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Exploring the Intangible at the Venice Biennale

11th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale 2008. Curated by Aaron Betsky. Through November 23, 2008.

By Beth Broome

If you come (naively) expecting to see a lot of architecture at the 11th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale 2008 — as traditionally understood in tangible form — plan to leave disappointed.



Photo © Antje Quiram

Slide show

This year, the Biennale's director and curator Aaron Betsky challenged participants to eschew the built environment and celebrate architecture's other, less tangible dimensions. "Architecture is not building," writes Betsky perplexingly in his foreword to the exhibition catalog. "It is the way we think and talk about buildings, how we represent them, how we build them." Entitled *Out There: Architecture Beyond Building*, the show presents a wide range of interpretations of Betsky's theme through installations, manifestos, and "utopian visions," or experimental work. Participants enthusiastically ran off with the theme (or didn't), as instructed by Betsky, to question reality and explore and experiment with architecture's enigmas.

Daunting at times because of its sheer magnitude, this year's exhibition, organizers note, is bigger than ever before, a fact that is not hard to believe, as one staggers through 30 international pavilions, scores of rooms, past hundreds of boards, models, and installations within the expanses of the Giardini di Castello and the massive Arsenale (not to mention the dozens of related exhibitions and events scattered across the city). It does not come as a surprise then that, in spite of a general drift toward the topics of sustainability, alternative energy, and the

landscape, the exhibition is characterized by a general lack of cohesion. This year's Biennale is not an orchestra, artfully blending a collection of scores to create a symphony. Rather, it is a cacophony of solo performances, a virtuoso violinist sharing the magnificent concert hall with a determined horn blower from the marching band. Visitors approach each pavilion or installation as if embarking on an entirely new experience.

A common complaint heard from exhibition goers is the preponderance of pedantic presentation and youthful enthusiasm — earnest attempts to address today's societal woes through well-meaning but complicated presentations that too frequently come across as so much homework. In an exhibition of this scale, the work has a matter of seconds to grab attention. Visitors seek out moments of clarity. The Japanese pavilion provides one. Here, architect Junya Ishigami has built a series of ethereal glass boxes housing living plants in the area around the pavilion, suggesting an architecture that bows to the natural environment. While rendering the exterior as a kind of interior landscape, the architect has left the inside space empty, save for a collection of delicately rendered graphite crayon drawings that cover the high walls from floor to ceiling. Drawn in a precise, though childlike manner, the scenes, accompanied by blunt, hand-written descriptions, depict fantastical environments, such as High-Rise House: "The upper stories are like a vacation retreat where we usually don't go ..." (for a close-up view of Ishigami's drawings, see page 280). Indulging us with playful fantasy, Ishigami's almost-not-there work, teetering between the built and unbuilt environments, suggests the limitlessness of the architectural imagination.

Lacking a pavilion, Estonia plopped down in the middle of the Giardini a section of a full-scale gas pipeline painted safety yellow (with cameras in its hollow, projecting live images of exhibition goers to screens in the Arsenale). This provides a different sort of pause. Placed between the German and Russian pavilions, the pipeline comments on a controversial one actually proposed to connect the two countries.

Architectural Record has a particular connection to the U.S. pavilion — having organized its exhibitions for the past two Biennales (2004 and 2006). We were glad to only have to watch with bated breath this year as the 2008 team worked to beat the clock and put together their exhibition in about two months. Commissioner William Menking, editor of *The Architect's Newspaper*, and cocurators Aaron Levy and Andrew Sturm, assembled a group of 16 architects, urban researchers, and activists for the show. The pavilion demonstrates how these individuals have reacted to contemporary social problems and conditions by, among other things, observing and actively engaging with communities. Entering the pavilion through a photocollage digitally printed on vinyl scrim by Estudio Teddy Cruz [RECORD, October 2008, page 240], depicting the contrasting sides of the U.S.–Mexico border, one is confronted by a small vegetable garden, a model from Alice Waters's Edible Schoolyard project, designed to educate students on nutrition and the origins of food. Inside, socially conscious projects abound: Design Corp's migrant housing, Rural Studio's animal shelter, Deborah Gans's portable human shelter, and Laura Kurgan's Spatial Information Design lab, which illustrates the relationship between demographics and the penal system. The relevance of the highlighted projects is easy to grasp and, though a tighter focus may have been in order, the pavilion effectively demonstrates how

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social problems and conflict can lead to experimental architectural solutions.

