

Culture
Venice Biennale

National pavilions take on Venice Biennale's decolonisation and decarbonisation themes



16 June 2023

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Chris Foges does a route march round a record 64 pavilions, but finds weariness rewarded by the uplifting effect of their sincere desire to make life better

Pack stout shoes if you plan a tour of the national pavilions at this year's Venice Biennale. Their number has risen to a record 64, and getting around all of them – at a decent clip – is probably two days' work. That growth has produced a welcome expansion of the festival's geographic scope. Panama gets its own pavilion for the first time. So too does Niger, doubling number of participants from sub-Saharan Africa – though its exhibition on the island of San Servolo is one of the further-flung outposts, some distance from the main clusters in the Giardini, the ornamental gardens filled with purpose-built structures, and the former naval yards at the Arsenale, where other countries find temporary billets.

As ever, these national pavilions are invited but not obliged to follow the direction taken by the curator of the biennale's main international exhibition. This year they have mostly complied. The twin themes of Lesley Lokko's show – decolonisation and decarbonisation – set the tone for a mixed bag of exhibitions that are for the most part more interested in the fraught cultural, economic and environmental conditions in which architecture operates than in the design of new buildings.

It was no surprise when the biennale's Golden Lion for Best National Participation went to Brazil, and a special mention to the British pavilion – two exhibitions that while very different in approach, are equally imaginative in their response to the first of Lokko's themes.



Brazilian pavillon. Credit: Matteo de Mayda

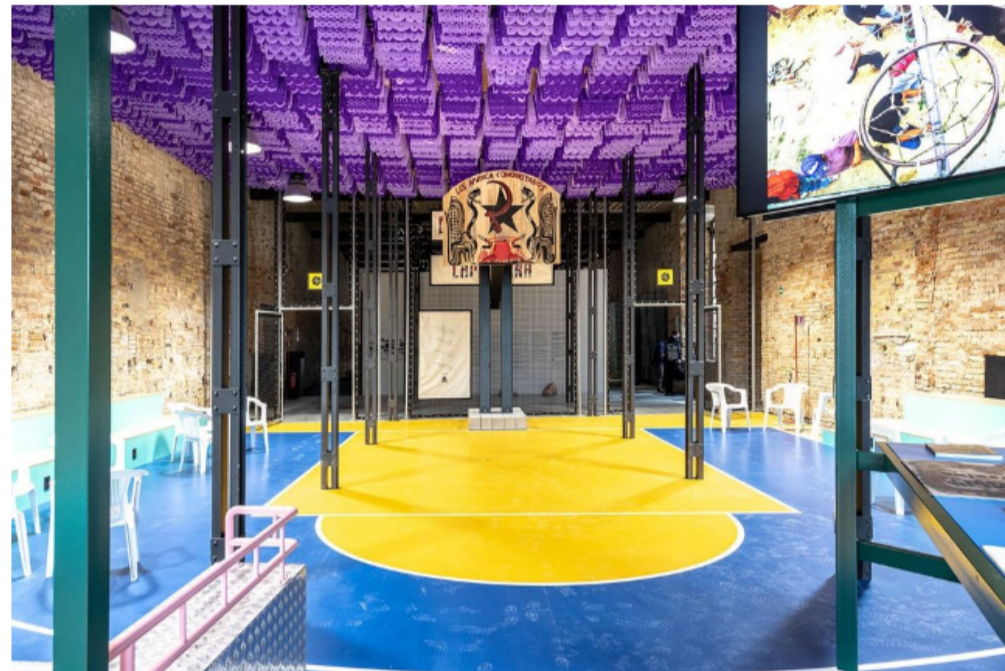
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Brazil's multi-stranded exhibition, *Terra*, looks at the role of land in shaping national identity, and the significance of earth in Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian cultures. Reddish earth fills the pavilion, packed hard to make the floor, and rammed to form massive plinths that are cool to the touch. The sweet, damp smell hits you at the door. Inside, displays range over a broad territory, from the displacement of indigenous people to build Brasília to examples of historic architecture that might, in some unspecified way, point to a new harmony between architecture and nature. It's a rich mix – taking in heritage and modernity, ecology, race and competing claims to belonging – but hard to digest.

The British contribution, *Dancing Before the Moon*, is a more refined affair. In the pavilion's central hall, a film combining new and archival footage shows how minority communities in Britain have claimed spaces and invested them with meaning through the 'rituals' of everyday life – from worship and protest to clubbing and hairdressing. Around it, six large-scale artworks reference similar phenomena in various global settings, to which each of the UK-based artists and designers has a cultural or familial connection.

In one room, Nottingham-based designer Mac Collins celebrates games played in Jamaican-run pubs in the Midlands with a giant distorted domino formed in ebonised ash. It's somehow friendly-looking, like a cartoon animal. In another gallery the London-based Angolan artist Sandra Paulson recreates laundry day in Luanda, with a stuffed fabric facsimile of a cement trough, a frilly dress and fragments of a colonial-era balustrade, all covered in blue soap. Other works are more abstract. There's a spiderweb of cotton panels stretched over wooden frames, making oblique reference to traditional architectural elements found in Yoruba and Cherokee cultures. And a shimmering screen of melted-down and recast aluminium punched with jagged holes, tying architectural recycling to Hindu and Buddhist conceptions of birth and death.

