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On design



This year's Venice Architecture Biennale is about people, not plans

Too many design exhibitions are big on architectural theory, but miss what really matters: human beings. This one is different

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A woman takes a picture of a model house at the Venice Architecture Biennale. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

The problem with architecture exhibitions, so it's argued, is that they lack the one thing you really want to see: real-life buildings. I disagree. The problem with architecture exhibitions is that they fixate on trying to represent buildings that are missing. Photographs, drawings and pretentious wall texts only highlight the fact that yours is a second-hand experience. They place you in the there and then, not the here and now.

The Swiss architect Mario Botta got around this problem spectacularly in 1999 when, for the 400th anniversary of the birth of Francesco Borromini, he built a full-scale wooden model of a cross-section of the baroque master's most famous church, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane in Rome. There it was in all its glory – well, half of its glory – on the shore of Lake Lugano.

Most architecture shows don't have Botta's titanic budget. But there is another way, as demonstrated at this year's Venice Architecture Biennale. This is not an exhibition about what buildings look like. Gone is the blowhard shape-making and bad sculpture

of the previous biennale, curated by Aaron Betsky in 2008. Neither is it didactic, like the 2006 version, curated by Richard Burdett, which was a blizzard of facts and statistics about cities – vital stuff, but rather like exploring a book pasted on the walls. Instead, this year's show is much more about what should happen inside buildings, the pure experience of space.

The person responsible is Kazuyo Sejima of Japanese practice Sanaa, the architects behind the New Museum in New York and the recent Rolex Learning Center in Lausanne. Sejima is a break from recent biennale directors in that she is a) a woman (the first, in fact) and b) a practising architect. However, perhaps her greatest strength when it comes to curating the biggest architecture show in the world is that she is not an academic. "People meet in architecture" is her theme. It sounds trite, and a little awkward, but this is rather how Sejima speaks. You're never sure whether she is stating the obvious or being incredibly profound. In this case, it seems clear the theme is one that preoccupied her in the making of the Rolex Learning Center, a university building in which there are no walls, just an undulating landscape intended to promote chance meetings between students and disciplines. It's a social education space, like Socrates's Agora but for the Facebook generation.

At the beginning of the Corderie dell'Arsenale, the epic former ropemaking factory of the Venetian navy where a biennale curator tries to make his or her case, there is a 3D movie about that campus building directed by Wim Wenders. Harking back to the famous library scene in his *Wings of Desire*, Wenders presents the space as a semi-sublime experience. Students free-float angelically, albeit with the slick assurance of actors in a corporate promo video. This rendition of a heavenly space sets the tone for subsequent rooms.



Cloudscapes by

Transsolar and Tetsuo Kondo Architects, Germany, at the Corderie dell'Arsenale, part of the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale, Italy Photograph: David Levene

A number of exhibitors have created atmospheric installations that maximise the already considerable drama of this 16th-century building. The architect Tetsuo Kondo and engineers Transsolar have made a cloud with a clearly defined layer of steam floating beneath the rafters, which you can enter and exit like a plane. Almost as ineffable is Junya Ishigami's structure made of thread-like wire so as to be almost invisible. The proposition here is that structure and space (one of which normally encloses the other) can be indistinguishable – a proposition that is clearly on the edge of impossibility, so much so that, last week, it collapsed twice, once after a stray cat

couldn't resist having a play (as CCTV footage later revealed).

Sejima has also invited artists to exhibit in the Arsenale. Olafur Eliasson filled his room with a sinister water feature. You enter in pitch black to the sound of water falling, and then realise through the slow strobe lighting that there are streams of it pouring from the ceiling. But instead of falling straight down they are flailing around, whipping the air like the end of a detached high-pressure hose. It's mesmerising, and I imagined people dancing under it. More serenely, Janet Cardiff has separated the voices in Thomas Tallis's Renaissance 40-part choral work *Spem in Alium* through 40 speakers arranged in a diamond. If you sit in the middle and close your eyes, you feel like a choir of angels is playing blind man's bluff with you.

Captivating moments, but are they architecture? One architect I spoke to felt that Eliasson's water and Transsolar's cloud were simply one-liners. I disagree. That belies how much research and experimentation it took to create them, and they prove there are ways to activate a space that makes a person stop in their tracks and feel alive. It seems clear that this is the message Sejima wants to impart.

But the biennale is not a one-woman show. As well as the main exhibition, dozens of national pavilions get to interpret her theme in their own ways, often lamely but sometimes provocatively. The [Dutch pavilion](#), for example, has created a foam city floating in the air, representing the thousands of state-owned buildings in the Netherlands that are empty – from ex-industrial sites, to disused municipal offices and abandoned churches. People, it seems, do not always meet in architecture. Why focus on new architecture, the curators ask, when so many usable structures are going to waste? [Bahrain](#), meanwhile, took the Golden Lion award for the best pavilion by recreating the ramshackle wooden huts that fisherman have been building on the island's waterfront. On one level, they are simply places to socialise in the open air – "The shopping malls are suffocating," says one fisherman in a video interview – but they are also poignant acts of resistance, attempts to preserve what's left of Bahrain's coastline from the high-rise builders.

For too long, architecture has been the plaything of speculators – not just property developers but city fathers commissioning signature museums as part of their global branding strategies. Buildings are not for portfolios, nor are they simply for architects to express themselves. Sejima reminds us they are for people: people with inner lives, who aren't simply units of flow. The beauty of this year's biennale is that it puts the human experience back at the heart of architecture. Inspiring places are full of spatial and sensory drama. And so are inspiring exhibitions.