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Architecture, Beyond Building

11th International Architectural Exhibition,
La Biennale di Venezia

Spanning from September 14th to November 23rd, the 11th International Architecture Biennale saw architects, intellectuals and students converging on the historical city of Venice. Titled *Out There: Architecture Beyond Building*, the exhibition was curated by Aaron Betsky, the former director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute. In this article, **Dr Lilian Chee** provides an overview of the exhibition and shares with us why the Biennale remains a top draw.



left Herzog & de Meuron and Ai Weiwei, *Installation piece for the Venice Biennale 2008*, bamboo framework with chairs was put together on site by a traditional builder; construction detail. (Photo: Lillian Chee)



[Buildings] ... are big, wasteful accumulations of natural resources that are difficult to adapt to the continually changing conditions of modern life... [T]hey are the result of economic considerations, they are put together by formula, and they are the final result of endless negotiations. For that reason most buildings are ugly, useless and wasteful. [Y]et architecture is beautiful. Architecture can place us in the world in a way no other art can. It can make us at home in modern reality. It offers and shapes that most precious and luxurious of all phenomena in the modern world: space. ... [W]e must start by clearing up a bit of confusion. Architecture is not building. Building is building. It is a verb. A building is a structure. Architecture is everything that is about building. It is the way we think about buildings; how we organise buildings; how we make buildings; how buildings present themselves. ... [S]o we must look beyond, within, before and after buildings to find architecture.¹

- Aaron Betsky, Curator,
11th Venice Architecture Biennale

At the height of summer, on the first weekend of the 11th Venice Architecture Biennale's press and curator preview, heavy rain came down on the magnificent stone city. Besieged by the torrential downpour, the lagoon risked overflowing, at times threatening the city's fragile floating mass of medieval buildings, elusive occupants and incessant tourists. Seeking temporary shelter from the storm, the stones of Venice seen up close, as John Ruskin would have it, acquired not only a customary beauty but an irony especially not lost on those who came specifically to a Biennale which called for an "Architecture Beyond Building". Indeed, what is architecture's relationship to building? And can architecture ever *be* without building?

In his curatorial foreword, charismatic wordsmith Aaron Betsky remains intentionally tentative in his questions and statements about what architecture could be. It is worthwhile drawing out some of Betsky's polemical stances, to be read here as a kind of post-exhibition manifesto, or to be used, if one wishes, as provocations to "wonder" (as Betsky puts it) about what else architecture could be, if not as building:²

Futility: "This text is about architecture that is not building, that has no function, that does not endure, and by the time you read this, may exist only in words."

Architecture Parlance: "I love grand styles, but I have never heard a piece of granite speak. I have never read buildings, unless there were words written on them. ... Buildings remain mute, and architecture as a semantic system dances over and through it, and will never have an intrinsic relation with building. Buildings do not speak, theoreticians and historians do."

Utopia: "We can no longer believe in utopia in good faith, but we also have to believe that we cannot let ourselves succumb to entropy and chaos. So architects give us ruins of dreams, fragments of utopia and shimmering of dystopias. ... Most who want to activate their visions extend their work into performance or installation... in order to act out what is otherwise a very difficult counter-reality."



The Sublime, or “*The Phenomenon of the Blob*”: “The “blobbers” produce enigmas that above all else make us wonder about what they are and make it clear that things can be produced that we cannot understand... As such, the best of this work resonates with the tradition of the sublime, in which the very immensity of scale, strangeness of form and texture, and the lack of defined limits or boundaries made one aware of one’s finite but clear human form. Standing at the abyss of endless realities and out-of-control forms, the blobbers recall us to ourselves.”

