

Modern in Venice Absorbing Modernity 1914–2014 at the 14th International Architecture Exhibition

The 2014 Venice Architecture *Biennale* is on display from June to November. This year's edition is directed by Rem Koolhaas and is bringing major novelties. For the first time the event will be held for six months and was assembled for a longer period than ever before. Koolhaas set this new schedule because he was committed to create a research-based exhibition. According to Paolo Baratta, the president of the Venice *Biennale*, this represents an unprecedented method that had never been used in past editions. The director engaged all participants in the theme *Fundamentals* and tried to establish a narrative between the show's three main components: *Absorbing Modernity*, *Elements of Architecture* and *Monditalia*.

Absorbing Modernity 1914–2014 is the theme offered to the sixty-six participating countries for showing their processes of modernization in the last century. In his provocative initial statement, Koolhaas invited all countries to reflect on the “erasure of national characteristics in favor of the almost universal adoption of a single modern language”. Most curators accepted the challenge and focused on specific national character and on the singularities of their countries' modernity. Throughout the *Giardini*, the *Arsenale* and some Venetian palaces, the exhibition presents a many-sided portrait of architectural modernity. Although using diverse strategies on display and aiming at different results, the national pavilions throw new light on the history of 20th-century architecture.

Great Failures in French Modernism

The French pavilion presents a critical exhibition curated by Jean-Louis Cohen, which received a Special Mention from the Jury. *Modernity: Promise or Menace?* focuses on the contradictions of the Modern Movement project, by portraying four French unsuccessful experiences.

The exhibition is divided in four parts: “Jacques Tati and Villa Arpel: Object of Desire or Ridiculous Machine?”; “Jean Prouvé: Constructive Imagination or Utopia?”;

“Heavy Panels: Economies of Scale or Monotony?”; and “Grands Ensembles: Healing Heterotopias or Places of Seclusion?”. Each part is represented by a large-scale object and linked-up to the others through a ubiquitous film.

The curator's statement argues that France has shaped modernity since 1914. The exhibition succeeds at expressing modernism as a complex reality by representing its great expectations and ultimate disillusion. From Jacques Tati's comedy to the tragedy of Drancy internment camp, France's discourse aims at epitomizing the Modern Movement itself.



01 *Office US*. USA Pavillion, *Giardini*.
© Zara Ferreira, 2014.

While France was focusing on its flops, other pioneers of the Modern Movement architecture chose to celebrate it. The Netherlands pays homage to Bakema with *Open*; Great Britain shows its specifically national forms of architectural and cultural modernity with a *Clockwork Jerusalem*; and *Office US* presents the American hegemony through corporate architecture, creating a repository of its worldwide contribution.

The Unwritten Story of Latvian Post-War Architecture

The *Biennale* was an opportunity for some countries to develop their first inquiries on 20th-century architectural legacy. Latvia, for instance, presents an exhibition curated by NRJA (No Rules Just Architecture) that asserts the need for acknowledged research and patrimonial evaluation of modern architecture in the country. The curators wish to start an informed debate on the future of these buildings that are currently at risk. They believe that biases towards Soviet architecture have blocked an objective assessment until the present moment; they name “aversion”, “uncritical nostalgia” and “superficial hipster joy” the responsables for the current situation.

Unwritten stands as an effort for starting a comprehensive survey on Latvia's recent architectural output. The exhibition develops a work-in-progress database performed by a bright installation. The collected examples of Latvian 20th-century architecture are presented in paper sheets hanging from the ceiling, which will continue to be piled up throughout the months of the *Biennale*.



02 *Modernity: Promise or Menace?* France Pavillion, *Giardini*. © Margarida Quintã, 2014.



03 *Monolith Controversies*. Chile Pavillion, *Arsenale*. © Margarida Quintã, 2014.



04 *Fair Enough: Russia's Past, our Present*, Russia Pavillion, *Giardini*. © Margarida Quintã, 2014.



05 *Unwritten*. Latvia Pavillion, *Arsenale*. © Margarida Quintã, 2014

Other post-socialist societies are dealing with similar challenges but using distinctive approaches to display their recent architectural past. Armenia, for instance, exhibits *The Capital of Desires* using Yerevan's modernism to represent the Soviet Armenian era. Russia shows *Fair Enough*, which is an original exhibition using the universal manners of a trade fair to advertise Russian modern ideas. According to the jury, the Russian Pavilion received a Special Mention "for showcasing the contemporary language of commercialization of architecture".

