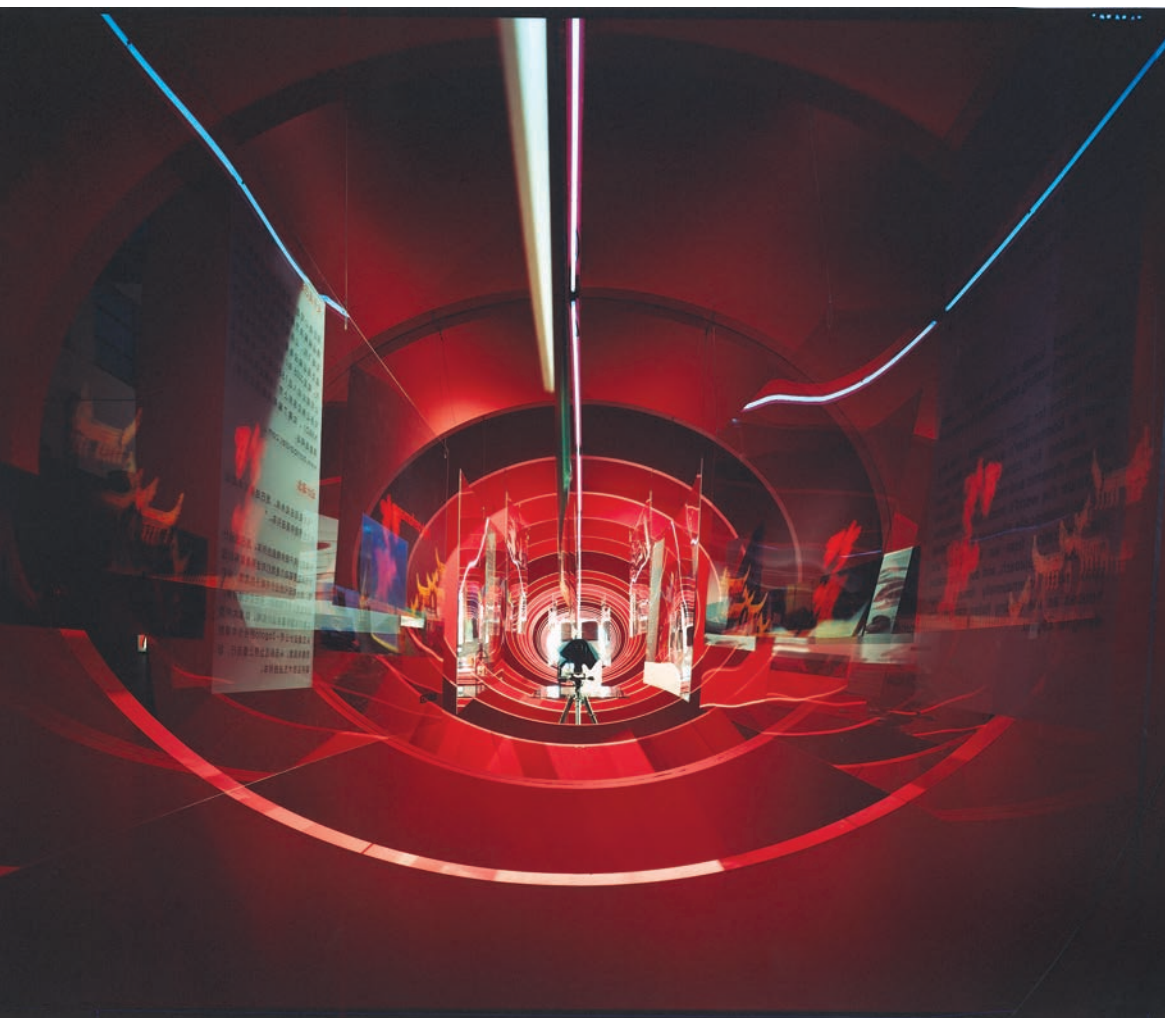


# TIME TO EXHIBIT

Directing Spatial Design and New Narrative Pathways

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Ico Migliore



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Directing Spatial Design and New Narrative Pathways



