



DESIGN: VENICE BIENNALE / VENICE

Telling storeys

Themed ‘The Laboratory of the Future’, the International Architecture Exhibition returns to Venice this year. We meet the professionals breaking new ground

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Venice Biennale’s International Architecture Exhibition is back. For the next five months in the pavilions of the famed Giardini della Biennale, the halls of the flagship Arsenale building and other venues across the city, the best minds in design will showcase how we might build a better world. Across the following pages, we provide a guide to the exhibition and an insight into the works of some of its key participants. To find out how the event is charting the future course of architecture, we start by talking to its curator, Lesley Lokko.

Curating the future

Lesley Lokko

By selecting the theme and the participants, the curator of the Venice Biennale’s International Architecture Exhibition is responsible for directing the discussion at the world’s largest congregation of architectural talent. In 2023, that honour has fallen to Ghanaian-Scottish architect Lesley Lokko. Raised in Accra, Lokko graduated from The Bartlett School of Architecture in London in 1992 and has since enjoyed a career that has been far from conventional.

Over the course of 30 years, she has founded two design institutes (Johannesburg’s Graduate School of Architecture and the African Futures Institute in Accra), written 12 best-selling novels and worked on three continents. It’s a blend of practice, academia and storytelling that leaves her well-placed to lead the conversation around her chosen theme of “The Laboratory of the Future”. The aim is to turn Venice into a living workshop where architects and creative practitioners will, in her words, “imagine for themselves what the future can hold”. She tells us more.

Tell us about the theme’s development.

There’s a kind of strapline to “The Laboratory of the Future”, which is, “Africa is the laboratory of the future.” Africa is the continent with the youngest population, so most Africans have their lives in front of them. This creates a certain kind of energy. Africa is exploding with potential, talent and creativity. The continent and the diaspora were in my mind when I was thinking about the theme for the Biennale but I didn’t want to put that story front and centre. Taking “Africa” out of the official title gave us a way to open what is happening in Venice to the rest of the world. The “laboratory” is meant as a kind of workshop; it’s less to do with the nuts and bolts of making things and more to do with ideas.

This laboratory will include 89 participants, more than half of whom are from Africa or its diaspora. Why has their story not been told before?

When you grow up in Africa, you don’t really have a sense of yourself being African because everybody around you is African too. You only become African when you leave. The word “Africa” is the veil through which we are always seen but it’s also the veil through which we look. I was interested in bringing together a group of people who know what it’s like to be both behind that veil and with it removed.

Many architects in that position – such as David Adjaye, Mariam Issoufou Kamara and Francis Kéré – are finding global renown. How has working in Africa set them on this path?

Working in contexts that are unstable politically, economically and sometimes socially, as is the case in much of Africa, does make you a different kind of designer. Add to this the infrastructure on the continent – we live without consistent electricity – and it means that you don’t take for granted the infrastructure that is being built all the time. As a designer, you prioritise slightly different things and you think about the environment in slightly different ways. I’m hoping that this exhibition will show that it’s possible to do that and still be phenomenally imaginative and creative.

How is this perspective relevant to non-African participants?

When I think about Africa, I can't think about it without the diaspora. For much of the African middle class, the relationship between Africa and former colonial countries is a physical one; it's not just someone on the end of the telephone or a video call. Sometimes the money that a person is earning outside the continent is the money that sustains half a village back here. As such, people have it in their minds that they can go "there" and become somebody; and the diaspora also has an idea of what "home" is like back in Africa. There's this traffic all the time between "there" and "here" that alters one's sense of scale, time and distance. This is something that many people around the world can relate to; migration is the theme of the 21st century. Many of the things that Africans have been experiencing quite intensely, over quite a long period of time, are now being experienced by the rest of the world.

Through your curatorship, how do you begin to explore these global themes?

To be a curator, you must have a strong sense of a narrative but also have a feeling for the physical. It's not unlike writing a novel; you have certain threads that you want to pull out in the story of the exhibition. For me, with a literary impulse, curating the Biennale started with the titles for the various components of the exhibition. Once that was set, it was a bit like a book with five or six chapters: I had to work out how I was going to fill them.

Tell us how you did it.

I knew that this would have to be an exhibition of parts because the story is very complex. Off the back of "The Laboratory of the Future" theme, we needed to start by talking about decolonisation and decarbonisation. These are two sides of the same coin but they're not always expressed or understood that way. You can't go at both ideas with the same focus all the way through with 100 participants; it would be too complex. So I broke it down into six subgroups, or components, very early on and they haven't changed [*see right*].

