

Biennale Venice
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Venice, Redefining the Way we Live

By Mariana Schroeder

September 13 (Bloomberg) The 9th International Architecture Exhibition is not just about buildings. It's about ideas, visions, dreams and failures. The massive show (September 12- November 7) gives us a preview of how the world is changing and how the architects of the 21st century are redefining the way we live.

The title of this year's Biennale is *Metamorph* – derived from metamorphosis, referring to the change of physical forms or structures. It takes place in Venice, a floating shimmering city where architecture defines history, and kitsch lives side by side with art. The Biennale, which concentrates one year on art, and next year on architecture, takes place on the eastern-most tip of the city in the *Arsenale* and the *Giardini Della Biennale*. The *Corderie dell'Arsenale*, a long continuous building, where rope was once manufactured for Venice's famous fleet of ships, focuses on individual projects by architects. The 32 pavilions in the *Giardini* represent nations. Each Pavilion has a commissioner or curator who chooses one or more architects to create installations or show recently designed projects.

More than 170 architectural studios are taking part in this year's Biennale, showing more than 220 projects, which document fundamental changes in contemporary architecture both in theory and design practice. One emerging trend, which appears with great regularity, is the prevalence of biomorphic forms – shapes borrowed from living organisms. Gone are glass blocks. Skyscrapers are the exception rather than the rule. The shells of buildings increasingly resemble membranes as architects confer organic qualities to their constructions. One example in the U.S. Pavilion, is Kolatan / MacDonald Studio's "ResiRise" project, a form of vertical urbanism made up of stacked pods which grow and change over time. Each pod is customized for the tenant, allowing the building to evolve as pieces are added or removed when a tenant leaves. The design calls for modified materials like plastics that undergo molecular restructuring with increased stress and "smart" glass that responds to light and temperature.

Computers have freed architects to concentrate on the art of designing structures. "The computer is being used a lot to develop forms," says Louisa Hutton of saurbruch hutton architects, a firm with offices in London and Berlin (name written in lower case). "The computer has liberated architects to design sensuous spaces. For us using computers is incredibly useful, especially in the production phase of architecture because it means you can build anything."

saurbruch hutton's sound and sight installation in the *Corderie* proves that space can be sensuous and shows that exhibiting architecture isn't limited to drawings and models. Their design for the Henningsdorf Town Hall near Berlin provides the subject matter of the installation, in which visitors don headphones and red-green glasses to view stereoscopic photographs and hear binaural sound. "Architecture is difficult to exhibit. Models are always a simulation. What we tried to do is produce an analogous experience." The Henningsdorf project, completed in 2003, is a public building where people go to renew passports or apply for retirement benefits. "We wanted show this space in its sensual aspects," says Hutton, who used a sound artist and photographer to recreate the visual and aural impact of the actual building.

Not all of the *Corderie*'s exhibits are that imaginative. Many architectural firms still use traditional vehicles such as models to get their ideas across. But even these take on new dynamism from the innovative style of the exhibition created by Hani Rashid and Lise Anne Couture of the New York-based studio *Asymptote*, which the Biennale commissioned to design the exhibition space within the renaissance brick vaults of the *Corderie*. The architects used computer-generated morphing animation sequences to create exhibition modules which create clear visual lines where exhibits seem to float through the continuous space of the *Corderie*.

Another innovative site-specific installation created for the biennale is "Frameworks" by StudioUp, Zagreb. The Croatian team of architects built a shifting framework of glass plates that mechanically changes shape. The tunnel-like construction of vertically positioned glass plates illustrates

metamorphosis through its constant shifting of color, shape, size and direction. Metamorphosis, which lends the biennale its name and theme this year, was the brief that all participating architects received.

The more than 200 variations on this single theme show the enormous creativity and originality among the world's architects. Kurt W. Foster, director of this year's biennale, chose the Italian Pavilion, to focus the theme. It functions like a theatre of experiences. There, ten architects and photographers prepared special installations to illustrate the recent metamorphosis in architecture. Peter Eisenman, who was awarded the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement, created an installation for the "Episode" sector of the pavilion. It forms an intellectual link between the works of Italian 16th century architect Andrea Palladio who profoundly influenced western architecture, 18th century Venetian architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 19th century rationalist Giuseppe Terragni and Eisenman's own design for House 11a.