Ico Migliore

*In copertina:* foto di Carlo Valsecchi per “Fast and Fabulous:  
from Beijing to Shanghai with Bombardier”, Wallpaper\*Express, Milano 2005.  
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*If speed is what results from time, the space needed in interior design  
raises as the speed increases.*

*Se la velocità scaturisce dal tempo, allora all'aumento della velocità  
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Ico Migliore

*You film a car that speeds away along a road, then speed up this image  
to infinity and the car disappears. What does it prove its existence? It's time  
that legitimates it. As time is the only real unit of measurement.  
It proves the existence of the material. Without time we do not exist.*

*Filmi un'auto che sfreccia su una strada, velocizzi l'immagine all'infinito  
e l'auto scompare. Quindi che prova abbiamo della sua esistenza? Il tempo  
dà legittimità alla sua esistenza. Il tempo è la sola vera unità di misura.  
È la prova dell'esistenza della materia. Senza tempo noi non esistiamo.*

“Lucy”, Luc Besson, 2014 - 1:09:13

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# Introduction

## The Perfect Time

Wondering about the meaning of time is not worthwhile unless one is guided by a specific goal. In fact, the traveller who decides to venture down this road runs the risk of becoming exhausted in his quest to discover the character of this apparently unfathomable dimension.

The thought that compelled me to write this book is therefore based on the belief that *time*, beyond its purely philosophical or scientific aspect, can take on a shape to become a reference element in interior design, and, in particular, in temporary and permanent set up.

This idea was developed with Mara Servetto, with whom I founded the studio Migliore + Servetto Architects. In twenty years of working together we have taken on the theme of *time*, and have had the opportunity to put things to the test in numerous national and international museums for which we have developed designs. We have explored the richness of valuable collections, in order to exhibit them, and we have gone into the incredible museum archives in order to tell their story.

This research and experimentation in our design work has led us to define the need to establish a tangible quality for the ineffability of time, around which the design is developed. Today then, *time* can rightly be considered the true dimension of interior and spatial design.

\*\*\*

Sergio Polano<sup>1</sup> has repeatedly decried the significant indecision over the uses and meaning of the verb *to set up*. Already an object of investigation

<sup>1</sup> Polano S. *Mostrare. L'allestimento in Italia dagli anni Venti agli anni Ottanta*, Milano: Lybra Immagine, 1988, p. 39.

and part of his research in the introduction to Issue 10 of “Rassegna” – dedicated to staging and exhibit design –, it reappeared in 1988 with his book “Mostrare”, that work that epitomises Italian exhibition practise from the 1920s to the 1980s.

Polano wrote:

The meaning of a word such as “*set up*”, in our language, creatively uncertain between process and product, [is] confused by the echo to quickly set up a display [...] and hovers between a thousand meanings: celebrations and parades, lunches and banquets, plays, operas and films, sets and choreographies, ships and aircraft, automotive and domestic interiors, as well as shop windows, stands and museums, are all set up. [Trans. I. Migliore]

Today, as then, the verb *to set up* lends itself to describing very different design activities, but the habit of using it to generically and hastily define the actions required to create visual order of some kind has been dispelled with the full recognition of the discipline known as exhibition design.

*To set up* therefore unequivocally defines the tasks of qualified professionals in the interior design field who design temporary or permanent installations for museums, exhibitions, commercial and cultural spaces; in short, all the places that intend to involve a public in their own space, so that the public may embark on a process of acquiring knowledge, built around the displayed object.

In order to give spatial boundaries a programmatic permeability, it is logical to design exhibition spaces that are not limited to functioning as *containers* of displayed objects, nor concluded when the designer’s and stager’s interventions have terminated, but open to the action of a public left free to interpret and modify the given design and narrative scheme.