In a voice that is by equal measure intelligent, challenging and critical on the one hand, but also elusive, elitist and contradictory on the other hand, Betsky admits that architecture will never rid itself of building but it must be able to rise above the latter. Architecture, in other words, cannot be reduced to *object*, whether it be one that speaks or remains mute. “I believe that fundamentally we must try to figure out what architecture might be,” Betsky says, “and that it is not either a substitute for language or a mute fact.”³ Architecture, as the curator of this year’s star-studded show wants to impress upon us, is essentially a verb, not a noun.

Architecture is about process – it encompasses thinking, making, living, changing, adapting, questioning, undoing – which works itself around building, and indeed may never make it

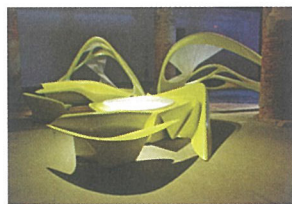
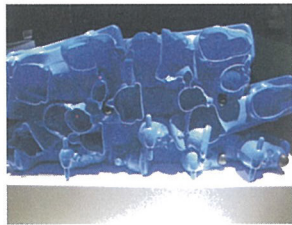
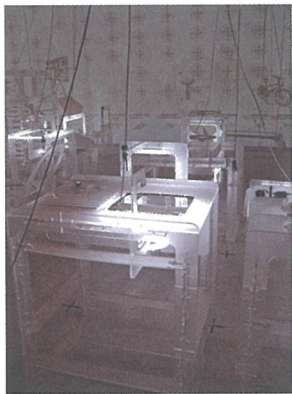
into a building proper. Yet, is it ever possible to escape the object-ness of building, which as we all know, gives exclusive premise and legitimacy to architecture?

Prefaced by a contentious theme – and stunning climatic scenography on opening weekend – the ongoing Biennale has managed to draw a mixed bag of comments from punters. Described as provocative, retroactive, ridiculous, irresponsible, out-of-date, experimental, enigmatic, and irrelevant, to record just a few discrepant critiques, the exhibition has again raised, albeit on a grand international scale, the problematic spectre framed by the old question “What is architecture?” Responding to Betsky’s call to think beyond building, or as he assertively ends his manifesto: “Buildings or Architecture. Buildings can be avoided”,⁴ participating architects began diving into their closets for what may be interpreted as “alternative” architectural identities deemed intelligent, robust and flexible enough to survive this latest architectural test drive.

As a result, and contrary to Betsky’s more nuanced intentions, many exhibits in the cavernous Arsenale tended to border on another version of object fetish. Here, across the seemingly infinite 300-metre-long

above Nordic Countries (Norway), Architect Sverre Fehn: Intuition-Reflection-Construction, interior. Commissioned by Eva Madshus (Photo: Joshua Teo)

opposite Venice, September 2008 (Photo: Joshua Teo)



old shipyard, designed objects of curvy, sinuous, geometric, and linear forms, all purposefully avoiding any direct association with traditional building, eagerly replaced an earlier and long-standing obsession for the architectural model/drawing-as-object. Pegged to themes of ephemerality and flux, examples came from architects such as UN Studio (*The Changing Room* – a triangular space constructed as a single flowing volume); Nigel Coates (*Hypnerotosphere* – a video installation of semi-naked dancers juxtaposed against a backdrop of Italian social housing); Philippe Rahm Architects (*Digestible Gulf Stream* – an architectural installation exploring the seriousness of climate change yet oddly distracted by nude actors); Guallart Architects (*Hyperhabitat* – photogenic installation of plexiglass domestic objects programmed to have a digital identity); Greg Lynn (*Recycled Toys Furniture* – quirky reincarnation of discarded plastic toys as kitsch designer furniture); Zaha Hadid (*Lotus* – a seductively contoured multi-use fabric structure for sitting, resting, storage and browsing); and Coop Himmelb(l)au (*Feed Back Space* – realising the architects' 1969 prototype wherein the body becomes part of the architecture which changes when it registers the user's heartbeat).

