

Following the Folly

Quoting, Constructing and Historicising Paper Architecture

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Abstract

In 1990, international architects including Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind and Bolles + Wilson were invited to design thirteen architectural “follies” for the International Garden and Greenery Exposition in Osaka, Japan. The poetic and varied aesthetics of these follies clearly differentiated them from the surrounding Expo halls and infrastructure and, coupled with an undefined program, made their purpose and their status as architectural objects ambiguous. To add to this confusion, the folly was only just beginning to re-emerge as an architectural type on the world stage, following a revival from origins in eighteenth century design. Perhaps because of the category’s relative newness, and the haphazard placement of the structures throughout the Expo master plan, the Osaka Follies were largely overlooked by critics from Western architectural periodicals. The few critical reviews that did surface were unsympathetic to their aesthetic and categorical ambiguity. Moreover, their perceived lack of meaning at the Expo was treated as a symptom of bigger problems at play in contemporary design. Despite their unfavourable reception, the Osaka Follies can now be seen as a pivotal historical moment in the development of the contemporary pavilion phenomenon. In particular, they document a history of experimental architectural design propagated through cultural exchanges between architectural visionaries from England and Japan, as well as some of the first built projects of so-called “paper architects”. This paper investigates the gaps in the understanding of these pavilions, and the nature of these exchanges, in which ideas are transferred, appropriated and quoted through periodicals, exhibitions and architectural competitions. It argues that the follies are products of this cross-cultural dialogue between paper architects, and creates a lens through which qualities that we recognise in contemporary pavilions—categorical ambiguity, aesthetic abstraction and weak relationship to site conditions—can be traced back to experimental paper origins.

The Osaka Follies, Expo '90

The International Garden and Greenery Expo was held in the Osaka Prefecture, Japan from the start of April to the end of September 1990.¹ With the goal of "contributing to a full appreciation of the relationship of garden and greenery to human life", the Expo was divided into nature-themed zones for exhibition halls, international gardens, food stalls and amusement park rides.² Scattered throughout this master plan in various crossroad plazas were thirteen architectural "follies". These structures were commissioned by the General Commissioner of Expo '90, Arata Isozaki, who invited a host of internationally renowned architects to design them, including Zaha Hadid, Cook & Hawley, Coop Himmelb(l)au, Andrea Branzi, Morphosis, Daniel Libeskind and Bolles + Wilson.³ All follies clearly distinguished themselves from each other and their surroundings with experimental aesthetics. Cook and Hawley's folly was described as a "car-wash pavilion" for its unconventional hydraulics.⁴ The Lapena & Torres folly fused together giant cacti, clocks and trees.⁵ As one of her first built projects, Zaha Hadid's folly featured her now iconic soaring vectors and angled planes.⁶ Some follies included natural elements, such as Gigantes & Zenghelis' folly which drew and fountained water from the artificial lake "The Sea of Life", and Macdonald and Salter's folly which utilised rammed earth and timber.⁷ These avant-garde antics surely would have interested festivalgoers, however their lack of purpose, and interstitial placement between themed zones gave them a confusing role at the Expo. Only receiving a brief mention in the Official Expo Guidebook, coverage and publicity of the follies in international architectural magazines reporting on the Expo was also patchy.⁸ While the follies were mentioned in periodicals such as *Architectural Record*, *Japan Architect* and *El Croquis*, few comments looked beyond their surface appearance: to what the follies were meant to represent, or why they were included at Expo '90.

The scant reviews that more deeply analysed the follies were highly critical of their seemingly random placement, their lack of meaning, purpose or function, and their categorical ambiguity. Diana Periton, in her review, "These Foolish Things", comments on their purposely ambiguous grounding, by stating "I am not sure whether the Osaka Follies exhibition intentionally makes no effort to be understood".⁹ Periton attacks the "surreal ridiculousness" of the follies, however she congratulates Macdonald and Salter's folly embodying "a sense of tangible existence", perhaps due to its use of natural materials, which resonates with the Expo theme.¹⁰ In doing so, Periton argues, their folly rises above the pervasive condition of event and spectacle with the "potency of physical presence".¹¹ Marc Treib, in "Osaka Expo Misses the Mark", takes a similar position, deriding the follies for their utter superfluousness and failure to engage with the garden festival. Treib finds them both categorically confusing, "hovering between sculpture and architecture", and contextually insignificant, "unsure of which direction to go, their intricacies were lost in the mess of signs, stands and structures that surrounded them".¹² Treib blames the architects' separation from site during the design process for the follies' inability to engage with its surroundings, and ultimately mocks them as "court jesters": silly, mildly entertaining, but a temporary, and pointless thrill.¹³

