



A very democratic Biennale

Claire Ulenberg visits the 16th Venice Architecture Biennale, which reimagines the possibilities of architecture, brings past, present and future together, and creates free space to breathe.

The theme of the 16th Venice Architecture Biennale is *Freespace*, which is ironic as Venice is a city densely populated with buildings and people. Yet the architects have responded by reimagining the possibilities of architecture to create new breathing spaces. There is a repetition of concepts: *Regeneration*, *Rebuilding*, *Reclamation* and *Repair*, presented in positive and new affirming ways.

The Biennale is curated by two Irish architects, Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara. In a field traditionally dominated by men, they have taken a humanitarian and democratic approach, placing architecture under the banners of generosity, thoughtfulness and a desire to engage. The theme of *Freespace* has provided a platform for environmental, humanitarian and political issues.

The Biennale exhibition is located principally in the Giardini, which was created by Napoleon at the beginning

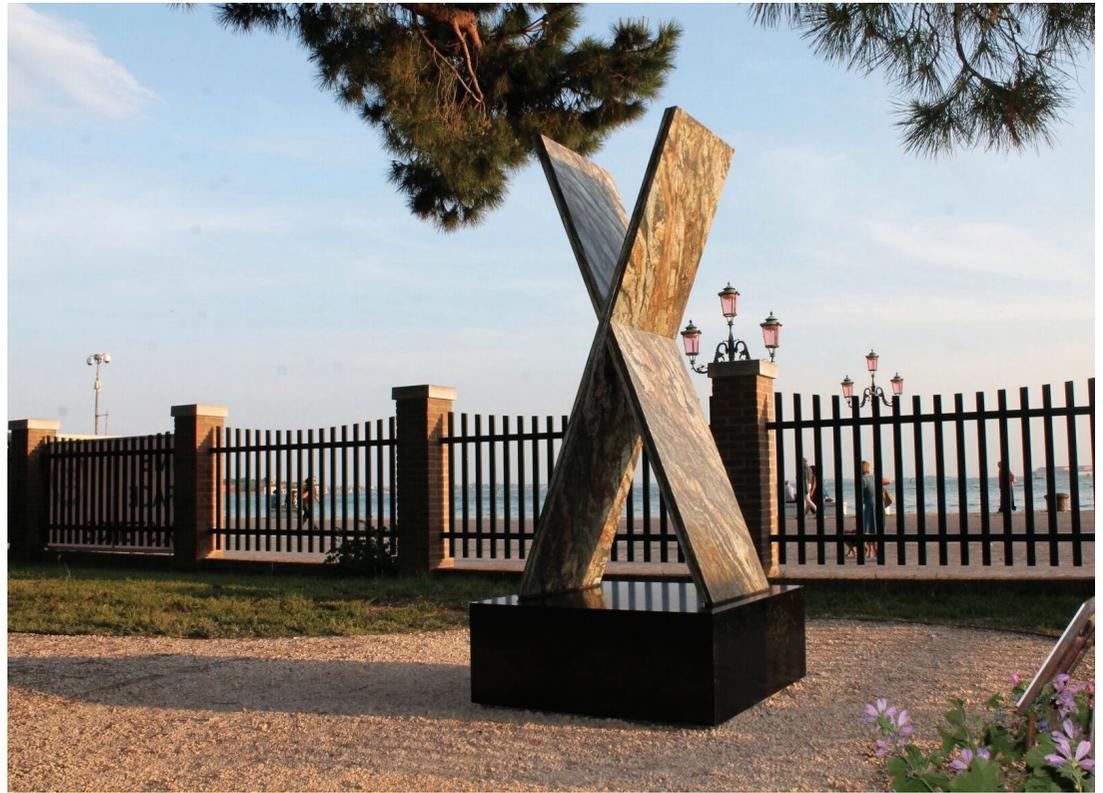
of the 19th century. Within the Giardini are 29 pavilions including the Central Pavilion. Countries own their exhibition space here, and have commissioned pre-eminent architects to design their pavilions. Complementing the Giardini is the Arsenale, the ancient shipyards dating back to Venice's maritime supremacy. Here, in the wide industrial space, is the site of the main curated exhibition. In total there are 63 national pavilions, overflowing from the Giardini and the Arsenale to occupy space over the city and nearby islands.

