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Wrestling for Relevance

By JULIE V. IOVINE

Venice

People are more familiar with the Venice art and film festivals and all the swellegance that goes along with celebrity artists and actors going to and fro by water taxi, but every other year there is an architecture biennale as well.

All the major players show up here too, but the mood is perhaps more earnest than glamorous. This year it was particularly so at the opening in late August as the 13th Venice Architecture Biennale laid bare a profession wrestling with its demons and a deeper dread that the public considers it irrelevant. "All good architects think they are making a contribution to society," said David Chipperfield, the 2012 director and the architect of such quietly resonant works as the 2009 rebuilding of the Neues Museum in Berlin. "Why does society think that architects are just a bunch of profiteering egotistical joyriders?"



Marco Zanta

This year's biennale explored the theme of 'common ground.' The Russian pavilion; and

This year's theme, Common Ground, was chosen by Mr. Chipperfield to be widely inclusive, and it was interpreted in almost as many ways as there were architects, curators, photographers and design editors involved—some 119 overall, presiding over 69 installations.

At the main exhibition in the vast Arsenale with its towering brick columns—where the Venetian fleet was built at the rate of one ship a day in the 16th century—and at the more than 30 national pavilions that complement the exhibition in the sprawling and dusty public gardens, three disparate notes reverberate

insistently: design from the bottom up; the mysterious sources of architectural inspiration; and the art of building.

Venice Architecture Biennale

Through Nov. 25
www.labiennale.org

Design from the bottom up is a movement gaining momentum. Sometimes called "tactical urbanism," it is about communities taking matters into their own

hands and building what they want and need—a response to frustration with architecture seen merely as expensive decoration, not effective problem-solving.

The best example in Venice is the replica of a squatter's bar plonked in the middle of the Arsenale. By the Venezuelan architects Urban-Think Tank, the installation re-creates a corner of an uncompleted office building in Caracas abandoned by developers during the financial crisis. The building is now occupied by some 750 families who have improvised markets, shops, apartments and restaurants—breaking through concrete and throwing up walls of the cheapest materials on hand. The replica café, complete with slap-dash brickwork, ice-cold *cervezas* and blasting television set, has become both a go-to meeting place and the site of impassioned debate about what architecture is and isn't.



Marco Zanta

The Caracas bar, known as 'View of Torre David,' by Urban-Think Tank.

With a slicker installation, the USA pavilion sends the same message of community empowerment. More than 100 color-coded roller shades have been feathered across the ceilings, each describing an instance of citizens in action. Among the stories: how a roving hipster flea market revitalized an empty warehouse and how volunteers "de-paved" an abandoned parking lot and planted trees.

And elsewhere at the biennale, a video tells the story of Tempelhof airport in Berlin, closed down in 2008. With the local government still fussing over development plans, the airport has been taken over by

Berliners who have planted vegetable gardens, turned runways into skateboard tracks and generally transformed the formerly vital Cold War hub into a people's parade ground.

The sections of Common Ground dealing with architectural inspiration are more cerebral—but also more intriguing for those who believe in design as something more premeditated than spontaneous.

British architect Zaha Hadid pays tribute to Frei Otto, a German engineer famous for innovative tensile structures, with her own elasticizing lily-shaped form emanating from a complex marriage of old mathematical and new digital formulas. And another London firm, FAT, has installed a cabin-size rubber cast of one of the most copied buildings on earth, Palladio's Villa Rotunda. On a more personal scale, New York architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien—fresh from successfully relocating and expanding the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia—have invited 34 architects and friends to fill small trunks and mail them to Venice. From the rocks painted with graffiti messages that Japanese architect Toyo Ito recovered from a tsunami-ravaged village to U.S. architect Steven Holl's frayed copy of Paul Celan's "Last Poems," the opened trunks offer some revealing glimpses into the designing mind.

The biennale's least controversial and most easy to admire installations, by far, are about the art of building. Anupama Kundoo, a young architect from India, has painstakingly rebuilt to scale her own house in South India with the help of Venetian, Australian



Marco Zanta

Zaha Hadid's 'Arum.'

and Indian craftspeople and students—down to cleverly made vaults formed from stacked plastic cups and coffers from inverted clay bowls. Almost 15 feet long, Darryl Chen's exquisite ink hand drawing in the style of an ancient Chinese scroll—at the British pavilion—depicts a village outside Beijing being developed by local artisans and peasants, another bottom-up project, dubbed by the artist as "an atypical new socialist village."

The upbeat celebration of influence and craftsmanship could not, however, drown out the persistent anxiety that the profession is feeling. The dire economics of being an architect today are demonstrated graphically by a group of unemployed architects from Spain—where half of all architectural practices in Madrid and Barcelona have folded—hired for the duration of the biennale to hold up models of buildings commissioned and built in the premeltdown boom years.

Those years witnessed a glorious flowering of architectural monuments, from Frank Gehry's radiant Disney Hall in Los Angeles to Norman Foster's reconstitution of the Reichstag in Berlin. And yet, if this year's biennale is the measure of anything it is that the time for showboat buildings is well past and that architects themselves are the most eager to move on and build for the everyday world where people really live. It's about time.

Ms. Iovine writes about architecture for the Journal.

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