For someone acquainted with 1960s avant-gardist projects such as those of Metabolists and Archigram, a walk through the Arsenale would feel strangely déjà vu albeit without the utopian manifestos. Unfairly criticised as paltry attempts at conceptual artwork, the Biennale's contemporary objects-beyond-building were viewed by some as deeply problematic for architecture. Perhaps they were troubling for their sense of excess, of being allowed to exist without purpose except to be either beautiful or ugly, to be either mundane or provocative. Or perhaps it was because these designed architectural objects still aspired toward objecthood without the rigour of the architectural programme and its accompanying functions. For some, architecture ultimately serves a more noble aim than aesthetic posturing even though the latter quality is an unsaid prerequisite for any construct deserving called "architecture". For others, architecture in a commercialised environment where formulaic solutions outperform original thinking is fast losing its *raison d'être*. It needs radical recalibration, and what better way than in a high profile exhibition. But stripped of

an agenda and temporarily unburdened by disciplinary limits, some of the designed objects ultimately plunged into design free fall.

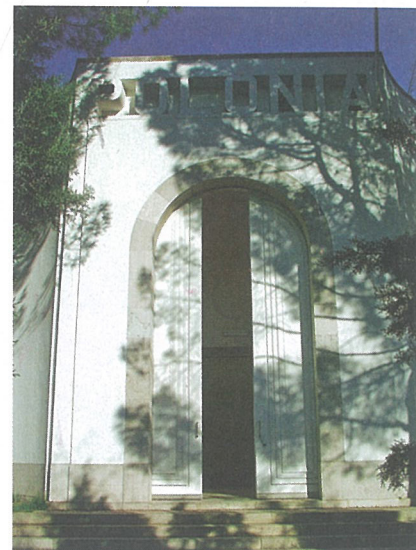
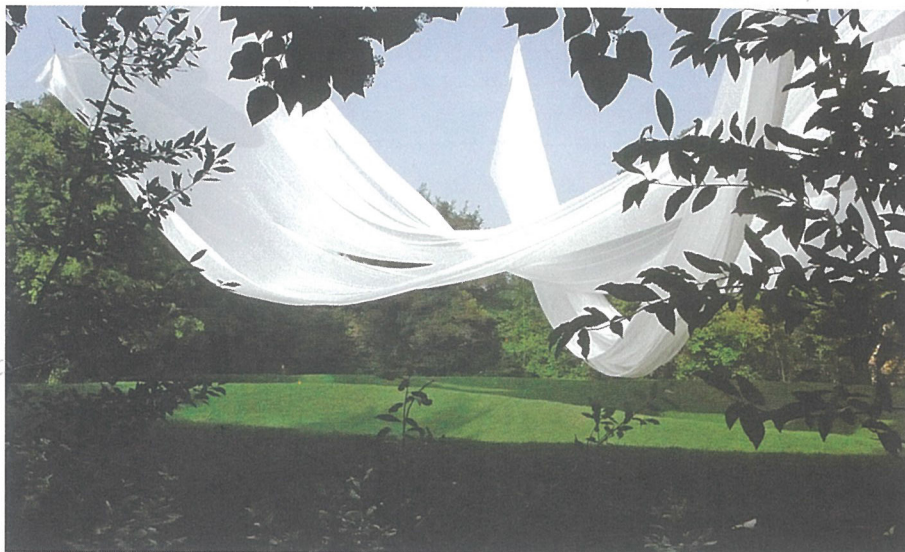
Yet, Betsky has not unknowingly picked an out-of-date theme. To him, the stakes for architecture, which has long lost its monopoly over the built environment (notably to developers, contractors, speculators, legislators, building codes, planning laws, etc.) are very high. In an interview, the curator tells us: "Architecture is a kind of luxury and I think we need to confront that reality... before one worries about architecture, about how we can shape our world, we need to figure out how to survive... in many countries, survival comes first... I do believe that architecture could contribute to that question about how to survive but it does not play a central role in it."⁵

Architecture, Betsky intimates, is inherently elitist, excessive and eccentric. It will not save the world. This is a risky position to take. But Betsky is not one to shrug away from controversy.

