

# Deutschland über alles

The architectural anarchy on show in the German pavilion looks set to be the highlight of this year's Venice architecture biennale, predicts **Jay Merrick**

The ninth Venice Biennale of Architecture, which commences on 12 September, allows its eminent curator, Kurt Forster, to examine the idea of metamorphosis. When he explained his intentions at London's Italian Cultural Institute in June, he spoke in a severely stentorian manner, as if intent on ensuring that a roomful of potentially fractious students should not miss a single laboured irony.

Deyan Sudjic, curator of the 2002 Biennale (and hardly a covert anarchist) sloped out before the end of his successor's peroration. The rest of us remained, cowed note-takers hoping to receive at least a B-minus for our comprehensions of the Forsterian rhetoric, which he banged out like a jack-hammer

crunching through the asphalt of our wretchedly inchoate sensibilities.

There will be quite enough irony at the Arsenale on party-night without another cannonade from Mr Forster. Perhaps there will even be a repeat performance by the wonderfully talented Dutch architect Erik van Egeraat who, two years ago, went a bit Gilbert & George on us. Like Garbo, he wanted to be alone – but in a highly observable spot, where he struck a statuesque pose and held it, Zen-still, for almost half an hour. How grateful we were to have had the opportunity to marvel at his dashing profile and superb mane, a follicular effusion that any aspiring actress-singer-dancer or thrash-metal guitarist would covet.

Mr Forster's makeover of the Arsenale (the architecture display units will resemble rows of gondolas! Who'da thunk it, as Dorothy Parker once said) will get most of the publicity. The British pavilion, curated by Peter Cook on behalf of the British Council, will be wittily two-edged. And might Israel deliver another profoundly subversive surprise?

I will be drawn to the German pavilion because, having suffered in it two years ago, I sense the opportunity for redemption. The German pavilion's contents in 2002 were shockingly uninteresting: a grid of tall plinths, far too close together to allow

**Below:** Dirk Paschka/Daniel Milohnic, Works Swimming Pool, Zollverein Coking Plant, Essen, 2002



**Right:** bayer | uhrig  
Architekten, Haus Göppner,  
Ramstein, 2003 **Below:**  
Seifert + Stöckmann, Living  
Room, Gelnhausen, 2004



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◀ comfortable circulation, each surmounted by variations on a cube – mostly dreary, some almost slightly interesting – by various architects. What on earth were we supposed to think about these droll objects as we edged between the plinths, murmuring apologies as we squeezed past yet another blank-faced visitor?

This time we will be forced to think. Not about architecturally platonic forms being fidgeted with, but about the actual – and the marginally actual at that. Strange architectural otherness is afoot. The exhibition, 'Deutschlandscape', is curated by Francesca Ferguson, a Brit based in Berlin who has been centrally involved in the German Urban Drift project.

The idea driving her show is a reconsideration of urban regeneration – but absolutely not the highly ordered, master-planned kind. The show highlights buildings conceived as architectural singularities; anarchic interventions designed to stop and hold our gaze to remind us that streets and buildings we think we know so well must change, and not necessarily in a predictably incremental way. We are asked to grasp the

nettle of unreadable forms, peculiar accents of detail, oddity, inscrutability; to accept, indeed, a shrewd disorder as evidence of fertility, if not of Kurt Forster's metamorphs.

Shock of the new? The phrase isn't quite adequate. If we consider the astonishing juxtaposition of industrial hardware and pristine rectangle of turquoise water at the works swimming pool in the brutal, steely clutch of the Zollverein coking plant near Essen, it's more a case of the shock of the *what*. Not even Peter Cook and his mind-hazing Archigramistas in the 1960s came up with an architectural collage of such apparent impossibility.

The power of this image may be triggered by its surreality, yet its resonance is founded in brute reality. Anything, announced one of Archigram's most famous axioms, is probable. It sure is in Zollverein when architects like Dirk Paschke and Daniel Milohnic are ready to rumble.

And in Ramstein, too, where bayer | uhrig Architekten produced the Haus Göppner. They describe the architecture as a 'hermetic closed monolith' whose gallery level is an inversion of the half-basements typical of the

neighbouring houses. The architecture is a development of the 'odd details' of the ordinary houses around it. Is the Haus Göppner a celebration of normality, or a stiletto driven into its quotidian heart? It hardly matters: one looks at it, provoked, and is forced to muse about the nature of the locale. It's much the same story with Seifert + Stöckmann's Living Room in Gelnhausen. Again, we are confronted with a cuckoo in the urban nest, a bricolage of local architectural styles containing a bedroom on rails.

Francesca Ferguson's palette of architectural provocations is considerable, and plinths will not overwhelm the German pavilion this year. There will be no gondolas, either. It is possible, though, that our attention may be diverted by the distant roar caused by the shock-and-awe of Erik van Egeraat's reappearance; or perhaps by a sternly booming voice emanating from the Italian pavilion, where Mr Forster has also worked his magic.

*'Metamorph: 9th International Architecture Exhibition', 12 Sept-7 Nov, Venice (www.labiennale.org/en/architecture)*