Sapeurs of Congo-Brazzaville / Firminy Revisited / Graphic Design from Iran / Open House at Exyzt
The Essential Jean-Marie Massaud / Helio Oiticica's Spirit / Simon Boudvin's Schizophrenic Art
A Question of Scale

THE 10TH VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE

Maybe it's glitzy landmark overload that had some visitors grumbling about the latest edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale, or it could be that statistics, however significant, don't actually make for a compelling experience. There is little doubt that the curatorial theme of Cities, Architecture and Society was timely, and while some of the national pavilions at this beast of an event translated the concept imaginatively, for others, interdisciplinary approaches equalled confusion and exposed the limitations of the event's ability to encompass non-western perspectives.

Text by Alexander McSpadden

‘If architects have a problem with this Biennale, it's not a problem with the Biennale it's a problem with the architects,’ pronounced Richard Sennett, professor of urban studies at the London School of Economics, referring to the international event as an 'architects' wake-up call'. With the theme Cities, Architecture and Society, the focus of the 10th Venice Architecture Biennale underwent a paradigmatic shift from individual architectural projects to the shape and design of 21st century urban society. This directional shift represented a challenge to many in the architectural community, and one of the most frequent criticisms leveled at the exposition was the lack of architecture. Departing from the traditional exhibition model of architecture based in objects and form, the Biennale moved to opening up the discipline to a larger social field. The fundamental question was how architecture can contribute to the fabric of cities and transform how people live their lives?
SOCIAL SPACE

Apart from a mega exhibition on 16 world cities curated by the Biennale director Richard Burcett in the Arsenale, 50 countries and leading research institutions addressed the meta-cities theme from a local perspective focusing on the diverse issues faced by large-scale metropolitan areas: from migration to mobility, from social integration to ecological sustainability. The field of architecture was thrust into a sometimes-uneasy complex web of interrelations with cultural theory, urban planning, sociology, engineering, and ecology. Architecture was no longer pure form and space was no longer viewed as being ‘abstract’, but something that you engage with socially. ‘Social space is a social product,’ affirmed British Pavilion curator Jeremy Till, commenting on the emergence of a new role for architecture.

The British Pavilion, Echo City, took an interdisciplinary approach to examine the city of Sheffield, a post-industrial city in northern England, inviting those in the fields of art, theatre, design, and music to develop an exhibition that located the social metrics of the city. Playing with architecture’s fondness for standard topographical scales, the team defined new scales based on the way people experience the city space. Through different creative strategies, the varying magnitudes of the human layers of the city were revealed, ranging from the personal scale of the 1:1 section, which presented an anonymous collection of photographs and fragments of people’s histories within a set of shared living spaces, up to 1:10,000,000, where an examination of the global scale employed a combination of soundscape and animation to present the city as both magnet and diaspora of people, stuff, sounds and virtual connections.

Clockwise:
The USA Pavilion’s theme “After the Flood: Building on Higher Ground” showing a prototype inflatable caterpillar serving as an emergency dam.
The Canadian Pavilion with Sweater Lodge by Pochet and Robb Studio.
Convertible City at the German Pavilion.
The Italian Pavilion.

Background image:
Visitors explore a photographic journey through the streets of Sheffield (1:1 scale) in the Echo City exhibition. © Photo: British Council/Gareth Gardner
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The pavilion refreshingly proposed a socially, topographically, regionally bottom-up approach to architecture and urban planning. For Till, it was about getting away from the idea of master plan: 'it's a horrible term. It's gendered, coming along with an overarching thing and imposing it on a space; and plan, as a noun, announces the fixity of form. Architects and urban planners instead need to start with social dynamics as a set of complex interactions and you make sense of that and that produces its form.'

**URBAN INFRASTRUCTURES**

This envisioning of city planning as a constant dynamic process was echoed in several other pavilions. The MIT - Senseable City Laboratory project, Connections, rejected the concept of 'planning' in favour of 'programming' the city to be more effective and livable. With the proliferation of portable devices (cell phones, BlackBerrys, laptops, GPS systems, and other mini transmitters), technology has been dispersed into the built environment blanketing the city with interconnected digital bits. The MIT exhibition showcased how this digital information can be harvested to re-programme critical urban infrastructures in real-time. In the Real Time Rome initiative, which used aggregate information from mobile phones made available through Telecom Italia, the combined activity of Rome's residents was interpolated and presented simultaneously with the flux of public transportation and taxis. These real-time maps of distributions of buses and taxis in correlation with the movement patterns and densities of people are designed to enable city authorities to instantly adapt to complex demands, but can also be used to assist individual decisions of all transport users. Another project saw MIT rethink the bus stop in The Zaragoza Adaptable Bus Stop prototype. Through technology, the bus stop is converted from a static object into a dynamic gateway conveying information from riders to the city and from the city to riders. A prospect of empowerment any regular passenger would surely rejoice in.

While in the different projects of Connections the city's residents remained completely anonymous with no links made to individuals, the Estonia Pavilion's exploration of real-time mobility, Joint Space, considered the personal dimension of geo-informatics. The social positioning method (SPM) studies space-time behaviour by analysing the location coordinates of mobile phones and the social characteristics of the people carrying them. Through the website http://jointspace.ee, individuals and interest groups are given the opportunity to display the spaces they use and by feedback affect the events in the cityscape. Live maps take on a new quality when personal information can be included. It encourages the possibility of creating new social connections with the landscape through visual mapping. In a test case, SPM was used to identify the locations and movement patterns of art students and the creative industries in
CULTURAL VALUES

Expanding out from the micro-level of mobility to a more global context, a few rational pavilions engaged with effects of migratory flows in shaping local urban environments. Looking at the concept of a meta-city from the perspective of immigrants, the Hungarian Pavilion focused on the Chinese quarter of Budapest and the creation of ubiquitous cheap commercial markets run by the Chinese in European city centres. The project, re:orient - migrating architectures, explored the local aspects of China’s global significance and showed how the commerce of inexpensive mass-produced products influences the architecture of different zones of the city. In a Biennale where the social context was often translated into a sea of statistical sound bites and omnipresent laser wallpaper with chart maps, the Hungarian Pavilion’s installation of thousands of functioning networked Chinese toys was nothing if not a welcome alternative architectural experience. But leaving the cuddly global nature aside, what the exhibition perceptively revealed was how mass-products, which are designed to have a short life span, have lasting cultural values in the redefinition of city neighbourhoods.

The exhibition design team focused on DIY methods rather than authored design, and in doing so insightfully grasped what the majority of the pavilion curators, and to a lesser extent the Biennale director, failed to figure out: an exhibition and an exhibition catalogue should be two different, but parallel projects. The rampant use of exhibition space to simply re-illustrate visual graphics from catalogues made for many textually dense and bland pavilions. A few enterprising curators did make poignant