

Exhibition as Topography:

Mutations (2000–2002)



Alice Haddad

Metode

One must ask crucial questions to understand today's city. ... In the course of our research, we feel as though we are discovering what exists at the same time as we are producing it. Speed and density—new methodological tools are needed to grasp the nature of the phenomena unfolding before our eyes. With *MUTATIONS*, we are not presenting a theoretical position but simply offering, based on the broadest possible documentary apparatus, an attempt to interpret this new reality. It is already here—but we did not know it until we committed to describing it.¹

It is with this collective statement that the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, the American cultural theorist Sanford Kwinter and the Italian urbanist Stefano Boeri sketched the premise of their respective contributions to the exhibition *Mutations* a few months before its opening in the year 2000. Their ambitious investigations into contemporary urban conditions featured prominently amongst the exhibited work of numerous other interdisciplinary participants. *Mutations* emerged from a collaborative effort to assemble heterogeneous knowledges, orchestrate encounters between disciplines and practices, and shape a terrain for collective sense-making as a means to push spatial concerns into public discussions.

Open to the public between 24 November 2000 and 25 March 2001 at the Entrepôt, a historical warehouse turned cultural venue located in Bordeaux, *Mutations* was produced by the architecture centre arc en rêve that, together with the Museum of Contemporary Art (CAPC), has occupied the building since 1981. The exhibition was instigated by arc en rêve's then co-directors and founders, Francine Fort and Michel Jacques, who wished to thematise the shifting conditions of the city following Rem Koolhaas's recent research on urban expansion and the neoliberal logics of globalisation.² Promoted as a flagship component of the French Mission 2000, a nationwide cultural programme marking the turn of the millennium, the exhibition attracted a broad spectrum of political endorsements and a diverse audience of about 40 000 visitors.³ Yet, *Mutations*

1 Stefano Boeri, Rem Koolhaas, Sanford Kwinter, "une nouvelle réalité", in "Mutations: Événement culturel sur la ville contemporaine", press release issued by arc en rêve (April 2000): 26. OMA Archival Collection, Rotterdam.

2 Rather than assuming the role of lead curator as was initially requested from arc en rêve, Koolhaas declined curatorial responsibility due to time constraints and his many other commitments. Instead, he assumed a looser role akin to that of an artistic supervisor. Hans Ulrich Obrist and Michel Jacques were considered for the role of lead curator, but no one was eventually retained. See series of correspondences of Michel Jacques and Francine Fort addressed to Rem Koolhaas, dated May 1998. OMA Archival Collection, Rotterdam.

3 See the report "Mutations. Bilan d'activité" compiled for arc en rêve's general assembly of board members dated 7 January 2002. Architecture centre arc-en-rêve, administrative archives, Bordeaux.

is probably most widely remembered today for its accompanying publication of the same name, which was edited in French, English and Spanish, and distributed internationally.⁴ The exhibition was also subsequently adapted for display in Brussels (La Raffinerie, 26 October 2001–6 January 2002) and Tokyo (TN Probe, 9 November 2001–24 February 2002).



Archival photograph from research conducted at arc en rêve showing a set of diapositives depicting various exhibition views of *Mutations*. © Alice Haddad. Exhibition poster for *Mutations*, 2000. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture. Photocopy of a newspaper clipping archived by arc en rêve, featuring an article from *Sud-Ouest*, 21 April 2000. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture. Exterior view of the Entrepôt with exhibition banner for *Mutations*, 2000. © Philippe Ruault. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture. Exhibition view of *Mutations*, 2000. © Philippe Ruault. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture.

In this essay, I wish to take you along a reflective exploration of *Mutations* based on archival findings of the exhibition which I collected for my ongoing doctoral research. My aim is not to reconstruct the exhibition in its entirety, but rather to use this case as a starting point to interpret and attach meaning to different

4 *Mutations: Rem Koolhaas, Harvard Project on the City Stefano Boeri, Multiplicity Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist.* (Barcelona, Bordeaux: ACTAR, arc en rêve Centre d'Architecture, 2000).

operations at play in exhibition-making practices.⁵ I will focus on three operations that make this exhibition particularly representative of what I call a topographic approach to curating. As literature scholar J. Hillis Miller notes, the etymology of the term “topography”, from the Greek *topos* (“place”) and *graphia* (“writing”), originally referred to the descriptive writing of a particular place. Over time, it came to signify both the act of mapping and the mapped terrain itself.⁶ This conceptual migration—from inscription to representation to the thing represented—offers a useful lens through which to understand the evolving function of certain art, architecture and urbanism exhibitions. By investigating when exhibitions become topographies—perhaps we could call them “topographic exhibitions,”—I seek to outline a specific mode of exhibition-making thematising spatial concerns through documentary means. Doing so can help reframe analogous curatorial practices, past and present, that escape fixed categories.