The winner of this year's Silver Lyon, Chile, also alludes to the Soviet influence in the country. *Monolith Controversies* is a notable exhibition set around a large concrete panel produced in the 1970's. At that time, the Soviet Union sponsored social housing programs in Chile by developing prefabrication systems. Chilean modernity is shown through an essential element of architecture embodying political and ideological debates.

Arab Modernism Collected by Bahrain

The Kingdom of Bahrain presents *Fundamentalists and Other Arab Modernisms*, documenting one hundred modern buildings across the Arab World. This architectural legacy is showed in "a subjective, non-exhaustive and sometimes fictional reading", as pointed out by the curators. The project is related to the Arab Center for Architecture, which is engaged in safeguarding the archival architecture heritage of this region.

The exhibition catalogue presents the collection of buildings and is used, simultaneously, as a relevant element to the display. Tall wooden shelves, in which countless catalogues are stored, outline a circular space with a large table. Sitting around the table, visitors can listen to political discourses, in different languages, from each Arab country. A map of the region with the buildings' location is shown in the table while a projection of the speakers takes place in the ceiling.

Focusing on the architectural legacy of the pan-Arab project, the Bahrain initiates a pioneering task. Modernism in the region is naturally linked to Colonialism, but the curators establish a chronological reading identifying different stages on its absorption within the last century.

Countries like Morocco and Kuwait, both participating for the first time in the Architecture Biennale, are also dealing with remains of 20th-century political and cultural transnationalism. Morocco presents *Fundamental(ism)s*, which is an exhibition divided in two distinctive periods; the first section is devoted to 20th-century modern housing experiments and the second to



06 *Fundamentalists and Other Arab Modernisms*. Kingdom of Bahrain Pavillion, *Arsenale*. © Ansgar Werrelmann, 2014.



07 *Acquiring Modernity*, Kuwait Pavillion, *Arsenale*. © Margarida Quintã, 2014.

08 *Forms of Freedom: African Independence and Nordic Models*. Nordic Countries Pavillion, *Giardini*. © Alexandre Delmar, 2014.



contemporary speculative projects in the Saharan desert. Kuwait displays *Acquiring Modernity* using the Kuwait National Museum, designed by Michel Ecohard, to represent the establishment of the state and its history of modernization.

Modern Africa by the Nordics

The Nordic Pavilion presents an exhibition on the modern production developed by Nordic architects in Tanzania, Kenya and Zambia in the 1960s. *Forms of Freedom: African Independence and Nordic Models* displays the architectural output of Nordic development aid in the newly established African nations.

The exhibition, curated by Nina Berre and Space Group, is part of a larger project developed by the National Museum in Oslo, Norway. The curators realized this legacy has been poorly studied, documented and exhibited until the present moment. Therefore, the *Biennale* is a first occasion to display a partial collection of buildings and projects from this historical period.

The show was specially tailored to Sverre Fehn's Pavilion: a series of walls, built-in the ceiling structure, present the chronological chart of projects. Iwan Baan and Mette Tronvoll's photographs complete the set showing contemporary aspects of selected buildings.

Nordic architects developed symbols for African independence using modern architectural language. In this case, modernism is presented as a synonym of freedom and hope for Africa. Nonetheless, Sub-Saharan African countries have many different stories to tell about the last one hundred years in the continent. The *Architecture Biennale*, unfortunately, could not cover a significant part of that narrative.

The five Portuguese-speaking African Republics of Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and São Tomé and Príncipe are portrayed in the exhibition *Ilha de São Jorge*, occurring in Venice from June 6 to July 6, 2014. The show curated by Beyond En-

tropy Africa is not officially part of *Absorbing Modernity 1914-2014* but is relevantly adding to the debate. With contributions from several scholars, architects and artists, the exhibition catalogue collects information on the ways modernity was developed, absorbed or rejected in these countries. With a common and recent colonial past, the five African countries share a cultural heritage with each other and with Portugal, overlapped with their own traditions and geographies. This contemporary struggle is the link between the seven videos presented at *Ilha de São Jorge*.

