

A Biennale of Knowledge

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A saying of wisdom tells us one must be able to look behind and understand one's past in order to move forward. Nothing could be truer as the statement of the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale.

And yet, this year's Architecture Biennale strikes if anything as one displaying the most "human scale" of the Biennales I have ever had the chance to witness. Owing to the theme chosen by its curator, Rem Koolhaas, "Fundamentals", the edition of 2014 happens to be an impressive collective research on the architecture of the past hundred years. It is this theme itself that makes the Biennale one that opens to the larger public by offering an "educational" role, reflecting on the evolution and interaction between social, historical and economic facts on the evolution of architecture and the role that architecture has had in society for the past hundred years.

This year's Biennale contains mainly three themes. For the first time, the Arsenale has been occupied by a whole exhibition dedicated to Italy – "Monditalia". Architectural designs interact with cinema and dance, the Biennale creating a space which breathes at the same time architecture, cinema and dance in one of the most harmonious ways possible. The Central Pavilion of Giardini focuses on "Elements of Architecture", an exhibition dedicated entirely to the declination of every element of architecture and the way it has been used and designed through history – a two year research programme with students from the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

Another important change can be found in the way the national pavilion exhibitions have been organized at Giardini, around one single theme for the first time - "Absorbing Modernity 1914 - 2014". Each of the 65 national participants, out of which 10 are newly introduced, had to adapt their scenography to this major theme.

According to its curator, Rem Koolhaas, this Biennale was supposed to be *about architecture and not about architects*, a fact that one can notice when visiting the Giardini, as the countries have responded to this request more than its own curator could have anticipated (as he confessed at one of the opening conferences). When strolling through the Giardini, one can see how diversely the countries approached the theme, each nuanced by their own past and historical context. However, from their curator's point of view there are mainly three approaches that can be distinguished.

On the one hand, there are pavilions powerfully oriented on the research aspect, thus offering an impressive quality of documentation that can be used as a support for creating a whole history lesson in one of the most positive ways. This is the case of the Japanese pavilion, which is impressive due to its quality and research associated with a sensibility that is so typical for this nation's pavilion. Having said that, to have the Japanese catalogue of the exhibition becomes a must. From the curator's point of view, contemporary architecture is a culmination of experiments represented by the generation of young, post Osaka Expo '70 architects. Among this generation we can find Takashi Hasegawa, the Architectural Detective Agency, Tomoharu Makabe, Toyo Ito, Tadao Ando, Hiroshi Hara, Riken Yamamoto and Kazuo Shinohara. Confronted with the crisis that had reached Japan, the generation after the modernists was forced to reconsider their profession by undertaking experiments on small houses. The exhibition, suggestively named "In the Real World", presents architectural projects and historical perspectives from the 1970s in Japan, juxtaposed with artifacts from the past 100 years.

Another posture is the "sensitive / symbolical approach" which appeals to one element that becomes the symbol of the modern development of the country and transforms it by creating a scenography around it, interpreting the modernity around this object or element as the generator of modernity. Besides the Chile Pavilion (winner of the Silver Lion), the Romanian, Austrian, or the German Pavilion also used this approach.

This is the case of the Chile Pavilion whose approach, “Monolith controversies”, is concentrated around the central model of a large concrete panel which is given the role of modernity’s precursor. Produced through a manufacturing method donated by the Soviet Union in 1972, a system known as KPD, along with the political history of Chile, the panel is endowed with the political and ideological controversies that surface using the aesthetical empowerment that this simple object receives. Witness of both political regimes and bearing first Salvador Allende’s signature and later on the representation of the Virgin and Child during Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship, the panel is the proof to the expression of a political ideal through esthetical means. Thus the panel is invested with the characteristics of a monument, an object of memory. In the pavilion it stands alone, stripped of its old political significances; only light penetrates and reveals its texture. The first room of the pavilion is typically furnished as an apartment in one of the housing blocks built in this system. Last but not least, the pavilion is completed by an impressive research of all the prefabricated systems used in countries around the world between 1931 and 1981, completed with statistical information regarding their composition – a two year’s research done by the students of architectural schools in Chile.

The Romanian Pavilion – “Site under construction” – continues the line of symbolical / sensorial approaches focusing on the industrial development of the country as the catalyst for absorbing modernity. It proposes a scenography that goes from post War industrialization to the contemporary urban voids. Striking as a powerful and clear intervention, this year’s pavilion develops around the concept of black box, which represents the contemporary city where one finds three stable isles, shaped as three cooling towers. On the exterior, the “glorious past” of the industry is projected, using archive images in a well-constructed choreography of buildings, repetitive gestures, “the new man”, everything being accompanied by tunes from the communist era; it also pinpoints the evolution of “the new man” and noises typical for industrial activities. Once one enters inside the cooling towers, the void of the urban contemporary ruins opens up; it is represented by the white curved space where all landmarks disappear. The only element that lingers on is the sound of the dripping water, as a reference to the Tarkovskian world illustrated in “The Stalker”. One remains alone with one self, reflecting on the void of the contemporary post-industrial city.

