

American Framing was the latest offering at the Pavilion of the United States during the 17th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, held in 2021. Under the theme of wood framing, curators Paul Andersen and Paul Preissner argue that, while the system has been overlooked by architectural discourse, it embodies American sensibilities of equality, improvisation, and lightness. This sets it apart from mass timber's engineered qualities, but nevertheless the nearly 200-year history of wood framing establishes a cultural context for the material. They spoke with Jack Murphy last fall.

JM What were the components of your Pavilion of the United States for last year's Venice Biennale?



Omaha Reservation, Nebraska, 1877.
Photo by William H. Jackson.

PP First, there's the existing original United States pavilion from 1930. In front, a wood-framed structure was installed. It was kind of like a house, as it had vaguely domestic elements like a porch and an attic. Inside, furniture contributions by Norman Kelley riffed on wood framing. Furniture by Ania Jaworska was shown in the courtyard. These three exterior elements introduced the curatorial concept without viewers needing to be told what was going on.

Inside the existing pavilion, models and photographs occupied its five galleries. In one, the framing models, made by our students at the University of Illinois Chicago, showed historic precedents more like miniatures than models. You saw the changes in tectonic techniques, typological ideas, social aspects of projects, and how framing accommodated different uses, from the benign to the mythological.

In the four remaining galleries, there were two photographic series. The first, by Chris Strong, was maybe more editorial in nature. He shot site conditions, construction materials, and the process of building, in one gallery, and the people, labor, and social aspects of construction in the other. Subjects range from undocumented day laborers to unionized construction workers, Amish builders, or people just working on their garage. A set of images by Daniel Shea was installed in the last two galleries. They're in black-and-white, vary in size, and explore the myths of the origin of wood in the forest.

In sequence you went from something familiar—what you might think of as domestic architecture—to some unfamiliar things. This culminated in a large model of the Snow warehouse, which may or may not have existed, but it's the building that Sigfried Giedion cited as the first version of wood-frame construction in the world. Afterwards you reentered the courtyard and encountered this blank shear wall of the front structure, complete with conduit and other stuff. The viewer obtained a deeper understanding of this front structure because of the contents of the pavilion.

Then you could ascend this new construction. There were four floors, so it was about forty feet tall. The circulation is

contained within the form. The fourth floor was like an attic; it got so narrow that you couldn't fit stairs and people up there, but you could use the staircases on both ends to access the second and third floors.

JM From photos, the pavilion seemed empty compared to prior iterations of the pavilion. Curatorially, what was the point of this openness? How did it reinforce the ideas of the exhibition?

PA There were some short texts to identify the various works, but not a lot to read overall. That was intentional. One of the functions of the big addition/installation in front was for visitors to enter through a full-scale version of the theme, which relieved us of the responsibility to explain what it is. We didn't need to tell people what wood framing is because, by the time they got inside, they had already seen it firsthand at 1:1 scale.

Also, people were able to be inside a framed structure before it's clad and finished, which you experience on construction sites from time to time, but not usually in a finished building. And you never get this experience in other parts of the world. Plus, the big wood addition was reminiscent of a house, but with exaggerated features. It was meant to be familiar and peculiar at the same time. We tried to open the topic of framing up; the point wasn't to locate the subject and say, "This is exactly what it is."

PP It was about architecture, not architects. It was important for us to put this addition in the front and to exhibit architecture instead of its representation. You literally saw and experienced this thing right in front, in order to showcase architecture itself.

This is a different approach than the sometimes insecure way in which exhibitions overexplain their content to visitors. It's a bit disrespectful to think that you must spell everything out. It also treats the pavilions and the exhibitions like a book in a room. You end up with no space to understand the work; instead, you're just being told about it. Our effort was to let visitors both experience framing to understand what's at stake—to establish both the physical and conceptual space required to understand the subject.

JM Did you use American lumber for *American Framing*?

PP No. The wood is from Austria. American lumber isn't certified for use in the European Union. It would've been difficult to get it approved for one project, plus the added cost of having to put wood on a boat. And then there's the extra engineering work and the requirement to build it elsewhere beforehand to prove it works so the municipality would let us build it onsite. So, we used European wood and European lumber dimensions, which are a little larger than 2×4, 2×6, etc.

JM What do you like about the experience of buildings that are framed but not finished yet?

PA There are a lot of counterintuitive qualities of a framed building that's not done. It seems lightweight, even flimsy. That goes against what architecture has been understood to be, which is a heavy, permanent, timeless thing. I love that this project felt light and thin. There's also the low-tech roughness of it; you get split studs and nails poking through. Not everything lines up perfectly. It doesn't look polished and refined, but it can be incredibly sophisticated structurally and aesthetically. It's fun to see the building as a big model—or the model as a tiny building. This comes through during framing but is lost by the time the building is finished. When complete, a project becomes nice in a different way.

JM Did anything change in the exhibition with the delay due to COVID-19?

PP Yes. I think most pavilions changed by using the extra time to add more stuff. We used our extra year to edit; we removed a lot of things and left only the valuable components in the show.

JM Your students at the University of Illinois Chicago built the framing models. What was the pedagogical context for that work?



