⁵ The relationship between architecture, art, and narrative would become the foundation for museum exhibitions in the following decades. The exhibition as a story with a clearly defined message would find its development in thematic museums at the end of the 20th century and fully blossom in the present day.

The experience of place, participation in the spectacle of architecture, exhibition, and content are reflected, among others, in the Philips Pavilion designed by Le Corbusier for Expo 1958 in Brussels, the IBM pavilion in New York in 1964 by Eero Saarinen, completed by Charles and Ray Eames¹⁶, and the Pepsico pavilion in Osaka in 1970, an event showcasing Japanese visions of metabolic architecture.

The Pepsico Pavilion was designed by the E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) group, led by Bill Klüver, who was fascinated by optical and electroacoustic phenomena. Together with a group of artists, he proposed an innovative concept: a white, crystalline pavilion surrounded by fog generated by sprayed water vapour, with external sculptures resembling rounded tubes. Viewers were given transparent telephone headsets and entered a pneumatic, mirrored hemisphere. The images created on the curved surfaces, the varied sound, and the impression of being suspended in space created a spectacular, multi-sensory experience. Despite its innovation, the Pavilion did not meet the expectations of the sponsor, who forced a change in the sound scenario to a popular song during the exhibition. The public also did not receive the project with enthusiasm – more understandable and educational forms of communication were expected¹⁷. One of the problems was also the illegibility of cultural codes. Nevertheless, the Pavilion is now considered a concept ahead of its time.

¹² K. Nowakowska-Sito, *Inżynierowie maszyn i dusz: nowojorska wystawa światowa 1939 roku a modernistyczna utopia lat trzydziestych* [in:] J. Sosnowska (ed.), *Wystawa nowojorska 1939*, Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warszawa 2012, pp. 25–36.

¹³ Anna Stefańska in her master’s thesis *Udział artystów polskich na Wystawie Światowej w Nowym Jorku*, Uniwersytet Jagielloński 1999.

¹⁴ A.K. Olszewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–24.

¹⁵ G. Świtek, *Gry sztuki z architekturą. Nowoczesne powinowactwa i współczesne integracje*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2013, pp. 135–153.

¹⁶ L. Garbutt, *Case studies* [in:] Z. Ryan (ed.), *As seen: exhibitions that made architecture and design history*, The Art Institute, Chicago 2017, pp. 33–80.

¹⁷ M. Wasiuta, *E.A.T. in Osaka: Transdukting Technology* [in:] E.-L. Pelkonen, C. Chan, D.A. Tasman (eds), *Exhibiting architecture: a paradox?*, Yale School of Architecture, New Haven 2015, pp. 83–96.

Expo exhibition experiences cover a wide spectrum – from innovative, captivating projects to traditional, text-centric presentations. The key is to choose the means and forms of communication appropriate to the audience. Many projects, especially national pavilions, feature objects borrowed from museums, such as Rodin's sculpture or Gutenberg's printing press at Expo 1967 in Montreal.

At the Expo in Shanghai, Thomas Heatherwick's British Pavilion, "The Seed Cathedral", blurred the boundaries between interior and exterior. Transparent rods penetrated the walls, exposing the seeds inside, and light played the role of a link between the spaces¹⁸. A similarly openwork sculpture was created by the British Pavilion in Milan in 2015, inviting viewers to contemplate its interior.

These are just two examples of experimentation at the intersection of architecture and exhibition content. Narrative exhibitions, immersion – physical or digital – and spaces that respond to the viewer offer not only a presentation of content, but also an experience, knowledge transfer, and real participation.

Contemporary museum exhibitions, especially in thematic museums, use a wide range of modern media and forms of communication. There is a clear division between object-based exhibitions, based on exhibits, and narrative exhibitions, whose main purpose is to convey an idea, story, or phenomenon. Even classic object exhibitions are now built on a well-thought-out curatorial concept that gives meaning to the viewer's encounter with the exhibit. In his arrangements, Carlo Scarpa sought spatial relationships between exhibits and between them and their surroundings. Depending on the type of museum, different approaches are used, ranging from the sterile space of the White Cube to the narrative architecture of the *parlante*.

Contemporary exhibition designers focus not only on the object itself, but also on the viewer. The key strategy is to design the experience and its durability. Retrospective research on participants of Expo 1970 in Osaka identified factors influencing the durability of memories of the exhibition: the implementation of the programme, accompanying emotions, and the possibility of repeating the experience. These results open up a new field of research on exhibition design, also in the museum context.

4. SUMMARY

History, including the history of architecture – understood as heritage, a resource of experience, but also a source of aesthetic codes and ideas – has had a significant impact on the development of exhibition architecture. In the architecture of museums and World Exhibition pavilions, periods of strong references to historical forms can be distinguished, both in terms of overall design and individual projects.

In the case of museums, this was primarily true of the early stages. Over time, there was a break with the original models, which was reflected in the way exhibits were presented and in the way a relationship with the place was established. Contemporary museum architecture has become an expression of modern forms and ideas, and this trend is confirmed by social expectations of museums as iconic objects with strong symbolic meaning.

¹⁸ S. Jordana, *UK Pavilion for Shanghai World Expo 2010 / Heatherwick Studio* [in:] ArchDaily, 3.05.2010, <https://www.archdaily.com/58591/uk-pavilion-for-shanghai-world-expo-2010-heatherwick-studio> (access: 15.07.2025).

The history of World Exhibitions documents this process. From early examples of modern structures – such as the Crystal Palace, the radio tower in New York, Frédéric Le Play’s pavilion from 1867, the Eiffel Tower, and the Machine Hall from 1889 – characterised by bold formal solutions and technological innovation, there was a shift towards staging and historicising concepts. An example of this was the first World’s Fair in Chicago in 1893. In the following decades, there was a return to modern ideas, no longer in the form of a single megastructure, but in the form of diverse thematic objects: company and national pavilions. Especially in the case of the latter, the renewed reference to historical models was part of a conscious ideological and political message.

For decades, World Expos served as a testing ground for innovative architectural concepts, the implementation of new materials, technologies, and ideas, as well as for diverse forms of exhibition addressed to audiences with different cultural codes of perception. They provided a space for testing bold solutions on a global scale.

Today, in the era of new technologies, and widespread and rapid access to information, the importance of Expo events is waning. Wojciech Kosiński, in his article *Trwanie i przemijanie architektury – stymulacje twórczości* (*The Permanence and Transience of Architecture – Stimuli for Creativity*), writes about the transience of architecture in two dimensions: physical destruction and disappearance from collective memory¹⁹. This phenomenon is also part of the experience of World Exhibitions. Pavilions are usually dismantled or remain in a fragmentary form; only a few are moved to other locations or reconstructed. The permanence of their legacy therefore relies primarily on the memory of participants, documentation, historical research, and the activities of architecture museums.

Historical contexts are permanently inscribed in the development of exhibition architecture, and the mutual transfer of ideas and experiences has contributed to its evolution. For decades, World Exhibitions were a global experience. Today, their role is being taken over by the world’s largest museums, such as the Louvre, which, with its impressive number of visitors, and growing network of branches, is itself becoming a global experience and writing a new history.

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