During the 1990s, Jean Davallon, a French sociologist specialising in the study of cultural mediation with a focus on technical and science exhibitions as epistemic apparatuses, asserted that “the exhibition is less a means of transmitting scientific content than it is the establishment of a relationship to science”.⁷ More recently the notion of curating as relational tool has gained renewed attention as a means to challenge formats of display and of public engagement. This aligns with the art historian Beatrice Von Bismarck who stated that “the exhibition always shows something (i.e., the exhibits), but it also shows itself. Being not only the result and the medium of exhibition practice, but also its tool, the exhibition format has an inherent potential for action, helping to actively shape the relations that constitute it.”⁸ The combination of these considerations, concerned with knowledge production and capacity for action, seems particularly relevant for thinking exhibition methods across the growing number of interdisciplinary practices grappling with environmental issues, especially in the fields of architecture and urbanism. As we will see, *Mutations* did not centre on the display of singular design objects or master plans. Instead, it mobilised cartography, statistics, ethnography and visual culture to stage ongoing explorations into complex urban realities and invite the public to become active interlocutors and co-observers. To look at *Mutations* topographically foregrounds the exhibition as a medium on its own right, capable of mapping spatial conditions, constructing relational systems and reconfiguring how knowledge is produced and shared. It becomes a lens for thinking of the exhibition as a site of inquiry,

5 Consulted archival sources: Architecture centre arc-en-rêve, administrative archives, Bordeaux; OMA Archival Collection, Rotterdam; De Singel Archival Collection, Antwerp; Flanders Architecture Institute Archival Collection, Antwerp.

6 Miller J. Hillis, *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

7 Author’s translation. Jean Davallon, *L’exposition à l’œuvre : Stratégies de communication et médiation symbolique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999): 91.

8 Beatrice Von Bismarck, *The Curatorial Condition* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022): 12.

where research is spatially and discursively enacted. What can the exhibition format contribute to knowledge production when its task is not to resolve complexity, but to enable engagement with uncertain realities?

Turning Documentary Practices into Eclectic Assemblages

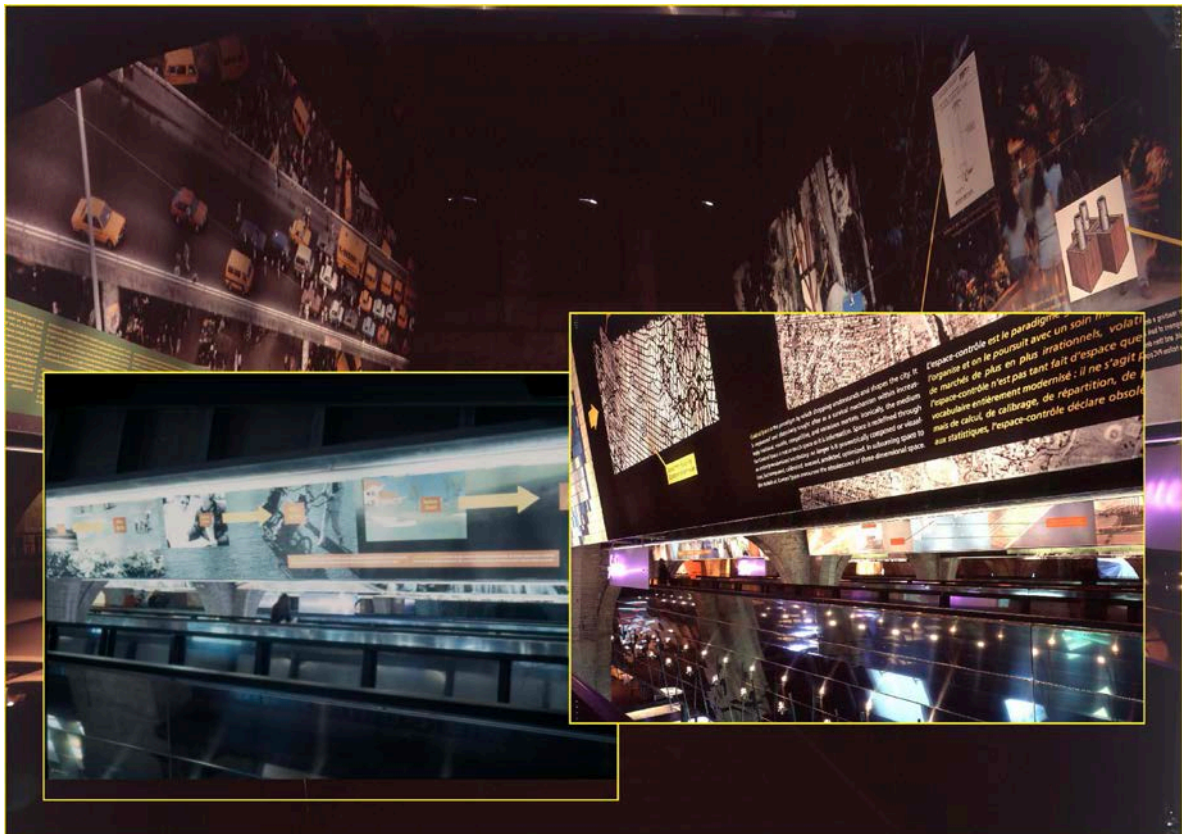
In *Mutations*, a great diversity of perspectives on contemporary urban conditions cohabited, from the display of statistics and cartography on global trends gathered by the documentalist Céline Rozenblat to urban rumours collected by the arts curator Hans Ulrich Obrist from various artists and acquaintances. These contributions best represented the two most distant poles that the exhibition attempted to cover, from (supposedly more) objective surveys to subjective impressions on changing urban environments. However, documentary investigations centring on more specific thematic or geographic zones (of the three protagonists mentioned earlier) stood in the spotlight at the exhibition's heart. This section will focus on two of them: the contributions led by Rem Koolhaas and by Stefano Boeri.

