



Racism, activism and climate crisis are on the agenda at the Venice Architecture Biennale

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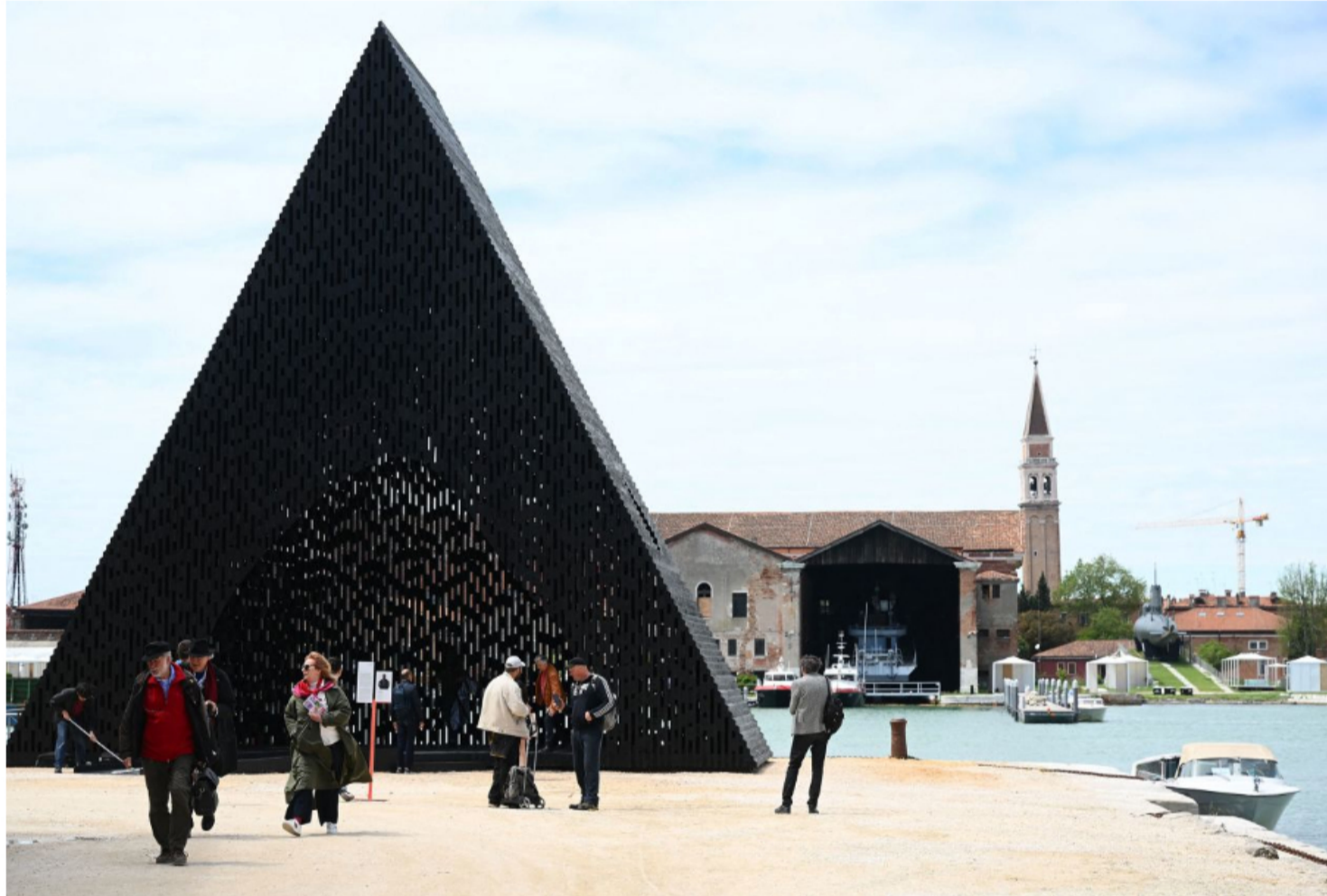
Scottish-Ghanian architect and academic Lesley Lokko, who is the first African to curate the architectural Biennale, poses for photographers at the Biennale International Architecture exhibit

Venice, Italy (CNN) — Until recently, the Venice Architecture Biennale — arguably the world's largest architecture exhibition — has drawn crowds for its (mainly Western) star appeal. Big, established names from the realms of design and architecture have often been the main talking points, alongside pavilions that, for the most part, were all about the new, the innovative and the aesthetically pleasing.

