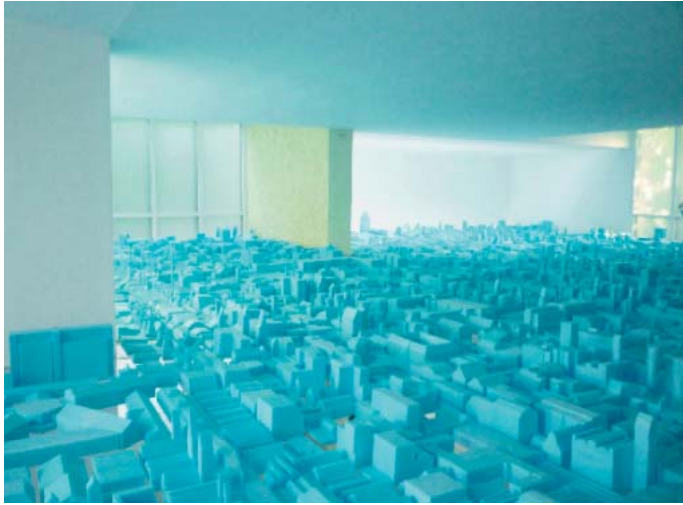


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The Architecture Biennale | A Last Look

By **FELIX BURRICHTER**



The pavilion of the Netherlands features the exhibition "Vacant NL," with models of 1000 state-owned Dutch buildings that are currently vacant. *Felix Burrichter*

If you happen to be in Venice this week for the [Film Festival](#), a quick hop over to the Giardini is also highly recommended. The public park at the tip of the lagoon, overlooking the Lido, is host to most of the national pavilions of this year's Architecture Biennale, which runs through Nov. 21. Perhaps the best way to tour the pavilions is to plunge straight in, literally, at the Polish Pavilion, which won the Golden Lion for National Pavilion in 2008.

The current installation, a collaboration between the architect Aleksandra Wasilkowska and the artist Agnieszka Kurant (curated by the T columnist [Elias Redstone](#)), invites visitors into a darkened room that is lit only by two neon signs that read "Emergency Exit" and "Jump at Your Own Risk." Visitors climb up a structure made of discarded steel birdcages to leap into an uncertain void filled with dry-ice smoke, which obscures an air-rescue cushion that provides a safe landing. According to the artists, the structure makes reference to "the forms of decaying sports monuments, such as the ski jump in Mokotow, Warsaw," but the darkness, smoke and eerie noises may also trigger associations with the plane crash that killed the Polish president Lech Kaczynski in May.

Another highlight is the Dutch Pavilion. "This building has been vacant for more than 39 years," announces the banner outside the Gerrit Rietveld-designed building, alluding to the fact that the structure, built in 1954, is only used for three and a half months a year. The makers of the installation, called "Vacant NL," use this cheeky math to introduce their striking research into vacant state-owned buildings in the Netherlands. Every one of the more than 1,000 empty buildings was rebuilt as a miniature blue foam model and suspended from the pavilion's double-height ceiling.

The curators assembled by the pavilion's commissioner, the Netherlands Architecture Institute's director, Ole Bouman — including the designer [Jurgen Bey](#), the N.A.I. curator Saskia van Stein, and the landscape architects [Rietveld Landscape](#)), call it the "Dutch Atlas of Vacancy." They propose to develop a strategy for temporary use, to make these buildings available to the public, particularly to the creative industries on which the Dutch government is banking its future prosperity.

Next door, "Usures," the quiet and poetic proposal at the Belgian pavilion, contextualizes "use" in architecture: worn parquet floors, overused handrails and stained carpets with cutouts where the furniture used to be are hung on the walls like pieces of art. The installation successfully manages to convey both the presence of people in architecture (coincidentally, the theme of the Biennale) as well as the notion of graceful wear and tear, which is all too often forgotten in architectural discourse.

The Israeli pavilion was all about kibbutz architecture, an interesting reminder of the young country's history of socialist idealism and its translation into architectural form. This year's Golden Lion for the best national participation, however, went to the installation by the Kingdom of Bahrain, "Reclaim," which featured three fishermen's cabins built on wooden stilts and furnished with carpets and cushions. These so-called "kabayen" can be found all along the Bahrain seashore, but the country's growing urbanization has forced fishermen to become more and more nomadic. "Reclaim" is a surprisingly humble and thoughtful proposal from a region that is more regularly associated with display of wealth and architectural excess. "The jury was impressed by the ... lucid and forceful self-analysis of the nation's relationship with its rapidly changing coastline," reads the official press release. Indeed, given the range of vast urban developments that the Kingdom of Bahrain could have been tempted to include in the show, its choice was an interesting, touching and, ultimately, laudable one.

There are always plenty of other things to discover during the Biennale, besides the different national pavilions and the Arsenale. Take, for example, "Modern Primitives," an installation by the New York firm [Aranda\Lasch](#). It features sculptural crystalline pieces, placed throughout the Giardini area in front of the main Italian pavilion, for people to lounge and rest upon. Aranda Lasch collaborated with the Roman fashion house [Fendi](#), and the Venice installment is a harbinger of what it will show at [Design Miami](#) in December.

Another interesting stop at the Biennale is a presentation by [Fabrica](#), the Benetton group's communication research center, which includes two exhibitions at the Guadagni showroom. "Down Side Up" features simple units of modular wooden furniture that have been transformed into customized objects by adding small functional elements like lamps, doors or extra legs. Equally compelling is "The Riot Act," a collection of 12 decorative articles like coat hangers, vases or fruit bowls, which use the same ceramic cylinder as a base.

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