

exhibition as “the ultimate symbol of a sacred site,” refer to a building long since destroyed—a fact that sometimes prompts a considerable degree of invention. Thus, in Sebastiano del Piombo’s unfinished *Judgement of Solomon*, the most striking loan in the exhibition, the temple (if that is what it is) is transformed into a grand Roman basilica.

The strength of the exhibition lay in the richness of the artworks on display. The visitor was provided with relatively little information in the form of text, and this lack of theoretical or art historical direction could have felt like a deficiency. However, the curators made the clever decision to include short films in which five speakers—an architect, a film director, an expert in computer animation, a historian of modern art, and a historian of cinema—reflected on works and themes in the exhibition from a contemporary perspective. These films were a great success. At a stroke, they provided new perspectives on the artworks, rendered them accessible to a broader public, and demonstrated their continued relevance.

The decision not to publish a printed catalog was probably the right one. Instead, a catalog was created that may be accessed freely online, along with the short films that accompanied the exhibition. The essays are informative and useful, although they are perhaps sometimes too dismissive of the theoretical potential of the topic. This is particularly evident where the issue of perspective is concerned. Erwin Panofsky’s extraordinary essay on the subject is, as has often been observed, highly problematic. Good arguments can be and have been deployed against many parts of it, but the claim that Renaissance painters had no conception of “psychophysiological space” does not strike me as being one of them.² After all, Renaissance painters were similarly unacquainted with the concept of “place making”—a thoroughly contemporary notion that is imbued with the speculations of modern phenomenology—but the exhibition itself demonstrated that we may nevertheless fruitfully employ this concept in the discussion of Renaissance art.

Overall, however, this was a clever exhibition that made good use of the gallery’s resources to provide an introduction to a fascinating but overlooked subject.

Abounding with marvelous and compelling works of art, it was the kind of small, free exhibition of which we might hope to see more.

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Related Publication

Amanda Lillie, ed., *Building the Picture: Architecture in Italian Renaissance Painting* (London: National Gallery, 2014), online only, <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/exhibition-catalogues/building-the-picture>.

Notes

1. Amanda Lillie, “Constructing the Picture,” in *Building the Picture: Architecture in Italian Renaissance Painting*, ed. Amanda Lillie (London: National Gallery, 2014), <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/exhibition-catalogues/building-the-picture/constructing-the-picture/putting-perspective-into-perspective> (accessed 12 Jan. 2015).

2. Ibid.

The Mound of Vendôme

Canadian Centre for Architecture,
Montreal
19 June–28 September 2014

Under the direction of Mirko Zardini since 2005, the Canadian Centre for Architecture has been mounting exhibitions that encourage an understanding of architecture that is inherently political. *The Mound of Vendôme*, curated by architectural historian David Gissen, drew from the CCA’s archives to provide the documentary background for Gissen’s own proposal to commemorate the Commune of Paris (18 March–28 May 1871), during which the citizens of Paris took control of their city in what proved to be a precursor to many subsequent urban social movements. Featured prominently on one of the walls of this small-scale exhibition was the original decree from the Commune stating that “the Vendôme Column will be demolished.” Why did the Commune want to bring down the column, and what was its significance? What is the significance of the mound? The archival material on display responded to these historical questions, while Gissen’s proposal to reconstruct the mound, which had been built temporarily next to the column during the Commune, sought to redress the lack of spatial markers in Place

Vendôme commemorating this extraordinary and brief episode in the city’s history.

For the supporters of the Commune, the column, with its statue of Napoleon, was associated with imperialism, war, and dictatorship. In April 1871 the Commune declared it “a monument of barbarity, a symbol of brutal force and false glory, an affirmation of Chauvinism, a negation of international rights, a permanent insult of the victor towards the vanquished, a perpetual outrage against one of the three great principles of the French Republic, fraternity” and announced the decision to tear it down. This decree caused both sensation and resentment, but the Commune went ahead. The mound was built to cushion the potential impact of the demolition on surrounding buildings and the infrastructure below the square. On 16 May 1871, the column was toppled. Once the Commune was suppressed and the previous regime reasserted, the mound was quickly cleared away; the column was reconstructed in 1875.