The Biennale has also successfully refuelled the energies of perennially sparring architectural partners – commercialists against designers, pragmatists against theorists, capitalists against socialists, and the latest and perhaps most intellectually complex pairing, designers against artists. As each half defends its true territorial right to architecture's legacy, it may do well for us to remember that the architect, who was given a professional profile during the Renaissance, remains a contradictory figure.

The architect is variously (and perhaps, uncomfortably) marked by distinctions and inclinations towards pragmatism, utopianism, commercialism, socialism, art and science. In these often conflicting roles, the architect is, for the most part, still accountable to society, or at least the works he produces is "out there" to be experienced (whether inhabited, seen or read). Thematically, "Architecture Beyond Building" seems unusually powerful, even by today's standards where claims for interdisciplinary within the profession abound. This is simply because it threatens to remove the architect's primary object – the building.

There are some particularly effective non-building projects such as Diller Scofidio + Renfro's *Chain City* – a video installation comprising two screens shot respectively from the stern and the prow of a gondola,



sandwiching between them a space for the audience. The guide for this ride is none other than a gondolier who speaks candidly about his love and disdain for tourists and tourism, amidst everyday observations about life in his Venice. In this thirty-five-minute long video, Venice is presented as a city brand which has been successfully replicated worldwide from Las Vegas to Doha. There is also Gustafson Porter (London) and Gustafson Guthrie Nichol's (Seattle) landscape installation *Toward Paradise* which one almost stumbles upon at the overgrown grounds of the former Church of the Virgins, a Benedictine nunnery that was destroyed in the late 1800s. This landscape project strips architecture of all its abstract ambitions and irony, leaving only the tangible promise of a rustic garden and the Venetian sky seen against a floating canopy held aloft by white balloons. While *Chain City* and *Toward Paradise* use very different media and are persuasive in very diverse ways, both projects are effective because they tap on the immediacy of experience, intuition and emotion.

Over at the Giardini and dotted around the city, the national pavilions provide a counterpoint to the Arsenale's mass spectacle. Bound perhaps by a national agenda or commitments to pressing social-historical-political issues, here the overall response to the Biennale's theme is more nuanced, and in this writer's view, more thoughtful. The British and American shows focus on social housing, with the latter particularly rethinking how

architecture can really matter for a severely deprived community. For others, architecture as building still dominates. The quiet geometry of Sverre Fehn's Nordic pavilion (completed in 1962), punctuated precisely by mature trees in the park, still overshadows its content, which is ironically a retrospective on Fehn's work.

Two national contributions stand apart for their radical thematic interpretation, and especially for successfully preserving humour alongside gravitas. Poland's offering *Hotel Polonia: The Afterlife of Buildings* cleverly restages the issues of durability and impermanence of buildings and their functions using two compelling media. The first is photography in which six prominent Polish buildings are documented through a set of photographs (by Nicolas Groszpiere) depicting their present condition. This set is exhibited alongside another set of photomontages (by Kobas Laksa), which are reminiscent of Piranesi's complex architectural etchings and Joseph Gandy's watercolour renderings of John Soane's buildings as ruins. Laksa's photomontages project the afterlife of the same set of buildings tampered by social change, use and occupation. The second medium took shape in the conversion of the Polish pavilion itself into a temporary accommodation called *Hotel Polonia*. *Hotel Polonia* challenged the functional limits of the national pavilion in the Giardini as it remained fully operational as a hotel during the first few opening days of the Biennale. The Polish pavilion won the Golden Lion award for the best national participation.