Apart from this limited and critical media coverage, one year following the closure of Expo '90, paper representations of the Osaka Follies surfaced as an exhibition at the Architectural Association (AA), London. Co-ordinated by the AA and the Workshop for Architecture and Urbanism in Tokyo, this exhibition displayed photographs of the follies on-site alongside working architectural drawings, sketches, model photographs, and descriptions of each folly by their respective designers.¹⁴ The *Osaka Follies* exhibition book was released concurrent with the opening of the exhibition, and stands as the only enduring work on the follies. The *Osaka Follies* book is historically important for two reasons: firstly, because it situates the Osaka Follies in a continuum of AA exhibitions, and secondly, it gives a contemporary reader an understanding of what philosophies and characteristics the AA wanted to historicise in these ephemeral structures.

In the 70s and 80s, structures, frequently referred to as follies or pavilions, began to emerge as an avant-garde architectural type: usually incorporated into garden and art exhibitions. Folly and pavilion

are at times treated as semantically interchangeable, however a distinction can be made between the two. The pavilion is commonly associated with a programme, being hinged on particular events. The folly, however, is an autonomous architectural object - a departure from the eighteenth-century garden “folly” of landscape design - a structure with no strong expectations for use, hence, pure “folly”. During this nascent development of pavilions and follies, emerged a parallel interest in paper architecture - a medium that offered design freedom and experimentation, as well as the means to be exhibited or distributed between international designers. This medium has certain liberties afforded to it being virtual, allowing for experimentation unhindered by expectations reality might impose. Drawings, sketches, and models have certain site-less, abstract, functionless and categorically indefinite qualities about them. What is interesting, is that these same qualities were all treated as highly problematic physical traits of the Osaka Folly over two decades ago by architectural critics. Periton and Treib do allude to the follies’ origins as virtual, experimental concepts. For Periton, a departure from its paper schemes gives a sense of legibility for Macdonald and Salter’s folly. While for Treib, this conceptual distance between the folly and the realities of the Expo is somewhat reckless. However, these once troubling characteristics for built structures, now appear as necessary criteria for contemporary architectural pavilions, which are currently experiencing peak popularity and unprecedented numbers.

This paper will argue that the Osaka Follies are a realisation of paper architectural ideas, and represent a legacy of cross-cultural paper experimentation—a concept that has been overlooked by current scholarship on the pavilion phenomena. In light of the current proliferation of pavilions that exhibit similar kinds of abstraction, categorical ambiguity and site-less-ness, this paper creates a lens through which these contemporary qualities may be traced back to an origin in paper architecture.

Future Utopias and Future Engagements

To understand why and how the Osaka Follies were commissioned for Expo 90, Isozaki’s architectural relationships with likeminded, international architects warrants an investigation. During the 1950s, the cultural shockwaves of World War II resonated through the architectural scenes of Japan and England, and profoundly influenced the content of much conceptual work of that era. Visions for dense urban utopias, technologically driven and socially rich programs were idealised in paper architectural schemes. Some of the most iconic were produced by Archigram—displaying punchy, comic-book style graphic and fantastic designs for future cities, while exploring ideas of urbanisation, mega-structures and man’s relationship with technology.¹⁵ In Japan, Kenzo Tange and the Metabolist architects had similar notions, however their urban proposals for high-density, sustainable city living were derived from the structure of natural organisms.¹⁶ Arata Isozaki, former student of Tange, was also gaining reputation for his own radical paper proposals, which diverged from the Metabolist’s nature-based ethos, by instead aligning with Archigram’s holistic philosophy towards technology, pop-culture and human engagement.¹⁷ Much of the work produced by Archigram, Isozaki and other visionaries was radically different from what was on offer in the built world of design and, due to its conceptual content, appeared grounded in the medium of paper.

