On gta Films : opening boxes in architectural archives

On *gta Films*:
Opening Boxes in Architectural Archives

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Dark corners, narrow understairs, busy corridors, main entrance halls, and formal exhibition spaces. For three months these settings housed a diverse set of objects — beamers, tablets, screens, television boxes, headphones, and chairs — each setting a stand-alone installation displaying one of fifteen films pulled out of archival boxes. Each installation beckoned the students, professors, staff, and visitors who crossed its loosely defined zone of display and shared with them testimony of the many affairs twentieth-century architects have had with film to design, document, communicate, and promote their work. In turn, each display magnified the film's own characteristics: photography, montage, animations, sometimes even the soundtrack, provoking passers-by to reflect on the milieus within which these films were once entangled.

Bridging the archival recesses and the corridors of the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich, *gta Films* curated a twin metamorphosis. VHS cassettes were replayed, studied, digitized, and thus transformed from dusty archival materials to sources of architectural histories. With them, the corridors in the Hönggerberg campus were transformed from circulatory spaces to stations of vision, and their users into involuntary spectators of architecture's filmic past.

Recordings included TV productions, such as *Messias des Neuen Bauens* (1989), an East German documentary about Hannes Meyer, whose screening intersected with the final acts of the Berlin Wall. Others revealed


amateur productions, such as the tryouts for *Bella Lui* (1930), which testifies to Carl Hubacher's and the couple Flora and Rudolf Steiger's use of film to communicate their projects. But each recording tells a story of how film has intertwined with the gta during its fifty years of existence. Since the moving image gives an account of things that differs from that of other documents—models, drawings, writings, and other "static" media—these stories do not always match with known records.

Visits to *gta Films* started in the department's gallery. There the main exhibition, *Phantom Theory*, celebrated the institute's jubilee in fifty-two vitrines. Among them, a pillar stood out as multiscreen signage animated by five filmic portraits of Swiss architects Alberto Camenzind, Hannes Meyer, Rudolf Olgiati, Andreas Studer, Alfred Roth. Close-ups of these historical figures were interspersed with other imagery, constructing a visual biography. Occasionally, all five faces appeared at the same time across all five screens, thus revealing the commonalities among the films, such as the staging of the architects' own houses. In this way, the pillar disclosed the

mechanisms underpinning all of the films as a *dispositif* used for the architects' individuation. At the same time, the pillar was revealed as an installation that, by prompting visitors to move about it, allowed them to see what the curators' guided tours of the exhibition colloquially referred to as "talking heads." The reference to institutional ancestry was anything but subtle: the pillar was better known as the "Totem."

The other installations were scattered throughout the department. Some were unavoidable, like the "Totem." Others were noticeable only from specific viewpoints. For example, one installation was situated in a double-height hall by the main entrance, near the Info Center, the library, the elevators, and various lecture rooms. On the ground floor it was barely detectable. On the first floor, however, users walking along the gallery that opens onto the hall encountered a surprising scene: László Moholy-Nagy's *Architects' Congress* projected on a white screen just below, laid out on the dark Pirelli rubber flooring. This film was commissioned by Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) organizer Sigfried Giedion to promote the association and boost its membership. It records CIAM's fourth congress, held in 1933 aboard the cruiser *Patris II*, where the film was also shown for the first time. Visitors leaned on the gallery's balustrade, as if on a boat,
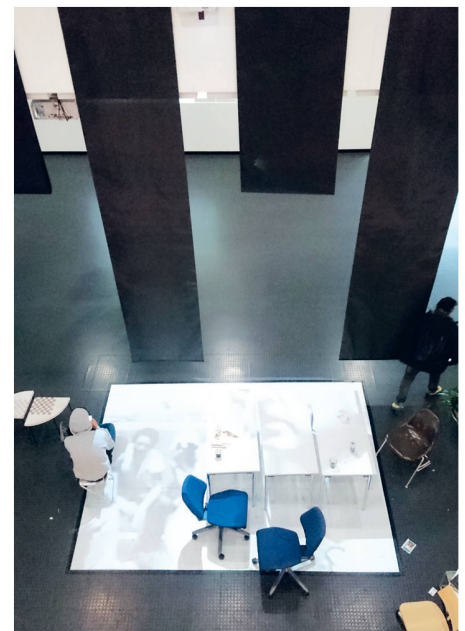
to see the moving spectacle below. Between classes, students would gather to watch and discuss the film, mirroring its use of cruising as a mode of debate and vision. With this one detail, the installation conveyed all the peculiarities of Moholy-Nagy's film—its original subject, photography, and display.

One day, the student association architektura took control of the Moholy-Nagy installation. Students framed the hall with black drapes, hacked the beamer, diverted its projection, and quite literally infiltrated themselves among the CIAM modernists. With this appropriation, the students reshaped the installation to launch an independent program of debate. Without notice, the installation displaying the silent journal of a historical encounter was transformed into a stage for contemporary architectural criticism. This was not an isolated event. Interactions between students and *gta Films* took place regularly. One of the most frequented installations displayed Niklaus Morgenthaler's *Halen* (1964/1989), an exploration of the namesake settlement built by Atelier 5 near Bern from 1955 to 1962. The architect's film was shown on a small tablet within a large and otherwise empty bulletin board at the busiest crossroads of the department, connecting the school's main staircases with the auditoria. The installation was attention-getting because the bulletin board operated

as a sound box, magnifying the soundtrack produced by the tablet's small speakers: The Rolling Stones' "Goin' Home" evoked the 1960s optimism for collective domesticity, while Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry Be Happy" contextualized the moment Morgenthaler edited the 16mm footage to narrate the life of Halen's inhabitants.

In using these spaces as exhibition sites, *gta Films* kept away from the white-cube approach. This had unexpected consequences. The gta Exhibitions team had to check each device every day, as they were routinely sabotaged. Nonetheless, this uneasiness furthered the visitors' experience of the estrangement produced by these films, a phenomenon *gta Films* further examined in a brochure, a seminar, guided tours, and guest lectures. We are not used to architectural histories being told through the medium of film. Although films can be found in the archives, they are often in precarious condition, and rarely have they informed the narratives of architectural historians. Yet, the dozens of films in the institute's vaults are strong evidence that films are neither isolated nor occasional incidents but are the result of significant intersections with architecture. Thus, we should keep asking—all the more so in jubilee years—which boxes are we unaware of not having opened yet?

Note: *gta Films* was curated by the authors and Samia Henni.
fig. 1 The "Totem" in the main jubilee exhibition. Photograph by the authors.
fig. 2 *Architects' Congress* in the main hall. Photograph by the authors.
fig. 3 *Halen* in the bulletin board. Photograph by the authors.