In this regard, we could talk about *architectures where it rains inside*. These welcoming spaces set aside common architectural schemes and define the container not in the relationship between ceiling and floor, but between sky and earth. They offer no protection or shelter, nor mark clear distinctions between inside and outside, between above and below. They are spaces of mutual connection – true, real and not virtual – between visitors and contents, between the visitors and the places, where experimentation with materials and light, the introduction of dynamic events, allow the design to determine the quality of the place and therefore of the cognitive experience.

Of the many definitions of *staging*, which have varied over the thirty-one years that Polano examines, there is the memorable one in which Pierluigi Cerri<sup>2</sup>, on the stroke of the new millennium, expressed his peculiar vision of the exhibit:

The *staging* is the creation of a space designed to intercept the *Monstrum* (something particularly large or impressive), that special hiatus identified in the systematic organization of knowledge, or the anomaly that makes itself noticed through a slight shift in meaning, or because it crystallizes into form, an apparition that could not otherwise be visualized, an artifice prepared to decipher the scientific criteria of exhibiting within the labyrinthine journey, the allusive story, the invention. [...] Intercepting the *Monstrum* means [...] a cautious *absence* that makes us look at the acuity of its artifices, the allusions and the inventions that make the exhibition object visible and relative. [Trans. I. Migliore]

*Staging* therefore involves a branch of interior design that has grown and matured, following the evolutions that gradually demanded that the traditional cultural piazzas be made accessible to an increasingly vast and varied public in terms of preparation, age demographics and origin.

However, uncertainty and confusion still characterize, if not so much the verb *to set up*, at least the ever broader range of disciplinary applications and tools available to designers, called upon to master not only the social multiplicity of the contemporary but also the complexity of the digital scenario. This landscape could be defined as a *new dimension* opened up by technology, where the traditional concepts of the physical and virtual support, the original and the replica, have liquefied into a binary language, becoming increasingly less distinct entities and more often elements of an ongoing voracious flow capable of incessantly rewriting the spaces in which it moves, making the distinction between the permanent and the temporary superfluous.

Formerly antithetical terms, today the temporary and the permanent demand an osmotic relationship in terms of design, consolidated by the fundamental concept of narration that they entail. In fact, often the design experiences developed in the field of temporary installations converge in the permanent, and these, in turn, often draw inspiration from the freest experimentation in temporary projects, both in terms of general approach and materials and new technologies.

Again due to the singular nature of digital technology, the public has been definitively removed from the orbit of the usual profiling criteria.

<sup>2</sup> Cerri P. "Intercettare il Monstrum", *Abitare*, 401, 2000, p. 91.

Expectations and behaviours have shifted from habitual to shared, ever more exacting and extreme in demands for adequate interfaces and dynamic interaction modes. However this public may be though, it remains the true cause and purpose behind every exhibition design.

There is probably a more urgent need to discuss the meaning of the verb *to set up* now than in 1988, though for different reasons. Then, the idea that the quality of exhibition spaces would become central to building narratives, identity and imaginary paths was still elusive. This awareness ought to be consolidated today, in an age when, on the one hand, global tourism is moving en masse towards the appeal of those exhibitions that represent the unrepeatable. On the other hand, there is an increasingly fragmented user base, which means new responsibilities for exhibition architecture, such as the creation of itineraries inspired by not only the objects or the themes on display, but also educational ethics of a sort.

Although the list is already long, it does not cover the list of new challenges inherent to exhibition design. This brief survey could suffice however to support the thesis of a necessary vision of the state of the art of a discipline which has not always been given the consideration it deserves. To some extent subordinate to the flamboyance of certain architectures, from the last century, the exhibit has nonetheless offered designers an irresistible invitation to take risks, on the assumption that the outcomes would almost never be definitive:

The only place where a certain experimental freedom was sometimes permitted and modern architects were allowed to try collaborating with the most vital artists, in a risky test of consistency, was the terrain of exhibitions. Only in this have I been able to work and attempt an effective collaboration between the various arts. And something lasting came from what was done with this ephemeral but glorious test case, at least in terms of teaching some taste, as an investigation into a modern interpretation of the monumental, as research to establish the limits of an artistically, functionally and morally bearable decoration<sup>3</sup>. [Trans. I. Migliore]