This “paper architecture”, which first began to take shape in the 1960s, used architectural magazines and periodicals to circulate and propagate its radical concepts. Isozaki fondly recalls the arrival of Archigram magazine in Japan, writing that,

During the mid-1960s, living in this confused, swelling city of the far east, I was struck by a series of shockwaves emanating from London. I did not resist them, and they lulled me into pleasant intoxication.¹⁸

Likewise, Archigram’s receptivity to pervasive social trends extended to their engagement with international architects and naturally, Isozaki’s work also sparked their attention. In 1964, Archigram’s fifth issue brought together designs for future cities by a selection of international designers under the

common theme of “Metropolis”.¹⁹ Isozaki’s contribution was a utopian vision titled, “Clusters in the Air” - a city model for dense, inverted pyramidal towers, which featured alongside the work of other emerging architects Yona Friedman and Leopold Gersler.²⁰ This was not the first international collaboration between Japan and London’s architectural scenes, but signifies a departure point for future collaborations between these stylistically close, yet geographically distanced designers.

Isozaki and Archigram’s Peter Cook subsequently worked alongside each other in parallel projects for the Milan Triennale XVI in 1968, and thus strengthening their ties through this contact.²¹ Cook recalls that this affirmed their friendship, saying “thanks to the Triennale we got to know Isozaki in person”.²² Isozaki’s interior installation “The Electric Labyrinth” evidences this, as it physically melds both Isozaki’s and Archigram’s shared ideas for future cities using collage.²³ The “Electric Labyrinth” even quotes Archigram and the Metabolists by featuring cut-out examples of their future city proposals, albeit as blasted and scorched ruins scattered amongst photographs of a destroyed Hiroshima. Despite the current confidence in utopian schemes, Isozaki’s “Electric Labyrinth” was a critical position on the fate of future cities, and forecasts their demise through inescapable historical and entropic forces. Whether this vision was shared by Archigram is unclear, however, their collaboration continued through Isozaki’s ongoing participation at Art Net: a conference series held in London through the 1970s under the organisation of Peter Cook. Art Net gathered together a wide range of international architects to debate and exhibit their work, and was not only an opportunity for Isozaki and others to rub shoulders and minds, but also to share and circulate their paper architecture concepts. During this time period, Isozaki also frequently visited the Architectural Association to lecture on Japanese architecture and his own design projects.²⁴ The exchange, however, was not unilateral. Isozaki formed a strong bond with the AA’s chairman Alvin Boyarski, leading to study tours of Japan by AA students, the formation of a “Workshop for Architecture and Urbanism in Tokyo”, and various exhibitions at the AA for Japanese Architecture.²⁵

By Expo 90, Isozaki had established a fruitful relationship with the Architectural Association and its orbiting community of radical designers. Upon his appointment as General Commissioner for Expo 90, Isozaki called upon Boyarski for assistance in selecting architects to build follies for the Expo program. As Isozaki recalls,

I had wanted to include as many different nationalities as possible and the AA School seemed a good place to start, with an international range of people teaching or studying there, or just passing through.²⁶

While Expo 90 headliners Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Coop Himmelb(l)au and Cook and Hawley had each some built works to their name, architects Andrea Branzi, Macdonald and Salter, and Bolles + Wilson were known for their exhibitions and schemes on paper. Isozaki’s decision to select this talented - if somewhat inexperienced - group of architects to build follies at Expo ‘90 also suggests an attempt to expand his established position as a cultural commissioner, having previously taken on that role for the urban development, Kumamoto Art Polis in 1988.²⁷ This would be an excellent opportunity for designers from the AA to build in Japan for the first time, and deepen Isozaki’s relationship with AA’s emerging paper architects. It would also be an architectural setting without strict functional, aesthetic and contextual requirements, in which designers could execute ideas that may ordinarily be constrained to paper.

