Exhibitions

11. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura
Arsenale and Giardini, Venice
14 September–23 November 2008

The International Exhibition of Architecture, best known in English as the Venice Architecture Biennale, made its eleventh appearance in 2008. It alternates with the much older biannual International Exhibition of Modern Art, inaugurated in 1895. One of its chief venues was the Arsenale, the 80-acre shipyard/foundry/armory complex founded in 1104 and enlarged from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. Dante visited the Arsenale in 1306 and Dickens in 1844. The other chief venue was the nearby Giardini di Castello, laid out in 1808–12 by Giovanni Antonio Selva, best known for his design of the Teatro La Fenice. Today it houses thirty national pavilions and some other structures, including the Austrian Pavilion by Josef Hoffmann (1934), the Netherlands Pavilion by Gerrit Rietveld (1954), the Finnish Pavilion by Alvar Aalto (1956), the Nordic Pavilion by Sverre Fehn (1962), the freestanding bookstore by James Stirling (1991), and several works by Carlo Scarpa: the Venezuelan Pavilion (1954), some ticket offices (now replaced) and several remodelings to the largest (32,000 sq. ft.) of the Giardini’s pavilions, that of Italy.

Thirteen other national pavilions were on the Arsenale grounds, and thirteen more in other parts of Venice. In addition, there were two dozen collateral events in Venice and around Europe. In Venice, for example, was an exhibition of Patrick Mimran’s Billboard Project, 30 photographs of the billboards that Mimran has placed in Venice, Rome, Milan, Tokyo, New York, and other cities (sample text: “The best way to use a brush is to clean your teeth.”). Farther offsite was Archibike, a two-day bike tour from Asolo, north of Venice, to sites by Palladio and Carlo Scarpa.

At the opening ceremonies there were Master Lectures by architects Zaha Hadid, Wolf Prix of Coop Himmelblau, and Frank Gehry, and the presentation of awards: the Golden Lion award for Best Project to Greg Lynn Form of the United States for Recycled Toys Furniture, Golden Lion for Best National Participation to Poland for The Afterlife of Buildings, Golden Lion for Best Project by a Young Architect to the Chilean group Elemental for low-cost housing design, Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement to Frank Gehry, and, fittingly, on the fifth centennial of Palladio’s birth, a special Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement in Architectural History to James S. Ackerman.

The main event, however, was the exhibition in the Arsenale and in the Giardini’s Italian Pavilion. Titled Out There: Architecture Beyond Building, it was curated by Aaron Betsky and organized by La Biennale di Venezia and its president, Paolo Baratta. Betsky has worked in the office of Frank Gehry; has taught at Columbia, the University of Michigan, and other schools; and is the author of many books and articles. From 1995 to 2001 he was curator of architecture and design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; from 2001 to 2006 he was director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam; and since 2006 he has been director of the Cincinnati Art Museum. For the three previous Bien- nales he served as the Commissioner for the Netherlands Pavilion, winning the Golden Lion award for best foreign exhibition in 2002.1 Betsky’s curatorial team members were Francesco Delogu, Emissary Gandolfi, Casey Jones, Reed Kroloff, and Saskia van Stein.

In a statement on the Biennale website, Betsky explained his intentions: “[A]rchitecture is not building. Buildings are objects and the act of building leads to such objects, but architecture is something else. It is the way we think and talk about buildings, how we represent them, how we build them.” This Biennale, he said, “seeks to collect and encourage experimentation in architecture. Such experimentation can take the form of momentary constructions, visions of other worlds, or the building blocks of a better world.” It “does not want to present buildings that are already in existence . . . but wants to see if architecture, by experimenting in and on the real world, can offer some concrete forms or seductive images . . . Can we reveal, appropriate and domesticate those forces, usually of a technological nature, that control our daily lives in such a way that we can feel at home in our modern world?”

The introduction to Out There was just inside the entrance to the Arsenale’s 1000-foot-long Corderie, where ropes for the Venetian fleet were once made.2 Here there was a Hall of Fragments created by David Rockwell and Jones|Kroloff. It consisted of an abstract walk-through light show and dozens of monitors, on which were seen clips from films that have presented alternative environments, among them The Wizard of Oz, Waterworld, Fellini’s Satyricon, Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory, Blade Runner, and—a nod to more conventional architecture—The Fountainhead.