Both contributions shared a commitment to extensively research, document and describe spatial realities through methods typically rooted in topographic practices, constructing rich archives of urban landscapes from photographic campaigns, field recordings, aerial imagery, census data, site plans, typological inventories, etc. As the philosopher and historian Jean-Marc Besse notes, such practices begin with an “orientation towards notation, registration, archiving”, that is operations of producing, collecting, assembling and ordering documents of all kinds.⁹ These documents result from cuts into data generating spaces of representation of the real that also delimit, reframe and recompose a space for its interpretation. “It is within this space of representation,” Besse further suggests, “that real data, which has been transformed into documents, is reused for narrative purposes: this is where the narrative of the landscape is constructed.”¹⁰ While the strength of documentary approaches lies in their openness to a vast diversity of sources, this also causes difficulties. Besse points out two main challenges: heterogeneity and accumulation. First, more than merely revealing visual and formal differences, means like photography, cartography, statistical tables or oral testimony rely on disparate documentary regimes, each operating under different rules of truth, evidence and legibility. Second, field research also tends to proliferate material evidence more than it can be meaningfully

9 Jean-Marc Besse, *La nécessité du paysage* (Marseille: Parenthèses, 2018): 88.

10 Author's translation. Besse, 2018: 89.

arranged. In the context of exhibition-making, curated assemblages of varied documentation may obscure the specific relation that exists between individual artefacts and represented reality to favour narration, one that privileges the construction and legibility of a space of representation conveyed through their arrangement in the exhibition context. What is compelling about *Mutations* is the way these two difficulties of compiling documentary evidence are turned into the objects of representation and narration through the artefacts and their form of display.



Exhibition views of the contribution by Rem Koolhaas and the Harvard Project on the City, *Mutations*, 2000. © Philippe Ruault. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture.

The contribution for *Mutations* led by Rem Koolhaas resulted in a series of graphic layouts mounted on large, suspended panels. It showcased the investigations conducted with his students at the Harvard School of Design (NY) as part of the Harvard Project on the City, which aimed to overcome the constraints of the architectural profession by conducting independent, systemic research on contemporary urbanisation. As a response to the obsolescence of traditional urban planning identified by Koolhaas, the research lab addressed large-scale phenomena like the rapidly adaptable urban networks in Lagos and the Pearl

River Delta in Asia and the alienating spatial processes involved in global shopping complexes. The project advanced a speculative and empirical approach to test new cartographic and conceptual tools, further explored through various means of communication and publication.

The exhibition panels were organised into dense, multi-layered panoramic fields where images and texts were interwoven *en masse*, encouraging scanning and associative reading rather than linear comprehension. These explorations made heterogeneity and accumulation itself into an aesthetic and analytic principle, using stratification—layering maps over photographs, placing provocative statements alongside statistics—to make visible the simultaneity and collision of urban processes, where multiple scales, temporalities, economies and subjectivities coexist next to one another. This approach shows that turning documents into exhibits did not end with the display of individual items, but went through yet another process of montage into these large panels, which the visitors could contemplate as a series of “hyper-landscapes”—a term suggested by the urban theorist Sébastien Marot to describe sub-urban layering and fragmentation. Their efficiency lay in configuration: how fragments were placed in adjacency, how pathways were drawn through the collected material, how contrasts and continuities were staged.

In the case of the contribution led by the urbanist Stefano Boeri, a series of film screenings and computer monitors gathered the collaborative research project “USE – Uncertain States of Europe”, conducted together with the research collective Multiplicity. The installation focused on various sites in Europe and how unregulated building processes had transformed these specific environments.¹¹ In this case, synchronised video montage combined filmed landscapes and interviews together with sketches, maps or diagrams. Projected on large screens, each film opened a window onto a specific urban situation. In addition, the visitors could access a database of the groups’ research on several computers. Like the Harvard contribution, the installation also enabled non-linear explorations of information, narratives and images.

