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Venice architecture biennale is like nerds talking about sex

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This year's Venice architecture biennale has been hijacked by awkward ambassadors of the parametric mafia and the elite of the avant-garde.



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When I see Patrik Schumacher (business partner and factotum of Zaha Hadid) speak about architecture, I get very sad for him. He looks like a member of Kraftwerk trapped in one of those kidnap videos released by organisations with names like Swords of the Righteousness Brigade. 'Parametricism is the great new style after Modernism,' he says in a talking head film in the main exhibition of this year's Venice architecture biennale. He looks as though someone is pointing a Kalashnikov at his kneecap just out of shot.

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The exhibition, located in Venice's Arsenale, is full of these videos, where the Elite of the Architectural Avant-Garde read out their manifestos to camera. Most are strangers to autocues and it shows. They chew gum, sweat and primp their hair. Eyes dart uncomfortably along sentences not written to be read aloud. That's because the Elite of the Architectural Avant-Garde is almost entirely made up of nerds like Schumacher, people whose obsession with computers and the language that accompanies them has driven them to the top of the international academic community, and therefore the cultural life of architecture.

The members of the Elite of the Architectural Avant-Garde included in this year's Arsenale exhibition coincide in great number with another list, which we might call Aaron Betsky's Mates. Betsky, curator of this year's biennale, is the former head of the NAI in Rotterdam and current director of the Cincinnati Art Museum. His friends include Frank Gehry (for whom he worked), UNStudio, Diller, Scofidio & Renfro, Coop Himmelb(l)au, MVRDV, Zaha Hadid and Asymptote (for whom he has authored texts).



Ungapachket by Frank Gehry

A total of 38 participants contributed the large installations that fill the 300m-long Arsenale Corderie, but this vast space does not include a single proposal for a building. Betsky's justification for this was his biennale theme – Out There: Architecture Beyond Building. 'We need some icons and some enigmas,' Betsky wrote in his exhibition foreword. 'We need an architecture that questions reality.' This was taken as a license to produce some kind of conceptual artwork.



The Changing Room by UN Studio had little room for 'flow'

Let's get the rubbish out of the way first. Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas created a giant green box (proudly described as the biggest installation in the Arsenale) with some crap holograms inside it – a titanic waste of resources. Britain's only participant, Nigel Coates, did a 360° faintly pornographic film with some unsettlingly equine seating in the middle. UNStudio made a vast triangular room that was all about 'flow', except that there were lots of shin-high things to trip over, and it got cramped if more than two people were inside.



Nigel Coates: porno film and equine seating

Zaha Hadid Architects' contribution to the biennale is significant, and deserves closer inspection. On the one hand there is Schumacher's sermonising and a weird bit of furniture created for the Arsenale (of which more later) jointly credited to Hadid and Schumacher. In the Giardini, another biennale venue, there is a room in the Italian pavilion containing original drawings by Hadid herself, most significantly of *The Peak*, a competition-winning project in Hong Kong that she lavished years and reams of canvas on after winning the competition in 1983. It was never built.



Zaha Hadid's painting of The Peak, Hong Kong

It's a truth commonly held about Hadid's work that whatever you think of her now, those early paintings were simply amazing. I bumped into Geoff Shearcroft from London architect AOC in that room. He suggested to me that despite that axiom, The Peak is actually a really boring building – 'a dog,' in his words. 'Look at the section,' he said. I did, and he's right: 3m ceiling heights in a kind of car-park arrangement, no discernible spatial quality or tuning of light, little description, let alone celebration of the circulation. Having visited a great many of Hadid's buildings, I can verify that her practice, now grown to 250 employees, is still unable to do sections. Look at Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, where the section is no better, nor different to a medium-sized office building.

The paintings are remarkable, though, and it makes you wonder what would have happened if computers, in the guise of Schumacher, hadn't taken Hadid's work away from this Koolhaasian-deconstructivism and towards wiggly shape-making, or Parametricism, as we will doubtless now be obliged to call it.

The shape that appears under the name of Zaha Hadid and Patrik Schumacher in the Arsenale is a piece of furniture, called the Lotus, which integrates a circular bed with a mess of tendrils swooshing around to form a desk, chair and shelving.