What do you hope that people will take away from the Biennale?

I've always been interested in the idea of spaces where people come together to work something out. To get practitioners, an audience and the curatorial team together to work out what we all understand by "The Laboratory of the Future" seemed to be a rich starting point. At the end of the Biennale, I'm hoping that we'll have a strong sense of what it was like to have taken part in this experiment, whether as a spectator or as a participant.

The six components of ‘The Laboratory of the Future’

1. **Force Majeure:** In the Central Pavilion of the Giardini, this component will feature the work of 16 practices that represent the unstoppable force of African and diasporic architecture and design. It’s a celebration of the continent’s best.
2. **Dangerous Liaisons:** In design circles, there is a seemingly endless conversation about what is and isn’t architecture. This component features 37 discipline-crossing creatives, who show how other fields, from art to landscape, enhance architecture.
3. **Curator’s Special Projects:** This hand-picked selection of practitioners highlight the role that architecture plays in gender development, agriculture, climate change and more.
4. **Guests from the Future:** Dedicated to young African and diasporic designers, the 22 exhibitors in this component respond to the notion of decolonisation and decarbonisation.
5. **Carnival:** A six-month cycle of events, lectures, films, discussions and performances, all open to the public. The hope is that this will broaden the thematic discussion beyond the national pavilions and halls of the Arsenale.
6. **College:** In the first-ever Biennale College of Architecture, Lokko will be joined by 15 professors to hold a series of experimental studios, seminars and lectures for 50 young architects in summer.

2.

Representing concerns

National pavilions

A highlight of the Venice Biennale is the national participations, which sees the countries involved nominate a curator who pulls together a showcase that responds to both the event’s theme (in 2023, “The Laboratory of the Future”) and the most pressing architectural concerns that the particular nation is facing. This year, 64 countries will be represented with many showing in dedicated pavilions in the Giardini. Here’s our pick of the bunch.

SOCIAL FRIENDSHIP: MEETING IN THE GARDEN

HOLY SEE

Sitting on a little island across from San Marco, the Abbazia di San Giorgio Maggiore was once, along with Venice itself, a focal point of power in the Christian world. With a history stretching back more than 1,000 years, the Benedictine monastery is still in operation, though over recent centuries the number of monks has dwindled to two. For the next five months, the Vatican has opened a corner of its quarters to the public. The exhibition, *Social Friendship: Meeting in the Garden*, commissioned by Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça and curated by Roberto Cremascoli, is only the second time that the Holy See has participated at the Architecture Biennale. “We invite visitors to care for the planet as we care for ourselves and celebrate the culture of encounter,” says Cremascoli.

Entering the abbey via a long, stone corridor, visitors can make out a larger-than-human figure beckoning at the other end. A procession of sombre sculptures by Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza – two in marble and nine more in wood – lead out into a walled garden. Among the monastery’s vegetables, herbs and chickens, Studio Albori has built structures using demolition-waste timber to provide biennale-goers with seating and shade. In a city flush with splendours old and new, this down-to-earth show is a reminder that it is the simple stuff that counts in the long run.

Abbazia di San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice

FERTILE FUTURES

PORTUGAL

Commissioned by Portugal’s Directorate-General for the Arts, the country’s pavilion investigates the management of fresh water on the Iberian peninsula. Called *Fertile Futures*, the showcase casts a critical eye on the issue, by building case studies around seven locations in Portugal, including the Tâmega basin the Lagoa das Sete Cidades, while also acknowledging that the country isn’t alone in facing water scarcity issues. “The planet’s existence depends on water and the way that we use it can tell us a lot about different societies’ quality of life,” Andreia Garcia, head curator of the Portuguese pavilion, tells MONOCLE.

In addition to the exhibition, the pavilion will also welcome a series of conventions, called Assemblies of Thought, where the public can talk with designers and consultants about the issues explored by the pavilion. The first was held in Lisbon, prior to the biennale, and will be followed by assemblies in Braga, Faro and Porto Santo this year.

Garcia says that broader conversation is essential as governments everywhere should be looking to the regions most affected by climate change for guidance on how to tackle future crises closer to home. “Our analysis, which uses the national context as a starting point, is still universal at its core,” he tells MONOCLE. “We all share these problems.”