Giuseppe Pagano wrote this in the early 1940s in the pages of the fourteen-year-old magazine founded by Gio Ponti, about design experiences that trained him in his early career alongside, among others, Franco Albini. The latter, a designer and a contemporary, threw himself into exhibition design from an early age with greater openness and dedication: ephemeral settings

<sup>3</sup> Pagano G. "La legge del due per cento", *Domus*, 6, 1942, p. 230.



such as museum spaces, trade shows and pavilions, some of which can rightly be traced back as the most intense expressions of his poetics.

An uncompromising interpreter of rationalist essentialism in the design of urban spaces, and a sensitive visionary in setting up interiors in an unprecedented interaction with art, in the 1940s, Albini debuted one of his most famous stagings in his Milanese home on Via Aristide dei Togni. Here, in the sitting room, an eighteenth-century canvas left the confines of the frame, fled the wall and, suspended from a slender tube in the centre of the room, participated once again in the life of the space – finally liberated from the weight of a physical contour – returned to the dynamism of time in the nakedness of its essence. In a lesson – held at the Polytechnic of Turin, during the academic year 1954-55 – Albini<sup>4</sup> addressed the «debated frame problem». Availing himself of the benefit of the doubt regarding the utility or futility of the support in question, the Lombard master confirmed the need to arrange an intermediate space between the painting – in fact, these considerations refer specifically to painting galleries – and the environment «whether a frame or wall [...] almost a zone of influence of its pictorial space»<sup>5</sup>.

It can be assumed that Albini, already overseeing the famous installations in Genoa for Palazzo Bianco (1950), Palazzo Rosso (1952-62) and the Museum of the Treasury of San Lorenzo (1952-56) – episodes that established his museum style<sup>6</sup> – kept these experiences in mind, in terms of a space's communication and staging, when he designed the interiors of the stations on lines 1 and 2 of Milan's subway, between 1962 and 1969. A success destined to set a precedent, which Albini pursued following the principle that everything should speak to the public, thanks also to the complicit collaboration of Bob Noorda.

Noorda had exemplary graphic clarity, applied with impeccable effectiveness from the positioning of the signs with the names of the stops, arranged in each station to be visible from each carriage window, by virtue of continuous support along the walls. It may appear to be a purely functional design, but in Albini's work we recognize some of the principles that more than half a century later still underpin contemporary compositions.

<sup>4</sup> Albini F. "Le funzioni dell'architettura del museo: alcune esperienze" in Bucci F. & Irace F. (Eds.) *Zero Gravity. Franco Albini, Costruire la modernità*, Milano: Triennale Electa, 2006, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> Irace F. "Il luogo delle Muse. Arte e architettura nello stile museale di Franco Albini e Carlo Scarpa" (The place of the Muses. Art and Architecture in the museum style of Franco Albini and Carlo Scarpa), *Domus Dossier*, 5, 1997, p. 8.

First of all, there is the conviction that the public, spectator and user should shape the basic lines of each project. The visitor is therefore an autonomous agent within a shared flow and not a passive drop in a river to be forced into a canal. He is the active and free protagonist in a journey that he will make – albeit within the times and methods suggested by the architect – preserving the exercise of free will, which could lead to sudden changes of direction.

For Albini, the modern exhibition layout was already that which, by shifting the focus of the work displayed to the public, tends to «orient the public»<sup>7</sup> instead of orienting the artwork. Around the visitor, this architecture creates an atmosphere, explicitly defined by the master as *modern*, and precisely for its quality, capable of entering a relationship with the sensitivity, culture and mentality of today's individual.