With NonArchitects/Interviews, the Brazilian pavilion sets out to show "the side of those who use instead of the side of those who create." The pavilion's main room is dominated by simple panels of text along the walls that present excerpts from 86 interviews of everyday citizens: chefs, taxi drivers, psychoanalysts. Though at first glance the room, with all its placards, is about as inviting as the DMV, the excerpts draw you in, bringing to life vivid memories, sensory experiences, and hopes, underscoring how place helps form the basis for who these individuals are and, by extension, why we are who we are.

The Italian pavilion is perhaps best saved for last, because a visit there is like going down the rabbit hole. With its sights focused on "experimentation," the pavilion wends you through the contributions of 55 firms, starting with six "Masters of Experiment," including, among others, Gehry Partners; Herzog & de Meuron, with artist Ai Weiwei; and Morphosis. The proliferation of boards, models, and installations sucks you deeper into the labyrinth of the disjointed pavilion. Past the I Ching reader, you might find solace in American architect Ben Nicholson's Studies of Labyrinths, happiness from Los Angeles's Bail-Nogues Studio's wispy wave made of pink cord, or amusement in European filmmakers Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine's Koolhaas HouseLife, a film that follows a busy housekeeper on her tour of the leaky Bordeaux retreat Rem Koolhaas designed 10 years ago. But enough already! It seems like the Italians just don't know when to stop!

If you visit the Arsenale after the Giardini, after a very pleasant 10-minute walk through the city, you will be much relieved to be able to turn off your GPS and float along the linear path of the complex's Corderie, a dramatic and extremely long 16th-century masonry building originally used for fabricating rope for the Venetian Navy. The starting point of this part of the exhibition is the Hall of Fragments (by David Rockwell, with Casey Jones and Reed Kroloff), an interactive piece that plays with images and color from iconic films by employing infrared cameras to track visitors' density and movement to create fractal images on large convex screens. From there one walks sequentially through a collection of 20-something seemingly disconnected installations, including Asymptote's sleek Prototyping the Future: Three Houses for the Subconscious. A few rooms on one finds Coop Himmelb(l)au's *Feed Back Space* — a science-fiction construction incorporating glass globes and scaffolding (the bastard child of The Robot from Lost In Space?). Zaha Hadid's swoopy lime-green *Lotus* follows, described in the exhibition catalog as a "system of enfolded furnishings through which one can seduce and engage the immediate and the more distant world." Farther on in the procession is Greg Lynn *FORM's Recycled Toy Furniture*, which took home the Golden Lion for Best Installation Project, although it looks pretty much as it sounds.

Hot on its heels is Barkow Leibinger's *Nomadic Garden* — a topography of oversize drill-bitlike metal tubes on a sprawling base, which visitors can reconfigure.

Somewhere in the middle of all this, perhaps in Philippe Rahm Architectes's surreal micro-climate landscape of chili peppers and nubile nudes reclining on a heated plinth accompanied by a man lethargically playing the saw (architecture as "a thermodynamic mediation"), the importance of enigmas fades away and you stop asking yourself whether or not it was all worth it. At this point, you are ready to exit this dream world and reenter the Venetian streets and their very real, embodied architecture in search of a nontheoretical, nonpolemical glass of wine.

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Reader Comments:



Anonymous wrote:

This review is evidence that Arch Record is a magazine stuck in the past. Architects are egotistical. I've heard that before. I think it's from the Fountainhead. GET OVER IT. Great innovation comes from brains that out think the common. I came away from this article understanding that Arch Record / Beth Broome not only have no idea what the exhibition was about, but that Arch Record is stuck in a place of the past and is refusing to move forward in the field. This article / magazine is outdated, and archaic, and not worth reading. Does anyone even care that Hadid has finally built a form like that (Lotus) that is self sustaining, and at a building scale? Those designs have been coming out of Graduate schools around the world for the last 3 years and finally, someone builds it. But we're not talking about that! Why not?! I want to talk about what these exhibitions mean for the world of architecture. I want to talk about the steps we're taking as architects framing space, framing moments in time. I don't care to blame the architect for their ego. That's an archaic argument and thank God for architect's egos or we wouldn't have some of the best architectural innovations we on the earth today.

11/19/2008 9:48 AM CST

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