

RA Magazine Blog: Biennale diary



Posted: 03 September 2010 by Kate Goodwin, Drue Heinz Curator of Architecture

The Royal Academy's Architecture Curator provides a special report from Venice on the opening days of the 12th Architecture Biennale

Venice didn't seem to be thronging with quite as many architects as it has in recent years, for the opening days of the **12th Architecture Biennale** – a sign of the financial times for architects – but the response to the exhibition on the whole has been very positive. Although it is difficult to generalise with such a huge and diverse amount of material, from the epic Corderie dell'Arsenale (the former ropemaking factory of the Venetian navy) to the 56 national participants, the exhibits were principally enjoyable and engaging rather than overly didactic or self-consciously theoretical. This suited the mood of the opening which this year fell at the end of the holidays and in sweltering heat. The exhibition focuses on the human element of architecture, rather than the formal.

This year the biennale is under the directorship of Kazuyo Sejima of Japanese architectural practice SANAA, who incidentally will be speaking as part of the Royal Academy architecture programme on Monday 11 October (find out more [here](#)). With a woman for the first time at its helm, the exhibition brings together architects, artists and engineers to respond to the theme "People meet in Architecture". Sejima chose and evidently directed her participants well, as, despite the open and somewhat elusive theme, the various contributions were of a high standard and complemented one another.



Cloud-scape by Tetsuo Kondo Architects and Transsolar Klima Engineering Photo: Kate Goodwin

Wim Wender's beautiful and seductive 3D film of the new Rolex Learning Center in Lausanne designed by SANAA was a fitting start to the exhibition in the Arsenale and introduction to the theme. Entitled 'If Buildings Could Talk', it provided an intriguing and otherworldly look at this unique building, capturing how people interacted with it and one another. Similar experiential installations ensued - An artificially generated cloud-scape by Tetsuo Kondo Architects and Transsolar Klima Engineering, and Olafur Eliasson's 'Your Split House' with twisting sprays of water illuminated by strobe lights.

Studio Mumbai created a transformative experience in their space, from the 1:1 structures, tactile materials and pieces carefully laid out, to the timber ceiling fans gently circulating the thick humid air and the smell of timber and incense. Bahrain, which won the Golden Lion prize for best national participation, with its installation 'Reclaim' - deals with the privatisation of the coastline and loss of public space- explored through film interviews with locals and watched while sitting in makeshift fishermen's huts transported from their seaside locations.



Usus/Usures, by Rotor Photo: Kate Goodwin

The national pavilion however that seemed to have most people talking was Belgium with their exhibition by Rotor, called Usus/Usures which looked at the wear and tear on buildings by use. It spoke of something far beyond the architect or their intentions and very much of how people naturally embrace and use a building. A handrail, tiles, scuffed chairs, worn carpets and seemingly banal materials were all removed from their context and poetically placed and exhibited, creating something quite special.



A visitor sketches in the Russian Pavilion as part of an exercise associated with the British Pavilion. Photo: Kate Goodwin

The British Pavilion also hit the spot with Villa Frankenstein, a direct reference to John Ruskin and his observations of Venice – under the artistic direction of collaborative art/architecture practice MUF. Ruskin's sketchbooks were brought from the UK while the rest of the work in and for the pavilion was done by local Venetians. On entering the pavilion, one is observed by those sitting on the 1:10 mock-up of the London Olympic stadium made out of timber by Venetian craftsmen. Ruskin's sketchbooks of Venice are juxtaposed with historical photographs of the area around the Giardini by local residents. It has been conceived as a stage-set for the exchange of ideas between the UK and Venice with 'close-looking' at its heart. It is reassuring that this is not just mere rhetoric, and it was a delight to see people of all ages and nationalities engaging with the sketching tours on Saturday organised by RIBA, filling books with drawings of the exhibitions in the Giardini, which will be kept in archives in London.

The Biennale also offered the chance to see much more of the footage of the interviews Hans Ulrich Obrist conducted with Cedric Price - and



which we only had a tantalising glimpse at when Obrist spoke as part of the **Critics' Choice** series at the RA earlier in the year. Rem Koolhaas' office OMA again offered an insightful commentary, hitting what one feels will become a hot topic in the next year: the relationship between preservation, restoration and demolition. One element of the display encourages people to make their own catalogue - tearing off images from pads a la **Paper City: Urban Utopias** (an exhibition at the RA in 2009), and seemed to be enjoyed as much in Venice as it was in London.

Visitors create their own catalogues of the Rem Koolhaas display. Photo: Kate Goodwin

The Polish pavilion - 'Emergency Exit' by artist Agnieszka Kurant and architect Aleksandra Wasilkowska - invited people (for the vernissage period only) to jump from a construction made of reclaimed birdcages, into the unknown, and refers ironically to the health and safety regulations in buildings and urban space that seek to plan, control risk and eliminate the accidental and unexpected. Not far from this was Serbia's contribution, a humorous and delightful installation of giant see-saws inviting play and interaction, along with little gardens on wheels like a children's toy that can be dragged around.

The real highlight of the Biennale for me however, was Janet Cardiff's piece the Forty Part Motet, forty speakers, set up in the round each with a single voice performing Thomas Tallis' *Spem in Alium* - it was the most amazing and spine chilling 11 minutes I have spent in some time. The piece is not new - it was created in 2001, was shown at the Venice Biennale of Art and has been shown all over the world including London's Whitechapel Gallery. However, experiencing it in the context of the architecture biennale in the amazing 16th-century factory spaces of the Arsenale transformed it and the exhibition. It is a salient reminder that space can be created not just by architects and material but also by music.



Janet Cardiff's piece 'The Forty Part Motet'. Photo: Kate Goodwin

When reflecting on the exhibition, it seems that the artists (or collaboratives) were the ones who created some of the most powerful statements about architecture and were able to address the theme with the most innovation, offering the unique and refreshing perspectives.



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