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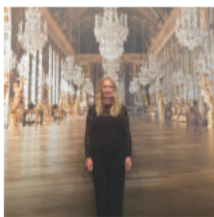
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Unsettling Queenstown: Questions of decolonisation at the Venice Biennale

The Australian pavilion at this year's Venice Architecture Biennale involves confronting questions of decolonisation in architectural form and history. Unsettling Queenstown looks at the ubiquitous presence of British colonialism.



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BY GILLIAN SERISIER
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Choosing to go large, this year's creative directors Anthony Coupe, Julian Worrall, Emily Paech, Ali Gumillya Baker and Sarah Rhodes are taking a stand. Riffing on the theme of The Laboratory of the Future set by curator Lesley Lokko for La Biennale Architettura 2023, who spoke of Africa as the laboratory of the future – in that it's "the place where experiments are conducted and theories formulated" – our curators have countered with: "Australia today could be seen as its workshop, where new social, cultural and legal implementations are being prototyped and tested." Indeed, this exhibition is all about architectural tactics and solutions to move us forward.

"As a colonial construct imposed on the oldest continuous culture on Earth, the example of Australia presents both caution and beacon to those elsewhere grappling with similar issues. As we note, there are Queenstowns all over the world. To unsettle one is to unsettle all," say the creative directors.

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Presenting Queenstown as an emblem for decolonial struggle the world over, the exhibition will overlay real and fictional Queenstowns, to question the muddy logic of colonialism and resource extraction. To this end, the pavilion will this year host a multi-faceted and multi-sensory installation exploring themes of decolonisation and decarbonisation through the construct of 'Queenstown'.

It should be noted that while there are Queenstowns all over the former British Empire, the Queenstown at the heart of the exhibition is a colonial copper-mining town on the island of Ltruwita (Tasmania). Brutally colonised, the town will be reimagined through video, voice and an immersive space comprising a floating 'ghost' of Queenstown's Empire Hotel, built out of copper – the material Queenstown was set up to exploit. No little sister to tragedy, the Queenstown on Kurna Yarta, kura Yarta Puulti (South Australia near Port Adelaide), will also be represented and reimagined.

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"The British Imperial hangover is pervasive in every corner of the globe: there is quite literally a Queenstown on every continent, bar Antarctica. Unsettling Queenstown unites decolonial theory and praxis, weaving elements from real places and gleanings from current architectural intelligence in search of ingredients to contribute to Venice's Laboratory of the Future," say the creative directors.

The intervention of settler colonisation has been an overwriting of Aboriginal Country, whereby British names and symbols are stamped on Indigenous lands. This act of cultural vandalism has been repeated and refined all over the world. As such, Unsettling Queenstown is an act of 'demapping', to show hidden histories of Country where colonies are built.



These layered representations of demapped Country will form part of an archive of tactics and methods from contemporary practice. The space will also play host to an Open Archive of tactics from 28 contributors working across the field of architecture in Australia. These tactics range from the retrofit and repurpose of colonial architecture, including cutting holes in the fabric of buildings to allow for new ways of experiencing and moving through space, to returning land to First Nations people and the creation of new cultural centres and memorials.

Tony Giannone, Australian Institute of Architects Venice committee chairman, said: "The AIA is honoured to take part in this year's Biennale Architettura, the most important event in the international architectural calendar. Unsettling Queenstown will offer an immersive, multi-sensory experience that will captivate and challenge visitors. The exhibition represents an approach to architectural thinking that we believe will become a critical strategy of architectural culture worldwide."

Unsettling Queenstown will be the ninth exhibition coordinated by the Australian Institute of Architects at the Biennale Architettura. The exhibition will be installed in the Denton Corker Marshall-designed Pavilion of Australia (2015) – the first 21st-century Pavilion to be built in the Giardini.

AIA at Venice

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Queenstown landscape photography

Sarah Rhodes