Addition to the Pavilion of the United States.
Courtesy the Pavilion of the United States at the 17th International Architecture Exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia.

PP By the time the biennale opened, this project was maybe four years old. Paul and I ran two sequential seminars looking into this topic of framing. His identified historic projects, timelines, and techniques.

My seminar examined weird artifacts like diagonal bracing and shims and identified individual projects to focus on. It was useful as a model to teach architectural history, but for the exhibition it helped us find the projects that matter. There aren't really canonical framing projects, though there are early versions and current ones. The building technology emerged independently throughout the American Midwest. In the absence of singular buildings, we researched the trajectory and development of a type.

PA Our students played a huge role in the project. In my seminar we figured out basic things like: How much do we actually build in wood framing? When did it start? Why does the US do this but other countries really don't? As Paul mentioned, it's hard to assemble an anonymous history that's not documented and was developed in different places by different people over a long period of time. The exhibition attempted to encapsulate that history in a series of models made by our students. Their contribution to the show was huge.

JM *American Framing: The Same Something for Everyone*, a book about the exhibition, is published by Park Books, with Jayne Kelley as a third author. What does the format of the book do differently from the format of the exhibition?

PA Some of the work from the exhibition is in the book, but most of the material in the book is new. We commissioned essays by a few different people which expand the topic and go in depth on different aspects of it. There are essays about environmental racism, housing, affordability, and wealth disparity. We also included more photos from the collections shown in Venice. It's an opportunity for us to bring other people into the fold, so it's a much broader view of the topic.

JM The Instagram account @americanframing was an active extension of the show. How did that factor into your curatorial strategy?

PP I started the Instagram account in the most boring, routine way. Then my own cynicism about social media made me not want it to just be like every other pavilion account, which posts photos of curators getting on planes, shipping stuff, and working. I thought it could be another way to explore framing, so I used it as a clearinghouse for smart and dumb things related to framing. I didn't feel the need for it to be thoroughly researched, so it could just be passing topics that we didn't cover in-depth, but ones that were still important or weird or funny.

JM Framing seems remarkably consistent, on one hand, but at the same time there's new kinds of technologies. What did you learn about some of these innovations?



Chicago Lumberyard, 1870.
Chicago History Museum.

PP We're getting close to 200 years of framing, as it started around 1830. In some ways there hasn't been a lot of change. Yes, there was the switch from balloon framing to platform framing, tool innovations like mass-produced nails, automatic nailers, standardized lumber sizes, sheet products like plywood and OSB, and glue-laminated beams, but you could probably list these significant contributions on one sheet of paper.

Most of the developments have been economic, cultural, or related to labor. Wood framing is cheap and light as a system, so the innovations just make it cheaper. Plywood made it possible to use more of the raw material than if you just sheathed walls with dimensional planks, as it was done originally. This made things cheaper. Then OSB converts even more waste into a product. It's interesting how the developments have been ways to use lower and lower qualities of wood in viable ways so that there's both more profit and less waste.

JM Can you make any cultural extrapolation from that trend?



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Chris Strong, *Untitled*, 2021.

PP For me, it seems to emerge from a particular American ethos that you see in almost all other forms of cultural practice. Consider painting, comedy, film, and music. Everything seems to be a form of artistic practice that seems bored with tradition and looks for ways to expedite creative products and to experiment with slop—or at least materials that are typically considered inappropriate or inferior. This might apply to production methods in electronic music or the expanding idea of what constitutes a joke in comedy.

There's a version of architecture that seeks to use materials and techniques that are considered bad or cheap—like softwood framing. It doesn't immediately look valuable or like you would like it, right? A lot of the early criticism of wood framing was that not only is it cheap, but it also *looks* cheap. Paul found this great anecdote of this house in a windstorm that was lifted off its foundations, and it just rolled intact down the hill instead of collapsing. For me, this maps onto a generalized American ethos of cultural production, which is messy. There's significance in the messiness. It's not virtuosic.

PA Paul and I both enjoy going against the grain and finding the things that most architects ignore. Early on, framing was a new system, and people built some bizarre buildings. Now there are well-established rules for how framing is supposed to work. I'm curious about how we can start to break those rules or test them in new ways, because for all of its adaptability and flexibility, we're locked into a limited view of how to design with it. I'm interested to see how we can bring some of the wildness of wood framing back.

JM Where did politics enter the show? One reading of it was that it was about a construction system, so it was somehow apolitical. But through the photos, viewers saw people in America working, and there was some political ambition to that display.

PP The show made space for viewers to see who is behind the work. In the photographs, we see people doing professional jobs alongside images of amateur recreation or even undocumented and/or exploited laborers. The politics also comes through in the models which track history. They include explorations of mass-produced housing and earthquake refugee housing. Another included example was a military outpost when the United States was expanding into what is now the Midwest.

The politics also come out in the topic's accessibility. Framing removes barriers to participating in architecture that exist with nearly every other building system. You can't build a steel treehouse in an afternoon without proper training. But if you knew a couple of details for wood framing, then you could do it with a few people. It even changed the nature of what a build team is and how big it needs to be. Setting aside the colonial aspect, framing allowed settlers moving west to build their own homes in the middle of nowhere, with or without expertise.