This year's edition, its 18th, which opened to the public on May 20 and is set to run until November 26, feels drastically different.

To start with, the average age of participants — 43 years old — is significantly younger than at previous editions, with only a few celebrity “starchitects” on the program, like British architect Norman Foster who presented a series of rapid-assembly buildings aimed to revolutionize post-disaster housing; and Ghanaian-British David Adjaye, who created a black timber pyramid for the Biennale and unveiled the design for India’s largest art and cultural center during the event.

Secondly, Scottish Ghanaian architect and academic Lesley Lokko, who was called to curate the event under the title “Laboratory of the Future,” has brought the event’s focus firmly back to the duties of contemporary architecture today, tackling issues like racism, the climate crisis and economic inequality. In doing so, she has delivered one of the most politically-engaged, environmentally-aware and inclusive Biennales in a long time — one where half of the practitioners hail from Africa or the African diaspora.



Vincenzo Pinto/AFP/Getty Images

Visitors look at the installation "KwaeE" by Adjaye Associates at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice on May 18, 2023.

Big ideas, little architecture

Striving to minimize the environmental impact of the Biennale, Lokko urged the architects, artists and designers involved to adopt a “paper-thin” approach to their exhibits. Large-scale models and architectural displays are relatively hard to come by, and in their place are films, sculptures, drawings and even games (South Korea’s pavilion features a quiz show on the social political and economic issues surrounding climate change).

Housed across three sites — the Giardini public gardens where countries present projects in a series of national pavilions; the Arsenale, Venice’s old shipbuilding yard and the city center — installations revolve around the themes of decolonization and decarbonization, while also expanding the notion of architecture to include art, performances and even activism.

This apparent lack of architecture, in its most classic form at least, has bothered some. In a May 20 Facebook post titled “Venice Biennale Blues,” Zaha Hadid Architects’ principal, Patrik Schumacher, wrote that “the ‘Architecture’ Biennale is mislabeled and should stop laying claim to the title of architecture. This title is just generating confusion and disappointment with respect to an event that does not show any architecture.”

But in employing a wide variety of mediums, Lokko's edition may actually be stretching the discipline's reach in compelling new ways.

The German pavilion, which is displaying construction waste produced by 2022's Venice Art Biennale is a case in point. Here, as people explore the space, craftspeople work to repurpose the found materials, essentially turning the museum-like space into a dynamic workshop.



Robert Messer/dpa/AP

The German Pavilion at the 18th Architecture Biennale is displaying and repurposing construction waste from the city's Art Biennale last year.

Similarly, the Netherlands has replumbed its pavilion — a Biennale icon, designed by Gerrit Rietveld in 1953 — to collect rainwater. Inside, displays propose alternative models for future-oriented, regenerative economies through a series of drawings called “The Waterworks of Money,” by cartographer Carlijn Kingma, which translates complex economics into a spatial environment using water as a metaphor.

Switzerland has simply knocked down the wall dividing its pavilion from Venezuela's in a project called “Neighbors,” which explores territorial relationships within the Giardini and the professional bond between the architects of the two buildings, the Swiss Bruno Giacometti, who designed the Swiss Pavilion and the Italian Carlo Scarpa, who was tasked with the Venezuelan one. Spain, meanwhile, has focused on food production with “Foodscapes,” a five-film audiovisual project accompanied by a recipe archive and a public program of conversations to investigate past and present food systems while exploring better, more sustainable ones for the years ahead.

The British pavilion, too, feels more like an art show than an architecture display, with different artists showcasing objects or installations reflecting diasporic culture in the UK. Among them is designer Mac Collins' giant, futuristic domino tile — the game is played widely by British Caribbean communities inside pubs and public spaces across the UK — and an intimate series of domestic objects made from fabric, textile waste and aromatic blue Angolan soap, by artist Sandra Paulson.

Decolonizing practices

In a Biennale that posits Africa as the main protagonist for the first time, it's little wonder that themes of colonialism, forced migration and land extraction feature prominently.

In the central pavilion, where the titular Laboratory of the Future hosts 16 architectural practices representing “a distilled force majeure of African and diasporic architectural production,” according to Lokko, several creatives have tackled the Biennale’s central themes through different works and critiques.