During the Biennale's vernissage, or preview, architects descend upon the city, many wearing uniform black *Comme des Garçons*, with designer glasses and tote bags – a flurry of activity seemingly oblivious to the multitude of tourists crowding the narrow lanes. Away from the hot congested streets, stillness is found in the city's gardens where the locals spend their time – in their backyards, their free space.

Opposite: *Horizontal Vertigo*, Argentinian Pavilion by the architects Javier Mendiondo, Pablo Anzilutti, Francisco Garrido and Federico Cairoli. A real storm brews in the reticular glass box replicating an Argentinian Landscape, playing with reflections, environment and spatial aspects. Arsenale, Corderie. Photo: Claire Ulenberg

Right: Gill Gatfield, *Zealandia*, 2018, New Zealand stone, stainless steel, Italian granite, 230 x 100 x 100cm. Exhibited in the Marinaressa Gardens. People are drawn to touch the sculpture as it stands elegantly in its environment. Photo: Gill Gatfield

Below: Daniel Libeskind, *Facing Gaia*, 2018, wood and GRIP Metal, 12 metres, as part of the *Time, Space, Existence* exhibition by the European Cultural Centre. Photo: Claire Ulenberg



Along the Bacino di San Marco, nestled in the Marinaressa Gardens, sits New Zealand sculptor Gill Gatfield's *Zealandia*. Farrell and McNamara say, in their curatorial manifesto: "In architecture time is not linear. Architecture brings past, present and future together." Gatfield's work is in this vein, bringing together Venice's lineage of Baroque architecture and contemporary abstraction. A single piece of ancient stone, over 100 million years old, extracted from a remote region of the South Island, it looks remarkably futuristic. *Zealandia* connects to our physicality on a human scale, with limbs outstretched in divine proportion, echoing Da Vinci's timeless drawing, the *Vitruvian Man*, now immortalised on the one Euro coin for Italy. This aspirational project fits within the environment and surrounding community of the Marinaressa Gardens. Just as the architecture and environment in Venice is unique, Gatfield's work speaks to this special place and to the universal themes of environmental cohesion and harmony. It mirrors the surrounding trees and landscape with the meeting of the stone planes and the colours of the environment, sitting subtly, elegantly and respectfully within its context.

In a neighbouring garden stands the work of Polish-born American, Daniel Libeskind, *Facing Gaia*, a modernist sculpture built of wood and GRIP metal (a stamping process to modify sheet-metal surfaces, reducing the weight and enabling quick fabrication) that stands 12 metres tall. The work explores the sociology of architecture, the connection between the earth, place, time and existence. Like the engineering of Gatfield's *Zealandia*, it showcases a new way of doing things.

Embracing Farrell and McNamara's democratic approach, countries such as Antigua and Barbuda, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Lithuania are exhibiting for the first time.





The Holy See (Vatican City) is also a newcomer, choosing to exhibit the project, *Vatican Chapels*, in a densely overgrown garden on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, where 11 architects have built chapels, each one an exquisite combination of space and light.

Lithuania's national pavilion, The Swamp School, interrogates the relevance of a single country's representation (the Biennale's traditional format) in this time of transnational crisis. With the existential threats of war and climate change, and their effects on global migration patterns, the Lithuanian pavilion uses an ephemeral architecture, and is a collective activity involving artists, architects, engineers, philosophers, historians, biologists and a supporting research group, who together explore new thinking about national borders. They have created a space based on the swamp ecosystem in Venice (which was a swamp until dredged) and Lithuania. Visitors participate in an open artistic and architectural form – an architecture of cohabitation.

In their curatorial manifesto, Farrell and McNamara state, "...we need to tend to culture, like tending to a garden." There are ephemeral projects here, which leave as little footprint as possible and deal with the environment, global warming and grapple with sustainability. The Australian Pavilion offers an evocative, crucial and rejuvenating project, *Repair*, by artist Linda Tegg in collaboration with Baracco + Wright Architects. Seeds were brought over from Victoria, Australia and grown in Italy, where they were used to create

Grasslands Repair, which is shown under a life sustaining lighting installation called *Skylight* and with a curated video series by Tegg and David Fox, titled *Ground*, showing built and unbuilt projects. The focus of the project *Repair*, is on the way architecture operates in its context and its potential to actively repair the environment.

Other evocative projects look at humanity, nature and architecture, such as the Argentinian Pavilion in the Arsenale, curated by the architects Javier Mendiondo, Pablo Anzilutti, Francisco Garrido and Federico Cairoli. Their exhibition, *Horizontal Vertigo*, conjures a real storm in an Argentinian landscape with the sound of birdcalls, thunder and rain fuelling the imagination and creating a room for reflection.