These enigmatic objects don't give up their meanings easily but, once decoded, do convey something of the significance of spaces and customs rarely given much consideration in architecture and planning. The beautifully wrought installations also hint at ways in which the variety of cultures that exist within Britain might give a fresh aesthetic charge to its built environment. Even so, this opaque, highly conceptual show might have been a better fit at the art biennale that occupies the same space in alternate years.



Mexican pavilion. Credit: Marco Zorzanello

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Two of the stand-out national contributions look at ways that architecture can bolster the identity of indigenous communities where it might be overwhelmed by dominant majority populations. The coolly minimal Sverre Fehn-designed Nordic pavilion is given over to a rumbustious celebration of the Sámi people whose territory, Sápmi, extends across northern Norway, Sweden and Finland. Sámi architect Joar Nango has made a reading room for his nomadic library of 200 books on topics ranging from ancestral building knowledge to activism. Visitors are invited to lounge on an amphitheatre of palettes covered in animal furs, surrounded by little shacks and gimcrack wooden structures festooned with reindeer skins and brightly-coloured tie-dyed fabrics. Low tables are littered with tools and ornaments in the haphazard manner of a rummage sale. The air is filled with the sounds of Sápmi and the scent of large logs split to make rustic benches.

Joyful chaos also reigns at the Mexican pavilion. Below a fluttering drop ceiling of purple paper, its curators have installed a full-scale fragment of a basketball court adopted as a meeting place by indigenous communities. It's a setting for music, dance and drinking mezcal, as well as debate. When I visited it had been discovered by grateful teenagers, and the racket of balls clattering off the backboard threatened to drown out tunes from the 'decolonial jukebox'. More architecture exhibitions should be like this.



Belgian pavilion. Credit: Matteo de Mayda

Things are much calmer in the ethereal Belgian pavilion, where the other major preoccupation of this biennale – sustainability – is addressed in an installation constructed entirely from natural materials sourced from the area around Brussels. On a floor of raw, compacted earth, a room-within-a-room is framed in beech and lined with fungal mycelium grown from waste coffee grounds in the cellars of PermaFungi. In delicate shades of pale pink and cream, the gently textured panels look almost like stone. Mushroom-based prototype structures are by now a familiar sight at architecture exhibitions, but this might be the first you'd call beautiful.



German pavilion. Credit: Matteo de Mayda

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Renovation and retrofit is a recurrent theme. Inspired by Berlin squatters of the 1980s, Germany has turned its pavilion into a recycling centre, processing the architectural waste of the last art biennale. Stacks of planks and rolls of carpet fill the space, which is undergoing its own demonstrative upgrade with the addition of new ramps and an accessible toilet. With an on-site workshop, it's a place of production too. Throughout the exhibition the pavilion team will work with local groups to renovate homes in the city.

But if the biennale can be taken as a barometer of environmental concern, what seems to be uppermost in the minds of architects from Argentina to Egypt, Greece and the Philippines, is water. Exhibitors wrestle with the problems of having too much or too little, of pollution, and of management at the scale of the region and of the building. Bahrain, for example, looks at using condensate from air conditioning systems to irrigate desert wetlands. A boon for the environment, if you ignore the air-con bit.



Finnish pavilion. Credit: Matteo de Mayda

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The Netherlands is retrofitting its Gerrit Rietveld-designed pavilion with a rainwater collection system, and the bulk of its exhibition is a tableau vivant of pipes, work benches and contractors busy up scaffold towers. Alongside is a set of large drawings by architect Carlijn Kingma, the Waterworks of Money, depicting the intestinal plumbing of a fantastical city – a metaphor for the flows of cash through the financial system. Smash the cistern!

In Finland's bijou Alvar Aalto-designed pavilion, pride of place is given to a composting toilet. Not operational, thankfully. These 'huussi' are a common feature of rural summer cottages. Doing something similar in urban areas could save a third of the fresh water we use, say the curators. 'Death to the flushing toilet'. A good point, well made.

Denmark lays out threats to its coastal cities from rising seas, and explores various nature-based defences from dunes to wetland farming. In a side-room, an evolving diorama warns of the grim consequences of inaction: dry ice spills from a model of Copenhagen in ruins as the sky turns an apocalyptic, blood-red sky. In the foreground, the Little Mermaid's rock stands empty.



Romanian pavilion. Credit: Matteo de Mayda

We might be in less of a mess if sustainable technologies invented long ago had made it into mass production. In 1950 a Romanian inventor developed a solar-powered desalination plant that turned seawater into drinking water. It was blocked by bureaucracy at prototype stage, but has inspired a fascinating, elegant show on such lost technological futures at the Romanian pavilion, with exhibits borrowed from the National Technical Museum in Bucharest. An admittedly janky-looking car designed in 1976 is made from recycled components. Other vehicles on display include the first all-electric car, built in 1904. The lesson, I suppose, is to stop making the same mistake.

