In reality, however, the Biennale merely reflects the precariousness and ephemeral insubstantiality of a discipline – architecture – whose only response to the seriousness and unpredictability of changes – which in barely a quarter century have transformed the social geography of the planet – has been autistic wallowing in the abstract limbo of its own formalisations. For anyone who still believes that environmental conservation, energy saving, social conscience, psychological impact on new users in local communities, etc. are the imperatives that architecture is being called upon to address, the grand parade at the Corderie is merely a redundant projection of glittering images that seem to have lost all contact with hard reality, and lack even the ethical support of utopian escapism. As they file past in Asymptote’s mediocre exhibit design – perhaps the clearest demonstration yet of the distance that separates the seductiveness of virtual reality from the checkmate of physical reality – a parade of shining, shadowless buildings turns a pigout of images and models into an undifferentiated, iridescent blob, confirming the truth of McLuhan’s celebrated dictum that the medium is the message. The aesthetics of accumulation inevitably forces world architecture into a single mould by presenting it as something inextricable and solid that irons out difference and obliterates contradiction. Which élites are the glittering concert halls in the Italy Pavilion intended to please? Who will visit all the museums, arts centres and leisure complexes whose space-ship designs, bloated serpentine coils and hanging floors are just the latest outcome of a never-ending search for special effects? In a world that has awoken from the euphoria of globalisation to find itself trapped in a nightmare of security threats and cultural conflict, which notion of social transformation seem likely to be addressed by the translucent walls, transparent screens and cellular membranes that this exhibition extols as the achievements of a new 21st-century sensibility? And what might be the most appropriate settings in today’s world for the undulating, amoeba-like shapes of these “hyper-places” that seem to have come straight from paintings by Salvador Dalí, the 20th century’s most brilliant artist?
histronic “metamorphist” before his time? In short, one would have expected something more problematic – and problem-fraught – from a survey as authoritative and international as the Venice Biennale, something more consonant with the dramatic complexity of the times we live in. The obvious risk is that visitors will end up thinking that architecture’s great expectations are the latest brainwaves of celebrities like Libeskind, Gehry and Greg Lynn, rather than the achievement of social justice and cultural integration, capitalising the problematic heritage of historic towns cities, and getting the territorial balance between towns and country right.

Once again, the transformations this exhibition talks about boil down to questions of form, cursorily dismissing the social frictions and resistance implicit in change. Models, photographs and drawings explain how the grammar and syntax of building construction are changing, but there is nothing at all about the social changes that these new forms are supposed to be a response to. The spotlight that play on upsets in the aesthetics of space cast cones of shade on the city, paradoxically the only thing that is truly noticeable by its absence in everything the Biennale has to say about architectural transformation. The previous Biennale – “Next” – isolated the buildings of the future in an objective, laboratory-like space, but “Metamorph” has done nothing to reposition the sights as one would have wished. On the contrary, by choosing only those projects that support its curator’s ideas, the Biennale has only confirmed the suspicion that transformation glitz is a way of giving the vested interests of world neocapitalism an attractive and acceptable face: that of an architecture whose opulence is what truly establishes the thresholds between different levels of “poverty” and expresses the pride-in-know-how of the world’s dominant, technology-based cultures that excludes any hint of “marginality” and negative criticism from its field of action. F.J.

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