The old adage of 'less is more' is more than apparent in the Arsenale where the curators have made a minimal architectural intervention to repurpose the old site, by placing simple marble benches at the north end of the buildings. Visitors to the gallery space are invited to sit and look at the view of the shipyards and the skyline of Venice behind. As Biennale co-curator Farrell says in the manifesto, "Space that deals with space, not with objects – the space between. Architecture should make as much nothing as possible."

Also in the Arsenale is *Evasão*, a low curving marble wall by Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza. Minimalist and effective, it invites people to sit on it and find quiet respite.

Opposite, clockwise from left: *Vatican Chapels* designed by architects Norman Foster; Teronobu Fujimori; Javier Corvalán. Photos: Art News

Right, from top: *Stand Ground*, 2018, by Mexican architect Rozana Montiel reconstructed a brick wall of the Arsenale and laid it on the floor. On the actual wall she projected a view of the canal just outside the window drawing our attention to structures and their installations. Photo: Claire Ulenberg

Unbuilding Walls, 2018, German Pavilion, curated by Marianne Birthler and GRAFT Architects, which presented personal interviews of people in East and West Germany separated by the Berlin Wall, the black panels have information and images showing the impact of walls worldwide. Photo: Claire Ulenberg



While in an architectural biennale we might expect a wall to be used as an architectural device, as it is in *Evasão*, elsewhere walls are used to highlight their capacity to divide and for defence, as in the pavilions of the USA, Brazil, Israel and Germany.

Dimensions of Citizenship curated by Niall Atkinson, Ann Lui and Mimi Zeiger for the United States Pavilion looks at notions of belonging, acceptance and human rights, as the threat of a reinforced US–Mexico border wall remains. The German Pavilion’s *Unbuilding Walls* features a series of interviews with people who lived their lives divided by the Berlin Wall; curators Marianne Birthler and GRAFT Architects aim to explore the ramifications of decades of division, to help the healing process.

For *Stand Ground*, in the *Freespace* exhibition, Mexican architect Rozana Montiel constructed a mirror image of the wall and window of her exhibition space onto the floor, and erected a screen projecting a video of the view outside the window, capturing the everyday life of Venetians. The projection focuses our attention on stillness, function and how beauty is not a luxury but a basic right. She describes her form of architecture as “...social construction. With the desire to change barriers into boundaries.”

The Swiss Pavilion’s *240 House Tour* won the Golden Lion Award for the Best National Pavilion. Presented as a generic apartment with a brochure reminiscent of a real estate catalogue, until you enter to find the proportions skew-whiff; door handles are at the wrong height as are kitchen benches, spaces do not line up, scale is distorted and we feel more and more curious like Alice in Wonderland. This playful and humorous element overlays the critical issue of scale, and the vernacular of space.

The controversial British Pavilion’s *Island*, was awarded a special mention “...for the courageous proposal that uses emptiness to create a ‘freespace’ for events and informal appropriation”. Caruso St John Architects with artist Marcus Taylor have drawn on themes including abandonment and reconstruction, sanctuary and isolation, colonialism, climate change and their current political situation. The concept of *Island* is also based on a quote from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: “Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises, sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.” The rooftop



‘elevated piazza’ has been opened to the public for the first time since 1938 offering spectacular views of the lagoon. Sarah Mann, Commissioner of the British Pavilion 2018 has said: “*Island* will offer a thought-provoking experience within the Biennale, continuing the British Pavilion’s role as a platform for debate, for exchanging ideas and for visionary thinking. This is the first time we have a joint commission between art and architecture at the British Pavilion. Rather than presenting an exhibition, we want to offer an unmediated experience through a new piece of architecture, which offers a generous space to reflect and to come together.”

Space is all around us and mostly we do not think about it, but in a world becoming overpopulated and diminished due to climate change and war we need to rethink our concept of it. The provocation of *Freespace* stimulates thought and discussion, and challenges us to look at architecture’s capacity to offer solutions. Farrell and McNamara define *Freespace* as a “space for opportunity”, a place where an individual can “imagine the free space of time and memory”, a site that emphasises “nature’s free gifts of light – sunlight and moonlight.” Breath is free and we own it. Space to breathe.

The Venice Architecture Biennale 2018, *continues to 25 November*.