

## Report on La Biennale Architettura 2010, Venice, Italy (open August 29 - November 21, 2010) – visit date October 10, 2010

My wife, Amy and myself took a serendipitous opportunity to visit the 12th International Architecture Exhibition, directed by Kazuyo Sejima and titled People Meet In Architecture, the current Venice Biennale. The Biennale di Venezia was instituted by the Venetian City Council in 1895 and since then it has been in the avant-garde, promoting new artistic trends and organizing international events in contemporary arts - "Art", architecture, film, theater, music, dance. In 1980 the first Intl. Architecture Exhibition took place.

The Giardini venue of the exhibition was the subject of our visit. We spent several hours there on the afternoon of our first day in Venice, but due to time constraints we were unable to visit other venues of the Biennale in the Arsenale or at scattered sites throughout the city.

The Giardini is a park on the east end of the Sant'Elena island of the Castello *sestiere*. Its permanent structures include the Palazzo delle Esposizioni built in 1894 and twenty-nine national pavilions, built at various periods by the participating countries themselves. Among the pavilions are the Austrian Pavilion by Josef Hoffmann built in 1934 near the end of his career, the Dutch Pavilion by Gerrit Thomas Rietveld built in 1954, the Finnish Pavilion by Alvar Aalto assembled as a temporary structure in 1956, and the Venezuela pavilion by Carlo Scarpa.

For the current Biennale, the national pavilions were dressed up by their participating national proprietors to express individual themes. It is not clear whether these themes relate to the overall theme "People Meet In Architecture", but there is certainly a surfeit of architectural subject matter here. On approaching the pavilions, the typical visitor must choose from this bounty which one to enter and so, make a critical judgement regarding their architecture: is the character of the pavilion inviting? To our eye, the Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish pavilion is inviting and pleasant, being visually open and enclosing three trees within its footprint. The Israel pavilion also has an inviting aspect, as well as a "take-away" in the form of stacks of tear sheets on the subject of Israel's unique contribution to urban form and modernist design, the kibbutz, but interior space and building elements are quite spare.

The US pavilion on the other hand, a 1930 beaux-art monument by Delano and Aldrich, had a bunch of balloons tied together hovering in the front entry court. I can't quite figure that one out. Is it supposed to be festive? The integrating theme for the exhibits is a presentation of architectural practice in the US, as if the rest of the world should be following our worn out practice models. John Portman probably is the most significant example. The 18.9 million square foot Peachtree Center in Atlanta is the centerpiece of his firm's presentation. Is this the model for urban growth that America wants to promote....say in Venice?



The Russian Pavilion

Australia presented models for growth of its cities through the medium of 3-D films. This mode of presentation is very effective if you manage to snag a pair of 3-D glasses to watch it...kind of a "Blade Runner" view (without the urban decay).

The Russian presentation took us past images of old, obsolete factories to a cyclorama of the utopian world that might be created by revitalizing them. This world would look really good on a sunny day. The doors from the cyclorama open onto the Venice lagoon, so the whole presentation is very picturesque and dramatic, an interesting and direct use of architectural space to convey an idea really, with little of the pretension that abounds through the rest of the exhibits.

The United Kingdom pavilion reflects on the host city, Venice, and the contribution of Venice to Britain's intellectual, artistic, and particularly architectural culture in the form of John Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*. The installation of a functioning slice of salt marsh on the patio at the rear of the building is the most effective component, but the intent of engaging the city of Venice and, especially, its history is commendable.

The Palazzo delle Esposizioni, in addition to accommodating a bookstore, cafeteria, library and educational space, contains presentations by a number of architects and firms. This provides an opportunity to gain an impression of the broad design themes (as opposed to staying-in-business themes) occupying architects today. The ubiquity of biomorphic forms in design is the stylistic convention of 2010 (once again Charles Jencks has scored a hit).

No surprise, there are a lot of architectural-looking drawings and models. In many cases, whether these drawing objects and sculptural model objects translate into significant architectural space is, one may say,



Object City - Studio Andrea Branzi

beside the point. Their purpose is to exist as architecture-like aesthetic objects in their own right. Since their value as architecture is questionable, one might critique them as the arty objects that they are. One presentation that I found remarkable is the Cherry Blossom Pavilion by AMID. The presentation consists of an up-to-the-minute biomorphic structure in a landscape rendered by traditional oil-painting technique. Somehow the contrast is delightful and indicates a thoughtful, if somewhat obvious, contrast between existing and new. The accompanying model of the biomorphic form, constructed of colorful reflective geodesic tesserae created using computer generation, is also visually delightful. Another standout among the Palazzo presentations was a series of theoretical vignette models of alternate urban forms by Studio Andrea Branzi of Italy. By surrounding and enclosing the vignette models with mirrors they extend into infinite space and give an idea of their effect at an environmental scale. These presentations contrast with the bored and boring muteness of too many of the others.

The presentation by Rem Koolhaas' OMA/AMO entitled CRONOCAOS is at the center of the Palazzo and indeed anchors the exhibition both spatially and, in some ways, conceptually. Rather than eyewash, it presents a serious and thought provoking discussion of critical issues regarding architecture, the built environment, and civilization today. Like much of Koolhaas' published work it is presented comprehensively and in considerable volume making a useful summary challenging, but I will try.

Finding an echo in the 1st International Architecture Exhibition in 1980, directed by Paolo Portoghesi and titled *La Presenza Del Passato* (The Presence of the Past), which presented an assertion of the Postmodernist movement, Koolhaas admonishes architects for neglecting preservation (in his opinion). At the same time, Preservation is a growing movement, while, simultaneously, destruction is expansive. He states a particular concern for the antipathy toward and destruction of postwar social architecture, implying a decline of appreciation for the public sector, but his primary concern is the lack of interest in an architectural theory of preservation in light of two strong conflicting forces, resulting in "CRONOCAOS". In my opinion, he is absolutely on the mark regarding neglect of preservation by the architectural academy, at least.

The Biennale provides an opportunity to reflect on the current global state of architecture. While actual architecture, in the form of full scale buildings, might be the best indicator, the presentations at the Biennale are enough to convey the preoccupations and stylistic fixations of architecture's practitioners. A fair sampling of biomorphic forms, both as building enclosure and structure, reflect biomorphism's current position as the stylistic fixation of the moment. Environmentalism, "green"-ism, has become an acceptable, even fashionable, element in our architectural utopia. By the way, no discussion of architecture is complete without use of the word "utopia" at least once.

Another broad observation gained from our visit to the Biennale is the impression of an extensive group of people, dressed in black and shades of gray, who are the audience for the Biennale. These folks present a different profile from the folks who go to the AIA Convention. For them architecture is a cult - "*Archi-culture*" – and they are *archiculturati*.

But this cult is not a community. *Archiculturati* do not communicate with one another by sharing comments, opinions, joy or outrage. There was very little discussion of the exhibits at the Biennale, or visible reaction to them, such as one might observe in a museum or art gallery. Despite the obsession with *archi-culture*,

despite the architectural-looking drawings and models, there is little dialogue about the substance of architecture. Pretentious *Archi-babble* carries on about utopia, time/space, deconstructivism, gender ideology, and inventive word play (site/parasite, analysis/paralysis) but misses the opportunity to support a dialogue about architecture. Instead it retards access, ultimately obscuring the substance of architecture, the most public of arts. At the Biennale, the contrast makes Koolhaas' clear voice stand out even more.