top left Gustafson Porter (London) and Gustafson Guthrie Nichol (Seattle), *Toward Paradise*, 'Enlightenment', day view. (Photo: Gustafson Porter and Gustafson Guthrie Nichol)

top right Poland, *Hotel Polonia: The Afterlife of Buildings*, entrance to the Polish Pavilion at the Giardini. (Photo courtesy of Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw)

opposite, from top down UNStudio, *The Changing Room* (Photo: Lilian Chee); Guallart Architects, *Hyperhabitat* (Photo: Lilian Chee); Greg Lynn Form, *Recycled Toys Furniture* (Photo: Lilian Chee); Zaha Hadid Architects, *Lotus* (Photo: Svetislava Isakov); Atelier Bow-Wow, *Furnivehicles*, working on the notion of mobility, three vehicles are constructed from a combination of furniture that can move and change in their organisation (Photo: Lilian Chee).



top Estonia, *Gaasitoru/Gaspipeline*, installation at the Giardini.
Curated by Ingrid Ruudi
(Photo: Lilian Chee)

right Japan, *Extreme Nature: Landscape of Ambiguous Spaces*, fragile glass houses by Junya Ishigami surrounding existing Japanese Pavilion.
Curated by Taro Ishigari.
(Photo: Joshua Teo)

The Estonian contribution features a lemon yellow pipe measuring sixty metres and spanning strategically between the Russian and German pavilions. Called simply *Gaasitoru/Gaspipeline*, the site-specific installation marries architecture with art in its formal response. Unmissable for its location at one of the main park thoroughfares, this outwardly tongue-in-cheek installation is inspired by a grave issue, that is, the planned Nord Stream project which aims to construct a direct gas pipe from Russia to Germany through the Baltic Sea. This global infrastructure is an example of many similar projects worldwide which not only threaten the ecological and geopolitical structures of neighbouring nations but also constitutes a physical breach of boundaries. Through its “in-your-face” manifestation, the cheery yellow pipe shows the “spatial dimension of politics and the political dimension of architecture”.⁶ It also questions the limits of architecture and the role of the architect in relation to such elusive power structures. As the Estonian side suggests: “... In spite of Biennale and the like institutions and events, presenting the Sunday side of





which occupies the entire length of the main room, stretching from the courtyard garden to the lagoon. The objects trace a new design ecosystem where ideas and influences between architects, artists, graphic designers, photographers, and product designers cross-pollinate. This emerging process is organic, and ultimately too nascent to be systematically categorised. In response to this atmosphere, the installation has successfully incorporated the element of ongoing conversations between the designers. Upon entering the main room, the most distinct experience is the cacophony of voices. The chatter is indistinguishable, pure babble. However, standing directly under a sound dome in front of a single object, the visitor becomes privy to a legible conversation between two designers. Although it does not show off grand designs, the installation openly engages Singapore's emerging architectural context. It also implicitly questions if architects can still claim to operate autonomously in an environment where design is becoming more and more accessible to the masses.

Touring the Biennale in a day, as this writer only had opportunity to do, had its obvious disadvantages. But the limitations of time may also quickly reveal the strengths of particular interventions. The immediacy of experience and intuition, access to emotive qualities, and

recognition of Venice's city fabric and populace as an architectural exemplar, still seem important. Above all, and beyond building, these values remain key to any architecture. ■

Notes

1. Betsky, "Architecture Beyond Building", in *Manifestos*, pp.19-20.
2. All quotations from this section are extracted from Aaron Betsky, "Questions Concerning Architecture: Speculations on the Spectacle Out There", in *Installations: Architecture Beyond Building Vol.1* (Venice: Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, 2008), pp.14-20.
3. Betsky, "Questions Concerning Architecture: Speculations on the Spectacle Out There", p.15.
4. Aaron Betsky, "Architecture Beyond Building", in *Manifestos: Architecture Beyond Building Vol.5* (Venice: Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, 2008), p.20.
5. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrlPCRK57Hs&feature=related> (accessed 28 October 2008)
6. <http://biennaal.arhliit.ee/project/> (accessed 29 October 2008)
7. <http://biennaal.arhliit.ee/project/> (accessed 29 October 2008)
8. Taro Igarashi, "Plants vs architecture?" in Junya Ishigami, *Plants and Architecture* (Tokyo: Junya. Ishigami+Associates, 2008), pp.84-91.
9. Title to Igarashi's introductory comments displayed at the Japanese pavilion in the Giardini.
10. Moritz Küng, "Context as critical mass", press material issued at the Belgian pavilion 2008.