Another way of interpreting Modernity is through the perspective of a main character – an architect that has reflected the modernity in the eyes of a country’s architecture. This is the case of the Swiss Pavilion, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, whose scenography strikes as one of the most subtle. The research on one of the most revolutionary characters in architecture, Lucius Burkhardt and Cedric Price, called “A stroll through a fun palace” intends to create, as the curator says, a “laboratory” where their visionary ideas can be used as toolboxes to create the future. Lucius Burkhardt is known as the founder of “strollology”, a science about walking, while Cedric Price’s project for the “Fun Palace” established him as one of the most innovative and thought provoking architects. What both of them have in common are their revolutionary teaching methods. The intention of the exhibition is to function, as the organizers predict, “as an architectural school under the leadership of the Italian architect Stefano Boeri with Lorenza Baroncelli.”

In the same direction goes the Dutch Pavilion with its exhibition entitled “Open: A Bakema Celebration”, focused on Jaap Bakema, the leading voice of the post-war avant-garde for CIAM and Team10. The exhibition reflects on the notion of *Open society* as one of the main purposes of Bakema’s work, and on the notion of *Open society* that could be used nowadays. Partner in the Rotterdam office Van den Broek en Bakema, and author of one of the most important projects that symbolizes the post War reconstruction optimism, the Lijnbaan, Bakema believed that architecture should be the one that helps both the emancipation of the masses as well as the self-realization of the individual citizen. Such ideals as the democratic, egalitarian society are to be put in perspective in our contemporary world by asking ourselves if we truly live in an open society. This constant shift of the balance between the different roles of state, market, architect and citizen is analyzed through an installation which uses multiple media means. Visitors are invited to reflect upon tomorrow’s open society through the “Post Box for the Open Society”, a platform of postcards which can be used for sharing ideas.

There are also pavilions that have chosen a way that uses the sensitive/symbolical approach, but from a more conceptual point of view, namely, one that refers to a much more global identity factor, as is the case of the French Pavilion or the British Pavilion, the U.S. Pavilion, the Northern Countries Pavilions, the Russian Pavilion or the Korean Pavilion (winner of the Golden Lion).

The Russian Pavilion – “Fair enough” – brings to life all the utopian studies elaborated during modernity in what it is believed to be the most radical urban laboratory. We find ourselves in the middle of an international trade fair, by no means an ordinary one, where each stand “sells” by applying the contemporary marketing principles on each and every one of these urban utopias, stripped of their ideology, re-thought and re-adapted as solutions to contemporary problems. Some are revolutionary, some are flirting with extremes in this expo of ideas, which the organizers call “a marketplace of urban invention – made in Russia, opened to the world” where the threshold between reality and utopian sarcasm is a very fine one, almost imperceptible.

“Modernity: promise or menace?”, the French Pavilion’s statement, is that France has not absorbed modernity that much as it was rather a shaper of modernity. Designed around a large-scale model of the Villa Arpel from Jacques Tati’s movie – “Mon Oncle” – a symbol of rejection of modernity as the Villa ends up by attacking its owner – the exhibition interrogates the difference between the expectation raised by modernity and its actual outcome. As the ambiguity of the *grands ensembles* and their use (the Cité de Drancy, designed by Eugene Beaudoin and Marcel Lods between 1931 and 1934, used as housing and transformed into a Nazi internment camp between 1941 and 1944) is strongly suggested by the title “*Grands ensembles: healing heterotopias or places of seclusion?*”, the two of the most important fabrication innovations are presented as main chapters. On the one hand, Raymond Camus’ fabrication pattern used on a large scale in France, both Western and Eastern Germany, exported to the Soviet Union and later to the Eastern European communist countries and in South America; on the other, there are the exceptional metallic panels built by Jean Prouvé, less known at an international level, very innovative but almost ignored by the industrial mass production.

The Korean Pavilion – “Crow’s eye view: the Korean peninsula” – winner of the Golden Lion is inspired by a homonym poem by the Korean architect turned poet Yi Sang, influenced by the Dadaist Movement. The exhibition uses architecture at its center as an instrument that narrates two stories that are yet the same one, of South Korea and North Korea, affected by the trauma of separation after the Second World War, as two possible endings for the same story. The organizers’ intention is also to be considered as the prologue for a first architecture exhibition of the Korean Peninsula. The exhibition revolves around four main themes – “Reconstructing Life” (the life after the World War Two), “Monumental State” (architecture as symbol of power), “Utopian Tours – The Nick Bonner Collection” and “Borders”.

The Austrian Pavilion – “Plenum. Places of power” – concentrates on the symbol of the parliament, a building that has changed very little over the past two hundred years. The exhibition presents in one plenum, a “parliament of parliaments”, by juxtaposing, the 196 1:500 scale models of parliament buildings from 19th and 20th centuries. This offers a global view on this symbol of democratic power in every country, correlated with architecture, society and the political situation. The exhibition then zooms in the Austrian parliament and the project for the new parliament of Tirana by Coop Himmelb(l)au. Its statement is that: “All power comes from people”, a phrase often considered empty of meaning, and more a promise than a result. This exhibition tries to analyze the sense of this phrase where the parliament building is at the same time an instrument and a monument. It succeeds in a very strong, yet subtle way.

To conclude this mere subjective experience of the Venice Biennale, in the end the visitor acquires along with the (quite rich) global architectural view of the past century, a strong geopolitical grasp on how different parts of the world have evolved in the past century. Considering the fact that the past century has been one of intense historical events we are able to have a perception on the different ways in which the countries have evolved. This difference can be perceived especially in the approach of the pavilions where there is a clear distinction between the countries that have experienced the communism of post World War Two and the countries that have not.