11 Multiplicity was founded by Stefano Boeri in 1993, and by 2000 it comprised around 60 practitioners scattered across Europe.



Exhibition views of the contribution by Stefano Boeri and Multiplicity, *Mutations*, 2000. © Philippe Ruault. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture.

Boeri called this presentation strategy the deployment of an “eclectic atlas”, hence requalifying a traditional tool of spatial disciplines:

By adroitly interlacing viewpoints, the eclectic atlases propose a multiple visual thinking that abandons the utopia of a synoptic vision from an optimal angle of observation. Their most interesting characteristic is the way they seem to mesh with their field of observation: an eclectic gaze on an eclectic territory. They experiment unsystematically with “lateral” ways of seeing and representing the territory of the European city. The viewpoint used by this approach, which proposes an “abductive” logic for the conceptualization of space, is the one best able to grasp the characteristics of the new European urban condition.¹²

Boeri grasped that this mode of gathering divergent viewpoints consisted of more than observation and registration: it was curatorial in essence, extracting, selecting and transforming dispersed yet situated knowledges into a spatially navigable form. The atlas format was mobilised as an exhibition method for its

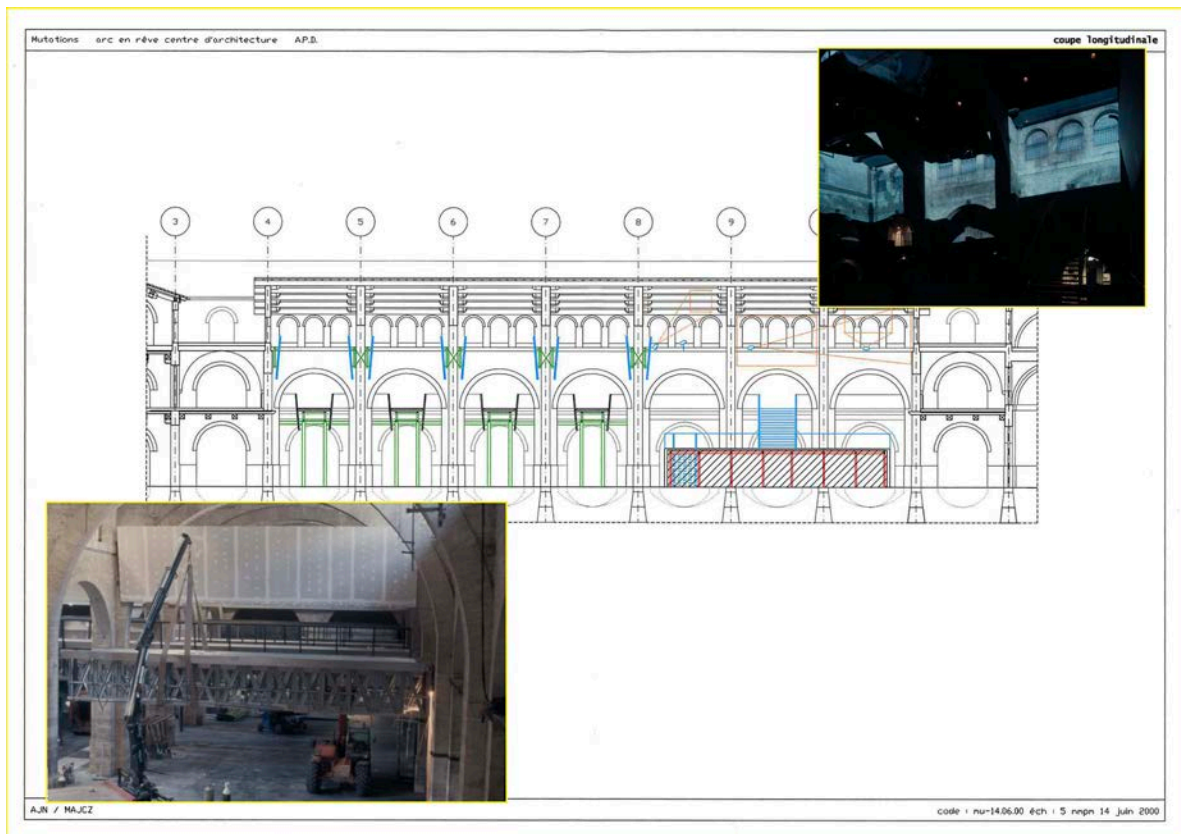
12 Stefano Boeri, “Notes for a Research Program”, in *Mutations*, 2000: 367.

capacity to assemble, order and classify without totalising, to stage multiplicity without promising a reconciled view. We can say that it was a way of developing what Besse earlier theorised as “an epistemology of the procedures for arranging things and ideas ... through which spaces of knowledge are created”.¹³ The atlas is thus not simply a container for various kinds of representations; it is an apparatus for thinking in relations.

