Every other year in Venice, architecture from around the world delivers a feast for the senses. The architecture biennale allows time to indulge in the works, ideas, projects and dreams of international built environment specialists and provides the opportunity to network, see old friends or collaborators and meet architectural heroes.

Chilean architect and 2016 Pritzker Prize winner Alejandro Aravena curated this year’s architecture biennale (see a full profile of Aravena in earthworks issue 31). Through his writing, activism and designs, Aravena has consistently demonstrated the role of architecture in the humanitarian effort, hence it’s not surprising that he would envisage a socially leaning theme for this year’s event. “Given the complexity and variety of challenges that architecture has to respond to, ‘Reporting from the Front’ is about listening to those who were able to gain perspective and consequently are in the position to share some knowledge and experiences with those of us standing on the ground,” Aravena states.

FOCUS
In contrast to what architecture is largely believed to be, the impermanence of architecture and the vulnerable spaces and contexts that it exists in – especially in our volatile climates – has come to the fore. At the architecture biennale I was looking for case studies focusing on the social and humanitarian effort – the collective and not the self, like so much of what architecture can be. I was less concerned about the mundane technical details of architecture but rather the formation of the craft alongside other skills and the environment. I questioned how and in what ways architects worked alongside other professionals and stakeholders to make space but also share information and develop programmes for these spaces. Architecture as process alongside other processes and the gentle and vital alignment
of these disciplines and skills is what is of interest, and architects as citizens alongside architects as professionals is what is needed.

FORM MAKER
The Danish had some insights in this regard. In the panel debate ‘The Right to Space’ at the Danish pavilion, architect Bjarke Ingels stated that the Danish word for “designer” can also be translated as “form maker”. He suggested that architects should view their craft alongside the skills of other specialists to give form to spaces and places.

That the architect’s expertise should be taken as one part of a greater making of form sparked a thought: how much of what architecture is and the role of the architect forms part of a larger narrative of city making, and how often do architects take the lead in this development? Are architects willing participants in form making alongside urban designers, planners and urbanists as well as community groups and governments? Or does the current creativity-stifling tender system dictated by governments dominate the built environment? Can we afford to leave the development of cities solely at the hands of governments? And are architects willing participants in this current format?

Bringing some perspective, fellow Danish architect and urbanist Jan Gehl described how he graduated as an architect in 1960. Having been educated in architecture in the 50’s he was taught not to build cities, but rather individual buildings. Public spaces, streets and squares were out; the new thing would be transportation focused on big freeways.

“So I rushed out to do all these wonderful things and then I married a psychologist... and then I was asked ‘Why are you architects not interested in people? Why don’t you learn anything about people in your study of architecture?’ It dawned on my wife and I that there is a big area between sociology, psychology and architecture – between the social sciences and architecture – that was completely unknown. That is why we needed to start from square one in learning how the built environment influences the behaviour of people. We can influence life and the character of life in any given space, but we cannot design life.”

The simple yet profound statements from these two highly accomplished architects offer insight into the role of various disciplines and skills in making form and also the programming of these forms.

Snapshots from the Danish Pavilion at this years’ Venice biennale.
REPORTING FROM THE FRONT

The architecture biennale hosted 88 participants from 37 countries in exhibitions, talks and tours. The approach different countries had to Aravena’s theme highlighting that architecture should respond to more than one dimension at a time and integrate numerous fields, was varied.

To my mind, what was missing in many of the national representations was consideration of the context in which the exhibitions were viewed and reviewed. I had the sense that, despite Aravena’s noble intentions and hopes that commissioners and exhibitors would explore the theme in relation to the challenges faced by their respective countries, practices and educational institutions, that many simply did not meet his proposal to “report from the front.”

For instance, Australia had built a swimming pool inside their pavilion, claiming that for most Australians time in the swimming pool was central to their lives. This is hard to buy into. While I enjoy a sunny afternoon by the pool, I don’t see the relevance of the swimming pool in addressing Australia’s most urgent urban problems.

There were some positive impressions: the UK focused on the residential space in ‘Home Economics’, introducing ways to economise on space and resources in our immediate environments and offering a new way to finance housing; Germany tackled immigration and particularly neighbourhoods housing refugees in German cities; The Netherlands highlighted the systems and compounds of the United Nation’s peacekeeping efforts globally.

EPHEMERAL URBANISM

The most compelling exhibition was on ‘Ephemeral urbanism’. This was not a country representation but rather a special invitation extended by Aravena to architect and academic Rahul Mehrotra who presented the consideration: “Does permanence as the sole instrument in urban imaginaries, really matter?” Ranging from the scale of the small temporary infill within urban areas to the scale of the ephemeral mega cities, this project gives an overview of hundreds of cases depicting settlements or urban configurations that are constructed with an expiry date.

Mehrotra and Felipe Vera started the research project on the Ephemeral City at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 2012, with the ambition of understanding and framing the idea that nonpermanent urban configurations are a legitimate and productive category within the discourse on cities. Such exploration of temporal landscapes challenges the illusion of permanence surrounding

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the urban and provokes questions about seemingly permanent and explicitly impermanent urban configurations.

The main argument is that in contemporary urbanism worldwide, it is becoming clear that for cities to be sustainable, they need to accommodate more temporary fluxes in their structure and broader ecology rather than being anchored solely to static material configurations. The research explored various ephemeral conditions globally including music festivals, refugee circumstances and religious festivals. Their exhibition in Venice centred on the Kumbh Mela festival in India.

Mehrotra states in reference to this ephemeral settlement accommodating seven-million people that “we can learn a lot, from the urban layout to the allocation of services (temples, residences, shops, health facilities, police, and administration of the place) passing through rather sophisticated infrastructure (each road ends in a bridge that crosses the river, maximising the connectivity with the territory), ending in the appropriate and restrictive material choice (the whole operation is conducted using only five easily available recyclable materials: bamboo, screws, rope, corrugated metal sheets and skinning materials such as plastic sheets or textiles).

“We may transfer some knowledge from this almost spontaneous but coordinated operation so that we get the basics right when facing the problem of rapid urbanisation. The ability to deliver a settlement at incredible speed and on a huge scale and still be able to balance the individual initiative with collective living is a great lesson on how to coordinate the common good and the logistics and the construction of the settlement itself.”

Documentation by the Mehrotra team captures the religious and cultural richness of the event and was able to extract lessons on the urban challenges facing the planet. The rarity of the phenomenon put additional pressure on the enterprise, as it’s a research opportunity that only comes around once every 12 years. The festival ends with the monsoon, when the rains and rising river level wash through the whole settlement, leaving not a single trace of the massive occupation of the territory. Its ephemeral condition may be the ultimate lesson in how to deal respectfully with the planet and the role of architects, alongside others, as form makers.  

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