

# A Panel's Trajectories

## Pedro Alonso

Profesor, Escuela de Arquitectura,  
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

## Hugo Palmarola

Profesor, Escuela de Diseño,  
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

---

**A concrete panel, manufactured to be transported from an industry to the work-site, ends up travelling from Chile to Venice to become the symbol of a modern constructive system of global scope. Its trajectories however, began when the cement was still wet, initiating a unique story of conceptual assembly and disassembly, where a prefabricated panel for the construction of housing units ends up becoming the cornerstone of a truly historiographical project.**

KEYWORDS · Architecture, Chile, Venice Biennale, prefabrication, modernity

A prefabricated concrete panel was the main piece we presented in *Monolith Controversies*, Chile's pavilion at the 14<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, 2014.<sup>1</sup> This piece was produced in the city of Quilpué in 1972, by a factory donated to Chile by the Soviet Union for the development of the social housing programme of the *Unidad Popular's* administration. The system was known as КРД, derived from the Russian acronym КПД, which means "large constructive panel" (*krupnopanelnoye domostroyeniye*). On November 22nd that year, this panel was signed onto the wet cement by president Salvador Allende to then be installed as a commemorative monument at the facilities' main entrance. After the 1973 *coup d'état*, the plant's new administration, led by the Chilean Navy, covered the signature and painted the panel, adding an altarpiece of the Virgin Mary and child instead of a window and two neocolonial lamps at each side (Alonso and Palmarola, 2014a). The panel also follows an international genealogy of large concrete panel prefabrication industries, initiated with the French Camus system

---

<sup>1</sup> Fundamentals, the 14<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Exhibition at the Biennale di Venezia, directed by Rem Koolhaas, lasted from June 7<sup>th</sup> to November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014. Curated by Pedro Alonso and Hugo Palmarola, Chile's pavilion was commissioned by the National Council of Culture and Arts. The former workers of the КРД Factory in Quilpué were essential part of the exhibition and the book, *Monolith Controversies*; especially the collaboration of Verne Díaz, Servando Mora and Héctor Pereira, as the factory's photographer Nolberto Salinas. Díaz, Mora and Salinas accompanied us to Venice.



Panel conmemorativo antes de partir a Venecia, cara interna, enero de 2014.  
*Panel before departing to Venice, inner face.* © Omar Faúndez, Diseña

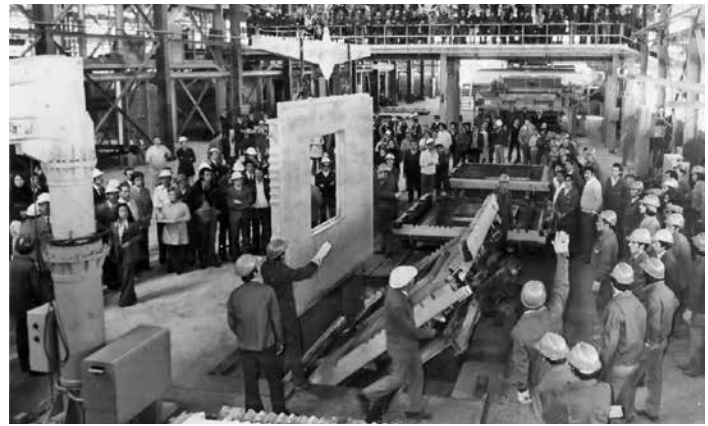
(1948) later redesigned in the Soviet Union as the I-464 system (1955), the donation of this system to Cuba and its adaptation into the Large Soviet Panel (1963), arriving then to Chile, where the system was assimilated in two antagonistic stages of the country's transformation, both in the socialist project as in the neoliberal, systems called КРД and ВЕР respectively (Alonso and Palmarola, 2014b).

Rem Koolhaas, curator of the 2014 Venice Biennale, titled his proposal *Fundamentals*, dividing it in three parts: *Elements of Architecture* (reviewing 15 universal architectural elements), *Monditalia* (regarding the emblematic and global duality of contemporary Italy), and *Absorbing Modernity 1914-2014* (with 64 national participations reflecting on the last 100 years of international architecture). Thus, Chile's pavilion was inserted within a dense and ambitious Biennale, discussing the absorption of modernity proposed by Koolhaas with only one gesture: a single concrete block. In this sense, Pippo Ciorra's comment "sharp, short, straight to the point"<sup>2</sup> –published in *Il Manifesto* newspaper– was probably the most accurate analysis of Chile's curatorial proposal and the public reception of the project. Ciorra was referring to the central element in the pavilion,

2 Pippo Ciorra, "Perdersi nella fundamenta," in: *Il Manifesto*, June 6, 2014, p. 9



Panel conmemorativo con inscripciones del presidente Salvador Allende y del embajador soviético Aleksandr Básov. Noviembre de 1972, Quilpué, Chile. *Panel with inscriptions of President Salvador Allende and the Soviet ambassador Aleksandr Basov.*  
 En base a: Castillo, Jimena. «Mujeres al volante de una grúa». Paloma, (1972), 33-35.