Tschumi’s Parc de la Villette

Isozaki attributes his key source of inspiration for the Osaka Follies to Bernard Tschumi’s 1982 winning competition entry for the Parc de la Villette - a highly abstract, Deconstructivist urban park.²⁸ This raises questions about which qualities of the park Isozaki wanted to aesthetically explore, quote, or introduce to the wider architectural scene of Japan. Bernard Tschumi reputation as one of the AA’s most famous alumni was initially earned through his highly experimental work on paper and his

curation of architectural exhibitions that often involved performance, live demonstrations and displaying conceptual content. From the beginning of his teaching career in 1970, Tschumi generated widespread attention for his work “The Manhattan Transcripts” and “Advertisements for Architecture”, which explored the notion of disjunction between form and function, and his theory of architectural “event”.²⁹ When in 1982, Tschumi won the international design competition for the Parc de la Villette, this would serve as his first built project, and the opportunity to turn his theoretical ideas into reality.³⁰

The Parc de la Villette occupies a former abattoir site in Paris with a few historical fragments of its former use. Over a mostly flat, green landscape of 125 acres, an invisible grid is overlaid, and at intersections a folly (or *folie* in French) is placed.³¹ The twenty-six follies that occupy these grid intersections are architectural objects without any prescribed use, aside from a few which contain basic amenities, and they visually reference with a striking red paint.³² They appear acontextual and alienating compared with their green surroundings, however their occupation of a grid and similar aesthetics, structures the space of the park. Although they may confront expectations for a more typical garden structure, the follies do obliquely reference the site’s historical context: the red paint alluding to the site’s former bloody history, and their title “folly” references the two surrounding eighteenth-century parks that contain classical garden follies.³³ The conceptual root of the folly also captures a double meaning - as both an unassuming garden structure, and as a kind of madness.³⁴ This semantic duality underscores the ambiguity of the follies and it is this paradox between expected function and actual use, between occupation and alienation that Tschumi ultimately wants these follies to achieve. These follies are therefore objects that purposely project their ambiguity, and in doing so, force the visitor to make what use and sense they they can of them, and to personally appropriate it for activities and events.

These conceptual qualities of abstraction, disjunction and spontaneous program that Tschumi’s follies embody were described belonging to a new category called “Deconstructivist Architecture” in an exhibition of the same name, held in 1988 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Curators Phillips Johnson and Mark Wigley, collected and displayed images of both unbuilt and built projects of a selection of architects, which Johnson describes, not as an aligned movement, but works that show “a similar approach with very similar forms as an outcome”.³⁵ Tschumi’s drawings for the Parc de la Villette were displayed alongside the work of other experimental (and paper) architects: Rem Koolhaas, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind and Coop Himmelb(l)au. The exhibition represented an emerging architectural discourse with tendencies to invert traditional systems of order. As Wigley alliterates:

This is an architecture of disruption, dislocation, deflection, deviation, and distortion, rather than one of demolition, dismantling, decay, decomposition, or disintegration. It displaces structure instead of destroying it.³⁶

Following Tschumi’s Park in the 1980s, there are instances of similar abstract structures featuring within exhibitions and garden contexts for the next decade. This includes the “The Long Thin Yellow Legs of Architecture” structure made by Coop Himmelb(l)au for the “Sculpture in the City” exhibition for the city of Rotterdam, Netherlands.³⁷ Additionally, the music video festival “What a Wonderful World” in Groningen, The Netherlands in the same year as Expo ‘90, included pavilions to facilitate music videos, designed by Deconstructivist architects from Wigley’s exhibition, with the exception of Gehry and Libeskind.³⁸ Isozaki’s decision to base the Osaka Follies on Tschumi’s Parc de la Villette is arguably a move to reference dominant architectural themes of the past decade by inviting Deconstructivist architects to the folly playing field. It could also be viewed as a parallel experiment to Tschumi’s exploration of Deconstructivist concepts of translating a two-dimensional medium to a built form, the folly, to test hypotheses for human engagement.