In topographic exhibitions like *Mutations*, the heterogeneous and accumulative nature of documentation was therefore embraced, or at least put on display, rather than combatted. If a first set of operations consisted in capturing urban realities through different means of representation, a second consisted in translating these into arrangements of exhibits capable of sustaining public engagement. Aerial photographs were blown up into immersive panoramas; interviews and filmed landscapes were edited into lively video installations; maps and statistical surveys became navigable infographics. Each step, from document to exhibit to assemblage, involved cuts and montages as key procedures: a reduction (selecting certain features, suppressing others), but also an amplification of pattern, rhythm and relation. These were not neutral transfers from “reality” into exhibition; they contributed to deliberate transfigurations of environments into documents whose re-use as exhibits served narrative and argumentative purposes.

Staging (as) Urbanisation

The vast content gathered for *Mutations* was arranged across the central nave and the adjacent aisles of the Entrepôt. For the exhibition’s scenography, arc en rêve commissioned the Parisian architect Jean Nouvel (who collaborated with the local architects Martine Arrivet and Jean-Charles Zébo), with the Parisian film producer David Danesi brought in to help with the exhibition’s conception and realisation. In an early concept outline, arc en rêve described their intended design strategy as a means to “urbanise” the monumental—then still very rough—interior architecture of the historical depot:



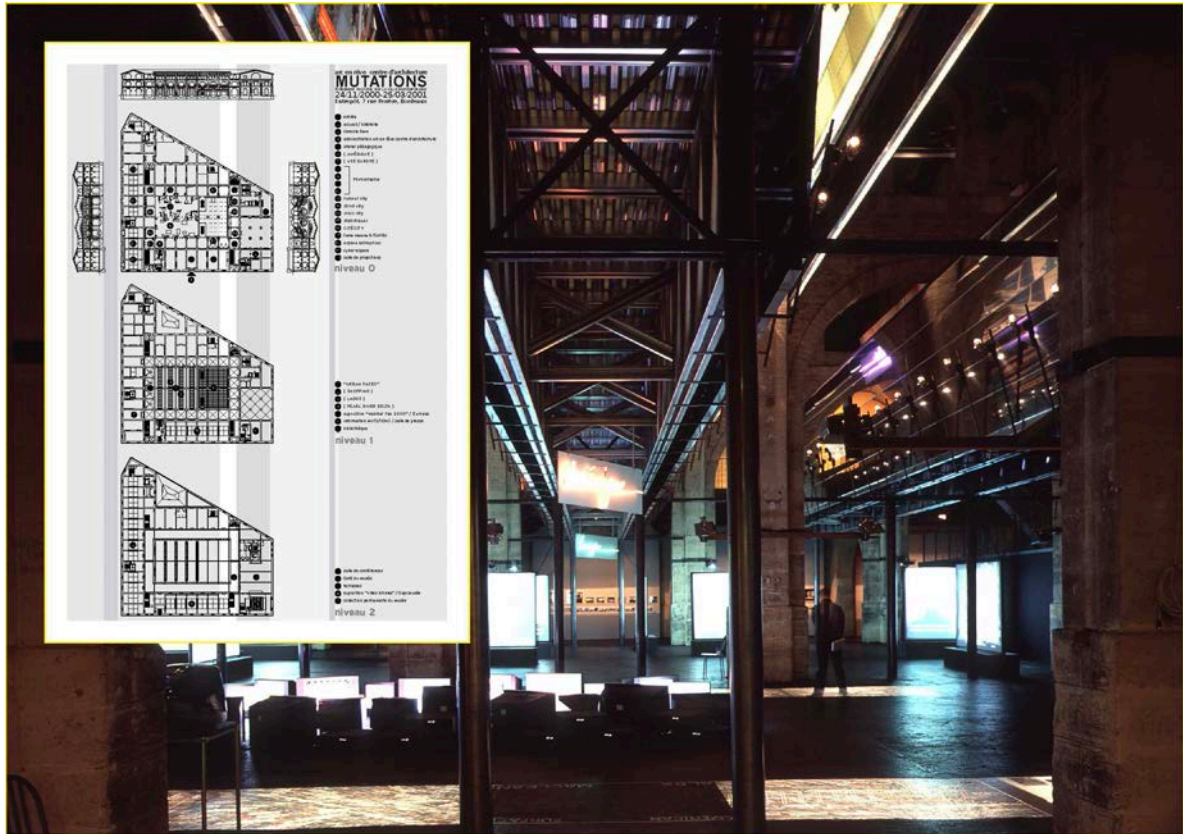
Longitudinal section of the Entrepôt depicting the exhibition design conceived for *Mutations* by Jean Nouvel and collaborators Martine Arrivet and Jean-Charles Zébo, 2000. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture. Photograph of the dismantling of the exhibition structure within the Entrepôt, 2001. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture. Exhibition view showing the Entrepôt's 'interior urbanisation', *Mutations*, 2000. © Philippe Ruault. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture.