Evento en la fábrica КРД pocos meses después del golpe de Estado del 11 de septiembre de 1973. Producción de un modelo idéntico del panel conmemorativo, Quilpué, Chile. *Event at the КРД factory a few months after the coup of September 11, 1973. Production of a model identical to the memorial panel, Quilpué, Chile.* © Norberto Salinas González



Salida de distintos modelos de paneles perforados, desde la fábrica en dirección a la obra. Quilpué, Chile, c. 1973. *Models of perforated panels leaving the factory towards the construction site. Quilpué, Chile, c. 1973.* © Norberto Salinas González



---

**“[the] pavilion was inserted within a dense and ambitious Biennale, discussing the absorption of modernity with only one gesture: a single concrete block. (...) since the Biennale is not a museum, the panel would allow us to avoid the production of a panoramic and museum exhibit design.”**

---

measuring 2,75 meters high by 3,2 meters wide and weighing 2,6 tons. Since the Venice Biennale is not a museum, the panel would allow us to avoid the production of a panoramic and museum exhibit design, risk which was implicit in the commission itself. To achieve acuity, being brief and cutting straight to the point was essential, considering the limited time that the public, press and jury have to visit the entire Biennale.

While one of the main characteristics of these type of construction technologies based on prefabrication is the transfer of structural weight and constructive technical demands to the panel itself, our challenge as an exhibition, was to show how a single element can also synthesize the transmission of the ideological weight that transformed such panels into symbols and agents of social transformation (Alonso and Palmarola, 2012 and 2014c). We were interested in what Nelly Richard later called “the social and political memory of objects” (Richard, 2015). The presentation of a single piece, local and universal at the same time, allowed us to expose the history of over 170 million apartments built all over the world using these technologies, approximately 5 billion square-meters (Meuser, 2002; Hoffmann, 1999), positioning –at least in terms of scale– the prefabrication by panels as the housing model of greatest global impact, a fact that contradicts the marginal space that the system still occupies in the traditional historiography of modern architecture.

However, to the Biennale we decided to take the panel without any signatures or virgins. We exposed it as an original, but also as a ruin of architectural and political modernity. In short, in Venice we exposed debris. Presenting it this way, seemed a radical but essential action, because it wasn't as if we were curating objects which had already a recognized value for architecture. On the contrary, the curatorial operation was to question the assumed value of this object to then trace the controversies contained within the panel itself, avoiding to solve them by the restoration of signatures or the images of virgins. Far from our interest was the historiographic stability of master pieces and unique works of local or international modernity. We were interested in showing that it was possible to deploy a complex array of interpretations and controversies from a single architectural element. We tried to present an open object, avoiding its closure through reassuring or stable categorizations. In this way, the panel was placed as a node of multiple relationships and elements in tension: it enabled us to connect, from a critical perspective, our country's recent history with the history of global architecture of the past 100 years.

Gonzalo Puga's exhibition design, allowed us to lift the panel vertically, on a rail, with only two supporting points in addition to direct and dramatic lighting; the production of Luigi D'Oro and Arguzia S.R.L. was also key in the various anchoring systems. Both operations, structurally complex, consolidated the protagonist role and tension of a concrete block that seemed to sustain itself at the center of the pavilion. Once inside, visitors could literally look at the other pieces in the exhibition through the window in the panel. This frame showed a dual



Panel intervenido con un retablo de Virgen María y el Niño Jesús, más dos lámparas neocoloniales. Quilpué, Chile, diciembre de 1974. *Panel intervened with an altarpiece of the Virgin Mary and child, plus two neocolonial lamps.* © Nolberto Salinas González



Panel en ruina y abandonado dentro de un botadero de chatarra industrial. Quilpué, Chile, 3 de junio de 2013. *Panel ruined and abandoned in dump of industrial junk.* © Hugo P. Rodríguez