An international jury also awarded several other Biennale prizes this year, including the Golden Lion for the most remarkable work in the exhibition, which went to the Japanese firm SANAA for two museum projects: The Twenty-First-Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa Japan, and an extension to the Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno (IVAM) in Valencia, Spain.

The most talked about award this year is the Golden Lion for the best installation presented by a country. This year's winner is the Belgium Pavilion and its installation "Kinshasa, the Imaginary City," conceived by Katrien Vandermarliere, Filip De Boeck and Koen Van Synghel. At first sight the exhibition, which won the jury's unanimous vote, has nothing to do with architecture. Videos on small monitors and large flat screens show a constant stream of people in the capital city of the former Belgian colony. There are no buildings, no cleverly designed public spaces – only bodies in constant motion with an undercurrent of human voices and traffic noise.

"We wanted to show how time takes revenge on architecture," says De Boeck, one of the curators who created the unique show. In the 1950s Kinshasa became an important showcase for Belgian architects who tried out their utopian ideas in the sub-Saharan city, an ambitious project that failed. "Since its independence in 1960 Kinshasa has expanded dramatically and now has between six and seven million inhabitants but no formal planning or construction has occurred since independence. It is a cityscape in crises." De Boeck is an anthropologist. His co-curator Koen Van Synghel is an architect. Together they set out to show that a city is not necessarily a collection of buildings but an organic unit that draws its energy and its creativity directly from the people who inhabit it.

The Belgian installation demonstrates that the most original country pavilions are those who take architecture one step beyond designing buildings. In the German Pavilion curator Francesca Ferguson chose to disregard the monumental and concentrate on the human scale of housing on the peripheries of European cities. She chose talented young German architects and created a panorama that is a composite of many cities made up of completed and planned projects. The visitor winds his way through the pavilion along an eye-view utopian cityscape eclectically composed of old and new, spectacular and ordinary. "I wanted to show German architecture as ironic, playful, adventurous, difficult – everything other than conventional," says Ferguson.

Her next concern was to find an alternative to drawings, models, photographs and other clichés usually associated with architecture in museums. The daylight simulated by the dropped ceiling panels and the unpretentious settings, create a realistic cityscape that is at the same time inviting and amusing. "Within the German Pavilion an important new tendency is emerging," says Andreas Hild of Hild und K Architects, who sees this trend as bringing architecture closer to the people who ultimately use it. "The idea of the periphery as a poetic metaphor comes from Germany."

The phenomenon described in the German pavilion has many names: periphery, suburbia, outskirts and no man's land. No one has ever loved the grey utility zone surrounding cities and architects rarely ventured into it. Suddenly this nauseatingly ordinary suburbia is a canvas upon which a new generation of architects are projecting their visions. Ferguson's imaginary cityscape includes a church in Speyer, a school in Ostfildern, a floating snack bar in Frankfurt, a parking garage in Munich, a tram stop in Augsburg – small projects based on great ideas. This is the new art of everyman and the architecture for daily life. At the Austrian Pavilion four young architects' groups tackle another neglected subject: the supermarket. "It doesn't have to hurt your eyes," says commissioner Marta Schreieck. The underlying idea is –everyone has a right to good architecture – is so simple, it is revolutionary

Not all the installations are designed to be built, nor do they seriously pretend to do so. "Aqua Alta" by Prede_Frane in Los Angeles (note the underline is part of the company name) evokes Venice with its magical light and constant interplay of air and water. The installation uses a field of 5,000 nearly invisible filaments, which end in round lead weights. Some filaments are tinted green, others are nearly transparent creating a floating liquid world symbolizing the flooding of Venice.

Israel names its project "Back to the Sea." It shows the utopian development of *Neuland*, a fictitious man-made island, which is a mirror image of Tel Aviv. Six teams of young architects were invited to rethink urbanism and "redesign" Tel Aviv. Neuland is a provocative and inspiring alternative to Israel's West Bank. It is situated in the sea, a neutral, unoccupied space which is neither holy nor disputed.

La Biennale di Venezia

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September 12-November 9 open daily from 10 a.m-6 p.m.