The scenographic concept, mirroring the development of today's cities, consists of "urbanising" the Entrepôt space in an extremely dense manner, sometimes to the point of causing visual and auditory saturation. This "urbanisation", however, will be based on segmenting the space according to the urban themes or situations addressed. The segmentation around the exhibition's five main themes—concentration, saturation, indifference, immediacy, and control—will be identifiable to visitors. ... The "urbanisation" thus provoked treats a mass of variegated information in a total environment, akin to a shopping mall, a train station, or a busy airport.¹⁴

To this end, an impressive demountable steel structure was deployed, based on the technical system Stytech typically used on film sets, for instance. It multiplied the exhibition surface—accounting for a vast 2 500 square metres in

14 Author's translation. Arc en rêve, exhibition concept outline, 20 July 1999, 55. OMA Archival Collection, Rotterdam.

total—so that visitors could walk up on elevated open mezzanines and bridges reaching in-between the building’s arcades. The massive industrial structure appeared like a fragment extracted from the generic non-places proliferating across contemporary urban landscapes.



Exhibition map included in the journal distributed to visitors to guide them through *Mutations*, 2000. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture. Exhibition view, *Mutations*, 2000. © Philippe Ruault. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture.

The spatial and material articulation of the exhibition space was not treated as filling a neutral container but as an active medium in the production of meaning. The exhibition layout supported the exhibition’s organisation, which functioned as a cognitive map that delineated various urban zones, with for example the ground floor featuring Europe’s unregulated territories (by Boeri & Multiplicity) and American suburbia (by Sanford Kwinter), while Lagos and the Pearl River Delta (by Koolhaas & Harvard Project on the City) were mounted on the structure’s railings, 5.5 metres above ground. Because of the way the different contributions and visitor itineraries were arranged, a dialogue was created between the exhibited material and the venue’s spatial features, oscillating between large overviews and intimate, detail-rich confrontations. Light and sound effects were mobilised in resonance with the works on display to produce a

polyrhythmic experience, evoking the fleeting and ungraspable quality of urban impressions. The apparatus' function was akin to Bruno Latour's description of the "oligopticon".¹⁵ Unlike the panopticon or the panorama—devices that imply total surveillance or total comprehension—the oligopticon works as a device offering partial but precise perspectives on complex phenomena that could be assembled by the visitors into their own interpretative constellation. The logic here is neither purely linear nor strictly thematic; again, it is relational. Through such an approach, the exhibition became a site where seeing, knowing, and feeling were bound together. Where documentary practices fed into aesthetic and narrative constellations; where archives and collections were activated into spaces of encounter; where multiplicity was not a problem to be solved but a condition to be inhabited.

The scenography in *Mutations* thus became a form of spatial argumentation that guided the visitors' perception and framed their interpretation. It orchestrated a spatial narrative through sequence and fragmentation, acceleration and compression, where the different contributors' screens, panels and installations collided in a visual and sensory overload reminiscent of urban spectacle. As the cultural scholar Michelle Henning observed, long before computers made it possible to synthesise different media into multimedia or produce "virtual" environments, exhibition design was a means to combine different media, to physically immerse an audience in artificially constructed settings, and to engage them in active, physical manipulation of their surroundings.¹⁶ This immersive capacity was intensified here through the combination of an overload of multimedia devices, amounting to the multiplication of virtual spaces, and the exhibition design taking over the entire hall, resulting in the creation of a total environment.

In effect, *Mutations* staged both its exhibition apparatus and its spatial context as a topographic environment, in which media, objects and architectural interventions intertwined to model and transpose urban conditions. The scenographic task was not to harmonise a sequence of views but to keep them in tension, compelling visitors to move between them and to recognise friction as integral to the conditions being represented. This compositional logic underscores the exhibition's double identity: at once a mirror of urban heterogeneity and a terrain in its own right. As visitors navigated this field, they practised the very acts of spatial interpretation that contemporary urban conditions demanded: cross-referencing registers, negotiating scale and shifting between descriptive and analytical modes. Scenography, in this sense, did not just stage and illustrate urban complexity, it operationalised it.

15 Bruno Latour and Émilie Hermant, *Paris, ville invisible* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond/La Découverte, 1998).

16 Michelle Henning, *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory* (Maidenhead, England: Open University Press, 2006).

MUTATIONS exposition

La collection de la Biennale d'art de la Ville de Bordeaux est présentée au Grand Palais de la Cité de la Sculpture et du Peintre et du Sculpteur.

19 novembre 2000
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Mutation in its monumental and complex exhibition form was not a standalone product. It came coupled with an important cultural infrastructure and communication apparatus, including postcards, flyers, posters, invitation cards in many different forms and formats, an exhibition journal, a press supplement and a heavy, 800-page compendium coupled with a soundtrack on CD, as well as an extensive programme comprising guided tours, educational workshops and a series of lectures and debates. These components were disseminated through public channels, locally and internationally, hence deferring the exhibition's reception through time and space.

