
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT | SEPTEMBER 10, 2010

Meeting in Space

The Venice Biennale Brings Together Architects

By [ANDREW MCKIE](#)

Three pavilions above all share a theme relating to Mr. Baratta and Ms. Sejima's idea of "listening to the space in which we live" in a practical fashion, even when expressed in wildly different interpretations. The Dutch, Japanese and French national entries each examine the notion of the void in modern cities. The Netherlands pavilion does it in the most straightforward manner, simply pointing out that the building lies empty for almost nine months of the year. As you enter an empty room, there is a suspended blue foam ceiling that, when one proceeds to the upper level, turns out from above to be a model of a city. It provides a neat visual example of the percentage of empty space in European urban spaces.

Dominique Perrault, who curated the French pavilion, entitled "Metropolis?," says he believes, "The future of the city is to control the quality of that empty space." In a kinetic, vertiginous multimedia representation of several French cities, his presentation argues that these spaces mean that our notions of the territory of a city are bound to change. "At first I was concerned that the void would be commandeered by developers or the state, but it is simply too big—85% or more. It's impossible now to imagine expansion continuing," he says. Mr. Perrault is so cheerfully enthusiastic that I hesitate to mention the Japanese entry, entitled "Void Metabolism." He roars with laughter. "I know, they are arguing exactly the opposite."

Yoshiharu Tsukamoto of Atelier Bow-Wow, which designed the elegant domestic models in Japan's pavilion, uses a film of the rapidly changing layout of Tokyo to make his point. "During the 20th century, architects could test different expressions and techniques, but the house was always particularized by consumers. Especially in Tokyo, where the ownership of small plots means that the average life span of houses is only 26 years," he says. "But there is no real connection with neighbors. We feel that the Internet and social networks have changed those dynamics, and that there is now the opportunity to create a new typology; to make a house as generous as possible and at the same time begin to use the adjacent spaces to create new community frameworks."

Looking at Mr. Tsukamoto's spare, graceful wooden model of an ordinary townhouse is a reminder that the end purpose of this huge gathering, these dozens of installations, models, films, meetings, discussions and different approaches is, after all, as simple as the theme suggests: providing a pleasant room to sit in, an agreeable place for people to meet.

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page W1

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