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Venice Architecture Biennale: shaping London's future

Some of our finest practices are in the spotlight at the Venice Architecture Biennale, with visions for a more decorative, robust capital



Coming soon: (left to right) large-scale models of the Young Vic theatre's new façade, designed by Haworth Tompkins; Lynch Architects' forthcoming Victoria Library, and an office building on Piccadilly by Eric Parry Architects, with a decorative cornice by Richard Deacon, confront Biennale visitors with pieces of future London



Kieran Long

29 August 2012

The Venice Biennale is the greatest of all architectural shows. From the beautiful to the incomprehensible, new exhibitions, large-scale installations, talks and workshops will attract architectural experts as well as novices keen to learn more about the discipline. It opens today and more than 200,000 people are expected to visit in the next three months.

I have written about five Biennales in my career as a critic but this year I'm implicated. I have been running the curatorial team as assistant to British architect Sir David Chipperfield, who is the artistic director of the 2012 Biennale. Chipperfield was appointed in January and has been responsible for inviting more than 150 architects to propose exhibitions and projects for the principal spaces of the Biennale. He also set the theme and title for their contributions: Common Ground, a rallying cry to architects to move beyond the superstar culture of recent years and understand their role in society today. The event has been directed from Chipperfield's office (next to Waterloo station) and is in some senses rooted in London, despite the global spread of architects (from Angola to China) involved in the show.

The 72 projects that form the Biennale will take place in two Venice locations. The most spectacular is the Arsenale, the former military port of Venice and home to a series of spectacular and huge buildings now used for culture. The other venue is a more gallery-like setting in the Giardini della Biennale, the so-called Padiglione Centrale or Central Pavilion. In addition, a series of national pavilions accommodate exhibitions by curators from 53 countries.

London looms immense in the British architectural landscape. Almost all of the country's internationally known architects practise here, along with many of the global superstars of the profession. Chipperfield is an architect with a big reputation, building across the world. But despite his decorated career, he has only recently started to get commissions in his home town. The tower his office occupies on York Road will soon be demolished and replaced by two large office buildings designed by his practice. He is also working on De Vere Gardens, a prominent residential complex in Kensington. However, debates about the future of the city have, in the main, gone on without his contribution.

The projects and exhibitions about London in this year's Biennale are his most substantial contribution to the debate about what the shape of the city should be in the future, and how we view it today.

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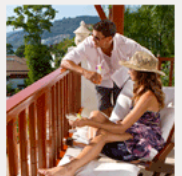
The Grand Old Duke of York... marched on up to the top of the Shard and abseiled down again

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One exhibit that is squarely aimed at the conversation around London merges newly commissioned films and drawings, questioning what is important about the city's built fabric: the skyline or the street. The Shard, an icon of London's global position and Europe's tallest building, acts as a protagonist in this installation. We commissioned recent National Film and Television School graduate Robert McKillop to make a film investigating the ways the Shard has affected our visual experience of the capital. It is a work of relaxed beauty, showing the tower from many vantage points, sometimes to its advantage, sometimes as part of the general sweep of London.

Juxtaposed with this are drawings of our high streets, by Fiona Scott of young London architecture practice Gort Scott. These sketches describe, in meticulous detail, the richness of our most familiar urban environments. One of the streets she has drawn is Borough High Street, at the foot of the Shard. Her observations celebrate the well-known characteristics of Borough — the yards of the ancient coaching inns that once lined the street and less-noticed spaces and buildings that define its character; from the bin store of a fast food shop to Guy's Hospital.

Both these works try to illustrate, to an international audience, a tension with which Londoners are familiar. The city is interpreted as a combination of set pieces: the sparkling towers that politicians and money men love to celebrate are juxtaposed with everyday urban environments that might have very few individual buildings of note but that define the public life of the city.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, three London architects (Eric Parry, Haworth Tompkins and Lynch) have created a spectacular series of "inhabitable models" of their buildings. They loom up to seven metres high in the space of the Corderie and confront visitors with large-scale pieces of future London. Two of the projects are already under way: a new library opposite Victoria station by Lynch, planned to be completed in 2018, and a major office and residential building on Piccadilly by Parry due for completion next year. Both façades make a place for art and sculpture. Lynch's work contains decorative elements from London designer Timorous Beasties and Parry's accommodates a cornice by Turner Prize winner Richard Deacon.

Anyone visiting the Young Vic theatre on The Cut in the next three months will be able to guess what Haworth Tompkins' contribution is. Right now, you will see a sign on its façade saying "on loan to the Venice Biennale". A section of the building has been shipped to Venice — a generous and provocative loan from the theatre. All these projects have the common desire to move beyond faceless modernism and to allow decoration back into their work by making a setting for art.

This interest in decoration and its meaning is present in many of the London contributions, which might surprise those who know Chipperfield's own, stripped-down architecture. Bethnal Green-based Caruso St John's sensitive group exhibition of European architects investigates decoration at various scales and the playful Folk in a Box (the UK's smallest performance venue — for an audience of one) designed by young office DK-CM is in a strange, Gothic revival style. FAT architects, based in Clerkenwell, takes its place in typically striking style by making a huge rubber cast of the Villa Rotunda by Palladio, a building from the Veneto that is here reduced to a piece of pop art in their so-called "Museum of Copying". Perhaps the cheek and humour of this one is typically London.

London-based curator and writer Justin McGuirk brings an extraordinary Venezuelan street food restaurant to the stately Biennale venue of the Arsenale, adorned with neon and serving arepas (Venezuelan corn bread sandwiches) to a hip-hop soundtrack. It is a means of presenting research about the future for informal settlement in the barrios and slums of the Venezuelan capital, Caracas. The hidden contexts of the city are also the subject of muf architecture/art's installation about Altab Ali Park in Whitechapel. In Muf's room you can play carom billiards and see a recorded debate between the many organisations and local people who use the park. Both these installations create social situations, via food and play, to provide access to the complex debates around cities.

The Venice Biennale is not a show about London but it does showcase the work of some of our most talented offices. The capital is presented as a place of humour, messiness and unpredictable charm. An idea of a new civic architecture is nurtured among a generation of architects, many inspired and prompted by Chipperfield's urbane and robust work. Indeed, among Venice's many messages, one might be that Chipperfield is ready and willing to play a substantial role in leading the debate about London's future.

Kieran Long is assistant director at the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale which runs until November 25 (labiennale.org).

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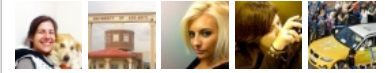
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