As a museum-style show centered on eloquent objects, it stands out among a hit-and-miss variety of curatorial approaches. In general the presentation of national pavilions has improved over time. There are few books-on-walls, though I imagine many visitors will skip Canada's text-heavy survey of housing activism. Spain's indigestible show on food production suffers from a degree-show abundance of material that is increasingly rare. Most curators now recognise that information and ideas must be distilled, and take a form that gives visitors a reason to be there.



French pavilion. Credit: Matteo de Mayda

So we get Uruguay's delightfully loopy opera about forestry, and South Korea's interactive gameshow set that collects feedback on how to deal with climate catastrophe in 2086. (A sample tongue-in-cheek question asks what to do about roving bands of refugees. 'Option C: shoot them'). There are lots of evocative sensory experiences; symbolic piles of organic matter, from soil and leaves to sheep's wool, abound. Live events figure strongly. France has filled its central hall with a shiny stage that resembles a shattered disco ball, a setting for 'utopian' dreaming. Estonia has set actors up in a rented flat for the duration, with visitors invited in to observe their daily lives. It's a neat way of tackling the unaffordability of home ownership, a growing concern in Tallinn, Venice and many places beyond.

While most pavilions examine the troubles of the world, the Czech Republic turns its sights on the profession. Its Office for a Non-Precarious Future addresses 'toxic' employment conditions, presenting the chastening results of a national survey and collecting feedback. Within hours it had gathered many dolorous testimonies, along with some robust correctives. ('Pls stop this bullshit', wrote one architect. 'Other jobs have it way worse').



Italian pavilion. Credit: Marco Zorzanello

Other nations attempt to get the biennale to put its own house in order. The Italian pavilion makes an implied criticism of the resources invested in a mere exhibition. Its curator, Fosbury Architecture, opted to spend most of the budget on nine socially useful projects by young architects throughout the country – though retained enough to illustrate them rather beautifully in a huge warehouse at the Arsenale.

Over at the Giardini, Switzerland takes issue with the chauvinism implicit in the event. 'Competition between national pavilions is a relic from the past,' say the curators. To be more neighbourly, they have removed an iron gate that separates the Bruno Giacommetti-designed Swiss pavilion from the Carlo-Scarpa-designed Venezuelan pavilion next door. (The Venezuelans were 'informed', if not consulted, and have carried on as if nothing has happened). Other than a carpet imprinted with the conjoined floor plans of both buildings, the building is left vacant. It might be good to rethink the structure of the biennale – not least because it gives 19th century powers like Britain a permanent claim on a plum spot, while poor North Macedonia is banished to a shopfront on the city fringes – but this felt like an empty gesture, in both senses.



The Austrian pavilion – partitioned, but not fully realised as a joint exhibition space and community centre. Credit: Matteo de Mayda

At the Austrian pavilion, on the periphery of the site, architect Herman Czech has tried to open up the event in a more meaningful way. Over the wall lies the residential district of Sant'Elena. By constructing a temporary bridge and partitioning the pavilion, one half could be reserved for the biennale with the other turned into a meeting place where residents could discuss local impacts of the ever-expanding festival. Correspondence on the walls documents Czech's effort to get permission, ending with a flat 'No'. Outside in the garden, the stump of a scaffold bridge stands as a monument to heroic failure.



Latvian pavilion. Credit: Andrea Avezù

But the wittiest comment is the Latvian pavilion. It is notionally about supermarkets – unloved for their architecture, but ripe with possibility as places of exchange. Look closer at its cardboard aisles, however, and a different story emerges. Every pack of biscuits and bottle of shampoo bears a snippet of text lifted verbatim from the 506 national exhibitions that have been staged in the last 10 editions of the biennale. ‘Sunyata: the poetics of emptiness’, says the label on an Indonesian beverage. ‘Paradise of Sanctuary’, says some Ukrainian detergent. Here, complex realities are boiled down to a form that is easy to consume, available off the shelf.

‘There have been so many great ideas,’ says curator Ernests Cerbulis. ‘The idea was to present them in a democratic way so they are available to everyone’. Might it also be poking fun? ‘I’m not in a position to criticise’, he says, with a smile. ‘We just show what it looks like’.

Arriving at this pavilion after a long slog through the others, footsore and perhaps a bit jaded by entreaties to ‘reawaken our desire for utopia’, it would be easy to see this garish display in a cynical light. The biennale is too big, and choice is overwhelming. It’s prone to vapid slognising, while frequently lacking substance. Some early visitors to this year’s event despaired at a near-total lack of buildings on show – important things over which architects have some influence – while Luxembourg, for example, frets about mining on the moon. There’s something in that, but I left with the impression of a discipline that is inquiring, energetic and adaptive, earnest in its intentions to address some terrible problems and imaginative in its responses. It might be tiring to do the rounds, but the whole thing gives you a boost.

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