top left Belgium, 1907... *After the Party*, entrance through new metal façade by Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen, wrapping around the existing Belgian pavilion. Commissioned by Moritz Küng. (Photo: Lilian Chee)

top right Scotland, *The Gathering Place*, designed by Gareth Hoskins Architects, structure under construction. (Photo: Joshua Teo)

opposite top Singapore, *Singapore Supergarden*, interior showing large table with exhibits and sound domes overhead. Curated by FARM, Design Act and [re:act]. (Photo: Joshua Teo)

Confronting a brief which also stressed that “the urge behind architecture is not to be exhibited but to be built”, the architects chose to show the original pavilion as a pure monument encased by a galvanised steel façade. The new façade does not allow the visitor an initial glimpse of the existing pavilion from the main avenue. Yet, the filigreed metal passage way heightens the journey into the old building. It filters light and shadow beautifully as well as emphasises the visitor’s bodily dimensions since the sleek structure seems to bend and creak just a little under the weight of each passing person. The austere passage opens into a light-filled existing pavilion. This pavilion appears almost empty except for a few scattered chairs and the floor, which is noticeably covered in a thick layer of multi-coloured confetti. The atmosphere suggests that the visitor has missed something that happened before his or her arrival. It conveys notions of occupancy, sentimentality, missed opportunity, and even loss. The architects wanted to evoke the centenary celebrations in 2007, an event which never took place. It also confronts issues of monumentality and memory, which are ever present in any architectural intervention.

Around the city, two national pavilions bear special notice. *The Gathering Place*, the Scottish pavilion designed by Gareth Hoskins Architects, is an elegant seven-metre high



staircase built from sustainable Scots larch. The temporary public structure does not contain any exhibits but offers a hundred-seater auditorium for people to gather, meet, relax and to experience different perspectives of the city in impromptu ways. It is located next to Santiago Calatrava’s new bridge at Venice’s central train station, the Piazzale della Stazione Santa Lucia.

The final entry for this article is notably Singapore’s own *Singapore Supergarden* (see feature article on the Singapore pavilion). Curated by FARM with Design Act and [re:act], the republic’s exposition is a courageous departure from the usual diet of architectural models and drawings. Using the ground floor spaces of a working women’s institute and orphanage, the Istituto Provinciale per l’Infanzia located off Piazza San Marco, the pavilion features an installation of designed objects and inter-related dialogues.

Visitors are drawn into the quiet walled garden by a green surface, which starts off as a garden path and ends as a surface holding twenty-two objects in the main exhibition space. The objects, which range from architectural models to miniatures, furniture and working tools, are contributed by Singapore architects and designers from diverse creative disciplines. They are laid out democratically on a table



which occupies the entire length of the main room, stretching from the courtyard garden to the lagoon. The objects trace a new design ecosystem where ideas and influences between architects, artists, graphic designers, photographers, and product designers cross-pollinate. This emerging process is organic, and ultimately too nascent to be systematically categorised. In response to this atmosphere, the installation has successfully incorporated the element of ongoing conversations between the designers. Upon entering the main room, the most distinct experience is the cacophony of voices. The chatter is indistinguishable, pure babble. However, standing directly under a sound dome in front of a single object, the visitor becomes privy to a legible conversation between two designers. Although it does not show off grand designs, the installation openly engages Singapore's emerging architectural context. It also implicitly questions if architects can still claim to operate autonomously in an environment where design is becoming more and more accessible to the masses.

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