Nigerian artist Olalekan Jeyifous has imagined a futuristic version of Africa free of its colonial legacy and history of western exploitation with a multimedia installation spanning psychedelic sci-fi images, Afrofuturistic costumes and an array of hypothetical zero-emission rapid transport systems aimed at repairing “the damage done to the African continent’s ecoregions by former colonial powers.”

Some rooms away, Zimbabwe-born designer Thandi Loewenson uses carvings etched into slabs of industrial graphite to explore the mechanisms of mining the mineral to produce lithium-ion batteries for vehicles in the northern hemisphere.



Courtesy The British Council

The British Pavilion curators Meneesha Kellay, Joseph Henry, Jayden Ali and Sumitra Upham, with commissioner Sevra Davis, photographed in London. Their display is just one of many non-traditional approaches this year, reflecting diasporic culture in the UK through installations.

At the Arsenale, the “world’s first digital repatriation of stolen art” features a 3D installation displaying allegedly looted artifacts currently held by museums around the world. By turning images of the objects into non-fungible tokens (NFTs), London-based product design studio Looty hopes to make it simpler for a younger generation of African students, artists, architects and creatives to access and study them.

The Brazilian pavilion, whose exhibition, “Terra,” has been awarded the Golden Lion for the best national participant, also focuses on decolonization. There, curators Gabriela de Matos and Paulo Tavares show the architectural heritage of Indigenous and African Brazilians (on a floor made of dirt and pedestals of rammed earth) to challenge the “hegemonic” narrative that the capital, Brasilia, was built in the “middle of nowhere.” Ahead of the Biennale’s opening, the country announced the establishment of a new Center for the Celebration of African Heritage in Cais do Valongo — the once largest port of entry for enslaved people in the Americas — as a place to reflect on and mark the legacy of African descendant people in Brazilian culture.

Similarly, Australia draws attention to its own history of colonialism and resource extraction through “Unsettling Queenstown,” an eerie installation exploring the legacies of two settlements called Queenstown — one a town in Tasmania and the other a suburb of Adelaide in South Australia. Featuring a 70% scale copper model of the belvedere at the Empire Hotel in the Tasmanian Queenstown (a nod to the town’s role as a copper mine) alongside immersive videos and audio recordings, the work aims to reassess architecture’s role in relation to the Aboriginal people it has overwritten, co-curator Emily Paech told CNN during a tour of the pavilion, calling it an “act of demapping.”

Recycle, reuse, rethink

Recycling, sustainability and the climate crisis also take center stage at this year’s Biennale.

The Finnish pavilion features a sleek, design-forward version of a traditional composting dry toilet called a “huussi,” which is typical of Finland’s rural areas. Curated by Arja Renell and The Dry Collective, a group of Finnish architects, the installation proposes an alternative solution to managing wastewater while questioning the impact of waste on the climate. It’s a smart, engaging reimagining of the future of sanitation — and one of the most practical projects in the Giardini.

Belgium’s “In Vivo” exhibit does an equally effective job of exploring architecture’s new relationships with alternative resources. The installation experiments with mycelium (the vegetative part of fungi), which is turned into bricks and panels — including a large-scale structure in the main exhibition space — to showcase its qualities as a sustainable, renewable and inexpensive building material.



Antonio Calanni/AP

A woman looks at the “Everlasting Plastics” installation at the United States pavilion.

Elsewhere, the American entry also focuses on environmental concerns, turning to plastic as its main object of interest. Titled “Everlasting Plastics” and commissioned by Spaces, a Cleveland nonprofit arts organization, the showcase looks at the material — first created in the United States in the 19th century — and how to cope with its non-degradability through the work of five artists and designers.

There are baskets made with recycled plastic bottles from Chicago-based African American designer Norman Teague; plastic-derived products creating an immersive environment by architect Xavi Laida Aguirre; and sculptures of clocks and crowd-control barriers featuring plastic grafted onto metal — a reference to capitalism’s role in the proliferation of plastic, courtesy of multidisciplinary artist Simon Anton.

“From toys to camping coolers, plastic is deeply embedded in the culture of the United States, where polymers were perfected and exported,” said co-curator Lauren Leving in a statement. “Our toxic relationship with the material is now a global phenomenon, requiring new approaches for addressing a widespread dependency around the world.”