The Lotus, by Zaha Hadid Architects

In the words of Clive James, it takes energy to be a lousy writer, and Schumacher doesn't lack that. He is blissfully unaware of the metaphorical connotations of his words, and thus contorts his descriptions into faintly humorous shapes. 'To seduce,' he says in the explanatory text for Lotus, 'is to be sensitive to existing standards that stand as the inseparable definition from which to seduce, compare and portray an "other" against.'

Come again? From this tortured, deconstructivist vision of seduction, I'm not sure Schumacher can ever have been seduced. Perhaps this is why his idea of a seductive object is one that looks like pulled-apart muscle fibres. The curves are perhaps meant to resemble some fantasy of sexual congress, but instead look like Victor Horta's Hôtel Tassel staircase without the craft and material quality. He ends the text by saying: 'The "Lotus" room operates like a Russian matryoshka doll performing a striptease.' If Schumacher's idea of eroticism is a fat Russian woman taking off her aprons to brassy trumpet music, then I think we'll have less of it.

The Arsénale is full of pieces like this – by people who are getting old and have a pressing need to reassure each other that they are artists. The only highlights for me are Barkow Leibinger's garden of laser-cut steel poles (which at least had something to do with craft and technique) and maybe Philippe Rahm's room, which changes temperature as you walk through it. Unfortunately the Frenchman ruined it by including some naked people lounging around and playing the saw (I'm not joking). At a stroke, this turns a physiological experience into a sleazy spectator sport.



Philippe Rahm's sleazy spectator sport

The national pavilions are more diverse, and here there are some real highlights. The China pavilion, through captivating photos of communist blocks, contemplates the writing and re-writing of architectural history through the selective destruction and retention of buildings in Beijing. The USA's contribution brings together a range of practitioners working as activist-designers in some of the most blighted neighbourhoods in the Western world. These projects are about architects intervening in existing power structures to effect real change for vulnerable people. Some of them add profound architectural moves to this, particularly the houses of Alabama's Rural Studio and the interventions of the Detroit Collaborative Design Center.

The jury awarded a Silver Lion for 'Promising Young Architect' to Alejandro Aravena, author of the Elemental housing project in Chile, which is displayed in a compelling room at the top of the Italian pavilion. This extraordinary project for super-low-cost, self-build housing for the poor and homeless of Chile deserves its recognition. The contribution of architects from Central and South America (such as the Guatemala-born, Teddy Cruz and the Caracas-based Urban Think Tank) shows what a powerful region it is for architectural ideas right now. As more and more of them take positions in US universities, it seems that they are becoming the social conscience of American architecture.

Britain's contribution, curated by critic Ellis Woodman, is measured, beautifully presented and includes work by admirable architects. Each of the five practices (Sergison Bates, Tony Fretton, de Rijke Marsh Morgan, Witherford Watson Mann and Maccreanor Lavington) present two of their own housing projects, one from England, and one from mainland Europe. In so doing, Woodman wrote, he hoped an 'interrogation of cultural differences' would ensue. In the event, it is less an interrogation and more a mild suggestion, with most of the critical context that makes British housing so unique absent from the exhibition and confined to Emily Greaves' (excellent) catalogue.



Inside the British pavilion

The British pavilion divided people. Some found it boring (mainly those who find the work of the above five architects worthy but dull), others a welcome break from the chaotic posturing of much of the rest of the biennale. Woodman made a smart decision to ignore Betsky's theme. However, there is always something of the trade mission about the British pavilion, which sets it somewhat apart from the explicit control given to the curators of, say the German or Japanese pavilions. Woodman was given the theme of housing to deal with. Most other curators get to decide themselves what the subject matter should be.



Greg Lynn's Golden Lion-winning installation

The jury's decision to award the Golden Lion for best installation to Greg Lynn suggests that they agreed with the pervading feeling that this was a weak year for the biennale. Lynn's furniture, made from children's toys, was amusing, but his manifesto much clearer. 'This is not a strong time for architecture,' says Lynn. 'It can be seen from the lack of publications, the lack of vision in exhibitions, and the focus on design service rather than the art of architecture. It is irresponsible not to focus a biennale on buildings.' Lynn means this last statement ironically, but I'll take him at his word. The 2008 biennale is the year that the avant-garde finally disappeared into its own darkest recesses. Let's hope the recession finishes the job.

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