In spite of some blanks, *Absorbing Modernity 1914-2014* is a wide-ranging exhibition on recent world history of architecture. National pavilions, in general, present serious and precise investigations on their latest years. Although the commission was to reflect on the years between 1914 and 2014, most countries focused on their Post-War period. The contributions do not present uniformity or international tendencies but stress on "modernity with national features". The diversity resulting from this common strategy is on the origin of Koolhaas most interesting conclusions regarding *Absorbing Modernity*. In his vision, this exhibition questions "the so called 'end of modernism' that Portuguese and Jencks had already proclaimed in the 1980s." He goes as far as stating that the postmodernism presented by the first *Biennale* is not more than a "confuse footnote" when looking at all sixty-six national narratives. Provocative as ever, Koolhaas also declares that "modernity has served so many different master narratives that it has become, finally, ideologically neutral." Furthermore, he points out his success at presenting an architectural exhibition that does not mention major architects. He believes that these countries' modernization was translated into architecture, but he devalues architect's real impact on the process.

The Korean Pavilion won the Golden Lyon with the exhibition *Crow's Eye View: the Korean Peninsula*, which tries to establish a

common reading between North and South Korea. The jury highlighted the curator's efforts in "presenting a new and rich body of knowledge of architecture and urbanism in a highly charged political situation." Minsuk Cho put up a dense show using many different materials to present an architectural discourse from this geopolitical territory. The awarded countries, Korea and Chile, are both peripheral in the traditional history of 20th century architecture. Their non-West contributions not only complete our vision of the recent past but also inspire a potential future. ■

Editor's Note

Absorbing Modernity 1914-2014 had the participation of:

Monolith Controversies — Chile
Commissioner: Cristóbal Molina, **docomomo** Chile

Modernity: Promise or Menace?— France
Curator: Jean Louis Cohen, **docomomo** France member

Crow's Eye View: The Korean Peninsula— Korea
Curator: Changmo Ahn, **docomomo** Korea

Acquiring Modernity— Kuwait
Deputy Commissioner: Zahra Ali Baba, in charge of the on-going creation process of **docomomo** Kuwait.

...Condenados a Ser Modernos— Mexico
Commissioner: Maria Margarita Segarra Lagunes, **docomomo** Mexico

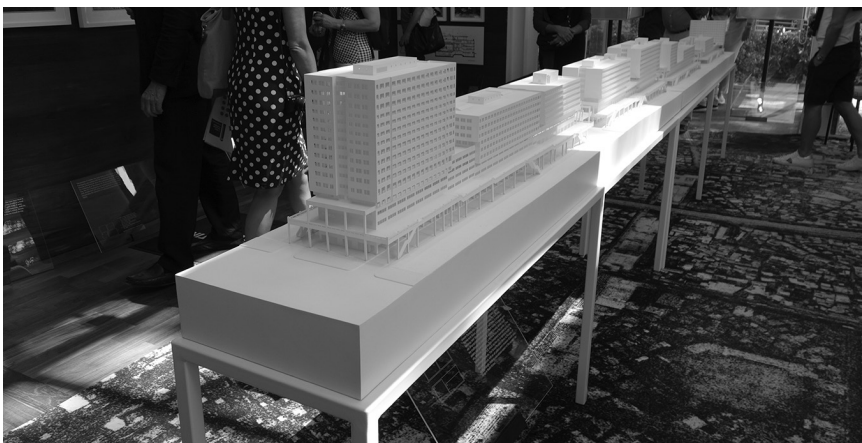
Open: A Bakema Celebration— The Netherlands
Curators: Dirk van den Heuvel, **docomomo** Netherlands

Forms of Freedom. African Independence and Nordic Models— Nordic Countries
Curator: Nina Berre, **docomomo** Norway

Homeland. News From Portugal— Portugal
Participant: Zara Ferreira, **docomomo** International

Officeus— USA
Curator: Ashley Schafer, **docomomo** US member

docomomo International congratulates all the **docomomo** members participants. Special greetings for Chile and Korea, for the achievement of the Silver's and Golden's Lion, respectively.



09 *Crow's Eye View: the Korean Peninsula*, Republic of Korea Pavilion, *Giardini*. © Margarida Quintó, 2014.