Beyond this introduction, Zaha Hadid presented The Lotus, which at first seemed a large model for her design for a performing arts center in Abu Dhabi, but
which the wall text described as both a house and a collection of furniture; indeed, among its swirling plastic loops one could identify a bed, a desk, and some seating. Frank Gehry used a multitude of heavy timbers to support an undulating façade of cracked clay planes; he titled it Ungapakhter, which the wall text explained was Yiddish for “thrown together;” it also told us that “it gestures at an architecture that exists before, through, and after buildings.” Diller Scofidio + Renfro offered Chain City, which presented views of the real city of Venice along with views of its imitations in Las Vegas, Tokyo, Macau, and elsewhere. Droog & Kessel-skramer showed Singletown, nine sets of suspended house parts meant for single inhabitants. Matthew Ritchie & Aranda/Lasch’s The Evening Line was a series of hypnotically intricate forms based on fractal geometry. Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas’s Kensington Gardens was an enormous green box, its faces blank except for three narrow slots through which holograms could be seen. Nigel Coates’s Hypnerotosphere was an assembly of saddle-like seating surrounded by a cyclorama on which vaguely pornographic films were shown; it was said to be “a metaphorical embodiment of human desire.”

In the Giardini, Betsky’s Out There theme was continued in the Italian Pavilion, where some of the same architects who exhibited in the Arsenale were seen again, perhaps to better advantage. Frank Gehry, for example, was given a gallery for his loose-limbed sketches and for some three-dimensional objects that might represent furniture and lighting designs; the felicitous wall text by Betsky himself said, “Frank Gehry thinks in doodles. . . . What they mean is as slippery and as beautiful as the fish that has become his emblem.” Zaha Hadid was also given a gallery for her large, virtuosic, and often vertiginous drawings and for some elegant, if mysterious, models. In the gallery next door to Hadid, Topotek 1 presented Cold War, a stack of twenty-two refrigerators of varied size and shape, their doors opening to surprising lighting effects. Herzog & De Meuron and Ai Weiwei of Beijing collaborated on a pick-up-sticks array of structural members to which chairs had been attached. Lebbeus Woods showed drawings and models for his 1995 San Francisco Bay Projects and his 2006–7 Conflict Space Series. Along with much more, the Italian Pavilion also housed a reprise of the 1978 Roma Intervrotta exhibition curated by Piero Sartogo, along with Uneternal City, presenting a dozen new urban designs for Rome.

In the Giardini’s national pavilions, Betsky’s theme was sometimes side-stepped. The most obvious display, not in one of the pavilions but snaking among them, was a 4-foot-diameter, 200-foot-long yellow pipe presented by Estonia; it was said to represent a controversial gas pipeline proposed by Russia for the bottom of the Baltic Sea. The United States Pavilion, which two years before had shown plans for low-cost housing in New Orleans, this year showed sixteen projects, some by architects, some by students, all by activists, including an Alabama animal shelter, a Brooklyn swimming pool, a sustainable arts center in Kansas, and migrant farm worker housing in Pennsylvania; there was also a planted tribute to chef Alice Waters’s Edible Schoolyard project; the organizer was William Menking, founder and director of Architect’s Newspaper, and co-curators were Aaron Levy of the Slought Foundation and Andrew Sturm of the PARC Foundation, in collaboration with architects Teddy Cruz and Deborah Gans.

The Golden Lion–winning Polish exhibition showed impeccable images by Nicholas Grospieree of recent Polish buildings along with astonishingly manipulated images by Kobas Laska of how they might appear fifty or sixty years from now: a sleek office block by Norman Foster converted into a prison, an airport filled with livestock, a church converted into an amusement park, a housing development choked with rubbish. For an exhibition
titled After the Party, the Belgian pavilion was wrapped in scaffolding, its galleries empty except for a few scattered chairs and ankle-deep confetti. In *From Building to Architecture without Paper*, the Spanish Pavilion showed many recent designs made largely on computers; of the projects actually built, interesting ones included the Biscay Foral Library in Bilbao by IMB Arqitectos and the Jaume Fuster Library in Barcelona by Josep Llinàs. The galleries of the Japanese Pavilion appeared at first to be empty, but a closer look found delicate, atmospheric pencil drawings covering the walls; outside were equally delicate steel and glass greenhouse structures by Junya Ishigami. The British pavilion showed two housing designs each (one in England, one abroad) by five British firms,5 curator Ellis Woodman’s aim being an “interrogation of cultural differences” that could emerge from the home/abroad comparisons. The Russian pavilion offered a *Chess Game for Russia* on a giant checkerboard of red and white squares on which models of recent building proposals could be rolled about, among them SOM’s mixed-use Moscow complex for Capital Group, Norman Foster’s 125-floor Russia Tower, also for Moscow, David Adjaye’s Moscow School of Management, and Thomas Leeser’s World Mammoth and Permafrost Museum for Yakuts, Siberia. Part of Germany’s exhibition was an orchard of potted apple trees hung with intravenous bags and tubes, and refrigerators appeared again in the Czech Pavilion, this time identical ones except for their contents (real leftovers).