Salida de panel desde botadero de chatarra industrial hacia corral municipal, Quilpué, Chile, 12 de marzo de 2012. *Panel leaving the dump of industrial junk towards the municipal junkyard* © Hugo P. Rodríguez



Panel cubierto por escombros en corral municipal, Quilpué, Chile, noviembre de 2013.  
*Panel covered by debris at the municipal junkyard.* © Hugo Palmarola



Salida de panel desde corral municipal de Quilpué hacia Santiago, Chile, 22 de diciembre de 2013.  
*Panel leaving Quilpué's municipal junkyard towards Santiago.* © Hugo Palmarola



Salida de panel desde Santiago hacia puerto de San Antonio, Chile, marzo de 2014.  
*Panel departing from Santiago towards the port of San Antonio.* © Hugo Palmarola



---

**“Far from our interest was the historiographic stability of master pieces and unique works of local or international modernity. We were interested in showing that it was possible to deploy a complex array of interpretations and controversies from a single architectural element.”**

---

approach: the panel as an object of study and as a tool of historical, social and cultural observation. In opposition to the distance from the object under study and the objectifying pretension of knowledge (proper of museums), we tried to deliver subjectivity to the panel, to get as close as possible, work with it, modify and intervene its trajectories, to enhance what the object had to say. This, because we consider that the KPD panel is a direct agent of significant political, ideological and aesthetic controversies; a highly signifying object due to its paradoxical nature, a situation that operates on different levels. For example, it's an industrial and functional piece produced in series which was, however, transformed from the beginning into a commemorative monument for permanent exhibition. It was also a controversial object when being installed as a symbol of Soviet-Chilean cooperation, before being censored and intervened during the dictatorship, rescued from destruction by the same workers who manufactured it, forgotten as debris together with industrial waste, and brought back to life to be presented in Venice. This industrial panel was intended to be moved from the factory to the construction site, but its transformation into a monument –and its subsequent abandonment and rescue– multiplied its trajectories, moving from a dump to a municipal junkyard to then, with stops in Santiago and San Antonio, travel by ship to Livorno inside the Rita Schepers V1407, in transit from Quilpué to Venice. Taking it to the Biennale and exhibiting it at the center of the pavilion are actions which belong to this panel, designed to be moved and monumentalized from its origin. Today it is back in Chile, waiting for a new trajectory. **ARQ**



Llegada de panel desde puerto de Livorno hasta la Bienal de Venecia, Italia, 30 de mayo de 2014.  
*Panel arriving from the port of Livorno to the Venice Biennale. © Hugo Palmarola*



Instalación de panel en el Pabellón de Chile en la Bienal de Venecia, Italia, 30 de mayo de 2014.  
*Installation of the panel in the Chilean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. © Hugo Palmarola*

---

Monolith Controversies received the Silver Lion for a national pavilion of the 14<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale 2014, and its book was awarded the DAM Architectural Book Award 2014 by the Deutsches Architekturmuseum and the Frankfurt Book Fair. The exhibition also achieved first place within the social ranking of the Biennale at the *Arsenale* location, ranking elaborated by *Domus* magazine<sup>3</sup> and obtained a Meeting on Architecture for the realization of an international seminar at Venice Biennale.

For more information visit: <http://monolith-controversies.com>

---

<sup>3</sup> Maria Novozhilova, "Venice 2014: social ranking", in: *Domus*, November 25th, 2014, available online at: [http://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2014/11/25/venice\\_biennial\\_socialmedia.html](http://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2014/11/25/venice_biennial_socialmedia.html)



Panel en el Pabellón de Chile en la Bienal de Venecia, Italia, junio de 2014. *The panel in the Chilean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.* © Nicolás Saieh





Llegada de panel desde puerto de San Antonio a Santiago, Chile, mayo de 2015.  
*The panel arriving to Santiago from the port of San Antonio.* © Hugo Palmarola



Panel almacenado en Campus Lo Contador, uc, Santiago, Chile, julio de 2015. *Stored panel.*  
 © Hugo Palmarola

#### / BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALONSO, Pedro; PALMAROLA, Hugo. «A Panel's Tale: The Soviet I-464 System and the Politics of Assemblage», en: Patricio del Real y Helen Gyger (eds.), *Latin American Modern Architectures: Ambiguous Territories* (Nueva York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 153-169.
- ALONSO, Pedro; PALMAROLA, Hugo. *Panel* (Londres: Architectural Association, 2014a).
- ALONSO, Pedro; PALMAROLA, Hugo (eds.). *Monolith Controversies* (Berlín-Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2014b).
- ALONSO, Pedro; PALMAROLA, Hugo. «Tropical Assemblage: The Soviet Large Panel en Cuba», en: E. Medina, I. Costa Marques y C. Holmes (eds.), *Beyond Imported Magic, Essays on Science, Technology, and Society in Latin America* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2014c), pp. 159 - 179.
- HOFFMANN, Hans Wolfgang. «Aua Fehlern lernen. Erbe des komplexen Wohnungsbaus: Wie Berlin seinen Nachbarn bei der Sanierung der Platte hilft», *Stadtforum* (Oct. 1999).
- MEUSER, Philipp. «The Aesthetics of the Plattenbau». *Project Russia 25* (Moscú y Ámsterdam: A-Fond / oio Publishers, 2002)
- RICHARD, Nelly. «La Memoria Social y Política de los Objetos» (entrevista a Pedro Alonso y Hugo Palmarola). *The Clinic*, 29 de enero de 2015, pp. 24-26.

#### PEDRO ALONSO

Architect and Master of Architecture, Catholic University of Chile, 2000. PhD in Architecture from the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London, 2008. Along with Hugo Palmarola, Alonso has exhibited at the Pratt Institute and the Architectural Association, has been the author the books *Panel* and *Monolith Controversies*, and won the RIBA Research Trust Award and the DAM Architectural Book Award of Deutsches Architekturmuseum. Alongside Palmarola he won the Silver Lion as curator of *Monolith Controversies*, Chile's Pavilion at the 14th Venice Biennale of Architecture 2014. Alonso is Associate Professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, Visiting Professor at the Architectural Association, and Princeton-Mellon Fellow 2015-2016 at Princeton University.

#### HUGO PALMAROLA

Designer, Catholic University of Chile, 2004. MA in Theory and History of Design, UNAM, 2010. He has received grants from The Society for the History of Technology, National Science Foundation, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art in USA. Along with Pedro Alonso, Palmarola has exhibited at the Pratt Institute and the Architectural Association, has been the author the books *Panel* and *Monolith Controversies*, and won the RIBA Research Trust Award and the DAM Architectural Book Award of Deutsches Architekturmuseum. Alongside Alonso, he won the Silver Lion as curator of *Monolith Controversies*, Chile's Pavilion at the 14th Venice Biennale of Architecture 2014. Palmarola is Professor of the School of Design at the Catholic University of Chile.

#### Muestra / Exhibition

The 14<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia

#### Fechas / Dates

7 de junio al 23 de noviembre de 2014

#### Curadores / Curators

Pedro Alonso, Hugo Palmarola

#### Comisionado por / Commissioned by

Cristóbal Molina, Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes

#### Comité Científico / Scientific Committee

Pablo Allard, Beatriz Colomina, Sebastián Gray, Hugo Mondragón, Fernando Pérez Oyarzun, Rodrigo Pérez de Arce, Bernardo Valdés, Enrique Walker

#### Proyecto de Montaje / Pavilion Design

Gonzalo Puga

#### Identidad Visual / Visual Identity

Martín Bravo

#### Artista Invitado / Guest Artist

Gianfranco Foschino

#### Producción / Production

Felipe Aravena, José Hernández

#### Multimedia

Francisco Hernández, Micol Riva

#### Comunicación / Communications

Marcela Velásquez

#### Producción y montaje / Production and construction

Luigi D'Oro & Arguzia s.r.l.

#### Auspicio / Sponsors

Fundación Imagen de Chile, DIRAC, CSAV, y SAAM

#### Colaboradores / Collaborators

Verne Díaz, Servando Mora, Héctor Pereira, Nolberto Salinas, Silvia Gutiérrez y otros ex trabajadores, fotógrafos y habitantes de KPD / and other former workers, photographers and inhabitants of KPD

#### Transporte marítimo / Ship Transportation

Barco Rita Schepers, Naviera SAAM

#### Fecha de fabricación del panel / Panel's date of fabrication

Nov., 1972

#### Ubicación original del panel / Panel's original location

Ex fábrica KPD / Former KPD factory, Quilpué, Chile

#### Materialidad / Materiality

Prefabricado de hormigón armado / Precast reinforced concrete