This adoption of Deconstructivist themes resonates both in the descriptive language Isozaki uses in written work for the *Osaka Follies* exhibition book, but also in the Osaka Follies' aesthetic characteristics and placement within Expo '90. The most obvious quotation is the word "folly", which Isozaki uses, possibly for the affective potential that Tschumi ascribes to it, compared to other monikers such as installation, structure, or pavilion. Elsewhere in *Osaka Follies*, Isozaki describes the folly as "a form - a thing that structures new meaning through public contact. Instead of having a meaning of its own, it interacts with other elements to create something else".³⁹ This aligns with Tschumi's notion of the architectural "event", as the *raison d'être* for the folly to publicly engage and stimulate human activity. The *Osaka Follies* also contains a transcript for "The Nature of the Follies", a symposium held in July 1990 during the Expo, where the follies' architects discuss how they tackled the metaphorical themes of the folly and the Expo theme of Nature. Isozaki led the discussion, and introduced topics such as the meaning of the folly as representing "madness" or "excess": another nod to Tschumi.⁴⁰ The Osaka Follies may not share a uniform appearance or use a conceptual system to occupy the site, however they do share Deconstructivist qualities of "distortion" in their abstracted aesthetics and "dislocation" from the Expo theme, program and surroundings. Like Tschumi, Isozaki also makes a sly wink to historical continuity, as there are precedents for folly-like structures in traditional Japanese tea houses, shrines and pagodas. These structures, typically featured in stroll gardens and sought out through meandering pathways, are echoed in the scattered placement of the Osaka Follies in various public plazas. In the quasi-traditional manner of a Japanese stroll garden, they rely on a visitor to either seek them out, or accidentally simply stumble across them.⁴¹ Isozaki has applied Tschumi's ethos of creating abstract structures that confront site, expectations and historical continuity, but also experimented with the Deconstructivist discourse, which, like Tschumi's park, uses highly abstract concepts, but, as will be discussed, does not fully appear to be grounded in reality.

Translating Drawings to Follies

What stands out about both Tschumi's Parc de la Villette and the Osaka Follies, is that they appear to have not yet fully transitioned out the world of paper architecture. While they successfully negotiate the shift in scale, and respond (although obliquely) to site and its history, they still seem sited in a virtual dimension. Certainly for Tschumi, the paper origins of the project remain tangible in certain virtual, fragmented qualities of the park design. For example, the site itself remains mostly blank and flat - almost like a blank piece of paper. Moreover, the invisible grid which structures the site and locates the follies remains a strong conceptual strategy rather than a palpable quality that visitors can engage with, or even be fully aware of. Despite that the Osaka Follies use a completely different spatial organisation to Tschumi's follies, they do share this paper-like quality of occupying the site in an abstract way. By analysing photos of the follies from Expo '90, few of them appear to reference any of their surroundings, apart from those which incorporate surrounding water or earth. They almost seem as if they were placed randomly in the Expo, and purposely not incorporated into any exhibitions, gardens or programme. Isozaki comments of the placement of the folly, saying that it is critical for these to occupy nexus points and plazas in order to engage visitors, and that "as the focus of the follies shifted from the garden to the "crossroads", the scheme came fully to life".⁴² The Osaka Follies share some similarities with Tschumi's follies which occupy intersection points, however for critical reviews, this comes across as a weak relationship to its surroundings rather than an affecting locus for public activity, among competing attractions.

The most engaging aspect of the Osaka Follies are their abstracted, Deconstructed aesthetic, which bear strong similarities with the way their initial architectural concepts may have been conceived on paper and in working models. Simply looking at the photographs of the Osaka Follies, one can get a sense of their origin as an experimental sketch, a collage or a maquette. For example, Zaha Hadid's folly is comprised of intersecting, angled planes, with an almost two-dimensional quality one could imagine as an abstract painting.⁴³ Other Deconstructivists Coop Himmelb(l)au and Daniel Libeskind have follies that share this angled, and at times, disjointed aesthetic, and almost a sense of material