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text commissioned from French philosopher Nadia Tazi, who was also charged with curating the public programme of lectures and debates. Tazi's text offered a transversal lens that framed the exhibition's narrative, drawing connections between contemporary urban conditions and the issues of consumerism, information and war. It emphasised that "the extend, the variability and the complexity of these processes impose an approach by sequence".¹⁷ Such "sequential reading" thus wished to reject a united discourse in favour of fragmentary, partial, layered and situated modes of knowledge production. Serving as an announcement of the curatorial intentions, and later as a reading guide for the exhibition, the manifesto captured the exhibition's commitment to showcasing a formal and conceptual disparity in line with the complexity of global urbanisation processes it wished to thematise.

A series of photographs depicting striking urban environments accompanied Tazi's text. They were superposed by a disquieting battery of questions echoing the exhibition's plea to interrogate current phenomena:

Is shopping the principal ritual of urban life?
Is the downtown area being lost in the suburbs?
Does Europe suggest a citizenship of a new dimension?
How is urbanism being reconfigured by the virtual?
How has public space been inscribed by mass media and branded culture?
How are local differences being defined in the face of globalization?
How has wilderness entered the city?
Are emergency situations triggering a new urban condition?¹⁸

Through problematisation, *Mutations* constructed a discursive framework that shifted attention from objects typically addressed in architecture exhibitions, such as buildings, master plans and design projects, to immaterial processes: flows, regimes, uses. The goal was to launch questions rather than solutions, challenging what counted as evidence, which scales mattered, which controversies were foregrounded. From the onset, these questions helped construct the curatorial narrative, while they also served as navigational tools during the exhibition visit, inviting the audience to read across the disparate contributions and create their own path for their interpretation. However, this strategy, as it turned out, did not fully succeed once put into practice.

17 This manifesto appeared in various communication materials. "Manifesto" was the English term chosen to translate the title "argumentaire" appearing in the French version; see Nadia Tazi, "argumentaire" in "Mutations : Événement culturel sur la ville contemporaine", 61. OMA Archival Collection, Rotterdam.

18 Excerpts from exhibition communication material (bilingual). Architecture centre arc-en-rêve, administrative archives, Bordeaux.

While several critics praised *Mutations* for its capacity to make complex research both visually and spatially compelling, particularly through its book format, others critiqued the overabundance of information and the exhibition's reluctance to offer concrete solutions, as well as the sense of confusion pervading the overall experience. One critic remarked: "Paradoxically, there is little to see in *Mutations*. It is less about the presentation of works than about a conceptual gaze on urban phenomena."¹⁹ And another stated:

The public is left to its own devices; there is no guiding thread. The visitor is simply swept along by a wave of images that floods the screens, the floors, the walls. ... This great whirlwind stirs up an ocean of questions. ... Stuffed with images, overfed with all this fascinating information about the "world-city", the visitor is nonetheless left unsatisfied. Have architects become powerless?²⁰

If the "topographic exhibition" carried a critical promise at the turn of the millennium, it also had limitations. The absence of either conventional forms of art or architecture, as well as prescriptive proposals or even a consensual disciplinary discourse, left the audience understandably dubitative. Its complexity sometimes risked opacity. Its emphasis on multiplicity blurred the line between pluralism and relativism. And its scenographic ambition overshadowed the legibility of its arguments. Yet the show enabled an encounter with urban research that is spatial, sensorial and performative, inviting both reflection and engagement on a very timely matter of concern.

Mutations, seen in this light, becomes both an epistemic device and a socio-political actor. Through mediation and mediatisation, between situated knowledge (partial, context-bound, embodied) and global spatial politics (circuits of capital, governance and representation), it crafted interpretive frameworks through which urban transformations were perceived, debated and therefore potentially also acted upon. By organising conflicts of interpretation through sharable mediums, these processes reconstituted the conditions under which urban knowledge became public. They invited different kinds of publics—architects, planners, policymakers, artists, citizens, kids and so forth—to recognise themselves as participants in the making of urbanity.

The exhibition's accompanying publications, public programmes, and media partnerships, as well as its promotion throughout Bordeaux and its later adaptations in Brussels and Tokyo, all further consolidated the exhibition's propositions into a portable discourse. The accumulated paratexts and visual proliferations were not secondary to the main exhibition's contents; they were

19 Author's translation. Jade Lindgaard, "asphalte jungle", *Les Inrockuptibles*, 19 December 2000. OMA Archival Collection, Rotterdam.

20 Author's translation. Francis Rambert, "Dans la jungle proliférante des villes", *Le Figaro*, 23 December 2000. OMA Archival Collection, Rotterdam.

co-productive of its knowledge object. They ensured that the issues pertained in the transformation of “urban conditions” circulated and endured as a shared cognitive problem-space beyond the gallery space, sedimenting into professional debates, teaching syllabi, media narratives and—perhaps most importantly—everyday life.



