

# At the Biennial— BOLD and the Chicago Room

Afterword by Geoff Goldberg

█ Last fall, Chicago hosted the United States' first Architecture Biennial, a new event on the world's architectural circuit. With 100 exhibitions on display, the city's Cultural Center was effectively repurposed, as this large and imposing classical structure became home to a catalog of architectural ideas for three months. Among these exhibitions was a grouping on the first floor, a show called *BOLD: Alternative Scenarios for Chicago*. Showcasing work by Chicago architects, this was a Chicago Room placed within the Biennial. It was curated by Iker Gil of MAS Studio and editor of this publication. █ If the Biennial intended to provide a general perspective on *The State of the Art of Architecture*, a title borrowed from a 1977 conference of the same name, this "Chicago Room" was alternatively positioned and highly intentional. On display were eighteen proposals, each endeavoring to establish an agenda for some aspect of change. Half were challenged with a specific urban problem; the remainder offered large-scale ideas about the state of architecture proper. █ Much of the room was dedicated to a particular issue, captured in *The Available City*, a long-term study by David Brown to regenerate vacant lots throughout Chicago. Nine architects put forward their ideas on what could be done, documented with highly detailed small models, each displayed on a pedestal. Most promoted viability by using realism as their claim to legitimacy, with their dollhouse-like models complete with miniaturized detail (Land-on Bone Baker Architects, Stanley Tigerman, Margaret McCurry, and Krueck + Sexton Architects), with a few (such as JGMA) pursuing bigness instead. Despite all this energy on display, none seemed to rise above their colleagues. It was as if the proposed answers cancelled each other out—the result was a flattening of the argument, not the hoped-for reinforcement. If one were to have chosen among them, it was the spirit of JAHN's abstracted megacity—a vintage utopia—that caught the eye and ineffably raised aspirations. █ Remaining was the larger question: What would be best for all these empty sites?

A collage drawing by David Brown compiled all the answers, and while well-intended as a summary document, it had the unfortunate consequence of suggesting anything proposed would do. With little here to raise the call for implementation, perhaps fewer more pointed ideas would have been more successful. █ Of interest was the event itself, with name architects working on the same problem as the lesser-known. All are due thanks for their willingness to engage. Their proposals were accompanied by David Schalliol's thoughtful images on vacancy, poignant and well crafted, but sadly here they served as background material to the other presentations. █ Elsewhere in the room were larger, more ambitious proposals. Upon entry, the first seen was *Logistical Ecologies* (Hinterlands with a film by MODUS Collective), a broad-thinking argument for repositioning development in a combinatory way, using land use, intermodal logistics, and a regional agenda to craft a script for the next 100 years. It came loaded with more hyper precision than elasticity, suggesting specifics rather than the trend-thinking more appropriate for a future so far off. █ Michael Pecirno's abstract readings of Chicago used representation to study underlying traces in urban development. This was an interesting perspective, but one also in need of additional development to become convincing—with its reliance on observation, its agenda was yet to be defined. In both of these, "big scale" was considered as "bold." █ *Filter Island* by UrbanLab (Sarah Dunn and Martin Felsen) operated between bigness and a disciplinary rethink. Their usually well-considered ideas on urban ecology were difficult to access here, with rather substantial barriers in the coloration and imagery of the presentation. █ *Late Entry to the Chicago Public Library Competition* by Design with Company (Stewart Hicks and Allison Newmeyer) compiled an assemblage of fragments and buildings to create a whole, in the service of memory. Message and image were in balance and mutually supportive in this work, aiming to recover the city by combining history and imagination. The idea of "architecture-as-sign" (also referred to as postmodernism) has precedent in Chicago—such as the 1980 revisitation of the 1922 Chicago Tribune Tower competition. Here recovered was the 1987 Chicago Public Library project, amid other urban objects resized and reused. Although the ontological problem (what is the role of memory?) remained unanswered, this reshuffling of the "known into new" offered a fresh perspective on what is and is not around us. █ *The Big Shift* (by PORT Urbanism) was a strong presentation for restructuring downtown Chicago's lakefront. It engaged the historic Chicago marriage between "where's mine?" and building, with its scheming to provide new swathes of developable land in the central business district. It was also the most dangerous proposal in the entire show, exciting and doable but oddly lacking a design agenda. If one were to reduce it to basics, architecture here was proposed as a means to expedite development. While

such flirtation with commerce is attractive in the abstract, if embraced, sadly such a proposal could, and likely would, be implemented without any design intention. Might one ask what happened to architecture? ■