Three thoughtful highlights were one-person retrospectives given to Carlo Scarpa, Sverre Fehn, and Jorn Utzon. The exhibition in the Venice Pavilion, *Carlo Scarpa and the Origin of Things*, was informative but appropriately poetic (Figure 1).6 Centered in the C-shaped gallery space were rails on which Scarpa drawings on thin tissue paper under glass could be moved along and superimposed one above another. On adjacent walls were images of famous paintings, partly blacked over to emphasize certain details. Four films featured elemental images: fire in Murano’s glassworks, water in Venice’s lagoon, stones from Vicenza’s hills, and molten gold in a crucible. Other films were of contemporary Italian authors discussing Scarpa’s work.

Sverre Fehn’s own translucent-roofed Nordic Pavilion was the appropriate setting for the work of this Norwegian master, who was born in 1924 and won the Pritzker Prize in 1997. *Architect Sverre Fehn: Intuition, Reflection, Construction* showed houses, exhibition designs, the Norwegian Pavilion for the 1956 Brussels World Exhibition, the 1991 Norwegian Glacier Museum in Fjærdal, the National Architecture Museum in Oslo (1997–2008), and more.7 The presentation was handsome and clear.

The *Architect’s Universe: Jørn Utzon* was housed in the fifteenth-century Palazzo Franchetti, next to the Accademia Bridge, which in the nineteenth century was the home of Archduke Frederick of Austria and, later, Baron Giorgio Franchetti, who also owned and restored the Ca’ d’Oro.8 The exhibition, which had been organized by the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark, opened with *Clouds*, a sympathetic film directed by Pi Michael in 1994 for the Danish Broadcast Corporation; it gave personal glimpses of the architect and concentrated on two of his works, the Sydney Opera House and Can Lis, his own retirement complex (he died at age ninety in Denmark on 29 November 2008) built of native stone and overlooking the sea on Majorca. Many other buildings and projects, as well as a chair and a glass vase, were seen in the other galleries. We were reminded that Utzon had won the Golden Lion for Life-time Achievement at the 2000 Biennale and the Pritzker Prize in 2003, but the emphasis was on his work’s close ties with nature, quoting this remark: “My laboratory is the beach, forests, and the sea, and the clouds.”

In summary, we can, of course, disagree with Betsky’s basic premise. The most old-fashioned of us can insist that the glory of architecture arises from the unlikely triumph of art over a whole catalog of functional requirements. When architecture is not building—when there is no need for it to be occupied, used, walked through, or touched—that triumph is hollow. We can also say that some of the things presented might be more at home in one of Venice’s odd-numbered “art” years than in an even-numbered “architecture” year. Yet, despite some disappointments and many puzzles, the 2008 Biennale offered a large share of excitement, sensuality, and energy. It gave the impression of architects beginning to take halting steps toward an architecture that might indeed help us to feel at home in a world that is increasingly more electronic than physical, more digital than analog, and more simulated than real. This, given architecture’s roots in reality, may prove impossible, but the next steps will be interesting.

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Related publication
Aaron Betsky, *Out There: Architecture Beyond Building*, five volumes packaged together in a PVC case. The first three books, *Installations, Hall of Fragments,* and *Experimental Architecture*, are devoted to the parts of the exhibition that were directly related to Betsky’s theme; the fourth is *National Participations, Special and Collateral Events, Travel Guide*, and the fifth is *Manifesto*. Venice: Marsilio, 2008, 608 pp., 900 color illus., €80 (cloth), ISBN 9788831794473