Palazzo Franchetti, Venice

CHILDREN’S FOREST PAVILION

LITHUANIA

A near-constant at the Venice Biennale are national pavilions that address architecture’s relationship with nature. Leading that charge in 2023 is the Lithuanian entry, which looks at the country’s paradoxical relationship with its forests: they are treated as either a robust material source for the construction industry or an untouched natural landscape offering reprieve from the urban environment. To tackle this complex and contradictory issue, a childlike curiosity has been applied to *Children’s Forest Pavilion*.

Curated by Jurga Daubaraite, Egija Inzule, Jonas Zukauskas, co-founders of design-led research and residency programme Neringa Forest Architecture, the exhibition brings together works and findings developed in parallel to outdoor activities held with children in woodlands in Lithuania and Finland. “We wanted to look at how we speak to children so that we empower them to think for themselves, explore their creativity and see the beauty of thinking about the future positively,” says Zukauskas.

Children’s Forest Pavilion will have a life beyond Venice. After the Biennale, the exhibition will be brought home to Nida. Zukauskas and the team hope that it will introduce thinking of forests as negotiated spaces where no single actor has a central stake.

Campo Tana, Castello, 2125, Venice

More pavilions to see:

1. United Arab Emirates, *Aridly Abundant* The exhibition space will be turned into a desert environment, creating a backdrop for provocations that show how architecture can better work with arid landscapes.

Arsenale

2. Singapore, *When is Enough, Enough?*

The Performance of Measurement

The nation-state's entry will explore how we can evaluate the intangible aspects of a city to make them more people-friendly. Analogue plotting machines will mark data on long calligraphic scrolls.

Arsenale

3. Egypt, *NiLab – The Nile as Laboratory*

Africa's only stand-alone pavilion is curated by a team from universities in Egypt and Italy. They will share lessons about building better based on studies of development along the world's longest river.

Giardini della Biennale

4. Australia, *Unsettling Queenstown*

Settlements called Queenstown are found across the former British Empire. This installation weaves together real and fictional Queenstowns to explore relationships between people and the environment.

Giardini della Biennale

5. Brazil, *Terra*

How do indigenous and Afro-Brazilian populations feature in the country's cultural discourse? This display considers human relationships with the earth and geographies.

Giardini della Biennale

3.

Building bridges

European Cultural Centre

The Venice Biennale inspires a host of satellite exhibitions to pop up alongside it in the Lagoon City. Chief among them is the European Cultural Centre's flagship showcase, *Time Space Existence*, which, inspired by the international architecture exhibition, highlights the latest innovations and encourage better built environments.

“We are a playground of experimentation for architects to test their ideas,” says Lucia Pedrana, exhibition organiser for the European Cultural Centre – Italy (ECC). It’s a sunny spring morning, shortly before the opening of the 18th Venice Architecture Biennale, and Pedrana greets monocle under a brick arch that straddles the entrance to a 16th-century palace in Venice’s Cannaregio neighbourhood. The days before, a crew of construction workers laid the bricks for the self-balancing arch, modelled after Brunelleschi’s dome in Florence, while wearing virtual-reality headsets that supplied step-by-step instructions. The befuddled builders served as guinea pigs for a collaboration between Princeton University and architecture firm SOM, which looks to revive age-old construction methods by way of augmented reality (AR). “It was amusing,” says Pedrana. “But it worked.”

The AR arch is only the parting shot for *Time Space Existence*, the ECC’s biannual satellite exhibition to the Venice Biennale. The title is fittingly broad for the show, which presents more than 200 projects spread out across two palaces, Palazzo Mora and Palazzo Bembo, as well as the Giardini della Marinaressa. There is no set theme for each venue but the curatorial team of the ECC (a private organisation without ties to the EU) invites architects, research institutes, photographers, product designers and artists from around the world to submit a piece or demonstrate a project that they are working on. “We want to open the door to all kinds of projects and only later draw out common themes,” says Pedrana. “It becomes a snapshot of contemporary architecture.”

With such an ambitious remit, a visitor wading through the labyrinthine floors of the two palazzos is bound to feel a little overwhelmed: here’s an MIT investigation into the geography of tourism; there are photos reflecting on time, space and existence by Kengo Kuma. Apart from a handful of commissioned artworks, participants must fund their installations independently, which results in some sections feeling slightly slapdash and others a little corporate. But the jumble imbues the display with surprises, such as at Palazzo Bembo, while a sober retrospective of German firm Gerber Architekten leads straight into a room full of surrealist sculptures by Mexican artist Pedro Friedeberg.

