

LETTER FROM VENICE

Gimme shelter

The Venice Architecture Biennale imagines bold new living spaces

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A visitor looks at S1ngletown, an installation by the collective Dutch Droog that focuses on the world of contemporary adults. S1ngletown appears at the 11th Venice International Architecture Exhibition. (Vincenzo Pinto/AFP/Getty Images)

The Venice Architecture Biennale is an every-other-year exhibition in which various nations, along with a curated show of independent designers and architects, display the best work they have to offer. The theme of this year's show is Out There: Architecture Beyond Building. That could mean anything, and given the exhibit includes everything from 2001: A Space Odyssey-inspired plastic sculptures to empty space strewn with beanbags or futons, it does.

The Americans score the highest points for relevance in my books. The seven architects in the group show all came up with simple, practical and fresh design responses to pressing matters of the day; namely, changing populations, shifting borders, uneven economic development and urbanization.

Deborah Gans, who teaches at the Pratt Institute in New York, is presenting a well-thought-out temporary home (a.k.a. tent with solar power, a toilet and shower) for the many millions of our fellow human beings living in refugee camps. The Roll Out House, as she calls it, is held up by lightweight, sturdy columns of enforced cardboard or bamboo, is collapsible and is strong enough to withstand being jettisoned from a plane along with emergency provisions.

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Shelter in refugee camps is a touchy matter: it needs to provide a functional safe haven, but it can't look permanent or people understandably interpret it as a sign they will never go home. What stands out in Gans's design is the way her triangular supporting columns can fit with others to form a cluster of tents or one enlarged tent. This allows the infrastructure or shape of a camp to grow out of family or community needs, rather than being imposed from above. (Think of the monolithic grid layout of most refugee camps.) Gans is now trying to get the UN to look at her Roll Out House, a process that -- just like being repatriated - can take years.

Another personal favourite in the U.S. entry is Jonathan Kirschenfeld's floating pool. The pool was inspired by the floating bathhouses of New York early in the last century. These were moored along the East and Hudson Rivers near tenement districts and open to the largely immigrant public so they could wash up. As many as 15 operated throughout the summers. Kirschenfeld's pool was hollowed out of the hull of a decommissioned cargo barge using conventional shipyard technology. Dubbed the "Floating Pool Lady," the barge opened for the first time in the summer of 2007 in Brooklyn. More than 50,000 swimmers, mostly kids from low-income families, showed up. Last summer it docked in the Bronx and was just as popular.

Having spent most of my own childhood summer days at a smallish community pool beside a strip-mall parking lot in a rather desolate Toronto suburb, I can attest to the world of difference a public pool can make to a kid. Kirschenfeld told me building the floating pool cost a fraction of the cost of an inland pool and its docking acts as a terrific neighbourhood herald of summer.

The nearby British pavilion tackles similarly pressing issues in Home/Away. In clearly laid out diagrams, curator and architecture critic Ellis Woodman focuses on the various factors that affect "housing cultures" - in other words, house size, number and size of



Jonathan Kirschenfeld's floating pool is made from a hollowed-out cargo barge. (Jonathan Kirschenfeld)

rooms, whether housing is privately or publicly built, price and so on. Currently, Britain is facing a towering housing crisis. Homes in the U.K. are the most expensive in Europe (not including that tax-avoidance heaven, Monaco). Just to give you an idea, property per square metre costs an average of \$29,000 Cdn in England, compared with \$6,700 in Spain or \$3,600 in Germany. (The average in Canada is \$4,700.) Not only are British homes the most expensive, but they're the smallest in Europe and have the tiniest rooms. (You only need watch a Mike Leigh movie to get that.) According to Woodman, this is all a result of the country's aversion to large-scale planning and the resulting domination of private-sector developers, coupled with a national obsession with single-ownership homes. Once you get through the exposition on just how screwed British housing is and the reasons why, models of nice apartment and townhouse projects by five British architects working at home and away shows a brighter possibility for British living.

Moving on, S1ngletown, by the Dutch collective Droog Design, is one of several exhibits that combined sociological and abstract approaches. Chaise lounges and beanbag chairs alongside chalk-white mannequins dangle from the ceiling. A-frame houses emerge from the torsos of the mannequins, with a "singles" profile printed on each: "RECENTLY DIVORCED: Works nine to five. Lives alone (after decades with a family). Celebrates newfound freedom but also struggles with loneliness. Believes in the possibility of another long-term, stable relationship."

This is a book that appears in the S1ngletown exhibit at the Biennale. The exhibition explains that by 2026, one-third of the world's population will live alone.

Or: "INDEPENDENT WIDOW: Works her mind at the brain gym. Lives far away from her kids and grandkids. Celebrates software which allows free calls over the internet. Believes that older people can live safely alone."

While most of the profiles are gender neutral, it struck me as more than a coincidence that all the lone hanging mannequins are female. I recognized a friend or family member in each and every profile: all of them women. A book entitled Love + Sex with Robots wired to a table - people will apparently steal anything - reinforces the impression. The cover features a lissome bride in white kissing what I can only describe as the least sexy robot I've ever laid eyes on. (My toaster is a stud in comparison.) Nearby, a wall blurb explains that by 2026, a third of us in the developing and developed world will live alone. S1ngletown, I read on, shows how architects and designers can create



This is a book that appears in the S1ngletown exhibit at the Biennale. The exhibition explains that by 2026, one-third of the world's population will live alone. (HarperCollins Canada)

social alternatives to “a landscape of alienated individuals and static objects.” It may all be high-concept tongue-in-cheek, but the exhibit depressed the hell out of me, and I live with a noisy family. Surely a vision of the single female future can be rosier and cozier than this?

The Germans also fuse the conceptual with the thought provoking. Once I made it past an obnoxious gauntlet of blistering illumination blasting down on the entrance threshold – a statement about wasting electricity on useless things, as if we needed the message exemplified – I reached a delightful, mid-apocalyptical Garden of Eden. Tall, skinny apple trees with IV bags of water feeding them create a perpendicular wonderland. But like those awful spotlights, the point of the apple trees is how architects around the world create “paradises” by gobbling up immense resources and triggering the destruction of natural landscapes. (Las Vegas came to mind ... then left it.) As pavilion designer Tom Matton points out, due to human technology such as over-farming, you couldn't grow the Tree of Knowledge, let alone a simple apple tree, without help from technology in the area that was once a biblical paradise. The question is: do we want more manufactured paradises or more global equilibrium?

Next door, the Japanese have a similar vertical garden housed in tall Plexiglas structures on the outside of their pavilion. (Vertical vegetation is big this year: Hong Kong's exhibit has a hanging garden version.) Japanese architect Junya Ishigami keeps the inside of the building totally empty and covers its white walls with delicate floral pencil drawings. For an architecture biennale curiously short on beauty, it at last provides something exquisite to contemplate.

Out There: Architecture Beyond Building runs to Nov. 23 in Venice, Italy.

Watch for a second instalment on Canada's contribution to the 2008 Venice Architecture Biennale.

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