■ Hoping to encourage longer-term dialogue, Gil approached Chicago's larger architectural firms with the idea of collaborating with new and younger voices. Chicago heavyweights Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) were willing and worked with CAMESgibson (Grant Gibson) on an open-frame tower. The proposal, called *The High Life*, was one that accepted "plug ins," a riff on the modular concepts of the 1960s. Detailed in high resolution in model (by SOM, with their effort led by Brian Lee) and in drawings by Gibson, its level of resolution was very high. SOM examined the system's capability to accept variation while Gibson probed the narrative of alternate lifestyles. These became two realities, staring at each other across a divide, and made for one of the highlights of the Biennial. Here could be found our two Chicagos: one of production, the other of impact. The difference between these two specificities could be probed further and even serve as themes for an entire show. ■

■ Original planning for the Biennial proposed Gallery 37, across the street from the Chicago Cultural Center, as a space for showing local answers—part of an ambitious plan to "spread" the Biennial beyond the limits of one building. With this basis for Chicago representation in the Biennial, Gil (in concert with Sarah Herda) initially conceived a large range of work, starting from the regional and spiraling inwards to local and more specific solutions. As things developed, this separate venue was wisely jettisoned and all the work was placed together in the Cultural Center, scaled down but otherwise unaltered. Such scope might have worked if writ large; but as presented in the Chicago Room, the variation and changes in scale were too great. Was the idea to put forth an agenda, or was this to serve as a collection of individual thoughts? While energetic, more cohesion would have served the audience better. Nevertheless, the room was well organized, and getting all this work on display was no small feat, especially in the complexity of this first Biennial. ■

■ Underlying this exhibition about Chicago and the region was a counterpoint discussion, one comparing *BOLD* to exhibitors elsewhere in the building. In short, the main show in the Chicago Cultural Center featured exhibitors individually, while those in the Chicago Room remained a subset of a different approach. Discussion between these two propositions would have been welcome. ■

■ How did other Chicago-based architects elsewhere in the Biennial fare? Thomas Kelley, John Ronan, and Jeanne Gang each had large presentations with varying levels of success. Kelley's super-graphics on the windows of the Chicago Cultural Center were a popular favorite, recasting this classic building with a contemporary commentary on the city. Ronan's exterior "armature-of-bushes" outside the building reminded

one of Herzog and de Meuron's Dominus Winery. But rather than using their rocks, Ronan's leaves suffered as the seasons changed—although, perhaps that was the point. Studio Gang's proposal for engaging police stations was a normative urban design project, popular with some locals. Yet in this context, why did one of Chicago's leading voices back away from architecture? Its placement at the beginning of the show suggests the curators were worried about where to situate the Mayor's favorite architect. ■

■ The Chicago Room was clear of such political matters. Although integral to almost all the presentations, the politics in *BOLD* was never a subject taken on directly. One could imagine an alternate posture, not to emphasize local politics, but rather to use locality to spur further thinking. For example, what of Chicago architects working on issues across the field, and not necessarily being limited to Chicago? Or perhaps architects from elsewhere could look at "Chicago-type" problems, with a methodology informed by Chicago's history to see what new ideas they bring in their responses. ■

■ Curators historically serve a function, which could be described as "Go forth, find good things, and show us." This remains a time-honored role and one appreciates the "shoe leather" expended by Gil, Herda, and Grima, the latter two globe-trotting to find work they thought interesting. "Uncovering the unknown" remains a time-tested model for transferring knowledge, and was adopted here without discussion or definition. Yet today, the presence, nay, the *celebration* of curation (as opposed to the work itself) has become a phenomenon of the mega-show today, slipping in through a side door with the curator now serving as today's taste-maker. There are however other ways to approach the problem of curation, as was evidenced in Fujimoto's assembly of small "architectural object-ideas." Here curation was part of the problem, used to reinforce an architectural proposition. This was a proposal that established intense relationships between small, innocuous objects with reference to larger architectural ideas. Collection was successfully used to provide credibility. It's an approach one might consider at the larger scale as well. ■

■ *BOLD* went in a different direction entirely, providing specific answers. It fit a particular brand of Chicago's history, one where concepts are easily legible and accessible. For this Architecture Biennial to continue to operate on the world stage, it will need greater definition of its intention. Proposals made large and more real are not a substitute, as high-resolution answers are only successful when responding to proper questions. *BOLD* offered one approach, the rest of the Biennial another—the two together bracketing the fact that future success of the Biennial will require greater awareness of what is being addressed and why. ■