Secondly, Albini captures the importance of the graphic and chromatic elements that must be used in the spaces, helping them to establish functions and methods of use and equipping them with a narrative text and interface. Graphic design contributes to the success and interest of the exhibition, abstracting – albeit momentarily – the visitor from the external reality, to «bring him into an environment with a special atmosphere, which helps him to focus attention on the displayed works and sharpen his sensibility, without tiring him out»<sup>8</sup>.

Finally, what already stood out in the Milanese urban project was Albini's *authoritativeness in directing* the expertise needed for the project, embodying the role of privileged mediator between the space and the skills necessary to (re)write it with due consistency. This last quality is intimately linked to the concept of direction applied to the field of exhibition design tout court, as a statement made by the master in the mid-1950s bears witness that throughout the whole exhibition «the same direction must be felt: there must be continuity in the expository method, coherence in systems and sometimes, in opportune points, repetition of the same elements»<sup>9</sup>. Albini also emphasises how, with potential patchiness in the exhibition spaces – due in this case to the intersecting of different topics – the use of an overall direction can reaffirm the connection between the different parts, articulating a precise and

<sup>7</sup> Albini F. “Le funzioni dell’architettura del museo: alcune esperienze” in Bucci F. & Irace F. (Eds.) *Zero Gravity. Franco Albini, Costruire la modernità*, Milano: Triennale Electa, 2006, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Albini F. “Le mie esperienze di architetto nelle esposizioni in Italia e all’estero” in *Ivi*, p. 76.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

still harmonious rhythm. Contemporary exhibition spaces should be able to grasp this legacy, in the name of the polyphonic scanning of diverse notes.

Enzo Mari maintains<sup>10</sup> on the pages of the magazine “Progex”<sup>11</sup>, in the text entitled “Per una qualità dell’allestire (For quality in exhibition design) and written in his own hand with the usual critical eye but quite clear in establishing that only the architect should have the responsibility of setting up the exhibition space:

The only director should always be the “architect” designer, obviously for cultural reasons – for example, those expressed by an authoritative historian of the institution – or for political-economic reasons – those expressed by an industrialist. A historian of the institution or an industrialist or, alas, a committee of “experts”, cannot expect to naively predetermine the exhibition design with prearranged decisions constraining the quality of the communication. [Trans. I. Migliore]

The architect is therefore called upon to play a privileged diplomatic role between the first vision that emerges through dialogue with curators, historians and artists – with whom collaboration is ever more decisive – and the concrete and traversable space that will constitute the actual exhibition design. If we were to identify the element that characterizes, more than any other, the effectiveness of the exhibition design, conceived to embody the story of a work or an idea, there is no doubt that it is time. Achille Castiglioni often remembered the importance of making each project *memorable*<sup>12</sup>.

With these words, the Milanese master wanted to indicate that in the exhibition design the designer has the opportunity to determine artificial landscapes where the staging drives behaviours and thoughts, giving life to a complex three-dimensional script.

<sup>10</sup> Mari E. “Per una qualità dell’allestire”, *Progex*, 07, 1991, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> “Progex – Design & Architetture espositive, rivista quadrimestrale di architettura per musei e mostre” was directed from its founding in 1989 until 1994 by Giampiero Bosoni.

<sup>12</sup> During the years in which Mara Servetto and I were Achille Castiglioni’s assistants at the Polytechnic University of Milan – we had graduated in Architecture with him at the Polytechnic of Turin – Castiglioni, during the lessons and during the hours we worked together, often used the adjective *memorable* to emphasise how the necessary and fundamental quality of exhibition design was its capacity to define a strong identitary synthesis for the space, deriving from the concept, which he used to call *leading design component*. Consequently, the set up could impress itself on the memory of the visitor, transmitting a message and urging him to reflect on it later.

This conception of total direction of the exhibition allows for different levels of perception and action in a specific place, making the exhibition project the elective instrument of intermediation and communication between the object and the public-player, within a broader and totalizing cognitive experience.

The sense of time in this experience recalls film editing. Perhaps in this sense it is the narrative form which, with greater ease, has been used since the dawn of the expansion and compression of the moment, based on the principle that if the edits are made respecting the logic and internal continuity of film, it extends the possibilities of the story in images, removing it from the constraint of a single, still shot lasting hours.

