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People take centre stage at 2010 architecture biennale

27 August 2010 | By Oliver Wainwright

"People meet in Architecture" is the rather quaint title of this year's biennial frenzy of cocktail parties and free bags in Venice, nimbly curated by Kazuyo Sejima of SANAA. Trumpeting architecture's noble role as a backdrop to the lives that inhabit it – or perhaps a sardonic critique of the Biennale format as an endless orgy of meetings and networking events – either way, the sentiment is a refreshing foil to the formally-obsessed offerings of the 2008 event. People must take centre stage.

The giardini's pavilions have responded in varying degrees to this challenge, some taking up the brief rather too literally – with a tiresome proliferation of 'forums', 'collaboration zones' and 'mixing chambers' – but others have taken it on in a much more compelling, critical angle.

The Dutch pavilion, by Rietveld Landscape, stands out for its notably vacancy. You enter a large white, empty room, with a suspended wire ceiling covered in what appear to be random blue Styrofoam off-cuts. It's like seeing the floor of the OMA model workshop from below. Only on ascending the staircase do these random blocks become apparent as a meticulous survey of Holland's vacant buildings, their latent potential screaming in the raw blue foam finish. You could literally carve a new use into their virgin surface. A large sign downstairs proclaims "this building has been vacant for more than 39 years" in a nod to the promiscuous waste of the giardini as a surreal Potemkin village used only for a few months of the year, the rest of the time sealed off or inhabited by squatters. A very Dutch manifesto accompanies the simple display, arguing for new models of temporary use and interim allocation as viable development strategies – themes which recur throughout many other pavilions, following the recession-chic trend for temporary projects and 'meanwhile' uses on our cities' growing number of vacant sites.

The Belgian pavilion, by art collective Rotor, takes a different, but equally simple tack. Harvesting used, heavily worn, fragments from a variety of public buildings – from stained carpet tiles to fading stair treads – extracted from their usual context and hung gallery like, the beautifully curated exhibition elevates these skip-bound remnants to works of art and argues for 'wear' as way of reading buildings. As props from our daily lives, these silent witnesses to mundane ritual activities take on a deeply charged quality, the history of use elicited from shadows, stains and marks.

While these two pavilions take their power from a carefully controlled absence, pregnant voids implying the potential for, or history of, use and habitation, the British pavilion goes all out to encourage a riot of activity. Coordinated by muf architecture / art, the 'Villa Frankenstein' is intended to provide a backdrop for meeting, drawing, debating and scientific enquiry. Showcasing an eclectic, often esoteric, collection of interests, from Ruskin's meticulous documentation of Venice to the endangered future of Venetian salt marsh, the pavilion is grounded in an adamant stance held by the practice that proposition must come from observation – or 'close looking' – and an obsessive interrogation of place. A 1:10 fragment of the London Olympic stadium has been recreated by Venetian gondola carpenters as a forum for ongoing drawing workshops, a surreal play structure which is dying to burst out of its Palladian proportioned room, while a mini lagoon and collection of stuffed birds is on show round the back. In each case, the idea of a 'two way traffic' cross fertilisation between London and Venice is demonstrated, often the first steps of a longer-term collaborative projects, with the 'legacy' of each exhibit held firmly in mind.

Muf have also been collaborating with Re-biennale, a mischievous collective of architect-squatters, including members of French group EXYZT, who see the overflowing post-biennale skips as a cornucopia of potential building materials, harvesting the leftovers each year to recycle into new structures. Industrious magpies of the expo aftermath, the group will be unveiling their latest creation over the next

few days, as an alternative makeshift mirror image to the polished works on show within the Giardini and Arsenale – the 300 metre–long old rope factory, down which I am about to begin the exciting voyage. I hope to meet lots of people – in architecture, of course.

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