

Changing world

ANDREW MEAD

Metamorph – Venice Biennale: The Ninth International Architecture Exhibition

At the Giardini della Biennale and the Arsenale, Venice, until 7 November



Top: Dagmar Richter's computer-driven Aalborg scheme. Above: restraint – Ábalos & Herreros

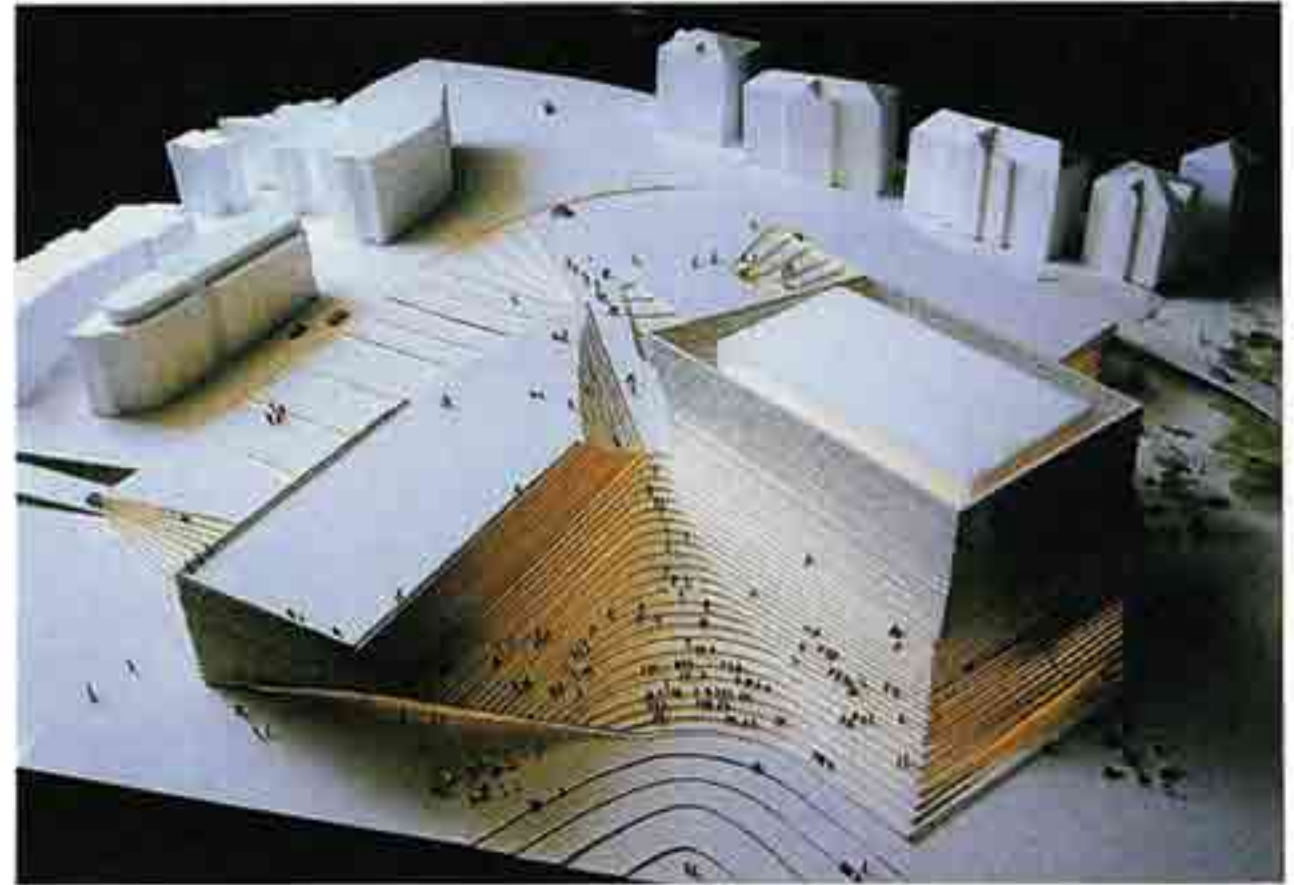
The last architecture biennale in 2002, 'Next', curated by Deyan Sudjic, had a focused and down-to-earth feel – it featured work that was going to be built, grouped by building type. 'Metamorph' is different. As that title implies, this year's director, Kurt Forster, doesn't mind being portentous. One section of the show is called 'The Harrowing of the City', which may look good on participants' CVs, but will hardly get tourists sprinting for the vaporetto to see it. Venice is a perfect stage for presenting architecture to the public, so why imbue the biennale with a false mystique?