Notes
1. The 2006 Biennale was titled “Cities, Architecture, and Society” and was curated by Richard Burdett. The 2004 Biennale, “Metamorph,” was curated by Kurt W. Forster. The 2002 Biennale, “Next,” was curated by Deyan Sudjic.
2. The Gorderie was built in the early fourteenth century and restructured in the late sixteenth century to plans by Antonio Da Ponte.
3. The 1978 participants were Piero Sartogo, Costantino Dardi, Antoine Grumbach, James Stirling, Paolo Portoghesi, Romaldo Giurgola, Robert Venturi, Colin Rowe, Michael Graves, Leon Krier, Robert Krier, and Aldo Rossi.
4. The 2008 participants were Centola & Associati, Delega Associati, Giammetta&Giammetta, Labics, nstudio, Nemesis Studio, t-studio, BIG—Bjarke Ingels Group, Clark Stevens—New West Land Company, Koning Eizenberg Architecture, MAD Office, and West 8 Urban Design & Landscape Architecture.
5. The five British firms were Sergison Bates, Tony Fretton, de Rijke Marsh Morgan, Witherford Watson Mann, and Maccreanor Livington.
6. The Scarpa exhibition was supported by the Veneto region in collaboration with the city of Venice, the province of Venice, and the General Management for the Quality and Protection of the Landscape, Architecture and Contemporary Art of the Ministry for the Heritage and Cultural Activities. It was designed by the Andrea Palladio International Center for Architecture Studies (CISA Andrea Palladio). Curators were Guido Beltramini and Alessandro Scandurra.

7. The Commissioner for the Fehn exhibition was Eva Madshus, assisted by Martin Dietrichson, Ulf Grønvold, Anne Marit Lunde, and Gennaro Postiglione.

8. The building had earlier been called the Palazzo Gussoni-Cavalli. It was largely reconstructed in the early twentieth century by Camillo Boito, the Director of the Accademia di Brera in Milan. It is now the home of the Istituto Veneto di Scienze Lettere ed Arti.

Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner
Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
13 July–12 October 2008

The Lighthouse, Centre for Architecture, Design and the City, Glasgow
19 March–26 July 2009

Wolfsonian—Florida International University, Miami Beach
15 October 2009–17 January 2010

Palm Springs Art Museum
20 February–23 May 2010

Organized by Nicholas Olsberg and Frank Escher in conjunction with the recently formed Department of Architecture and Design at the Getty Research Institute and the John Lautner Foundation, Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner has been largely drawn from the John Lautner Archives, which were donated to the Getty Research Institute by the John Lautner Foundation in 2007. This generous gift has made many of Lautner’s writings, papers, and drawings accessible for the first time to scholars and the public, allowing the curators to undertake the first major critical assessment of this important architect’s work. A handsome catalog draws upon more of this rich archival material, allowing Olsberg and Escher in their essays to evaluate in more depth what they see as Lautner’s achievement.

John Lautner, Jr. (1911–1994) was born in Marquette, Michigan, where he was nurtured by parents steeped in German philosophy, American Transcendental thought, and Nordic and Indian mythology, and who also shared a deep interest in art and architecture. Lautner joined the Taliesin Fellowship in Wisconsin in 1933, where he absorbed many of Frank Lloyd Wright’s ideas about architecture and society. Following employment with Wright, and later in defense-related construction during the war and collaborations with Los Angeles architects Whitney Smith and Douglas Honnold, he struck out on his own in 1947.

Thus began the first stage of his career, which is amply documented through drawings, photographs, and models in the first gallery of the exhibition, which covers the years 1947 through 1960. During this postwar era Lautner, like many young Los Angeles architects, focused heavily on the problem of the small single-family residence. This exploration includes the Gantvoort, Carling, Jacobsen, and Polin houses, all designed in 1947, and all of which share the architect’s early fascination with innovative roof structures of either steel or wood, employed to shelter free and flexible plans that often open dramatically to the Southern California landscape. Lautner deployed similar structural and planning strategies in his designs for half a dozen drive-in restaurants and automobile showrooms that he produced during this same period. A series of shadow and light studies for the Lincoln Zephyr Showroom in Glendale (ca. 1948) reveal the duel objectives of these expansive structural systems for his commercial work: to open vistas of the interiors and their merchandise to the passing automobile while simultaneously sheltering the contents from the harsh Southern California sun.

In his elegant design for the Desert Hot Springs Motel (1947), Lautner translated the wood and canvas vocabulary of Wright’s Ocotillo Desert Camp (1929), and the later Taliesin West drafting room (1937 on), into thin Gunite and glass walls combined with steel I-beams, whose 45- and 60-degree angles echo the desert terrain in which this only partially-realized complex is set. Small exterior gardens and walls separate the units, which are exca-