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CULTIVATING SPACE EDUCATION THROUGH ARCHITECTURE: A STUDY OF OUTER SPACE
DISPLAYS IN US PAVILIONS AND SPACE MUSEUMS (1957-1986)

Abstract

The space conquest has flooded all areas of creativity, including architecture. Studying the way space objects have “invaded” architectural spaces, in pavilions on museums, is a way to assess how outer space knowledge penetrated in popular culture and how NASA and the US government worked towards educating and sensitizing the public to these matters. This presentation is derived from my Ph.D. thesis in Art History, defended in December 2023 in the university Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne. The aim of this thesis was to study the cultural impact on architecture, built or otherwise, between 1957 (launch of Sputnik I) and 1986 (the Challenger disaster), mainly in North America. The first hypothesis was that architects exploited the idea of outer space and tried to find related opportunities in projects with high prestige stakes (Expo pavilions) or in space themed buildings (aerospace, museums). The second hypothesis related to outer space and architecture’s impact on collective imaginations through the study of architectural literature, works of fiction, leisure architecture (Disney parks) and prospective projects (space stations projects). This led to the conclusion of the existence of a diverse Space Age architecture composed of selected forms (e.g., saucers), inspired by technologies derived from outer space exploration and dominated by the tension between outer space science and fiction. In this presentation, I intend to examine how a “space literacy” is created by the means of two main types of architectural proposals: in the US Pavilions of the Montreal (1967) and Osaka (1970) World Fairs and in the fledgling space museums being built around the USA, such as the Alabama Space and Rocket Center which construction started in 1960. I intend to show how the display of space objects, such as rockets, rovers, suits, landers or moon rocks, linked at times with interactive exhibits, combines with architectural forms to create a Space Age environment apt to display the “glory” of the American space race. I will also examine how the opening timelines of these pavilions and museums collide with successes and disasters of space exploration, such as the Montreal US Pavilion and the aftermath of Apollo I, and thus force architects to adapt their projects.