The exhibition’s emphasis on the role of place in social movements was timely. In recent years, claiming public spaces has emerged as one of the characteristic and unifying features of mass protests. In addition to occupation, the toppling of statues of political or ideological figures in public spaces has resurfaced, at least in part because it draws the media coverage essential to the perpetuation of such protests. The toppling of the Vendôme Column is arguably the most famous episode in the long history of “political iconoclasm” because of the significance of the Commune, but perhaps also, as the numerous high-quality photographic prints and engravings in this exhibition seem to suggest, because of the careful visual documentation of the column’s toppling and the mass dissemination of the resulting images.

The CCA’s Octagonal Gallery, with its powerful geometry, symmetrical plan, conical ceiling with clerestory windows in the narrow drum, and two entrances at 90 degrees to each other, is the furthest thing from a neutral “white cube” space. The exhibition design managed to confer a meaningful directionality on the centrally planned space. The presentation of the archival material on three long tables in the middle of the gallery space allowed

Figure 1 The Mound of Vendôme (digital print, rendering by David Gissen with Victor Hadjikyriacou, © David Gissen [2014]; original image by Michel Setboun, 2001, © Michel Setboun/Corbis).



the visitor to view the design, erection, fall, and reconstruction of the column in cinematic terms with chronological and episodic sequencing. The first table/episode, labeled “The Column 1822–1851,” featured the exhibition pamphlet, two books in a case opened to pages with printed illustrations of the original proposal and designs for the column and its statue of Napoleon, and, outside the case, a framed photograph from 1851 that showed the column in place. The second, longer table narrated the second episode in 1871, namely, the toppling of the column during the Commune, using five books and one print arranged in a case—re-creating an embodied understanding of the sequence of the demolition process as the visitor moved alongside the display. The third episode/table was devoted to the reconstruction of the column in the period 1873–76. According to the curator, this layout sought to transmit the experience of the researcher in the archive.

In contrast to the display of archival material on tables, the explanatory texts of the 1871 decree to demolish the column and the 2012 petition supporting the proposal to reconstruct the mound were enlarged on the walls. The walls were also used to display photographs of Gissen in Place Vendôme as he collected signatures for the petition and manipulated images of Place Vendôme showing it cleared of its present-day markers and

with the reconstructed mound in place (Figure 1). At the rear of the exhibition, on a fourth table, was a specially commissioned physical model of the column with the mound next to it.

Despite the visual centrality of the column, the focus of the exhibition was the mound. In fact, the exhibition doubled as a proposal to memorialize the mound built by the Commune in contradistinction to the column erected by the emperor. Whereas the column had been built of bronze from enemy cannons and signified empire, the mound was assembled from “unworthy” materials ranging from manure, straw, and tree branches to construction debris—in short, from the stuff of the city—by the citizens, and with associated symbolism. In the exhibition pamphlet, Gissen explained that the act of building mounds on which to raise symbols during mass spectacles had precedents in the revolutionary culture of France. Vendôme’s mound was special, however, in the sense that it was there that the symbol of empire, the column, had fallen into pieces, signifying the (temporary) emasculation of the empire. With the demolition, the Commune had succeeded in taking back the imagery of the city from the emperor for the masses. Gissen’s reconstructed mound was presented by the CCA as a “counter-monument” fitting to commemorate the Commune and, as Gissen explained, an extension of both local and

international efforts already in place to do so.

By highlighting the mound as a collective means of spatial occupation, the exhibition demonstrated how architectural history can align with recent calls to renew architecture’s social and political relevance. Instigating participation through the petition, Gissen’s proposal promoted ways of knowing other than textual through its creative image manipulation; it explicitly fabricated connections among historical texts, objects, and their reconstructions. By revisiting the history of a radical landscape, as opposed to a monumental one, it set an inspiring example for the discipline to invigorate current struggles for the right to the city.

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Related Publication

David Gissen, *The Mound of Vendôme: A Project by David Gissen* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2014), pamphlet, 14 pp., http://www.cca.qc.ca/system/items/10780/original/cca_anglais_pdf_screen.pdf?1404402420.

Wood

Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam
16 May–10 August 2014

In the summer of 2014, Het Nieuwe Instituut inaugurated Things and Materials,