Then add Peter Eisenman, who says his installation *Diagrams of Virtú* 'takes as its trajectory a narrative from Palladio by way of Piranesi and Terragni on to my own work. But rather than present this work in images, models or a narrative text, we have proposed a spatial construct that attempts to disjoin, displace and destabilise.' Strange that the results of all this ingenuity – the folly-like 'spatial construct' in which Palladio's Palazzo Chiericati meets Eisenman's inverted staircase – are so arid.

Maybe the 'Metamorph' title is justified after all, though, for the biennale does suggest that there's a heightened state of change in architecture at present. This is partly due, of course, to the ubiquity of the computer, with one contributor to the catalogue even talking of 'the poetics of computation'. The long halls of the Corderie – the old ropeworks at the Arsenale – are full of determinedly expressive forms, with warps, folds and extrusions, sinuous Möbius strips, and 'the enigmatic patterns underlying nature' that Charles Jencks identified in his article on icons (AJ 9.9.04).

But a more restrained architecture is included too, by practices who doubtless make use of the computer but aren't in thrall to it. The Golden Lion-winning SANAA (Kazuo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa) is among them, as are David Chipperfield Architects, Gigon Guyer, Souto de Moura and Ábalos & Herreros. The show is more catholic than a first glance suggests. Graham Morrison shouldn't stay away.

The installation of the Corderie displays, 'emerging from computer-generated morphing animation sequences', is by Asymptote (Hani Rashid and Lise Anne Couture), but is more conventional than that sounds. Models are placed across the central axis on a series of, what Asymptote calls, 'platform trays': long tables with varying gondola-like profiles, which surge up at either end in a way that threatens to concuss the unwary but provides space for an exhibit underneath. Documentation is on flanking, free-standing walls.



'Topography' (clockwise from above): Chipperfield at La Coruña; Guallart's Denia 'mountain'; Hadid's Taichung Guggenheim; PLOT's Stavanger hall

'Topography' is a central theme at the Corderie, with projects that often *fuse* building with landscape. The magisterial predecessor for this must be Sydney Opera House, with its Mayan-inspired staircases and platforms; a more recent example would be Foreign Office Architects' (FOA) Yokohama Terminal.

As its show at the ICA last year revealed, FOA seems to specialise in this fusing or interweaving, and its Novartis Car Park in Basel won the special award in the biennale's 'Topography' section. Other noteworthy schemes here include Vicente Guallart's crystalline 'artificial mountain' at Denia, Spain, with its (perilous?) multiple pathways, Architekturatelier Podrecca's patchwork park in Linz (on post-industrial land beside the Danube), and David Chipperfield's Visitor Centre at La Coruña in Spain – like a necklace around its contoured site.

There are some major interventions: 3XNielsen's proposal for simplifying a scary traffic intersection in Stockholm, for instance, which makes a green urban *place* as well as a space of transit. (So many poten-

tial sites in the world are just like this.) And schemes elsewhere in the biennale display a similar concern for landscape, with the special award winner in the large section on concert halls – PLOT's new hall in Stavanger, Norway, connecting the city to the water – being a further instance of 'building the site'.

Another theme at the Corderie is 'Surfaces': 'buildings no longer based on the dialectic of supports and weights, but instead on continuous surfaces, be they folded, curved or layered'. The uninterrupted ribbons of Diller + Scofidio's Eyebeam Museum and Lesser Architecture's Design School, Zollverein,

create buildings which could almost be twins (with a relative in FOA's BBC Music Centre). Perhaps a new orthodoxy is imminent.

'Metamorph' also includes a section on 'Atmosphere', which Forster (convincingly) proposes as a current concern, in the range of fleeting effects that buildings can generate through transparency, translucency and internal/external light. Here are the perforated metal skin of SANAA's IVAM extension, the facades of UN Studio's La Defense Offices, Almere, whose colour varies with the time of day, and the patina of Saneksenaho Architects' St Henrik Ecumenic Art Chapel.