Time Space Existence was first organised in 2012 and now forms a decade-long archive of architectural research. “Throughout the years, there’s a narrative that continues,” says Pedrana. There are also specific and sometimes surprising threads that emerge from the submissions. Two years ago, many were thinking about digital design; this year, Pedrana says, the key themes are novel materials, “trans-species design” (which considers non-human life) and population displacement. To see a hopeful answer to the latter, head to the Giardini della Marinaressa by the lagoon, which the ECC has turned into a public sculpture park. Here stands the result of a workshop in Madrid in summer 2022, where the Norman Foster Foundation, supported by Swiss building-solutions firm Holcim, tasked 10 architecture students with designing housing for longer-term refugee camps. The issue has only become more urgent since then, after the February earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. “In response to these crises, you have to very quickly create camps,” says Foster. “But the reality is that families can spend literally decades in a tent that is supposedly temporary.”

The first built prototype to result from this Essential Homes Research Project is shaped like a triangular tube with everything inside that a small family might need, including a bathroom, kitchen, sofa and beds. Built from timber and wrapped in a Holcim-made concrete carpet, which is rolled out and fixed in place by spraying it with water, the idea is that these sturdy, modular houses could be flat-packed and assembled on site in just one or two days. “It’s designed nicely, obviously, because it’s Norman Foster,” says Edelio Bermejo, head of R&D at Holcim. “It also provides comfort, well-being, dignity and the chance to create a community.”

Both Bermejo and Foster emphasise that there is still a long way to go before the design is useful on the ground: the prototype took a team of builders about a week to put together. Nevertheless, it proves that *Time Space Existence* is serving its purpose as a testing ground for ambitious architectural ideas. “It’s an exploration and it provokes discussion on the key issues, which are refugee housing and protection for the homeless,” says Foster. “That has to be positive.” — sro

‘Time Space Existence’ takes place at Palazzo Mora, Palazzo Bembo and Giardini della Marinaressa, Venice, from 20 May to 26 November; ecc-italy.eu

4.

Growing influence

Demas Nwoko

“Architecture is a regional art,” says Demas Nwoko, speaking to *monocle* from his residence and studio in Idumuje-Ugboko, his hometown in southern Nigeria.

“Architecture should differ from geographical zone to geographical zone, and the shape of the interior should be determined entirely by the way of life of the people using the space.” Such ideas have resulted in the 88-year-old artist and self-taught architect being honoured with this year’s Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, the Venice Biennale’s most prestigious award.

Nwoko first rose to prominence as a founding member of Nigeria’s Zaria Art Society in 1958, a student group that blended Western and African art traditions in their work. Decades on, in a much more globalised world, Nwoko still frowns upon importing any idea wholesale. He believes that architects should look to, and develop, local knowledge, building culture and identity. In the Nigerian tropics, Nwoko’s enclosed but ventilated buildings are designed to moderate the sun, heat and rain. They are also resource-conscious; some of them are constructed from stones or bricks made from laterite soil that’s excavated onsite. And, practical as he is, Nwoko also acknowledges that built works need to grow and develop alongside their inhabitants.

Today the octogenarian is revisiting the New Culture Studio in Ibadan, a design and performing arts centre that he began building as his own residence and studio in 1967. “It was never a solid piece of design but was added to over the years as needs arose,” he says of the evolved building. Having honoured Nwoko with the Golden Lion, it seems that this is an approach to architecture that the Venice Biennale will be hoping others emulate.

An exhibition of Nwoko’s work can be viewed at the Stirling Pavilion in the Giardini della Biennale.

5.

Home from home

Hood Design Studio

To open the biennale display in the Central Pavilion of the Giardini, curator Lesley Lokko has tapped 16 design practices from Africa and its diaspora to present their work. Called Force Majeure, the dedicated showcase will offer creatives such as Walter Hood, founder and principal of Hood Design Studio, the chance to explore human connections to places and landscapes.

For California-based landscape designer Walter Hood, Charleston and the surrounding Low Country in South Carolina is an enduring source of fascination. The area is home to the Gullah Geechee people, who are descendants of the transatlantic slave trade. They developed (and retain) a language, cuisine and cultural practice – and their story anchors Charleston’s International African American Museum, which opens in June. Hood designed its memorial garden and returned to this landscape and region for inspiration for his two-part exhibition *Native(s)*.