flatness.⁴⁴ Bolles + Wilson's folly creates a "salon roof" with tensioned tent fabric, and, contrasted against an opaque metal shell likewise seems devoid of strong material depth.⁴⁵ Lapena & Torres' folly resembles a three-dimensional representation of a fragmented collage, in the way it overlays palm trees, clocks and abstract cacti models together seemingly at random.⁴⁶ These qualities collaged qualities also surface in Andrea Branzi's folly, comprised of simple horizontal and vertical planes, corrugated surfaces, and a giant fibreglass ear as centrepiece.⁴⁷ It may therefore be argued that Isozaki's quotation of Tschumi's Parc design was more than a casual reference to ironic, fragmentary, post-modern structures in an urban setting. It is an experiment into realising highly abstract, paper concepts in built form. However, the consequence of not completely occupying a physical realm, and still having one foot in the virtual, comes with issues pertaining to how the Osaka Follies were historicised as fleeting ephemera of Expo '90, and specifically which qualities - physical or virtual - they were remembered for.

The Architectural Association played a substantial role in how the Osaka Follies were commissioned and constructed for Expo '90, as well as how they were to be posthumously represented. The 1991 exhibition for the Osaka Follies synthesises information on Isozaki's commissioning process, the AA's involvement and the individual architect's affiliation with the AA. The *Osaka Follies* publication also gives a sense of how images of the built follies, and sketches, models and drawings were curated for the exhibition. What stands out, is that the photographs of the built follies have an undeniable sterility about them. They are indeed artfully shot and give a sense of light qualities and material textures, however there are very few photos of follies that include visitors queuing up to see them, or engaging with them in different ways. In the written statements by Isozaki and in the symposium transcript, descriptions of visitor engagement are absent, as is any real mention of the actual Expo itself. Instead, photographs of built follies have all the appearances of a photograph of a working model or a design maquette, and it may be difficult for a reader to distinguish between a photo of a built folly, and a virtual representation—moreover there is no apparent emphasis of one over the other. Arguably, what seems to have happened in this exhibition, is that the Osaka Follies have transitioned away from the physical world after their brief existence in it, and back to the virtual: from a temporary built structure to an exhibition and thus, back again to a series of paper architectural schemes.

Paper to Follies and Back Again

This paper has argued that the Osaka Follies represent a historical legacy of paper architectural schemes, being circulated, appropriated, and shifted between experimental architects from England and Japan. The Osaka Follies are positioned as both a realisation of Deconstructivist concepts and experimental paper architecture, and importantly, a strong, yet overlooked predecessor for today's pavilions. The idea that qualities of abstraction, categorical ambiguity and site-less-ness - which are typical of contemporary pavilions - can be read as a departure from paper media, such as sketches, drawings, collages and models. This concept has been previously unexamined and exploring the life-cycle of the Osaka Follies has illuminated this gap in current scholarship. However, the Osaka Follies, and by extension, ephemeral contemporary structures, pavilions and installations, appear unable to fully ground themselves in reality and are trapped in a cycle of virtual representation. Beginning as paper schemes, follies briefly transform into built objects, only to shift back to paper representations, and reduced to descriptive obituaries. From here they are liable to be historically forgotten or overlooked, or instead, available for circulation, debate, scrutiny, to be scribbled, traced over, or maybe, even re-quoted or re-imagined for future forms and purposes.

Endnotes

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- ⁴² "13 Follies: International Garden and Greenery Exposition, Osaka", *Japan Architect* (1991): 200-207.
- ⁴⁴ Wolf D. Prix, Helmut Swiczinsky, "Folly 6 Coop Himmelblau", *Osaka Follies*, 80-91; Daniel Libeskind, "Folly 9 Daniel Libeskind", *Osaka Follies*, 118-125.
- ⁴⁵ Peter Wilson, "Folly 2 Architekturburo Bolles-Wilson", *Osaka Follies*, 30-43.
- ⁴⁶ "Folie En Osaka: José Antonio Martínez Lapeña Y Elías Torres", *Croquis* 10, no. 48 (April 1991): 140-49.
- ⁴⁷ "Andrea Branzi, Folly 10 Osaka", *Domus* (September 1991):14-15.

