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Yona Friedman. Mobile Architecture, People's Architecture

Review of the Exhibition Curated by Gong Yan and Elena Motisi

(MAXXI, Rome, 23 June 2017 – 29 October 2017)

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ABSTRACT

This review aims to summarize the highlights of the exhibition "Yona Friedman. Mobile Architecture, People's Architecture", curated by Gong Yan and Elena Motisi and displayed at MAXXI, Rome, between 23rd June and 29th October 2017. Thanks to models, drawings and installations, the exhibition has retraced the steps of Friedman's lifelong architectural experimentations and theory.

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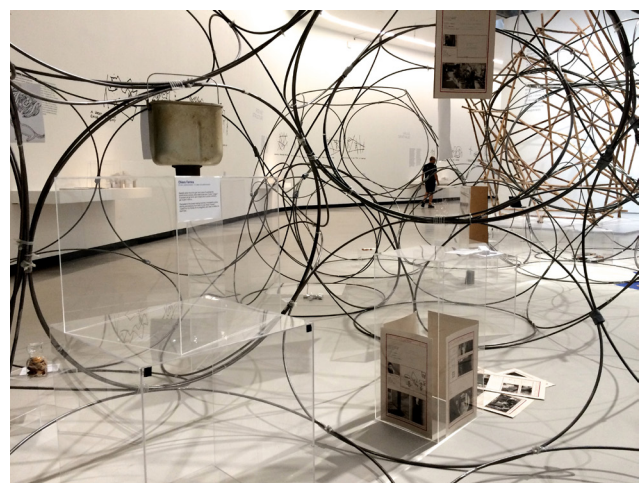
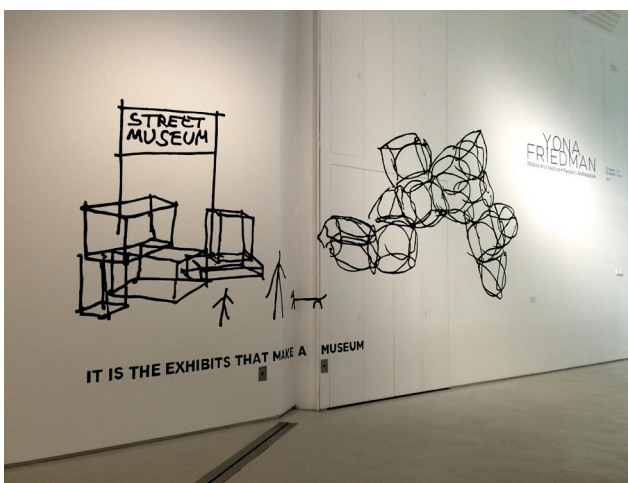


KEYWORDS

Yona Friedman, MAXXI, mobile architecture, space frames, ville spatiale

Entering *Gallery 4* of Zaha Hadid's curvy and well-known MAXXI Museum in Rome, one encounters a thin spatial structure displaying several objects, in apparently random order. This so-called "street museum" is the result of an open *call for objects*, which was published by MAXXI in May 2017, some weeks before the opening of its *Yona Friedman. Mobile Architecture, People's Architecture* exhibition. "It is the exhibit that makes a museum", writes Friedman on the entrance wall: similarly to his theories on the adaptation of buildings to their inhabitants (and, the curators claim, "not the reverse") it is the museum which has to adapt to the objects displayed. Sixteen "symbolic and important" objects were sent to the museum by those who answered the call. They were then selected and collected within a "space chain" designed by Friedman himself. The objects range from photographs to books and a student's architectural mock-up for a failed exam, and are gathered within a thin wire structure, which transforms them into works of art. This "street museum" is nothing new in the work of Yona Friedman: the first attempt was made in 2004 and a similar collection of personal objects was displayed at the Shanghai Power Station of Art, during the first edition of the exhibition in 2015. The Shanghai exhibit¹ is thus re-displayed in Rome, by modulating some of its features according to the spatiality of MAXXI.

1. *Yona Friedman. Mobile Architecture* was displayed in Shanghai Power Station of Art between May 16, 2015 and August 16, 2015.



FIGS. 1-2 Street Museum (Photo by Sofia Nannini).

