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Review: Architecture room at the RA Summer Exhibition

9 June 2017 | By Michael Collins

Michael Collins on the exhibition curated by Farshid Moussavi

Some years the architecture room at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition has jarred as an exhibition within an exhibition.

This year the show is curated by Eileen Cooper and features a colourfully eclectic mix of 1,100 works from a range of international artists, including for the first time the media of spoken word by Alana Francis.

Visitors are drawn into the architecture room through a space featuring *Full House* by Sean Scully, and *Black Path* by Cornelia Parker. The former, a dense collage, the latter a floating line drawing set the tone for this year's drawing-based offering curated by Farshid Moussavi. Visually the Large Weston Room glides in continuum with these beautiful collages.

The thematic link this year is *construction coordination drawings*. Moussavi suggests this takes 'a slice' through a process very particular to architectural production, and considered more prosaic than earlier design stages. These 'slices' are in the forms of plan section cuts and exploded isometrics and aims to express frozen design team politics, spatial conflicts and layers of negotiation as artform. This is a welcome departure, following the legacy of the curator's past publications *The Function of Ornament* and follows the lineage set over a decade ago by Herzog & de Meuron's *Natural History* (Tate Modern 2003) and more recently OMA's *progress* (Barbican 2012) both inviting a glimpse backstage and inviting independent readings of the by products of architectural process.

Architects from many of the best-known practices were as asked to respond to this brief and the results are expressed largely through colourful thickets of structural and services with a general celebration of complexity.

The wall-mounted technical pieces gravitate around three central tables containing early stage conceptual hand drawn collages by Gordon Benson, drawings by Peter Cook, Will Alsop and Trevor Dannant. These are confused by some rather more contrived mathematical visuals by Isosaki and Ron Arad. Each wall contains a grouped collection of pieces ranging from more earnest isometric representations, fragmented technical details following conventional drawing techniques to a wall of more wilful abstractions driven by formal composition. Unusually models are placed awkwardly in each corner, some such as Eric Parry's *Skyscraper* slightly ambiguous additions.

A series of more literal three-dimensional representations, among them works by Adjaye, BIG, and Gehry, are arguably those that engage least with the exhibition theme, following instead the well-trodden pathway of more holistic technical studies akin to competitions and student shows. Foster's beautiful anatomical study of Mexico City airport follows suit but provides a fascinating diagram of the cultural and political issues associated with contemporary air travel.

Many similar pieces lack critical engagement with Moussavi's theme, driven instead by the lust of mass data, and forming a general wallpapering of the exhibition. Between the lines, arguably the most successful pieces are the most technically abstracted, decontextualised and often the most dogmatic wall-mounted pieces, resonate more powerfully with the early conceptual works. These present single strands of data in a way that provokes the viewer. These include the timber setting out by Dominique Perrault, surface fabrication matrixes by Ascensio Mah to name a few. More could have been made from the paradox of openness that results from the extreme abstraction of technically prescriptive drawings.

Moussavi argues construction drawings are an expression of architecture as an 'instruction-based art'.

- ⊖ However there is an interesting contradiction that unlike the works of artist Sol Lewitt and others of that genre, these architectural 'instructions' seek through legal frameworks to control and eliminate multiple readings rather than encourage them. This tension between responsibility, serendipity and the sliver of open interpretation between the instruction and the maker's hand would have presented a critical opportunity, only Chipperfield's Curtain study of the refurbishment of the Neues Museum connects in this manner.

The decision to make this an exhibition of physical manifestations, 'exports' of what is now a dynamic process that occurs in a parallel three dimensional space by multiple actors was most successful when this went beyond the predictable drawing outputs of sections plans and isometric structural drawings. Like the sculpture by Yinka Shonibare in the main courtyard which colourfully freezes a moment of time. These mark the moment where the coordinated 3D model is made static. Stanton Williams' layered perspex piece which sits between model and drawing captures this sense. Many of the more formal compositions start to reveal tensions between different design disciplines, rogue ducts, clashes and structural grids tortured under the tyranny of architectural whimsy are apparent in Heatherwick's layered plans of the Nanyang Learning Hub and H&D's Ephelharmonie.

Wilkinson Eyre arguably produced one of the most successful pieces. A beautifully intricate services drawing of Battersea Power Station where ingenuity and compromise can be seen amid the ghost infrastructure of London's residential market. In this drawing there is a sense of the original architecture as a living and regenerating organism. This is complemented by a similar study of the Economist building by DSDHA where the 'original' and 'executive' architects' design intent is both subverted and celebrated.

Postscript: The exhibition runs from June 13 until August 20


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