To illustrate the most extreme consequences of film editing applied to exhibition design, there is the reckless filmography of recent years in which Christopher Nolan<sup>13</sup> has disseminated his own poetics of temporal paradoxes, ploys that, with respect to the exhibition design culture, could appear as an extreme and inappropriate example. But without pushing the allegorical game too far, the comparison with cinema, better than many, helps explain how the introduction of the principle that a space can present itself as a series of sequences of varying length and intensity produces the principle of management and manipulation of rhythm and time.

Time for standing still or crossing a space, for moving faster or pausing, but also reading. Today, the exhibition space asks to be modified and transformed from its essential size into any story in order to be defined as such: time, in fact. Time that steals the role of the true measurement of architecture from the yardstick, recalibrating the balance of the designer's tools and objectives.

Exhibition design has the capacity to become history and evolve into a narrative space: a space closer to the idea that designing pathways is a practice that must begin with the public and the time available to the public. And it is because of the increasingly heterogeneous nature of today's public that this practice must be declined in the plural, from designing the pathway to *designing pathways*. Variable and multiple pathways, physical or intangible, that the designer must be able to visualize and realize in the design, determining

<sup>13</sup>The British director's obsession with the manipulation of time can be seen above all in *Inception* (2010), *Interstellar* (2014) and *Dunkirk* (2017), three very different films in terms of genre and setting but with a consistent and precise editing technique, in relation to the perception of time. Lee Smith, editor for Nolan since 2005 and Oscar winner in 2017 for work on *Dunkirk*, speaks explicitly of this expedient and calls it *parallel editing*: «In parallel editing, different shots that can also be taken in different places and times, are cut together to give the illusion that they are taking place at the same time».

an essential *crescendo* character in them. This is the only way that the visitor's simple advancing towards the exhibit's content can become a sort of *lay procession*. The latter term which guarantees that movement will have a sense of anticipation, of preparation for the mind and the eye in comparison with the content, and, finally, of almost religious devotion, antithetically directed towards the icons of the profane cathedrals of culture, and therefore secular.

It is interesting to note how, at a time when humanity increasingly appears to be a conglomerate of hermits clinging to mobile phones and where relationships often last no longer than 120 characters, museum spaces and cultural piazzas are preserving and taking on even greater relevance. Economic drivers for the economy, for the cities where the cross contamination takes place, and the public, which is given the opportunity to try practices and behaviours destined not to end in one visit but to last over time, mediated channels for propaedeutic starting points to a greater awareness, memorable invitations to reconsider the relationship between oneself, others and the design of the world as a delicate *architecture of relationships*.

The purpose of this book is to trace a new pathway for exhibition design, in light of the most recent design and communication challenges on the basis of the systematization of research, and more than twenty years of experience developed in the field, internationally, with Mara Servetto and the team of Migliore + Servetto Architects. Breaking up apparently antithetical pairs such as metre/time, pathway/procession, display/polyphony, temporary/permanent, preserving/recounting, staging/scenography allows us to enter this design vision, intended to shed light, in perspective, on the evolution of the culture in the field of exhibition design.

This text attempts a reinterpretation of the direction of a field without which it would be impossible to envision future scenarios, in light of the essential contribution of new digital and multimedia technologies and innovation in how exhibition design is used, in relation to the fundamental concept of *time*, a true measurement of the design and a research objective. The *time* requires to stand still or cross a space, but also to move faster or pause on *in crescendo* pathways, making the visitor feel like the protagonist in the exhibition space.

Recovering the relationship between *time*, intelligibility and perception, the simple concept of bringing the visitor closer to exhibit content is then converted into a *lay procession*. This expression is based on the concept of cognitive evolution, density and stratification of the contents and apparatuses, and ensures that the pathway has a sense of growth and curiosity regarding the expectations that the designer is responsible for stimulating and satisfying.