Photograph documenting a bus promoting *Mutations* throughout Bordeaux, 2000. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture. Announcement flyer for *Mutations* at La Raffinerie, Brussels, 2001. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture. Announcement flyer for *Mutations* at TN Probe Gallery, Tokyo, 2001. Courtesy of arc en rêve centre d'architecture.

These processes of dissemination can also be understood as topographical, insofar as they produced new fields of imagination and socialisation rather than merely transmitted information. This understanding draws on architectural theorist and critic Ignasi de Solà-Morales's dual use of the notion of “topography” in the 1990s: first, as a descriptive tool for registering unstable and hybrid urban phenomena, and second, as a metaphor for emerging interdisciplinary communities of practice marked by discontinuity and plurality.²¹ As spatial disciplines increasingly intervened in territories structured by networks rather than fixed boundaries, topography came to denote both a mode of observation and a mode of collective formation.

21 Ignasi de Solà-Morales, “Present and Futures: Architecture in Cities”, in *Thresholds*, no. 14 (1997): 18–25. Ignasi de Solà-Morales, *Territories*, edited by Mónica Gili (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2008).

Read alongside cultural theorist Tony Bennett's analysis of the "exhibitionary complex", further developed through the notion of the "governmental assemblage", such networked relationships illuminate how discursive and disciplinary formations take shape within institutional ecologies—museums, cultural centres, biennials, universities—where curatorial agendas, funding structures, expert cultures, and governmental frameworks condition what becomes sayable and seeable.²² Such topographies inscribe exhibitions as part of an intricate set of practices, not as neutral media, but as powerful tools of societal organisation. Choices about the selection, mode of display and target audience are constitutively political: they nurture ecologies of practices, establish publics, privilege certain voices and sideline others.

Towards Critical Topographies

More than two decades ago, *Mutations* demonstrated that exhibitions were not the endpoint of research or communication, but sites where new forms of topography could be composed, tested and disseminated. Through its polyphonic components and complex organisation, the exhibition assembled a multifaceted account of global urban environments, defying linear narrative and disciplinary boundaries. The challenge of mediating such a broad and heterogeneous field of inquiry was considerable. As this analysis has shown, many of *Mutations*'s components performed a cognitive and symbolic function that condensed urban conditions into the exhibition apparatus and, in turn, fuelled them back into the exhibition hall and beyond. Through layered media, oblique sight-lines and deliberate disruptions of scale, *Mutations* transfigured the complexity of urbanisation processes into a topographic field, privileging immersion and confrontation over synthesis or overview.

Rather than pursuing documentary legibility in a conventional sense, the exhibition sought to produce an event of inquiry. Understanding was not offered as a stable outcome but staged as an open problem. In this respect, *Mutations* echoed the epistemic logic of exhibitions such as *Les Immatériaux*, where, as Davallon observed, the spatial labyrinth doubled as a labyrinth of knowledge, and access to an overview emerged only through the interference between exhibition and its accompanying discourses.²³ In *Mutations*, the ambition to map urbanisation as a global condition pushed this logic to its limits: the sheer scale of the phenomenon strained the exhibition's intelligibility, exposing a tension that was not merely conceptual but structural. This tension, I would suggest, is

22 Tony Bennett, "Thinking (with) Museums: From Exhibitionary Complex to Governmental Assemblage", in *Museum Media*, volume edited by Michelle Henning (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015): 3–20.

23 Author's translation. Davallon, 1999: 184.

inherent to topographic exhibitions more broadly. Their critical force emerges most clearly when detailed, situated perspectives are held in relation to broader analytical frames, without dissolving contradictions into a single narrative or losing complexity to fragmentation.

By documenting changing urban conditions as they appeared—raw, uncertain, and unresolved—*Mutations* sought to provoke critical encounters. At the same time, the exhibition and its derivatives sketched the contours of a public laboratory where collective forms of politics could be rehearsed. The stakes were at once cognitive, experiential, and civic. The exhibition provided a space to stage multiple perspectives, make issues visible and test the viability of shared narratives without smoothing them into consensus. It both reflected and shaped the imaginaries it sought to interrogate.

Seen from today's perspective, *Mutations* offers a methodological insight that extends beyond its historical moment. It shows how exhibitions can function as topographies: as spatial forms of writing and producing knowledge that actively organise relations between places, data, images and publics. Conceived in this way, exhibitions can become performative arenas that operate not only as platforms for discourse and representations of spatial conditions, but as sites where such continuously transforming conditions and their political implications can be thought and revised—through layered, situated and contested topographies.

Cite this essay:

Alice Haddad, "Exhibition as Topography: *Mutations* (2000–2002)," *Metode* (2026), vol. 4 'Exhibition as Method'

Metode

Metode (2026), vol. 4 *Exhibition as Method*
ISSN 2704-0550

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