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By Robert Bevan

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Robert Bevan at Venice's Architecture Biennale

From Trump's wall to Brexit to #MeToo, this year's biennale responded to the issues of the moment with earnestness and beauty



HERE were scuffles in Venice earlier this month as the mayor experimented with turnstiles outside the train station to separate the tourist hordes from locals. Protesters held up a banner saying "We are not Veniceland", pointing to the shift from living city to ossified theme park that intensifies each year. Tensions reignited last weekend with the opening of the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale.

Its baggily positive theme of "Freespace", chosen by Irish practice Grafton Architects, is at odds with the reality and power of the biennale in its host city. A large chunk of Venice's eastern end is segregated, open only to ticket holders, including the Giardini – the island's main green space – and the historic Arsenal, where the Venetian empire's ships were built.

"Like an alien spaceship, the biennale lands in Venice every year, maintaining its lifelines to other worlds... while keeping itself detached from the city," argues the Forum Futuro Arsenale, which is calling for free passage through the area for Venetians.

In the past, the biennale organisation engaged with Venice directly by funding local projects, but these days neither the bureaucracy, curators, nor exhibitors deal much with the city itself. One



Building sights:
above, John Wardle's *Somewhere Other*; left, the austere German pavilion; right, an aerial view of the British pavilion





exception this year was a miniature living salt marsh by We Are Here Venice (a local group) working with Assemble, installed at the artsy V.A.C. Foundation as a reminder of the fragility of the lagoon's ecology. Lovely tiles made in the Granby Workshops in Liverpool – another Assemble community project – which temporarily adorn the central pavilion of the biennale, will find their way to the foundation's garden.

Segregation elsewhere in the world was, however, addressed directly. The US pavilion responded to Trump's wall-building mania with a show that included illustration of not only the lives the barrier with Mexico will disrupt, but also the ecology of entire river systems across the border.

The Israeli pavilion, meanwhile, explored divisions at sacred sites in Jerusalem and beyond, where encroachment can prove explosive.

The British pavilion – left deliberately empty and scaffolded but for a timber plaza created on its roof – positioned itself as Island, a conceptual piece that, with its call for other nations to use the British space at a time when barriers with the EU are being raised, was a thinly veiled critique of Brexit.

Germany, in a somewhat prosaic display, explored Berlin's architectural responses to the fall of the Wall. Rotterdam-based Crinson Architectural Historians, meanwhile, wove a carpet integrating the various marginalised migrant areas in European cities.

If it sounds like this year's offerings were entirely earnest, there was also a lot of beauty. Venice Architecture Biennales tend to oscillate between giant installations and experiential spectacles one year to an emphasis on the basic architectural tools of drawing and model the next. This was the latter and there were elegant displays of both – tiny, intricate models of sex clubs (shown well away from the official offerings), models that rotated through the light of sun and moon, massive models that could be walked through such as Australian architect John Wardle's sensual installation, *Somewhere Other*, like a giant Victorian camera made of eucalyptus scented spotted gum timber.

A gorgeously drawn display of unbuilt post-war projects for Venice by the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier was instructive. In particular, the latter's scheme for a new Venice hospital that would expand into the lagoon to create water-filled squares, demonstrates an earlier vision

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of local life that went beyond cultural tourism.

The Holy See's first biennale pavilion, a collection of beguiling temporary chapels by various architects, was sequestered behind the monastery on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore.

Most fun was to be had in Switzerland. Not a sentence you hear often, but this year the Swiss pavilion won the Golden Lion for an Alice in Wonderland-like installation made up of house interiors of various scales — one minute your head was cracking the ceiling, then turn the corner and you were eye-level with an oversized kitchen worktop.

The V&A Museum's decision to display an eight-tonne slice of the controversially demolished east London council estate Robin Hood Gardens provoked a protest by Venetian housing activists. That the museum decided to save a fragment for its collection is unproblematic but shipping it to Venice could be seen as being a prosecco-soaked indulgence. It was saved from this, perhaps, by a



Top award: the Swiss pavilion, left, won the Golden Lion with an Alice in Wonderland-like installation made up of house interiors of various scales

display that made explicit the contemporary problem of destroying and gentrifying public housing. Robin Hood Gardens, by architects Alison and Peter Smithson, was designed to be a community with streets in the sky. That

it pretty much failed as a housing solution doesn't negate its vision of a kinder, less segregated life.

Across the biennale, though, one can still see more superficial architectural thinking, such as the notion that a flowing curved ramp means connection and freedom rather than simply being a shape that certain architects fancy.

The biennale also had its #MeToo moment with the unveiling of a S****y Architecture Men list — which is pretty much self-explanatory.

While there is truth in the criticisms that the biennale separates itself from Venice and that participants use the city simply as a beautiful backdrop, it is also true that the Venice administration needs to sort out its act, to wean itself of the worst consequences of tourism and define an alternative vision for its future. The biennale may bring in higher-spending visitors with less-negative impacts on the city, but architects are also missing an opportunity to contribute responses to Venice's ever more urgent tasks. Instead, the biennale risks becoming part of the problem.