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Asia at the Forefront of Venice Architecture Biennale



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“Reporting from the Front” is the theme of this year’s Venice Architecture Biennale curated by Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena. The idea of “the front” has been interpreted in different ways by the national pavilions, with the Asian pavilions very much in the spotlight.

Venice Architecture Biennale 2016: the Asian pavilions

A front implies some sort of ongoing battle, and of course every nation has its own. In this sense, there is no better place to brief about ongoing (if you want rhetorical repetition)/ continuing progress than the Venice Architecture Biennale.

Some of these challenges are on a global scale, like the need for the megalopolis to be reconfigured to counter global warming. Others are cross-national, like the transformation of cities in the face of migration. On top of that, countries have their own local needs to address. In all these instances, however, the conception of space is the point of departure for change.

This year, in particular, there has been a lot of interest around the Asian pavilions. From first-timers such as the Philippines, to habitués like Korea and Japan, a lot of smart ideas for the future of our cities seem to be coming from the East.

Singapore: Empowering the community and the individual

Located in the Arsenale, the Singapore pavilion is visionary but grounded. It tackles the numerous issues Singapore is facing, presenting some solutions that have already been implemented and others merely planned.

Right from its title “Space to Imagine, Room for Everyone”, the Lion City sees imagination as the solution to the notorious housing problem on the island. Imagination, however, is not a given in a city that has achieved

incredible results in fields such as economics, yet paid a high cost in terms of spontaneity and personal initiative.

Now the nation is taking a step back, trying to look at what has been lost in the stream of modernisation. The pavilion looks at the main protagonists of this process of resurgence, namely the state, the community and the individual.

Through the projects presented, we see how the paternalistic state is slowly loosening its overcontrol. Citizens are gradually feeling freer to create their own gardens, build their own communities and start unleashing creativity. A series of glass boxes show the interior of everyday Singaporean houses. This lends a human element to a state which aspires to be considered by the world for more than its GDP.

“Space to Imagine, Room for Everyone”, the Singapore Pavilion, Arsenale

The Philippines: re-building identity in the adolescent city

There is a leitmotif connecting the conceptual and introspective Philippines architecture pavilion to the art pavilion of the previous year.

The latter exhibition focused on the narrative of destruction and rebuilding. The contemporary megalopolis of Metro Manila has indeed risen up from the ruins of the colonial city destroyed during the Second World War.

The title of the pavilion is “Muhon: the Adolescent City”. The Filipino word *muhon* can be roughly translated as “monument” or “place maker” and is a term charged with desire for a sense of belonging. Throughout the exhibition, this concept is associated with the metaphor of adolescence. We know adolescence as a turbulent time marked by search for identity. Body, voice and interests are rapidly evolving, and the old self is erased. This is an analogy that applies well to the Philippines’ capital city.

Within the pavilion, artists and architects engage in a “visual conversation” about developments in Manila by reflecting on an iconic city building. In this sense, the Philippines pavilion exemplifies the idea of the “expanded eye”, as the curator Aravena puts it – a perspective from which architecture is a fluid concept which strays into art.

“Muhon: The Adolescent City”, the Philippines Pavilion, Palazzo Mora

Thailand: Architecture In the Face of Uncertainty

In our society, we tend to associate houses and buildings with stability and safety. The Thai pavilion confronts us with the flimsiness of this conviction: uncertainty can strike at any moment.

Albeit small, the Thai pavilion conveys its concept powerfully through an art installation. Pieces of woods shaped like small houses are placed on a series of metal wires. Walking on the unstable floor of the pavilion, the viewer makes the little wooden houses shake.

This experiential work can be read in two ways. In one, humans are aggravating natural disasters by interfering with the natural equilibrium. Alternatively, we can see seemingly stable conditions reveal themselves in all their fragility only when we step into the thick of it.

Videos around the space reveal what the work refers to – namely the 2014 Chiang Rai earthquake in the northern province of Thailand. At a magnitude of 6.3 on the Richter scale, it caused the destruction of nine elementary schools.

While focusing attention on the role of places of education in rural areas, the pavilion also has philosophical breadth, making it one of the strongest in its simplicity.

“The Class of 6.3”, Thai Pavilion, Arsenale

Hong Kong: Military Stratagems for Urban Liveability

While not present with an “official” pavilion, Hong Kong has delivered a top-quality collateral show. The curatorial concept tries to imagine a more liveable city and revolves around the classical Chinese essay *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, a collection of military tactics. The curators apply these tactics - already widespread in politics, business and civil interaction - to urban planning. Through scenic installations and data, the viewer is enticed by this aspirational idea for combatting the overpopulation problem the city faces.

Stratagems in Architecture, Hong Kong exhibition, Arsenale

Japan, Updates on Essential Living

Elegant and advocating its brand of functionality and design, the Japanese pavilion focuses on the idea of sharing. This need has become apparent after the Great East Japan Earthquake and the exhibition shows how from the configuration of a home can create a sense of peace. The next step is then transferring this to the larger community. Walking through the doll house-like miniatures of common living solutions, you can't help but envision yourself in those minimalist, essential spaces.

“Art of Nexus”, Japanese Pavilion, Giardini

China, Anachronistic Visions

Curiously understated, the Chinese pavilion concentrates on the idea of tradition, countryside and artisanal labour, and employs very simple materials. There is no trace of the numerous and complex issues regarding China and its urbanisation. For the curator, the future is about returning to the frugality of their ancestors. Is it possible to do so in the way the Chinese pavilion envisions it? While somehow confounding expectations, this exhibition is likely to leave the public disappointed.

“Daily Design, Daily Tao-Back to the Ignored Front”, China, Arsenale

Korea, Playing the FAR Game

Korea has decided to go very technical in its pavilion, identifying the linchpin of Korean urban planning in FAR or Floor Area Ratio. In the exhibition, FAR is presented almost as a game Korean architects are forced to play. This is an informative pavilion, with plenty to read on the walls, and very little is left to the viewer's direct experience.

“The FAR Game”, Korean Pavilion, Giardini

Macau, Touristic Brochure

For the first time at the Architecture Biennale, Macau's collateral exhibition is mostly didactic. It makes sense for a Special Administrative Region which is not yet well known in Europe, but it ends up feeling more like a tourist brochure than an actual pavilion. On the other hand, the charm and peculiarity of Macau's architecture, a mix of Chinese and Portuguese influences, is undeniable.

“Coexistence”, Macau exhibition, Arsenale