Born in Budapest in 1923 and living in France since the 50's, Yona Friedman is indeed one of the most influential architectural theorists of our times. The "mobile architecture" celebrated by the curators was born almost 60 years ago, in 1958, and has influenced studies by Archigram, Metabolists and on the so-called *Megastructures*. The exhibition at MAXXI shows the infectious irony and lightness that Friedman uses in explaining his theories, which are never banal or predictable. It is indeed interesting to properly see the work of an architect who has always been defined as "utopian" or "theorist", but who is nevertheless utterly interested in the real world and its built environment.²

2. Yona Friedman's main publications can be found in his official website (www.yonafriedman.nl). Recent Italian publications are: Friedman, Yona. *Tetti*. Macerata: Quodlibet, 2017; Friedman, Yona. *Villes Imaginaires / Città immaginarie / Imaginary Cities / Imaginären Städte*. Macerata: Quodlibet, 2016.

In addition to the "street museum", the exhibit embraces several

architectural proposals, corresponding to Friedman's research paths, such as "Architecture Mobile", "Space Frames" and "Ville Spatiale", covering not only the walls of the gallery – with drawings and sketches of the architect – but also its spatiality, thus creating a three-dimensional effect able to define the architectural character of his experiments. "Architecture Mobile" mirrors his widely known *Manifesto*, whose main results can be seen in the definition of the so-called "Ville Spatiale". The exhibition, through Friedman's sketches, highlights the steps that make this *spatial city* possible, also transforming it into an architecture for the people. "There are 3 preconditions for *People's Architecture* – It must be easy to assemble for a layman – It has to be an assembly of inexpensive technical components – And easy to dis-assemble and re-assemble into a different pattern".

Moreover, the curators show how tangible the works of Friedman are, regardless of their utopian features: structures such as "Rod Nets", "Gribouilli" and "Crumpled Sheet" are all part of the wider group of "Irregular Structures", which – in Friedman's mind – can be designed, built and used by citizens and inhabitants themselves. According to the architect, "I see architecture as a process. We all can participate in that process. Anybody can build something, anybody can *do* an architectural act". It would seem that architecture is doomed to disappear within the void, framed by these structures; on the contrary, as Friedman writes, "When I think of architecture as an art, I think of it as sculpting the void: the prime material of architecture is emptiness".

Friedman's visions are not only represented by mock-ups and frame structures, but also through unpublished drawings and collages, including photomontages of MAXXI covered by a forest of space chains.

The exhibition also shows all manner of objects found in Friedman's apartment in Paris – the section is called "Boulevard Garibaldi", after the Parisian address of the flat -, including first editions of books, sketches, projects and Friedman's ironic "Noble", "Fundamental" and "Simple Truths" (among which: "We Can Not Understand The Universe – We Do Not Need to Understand The Universe"). Defined as "the rescuer of memory", the curators show the importance of Friedman's personal living space for "its stratification and identity dimension, which is in a constant state of becoming", in close relation to his way of thinking architecture.

Finally, a small room hosts a non-stop slide-show of the architect's comics, taken from the chapter "Architecture" of the book *The Human*



FIGS. 3-4 Space Frames (Photo by Sofia Nannini)

Being Explained to the Aliens (2016). These playful, yet serious, comics show all aspects of Friedman's way of analysing the world, underlining his recurring topics: the changing of cities, from being something enclosed and limited to the explosion of huge "nets of cities linked by fast trains"; the overbuilding of the Earth, linked to the much-ignored truths that "most functions do not need buildings" and that "Earth is overbuilt / Earth is overplanned"; the transformation of life conditions between 1950 and 2000; void as "raw material of architecture"; urban space as something "not created by architects", yet defined by the "use-pattern deployed by its inhabitants".



FIG. 5 People's Architecture (Photo by Sofia Nannini)



FIGS. 6-7 Boulevard Garibaldi (Photo by Sofia Nannini)

Far from being merely utopian, the exhibition helps to understand the roots of Friedman's theories and his down-to-earth approach to architecture and society, which is both deep and light, mirroring the architect's feelings of constant curiosity and cheerfulness, no matter one's age or background. Moreover, the exhibit also echoes today's interest for ephemeral architectures – such as shelters – and a renewed, almost nostalgic, attention to the so-called architectural "megastructure".

This exhibition is part of the great effort made by the MAXXI Institution to promote knowledge and stimulate curiosity on contemporary architectural projects and theories. MAXXI is indeed one of the few Italian stages for this kind of display and visitors are never disappointed when it comes to the variety of set-ups and the richness of the selected topics.