There's also the matter of creativity in construction. Unlike other forms of construction, framing can still be ad hoc; with a concrete or steel building, everything needs to be planned. Once that happens, the building is put up according to the drawings. Yes, framed buildings are obviously planned, but afterwards you can move walls or add or subtract windows. It's much more improvisational and allows for change. You can be designing as the thing is being built, unlike other construction methods. We tried to represent these different levels of politics in the show.

PA Wealth disparity is big political issue right now, too. Even though barriers to home rental and ownership largely hinge on issues outside of architecture and construction, wood framing's history might offer some strategies for how to at least build housing that's cheap and good. For example, even mobile homes are framed in softwood products. Their portability comes in part from using an inexpensive, lightweight structure.

Framing has a very clear anti-elitist bent. It has an egalitarian nature; there's the same system and materials for everybody. No matter how much money you have, you can't buy a better 2×4.

As a system, you can move and even subtract parts freely, which means that no one stud is critical. Instead of putting emphasis on the performance of a single element, the system makes walls and floors and roofs with an assembly of pieces that are dedicated to the same goal. This redundancy allows wood framing to be a strong structural system. There's a connection here to the broader idea of an individual not being exceptional, but what matters is their work toward a collective goal. This idea absolutely translates to our government and society in the US, in its best version.

JM Were there any ideas about climate change included in the show?

PP Softwood is sustainable in ways that steel, concrete, masonry, and carbon fiber are not. Its use seems like a good idea as the planet gets hotter.

JM What about mass timber? How does it relate to this history of framing, if it does?

PP I like it, but it doesn't relate, other than it uses wood. This usage is more like other, more sophisticated, preplanned forms of architecture where the entire thing needs to be figured out in advance and then assembled onsite. That's the opposite of what I like about softwood framing, where you can move walls around and make windows or doors. You can't change your mind with mass timber. But I still love it.

PA Architects are experimenting with mass timber differently than with dimensional lumber, which tends to be rougher and quicker. At the moment I prefer the accessibility of regular framing and the challenge of doing something new with an ordinary, work-a-day system.

JM How are your separate interests related to this effort? Did *American Framing* expand what you do outside of this curatorial project?



War housing in Erie, Pennsylvania, 1941.
Al Palmer, Courtesy Library of Congress.

PP Both of us have separate practices, and while our seminars about framing were thematically connected, they were still independently directed. Our work as collaborators is about how our separate interests come together. These efforts always seem to look at an anonymous form of history, but one that's meaningful and robust to the point that it's ubiquitous and invisible at the same time. Then we find ways to present those special things. I think that's part of this exhibition, too. Maybe that's also part of the political ambition of this show, in which we took an international architecture exhibition in Venice as a place to produce an experiential show about something that isn't thought of as worth exhibiting. It's not about carbon fiber spun by robots or making a big tower. *American Framing* is pretty normal and dull, yet it ends up being a more meditative and profound experience than many other special, expensive, and privileged forms of architectural research.

This subject is one that's present in both of our practices. Paul still makes framed houses, just like I do. We didn't have two different ideas that had to compete—instead the theme is a thread between our individual practices. A couple of years ago I would've thought about it in the opposite way.

American Framing has also shaped contemporary discussions. The theme was announced three years ago when it wasn't okay to exhibit framing in such an important venue. We've already seen things change since then. Now there are research studios at prestigious schools about the subject and people glorifying framing in all kinds of projects. I'm not claiming we started this, but I think the show helped people feel comfortable with the idea that framing isn't just something you do to achieve other formal goals, but that the system itself has worthwhile qualities



Model 01: Snow Warehouse, 25" x 50" x 22 1/2", designed by University of Illinois Chicago students for the United States Pavilion at the 17th International Architecture Exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia. Photography by cocurators Paul Andersen and Paul Preissner.

and conditions. I don't think I'll teach a framing studio in the future; I might be wooded out.

PA I learned things that I will take forward. Maybe not directly with my projects, but in other ways. It can be useful, and sometimes fun, to not accept the implied value or lack of value in things, but to investigate something that could be considered wrong. Then you learn what the driving principle of a project is and how to take it in a new direction.

JM I appreciate that everyday things like framing are starting to be talked about more. It feels more connected to reality, and that seems healthy.

PA That's great to hear, but it's not totally altruistic. Part of what makes framing worthwhile is that it's expedient. This also makes it accessible to more people, both in architecture and outside of the field. If you're working with things that people see every day, then they can understand and recognize when something's new or different.

PP I don't have any prospects for projects that might cost \$800 per square foot. It's a waste of time for me to worry about robots and scripting as ways to make architecture meaningful. I imagine that's the case for nearly everybody. It seems worthwhile to find intellectual projects that use more normal things instead of requiring the work to be exotic and expensive for it to feel worthwhile.

PA Speaking of reality, what was nice—though it's nearly impossible to put in writing—was the experience of the exhibition in person in Venice. It meant a lot to be there.