AGPS Architecture shows a 1:1 mock-up of the tri-part facade of its Hohenbühl housing, Zurich, which comprises a silvery metal curtain in front of a glass membrane, with coloured wall units behind. Given the biennale's constant light, you can only speculate on the effects that will occur, but in this section, where the treatment of materials is paramount, it would be good to have more such full-scale samples.

Playing a substantial part at the bien-



'Surfaces': Lesser Architecture's design school



Clockwise from top left: PTW's Beijing swimming centre won the 'Atmosphere' special award; Saneksenaho's chapel; Annelies Strba; Luisa Lambri

nale, especially in respect of 'Atmosphere', is photography, and the images do two things in particular. They confirm that a good photographer's eye can prompt viewers to see what they might not have done before: Kay Fingerle's two wonderful Villa Tugendhat studies, where inside and out adhere to the intermediary glass in a complex play of the real and illusory (and a photo by Charles Eames that does much the same); or the almost monochrome abstractions that Luisa Lambri discovers at Herzog & de Meuron's Goetz Collection.

Secondly, they're a reminder of how

subjective the experience of a building or environment can be, as in the DVD-derived city images of Annelies Strba. They show what lies beyond the architect's control.

These groups of photographs punctuate a visit to the biennale, as do several architect's installations that Forster has commissioned. One is Eisenman's 'spatial construct'. A second is *Eyescape/Soundscape* – a thoughtful attempt by Sauerbruch Hutton to deal with the problem of presenting architecture in an exhibition, with a four-screen projection based on its Berlin Fire and Police Station (simultaneous fragments, sometimes just a

blur of colour), and an aural evocation of its Hennigsdorf Town Hall.

In Wilkinson Eyre's installation, *Reflections*, designed with sculptor William Pye, images screened overhead are reflected in a large water table so they seem to hover at the bottom of a clear, still pool. Four schemes feature and visitors are intrigued – but, beyond the allusion to Venice as a city of reflections, is this simply an unusual projector?

Of the national pavilions, Belgium's Golden Lion-winner combines the research of an anthropologist and photographer in documenting post-colonial Kinshasa, and



Four simultaneous images from Sauerbruch Hutton's *Eyescape* installation convey aspects of the Berlin Fire and Police Station



questions some habitual assumptions about urban design through conveying 'an urbanity which exists beyond the city's architecture'. It makes for an enlightening exhibition.

The German Pavilion impresses, with its focus on projects in residual or marginal spaces, displayed in a continuous photomontage that snakes throughout the building, with documentation in the central room. Perhaps visitors must persevere to find the information, but it's all there. France puts on a bold show too, taking a 144ha site in suburban Paris and presenting the results of workshops that try to predict its future, first in 2014, then 2034, and finally 2064 – 'if sustainable development was a priority'. This is contentious, serious stuff.

Spain, the Netherlands, and Portugal all have exhibitions worth seeing, while anyone nostalgic for the scent of freshly cut timber should head for the small Finnish Pavilion, whose 'From Wood to Architecture' display includes a striking shingle-clad church by Anssi Lassila. Timber structures recur in O'Donnell + Tuomey's poetic Irish Pavilion,



Clockwise from top left: the Parisian site studied in the French Pavilion; the German photomontage; waterfront regeneration is the subject of a separate exhibition in this floating pavilion at the Arsenale; O'Donnell + Tuomey's 'Scary House'. Above: a sheet of sketches by Frei Otto for the Hombroich spaceplacelab

which highlights the transformation of a former penal institution – another project in which landscape is central.

As it is too in the most interesting of the events staged alongside the biennale: a display at Palazzo Zenobio of the Hombroich spaceplacelab – 'a laboratory for other modes of living'. In this wildly ambitious extension of what began as the Museum Insel Hombroich – a fusion of art, architecture and landscape on a riverine site near Düsseldorf – Tadao Ando, Alvaro Siza and Frei Otto (among others) propose radical alternatives to the creeping suburbia nearby.

The principles behind the development include 'visionary donations of labour, resources, ideas and time', a 9:1 ratio of landscape to buildings, and 'coexistence of all, with vegetation, animals and humans having equal rights'. Who knows how much of it will ever be built or what will happen if it is?

It seems, though, that whatever else is changing in the world of 'Metamorph', the search for a utopia persists. Meanwhile, Venice masquerades as a utopia of the past.