Hood’s ambition was to challenge the notion of belonging and question what it means to be native. He explains that both the Low Country and Venice are ideally suited for unpacking this. For the exhibition’s interior component, Hood is displaying two models of basket houses that he designed in response to pressures facing Phillips, a Gullah Geechee settlement in north Charleston. As families grow in Phillips, they carve out plots for new houses from palmetto forests deeded to their ancestors upon emancipation in the 19th century. The landscape also provides the raw material for sweetgrass baskets, sold by the Gullah Geechee on country roads, which are destined for infrastructure upgrades. Naturally, one of the exhibition’s houses is inspired from sweetgrass basketmaking and the other inspired from the structure of palmetto trees. The exterior component consists of wood columns slotted alongside the concrete pillars of Carlo Scarpa’s Sculpture Garden. While Venice’s architecture is famed for its masonry, the city is propped up by wood pilings. Hood sourced the chestnut for his installation from the same company that provides most of Venice’s replacement pilings.

His installation begs the question: is the palmetto tree more native to the Low Country than the basket-weaving tradition brought across the Atlantic? Are concrete columns designed by the beloved Italian architect more native than the city’s hidden pilings?

“I’m hoping that this investigation will help us to articulate the idea of ‘native’ in a way that is more inspirational and less pastiche,” says Hood. “Everything we don’t like isn’t ‘native.’” Through hardwood and grasses, Hood’s designs disarm any such hostility.

6. Close encounters

AMAA

A key showcase at this year’s Arsenale is ‘Dangerous Liaisons’, which will highlight the practice of 37 designers working across disciplines. In that number is Veneto-based AMAA, a studio that proves art and architecture are perfect partners.

Architects Alessandra Rampazzo and Marcello Galiotto set up AMAA, a collaborative office for research and development, in Venice in 2012. In 2015, a second office was opened in Arzignano, which is in the heart of the Venetian plain, an hour inland from Venice. “We started by recovering an old electric motor and water pump factory, turning it into a café, retail space and studio,” says Galiotto. “The project showed how you could turn an abandoned industrial structure into a meeting place and immediately, new commissions came in. In a sense, Arzignano gave us an architectural playground.”

Recently, several of AMAA’s large-scale projects are being realised, including the art organisation Atipografia’s Threshold and Treasure gallery, which is tucked in between luscious hills, tall pines, industrial buildings and the mediaeval castles of Arzignano. It’s this quickly growing portfolio that drew the attention of the curatorial team of the biennale, who invited the studio to participate in *Dangerous Liaisons*, an exhibition that celebrates designers working across disciplines.

For AMAA, art is close to its heart. When MONOCLE visits its studio ahead of a tour of its projects in Arzignano, a wall-covering art installation in mixed wood and ceramics acts as a backdrop to a series of sculptural models cast in concrete, which is on display across the enormous industrial floor.

“These wall pieces are made by an artist who always works with us called Alessandro Neretti,” says Galiotto. “He reuses found materials and sculpts them.” AMAA’s close collaboration with artists over the years includes works by artists from northern Italy, such as Arcangelo Sassolino and Andrea Bianconi, who they’ve turned to in order to enhance their architecture’s spatial and atmospheric qualities. “The way art addresses the experience of the user – and achieves a grasp of eternity – is instrumental to the development of our projects,” says Rampazzo.

For proof, Rampazzo and Galiotto point to Threshold and Treasure gallery. Set in an early 20th-century printing house, the gallery's pavilions reveal the art – and the site's history – gradually thanks to the staggered placement of walls and doorways. “I get goosebumps in here,” says Galiotto as he walks through the main hall. “The current exhibition by artist Diego Soldà is a series of artworks that enhances our architecture. Three-dimensional paint sculptures made up of thousands of layers of paint, cut or sliced, perfectly echo our philosophies.”

We walk upstairs to the gallery office and Rampazzo and Galiotto spontaneously buy two works from the exhibition. “The art is making the architecture react and live; that is what the collaboration between art and architecture is all about.”

Mixing things up

AMAA isn't alone in crossing disciplinary practices. Here are three other studios showing as part of *Dangerous Liaisons* that are worth knowing.

1. Liam Young

Looking to develop a vision for a new urban environment? The Australian-born director is your go-to, using film to tell stories and design the cities of the future.

2. Office for Political Innovation

Need an architecture office willing to challenge the status quo? Turn to this Madrid-based firm, which blends design with research and bold environmental practices to deliver projects that break the mould.

3. Dream the Combine

Far from delivering stock-standard buildings, the New York firm collaborates with filmmakers and fabricators to create works that blend art, architecture and cultural theory. The result? Buildings that create otherworldly experiences for their inhabitants.