

Kvadrat Interwoven

No Drama: In Chicago, designers explore the relationship between theatricality and architecture

By Jesús Vassallo

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Spaces without Drama or Surface is an Illusion, but so is Depth is the very long title of an exuberant exhibition, a lively mix of artifacts produced by architects, artists, scenographers and dramaturges set in the rooms of the Graham Foundation's Madlener House in Chicago. The brainchild of Ruth Estévez and Wonne Ickx, the show builds on the duo's prolonged interest in exhibitions, explored through their experience as founders and partners of the Mexican collective LIGA, an initiative now in its sixth year of promoting young Latin-American architecture through innovative exhibitions and programs.

The diversity and richness of objects and ideas found in *Spaces without Drama* is a direct result of the heterogeneity of origins and interests found in the association of Estévez and Ickx – a Spanish art curator and set designer and a Belgian architect, who met in Ciudad de México before moving to Los Angeles. Heterogeneity is in fact not an anecdotal feature of the exhibition, but rather its structural and defining trait, as the curators manage to amalgamate a certain zeitgeist of contemporary cultural production around the elusive but intense fascination with theatricality that seems to have influenced many architectural practices of their generation.



View of "*Spaces without drama or surface is an illusion, but so is depth*," 2017, Graham Foundation, Chicago. Photo by RCH | EKH

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According to Ickx, this interest in theatre has an unexpected origin in the disenchantment with dominant modes of representation in architecture – mainly the tyranny of the photo-realistic digital rendering – which pushed many of his colleagues to experiment with pre-digital modes of collage for the presentation of their projects. This mode of image production, based on the appropriation and combination of pieces of two-dimensional imagery allowed young architects to focus not so much on the way that a proposed building would look when finished, but rather on the set of cultural references that they wanted to bring to the table in order to generate it. Allegedly, this process of working through the layering of flat graphic fragments to produce rudimentary perspectives soon revealed itself as analogous to the way that set designers work with two-dimensional elements to simulate architectural settings, therefore prompting a whole generation to interrogate the potential of scenography and theatricality for architecture today.



fala atelier, *Building with Three Apartments*, Oporto, Portugal, 2015

In an interesting turn of events, this young generation – almost accidentally interested in the visual mechanisms of scenography – have gradually gravitated towards a previous generation of architects and artists who perhaps for the last time displayed a similar interest in theatre. With Aldo Rossi and David Hockney contributing some of the cornerstones of the show, and a general insistence on works from the late 1970s and early 1980s including pieces by Charles Moore or Emilio Ambasz, *Spaces without Drama* is as much a survey of a current group of young practices as a testament to their longing for a previous generation, therefore establishing a bridge and a dialogue between two specific moments in time.

Ultimately, what theatrical mise-en-scène has in common with collage is precisely the tentativeness with which they both bring objects and characters together. While in collage tentativeness is manifested in the lack of resolution with which the different appropriated fragments are juxtaposed, in theatre it is represented literally in the speed with which the different sets are put together and taken apart for each new scene. This tentativeness relates in turn to a certain economy of means or immediacy that permeates the two media, which from different perspectives ask similar questions about what are the minimum and most basic elements that can construct a given situation.



Installation view of "Stage (after Kurt Schwitters)", 2017, by Silke Otto Knapp, Graham Foundation, Chicago. Photo by RCH | EKH

The appetite for working with preexisting materials and references within an ethos of perpetual renovation is precisely what, in the light provided by this exhibition, best describes the young generation brought together by Estévez and Ickx. For the architecture offices in the show, the impact of these ideas translates into an emphasis on multiplicity, a specific spatial paradigm which seeks to enable the coexistence of different parallel situations. The Weekend House by Office KGDVS, or the Cien and Meri Houses by Pezo von Ellrichshausen are perhaps the clearest examples of such structures where the repetition of simple spatial units enables different scenes or realities to unfold simultaneously and in parallel.

These projects, with their arrays of repetitive rooms that resemble traditional enfilades, so distant from the modern ideal of a universal space, are telling of a time in which we define ourselves more than ever by the things that we choose – by what we consume – and where

aspirations to synthesis or authenticity seem no longer to apply. In turn, these domestic spaces display a different type of neutrality akin to the theatre stage, one optimised for the quick assembly and disassembly of different situations by the simple arrangement of a few objects or prompts.



Installation view of "Vale/Cabinet", 2017, by Batia Suter, Graham Foundation, Chicago. Photo by RCH | EKH

Following a similar logic, *Spaces without Drama* mobilises the mechanisms and strategies that it unearths from its curated projects in order to become itself a piece of theatrical architecture. To achieve this, the curators cunningly leverage the representational quality already present in the architecture of the Madlener House, a mansion built in 1902 for a German émigré in the style of Karl Friedrich Schinkel (yet another architect obsessed with theatre) and itself conceived as a series of highly staged spaces featuring an octagonal foyer, a monumental staircase and a series of rooms linked in an enfilade.

To operate in this environment, the curators capitalise on the diversity of the works in the show, which range from pieces at an architectural scale to small scenography models, as well as images of built and unbuilt projects. A division of labour is then established in which the larger pieces, such as the oversized curtain by Office, the modified cabinet by Batia Suter or the movable panels by Silke Otto-Knapp, operate as interventions in the architecture.

generating small stages across the exhibition. with the medium and smaller objects becoming in turn the protagonists of the spaces without drama. which the title of the exhibition alludes to.



Installation view of "No More No Less (Chicago)", 2017, by Pezo Von Ellrichhausen, Graham Foundation, Chicago. Photo by RCH | EKH

In the resulting controlled chaos, the exhibition finds its most intriguing moments precisely when the distinction between the different scales and types of artifacts contained in it becomes most ambiguous, such as with the double drop-leaf table by Norman Kellev, or the ambiguous objects by Sam Jacob Studio or Johnston Marklee, both of which similarly refuse to be identified completely as either scale models or actual pieces of furniture. In the most jarring case of this intentional confusion of roles between the real and the fictional, a wood model of a theatre project in Varese, Italy, by Baukuh, is placed directly on the lobby's floor, diverting our path as we first enter the building and forcing us to question, in its engagement with the architecture of the building, whether it is itself an architecture or a representation of architecture.

It is precisely in the accumulation of these moments, where the authors and the curators of the exhibition explicitly acknowledge the trans-scalar nature of scenography and the permanent conflict that it presents between representation and construction, that we start to understand Spaces without Drama as not just a compilation of works, but rather as a work in and of itself, a complex machine that modifies existing spaces in order to create new spaces, suggesting in the process a new genre between architecture, scenography, and exhibition design.

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View of "Spaces without drama or surface is an illusion, but so is depth," 2017, Graham Foundation, Chicago. Photo by RCH | EKH

The exhibition **Spaces without Drama or Surface is an Illusion. but so is Depth** at the Graham Foundation in Chicago. runs thru 1 Julv 2017.

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