

# ARCHITECTURE ALONE

## HALF MEASURES AND LESS AT THIS YEAR'S VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE.

BY THAÏSA WAY, ASLA

**A** rapidly urbanizing planet demands radical solutions for human and environmental health, climate change, and equity. To design the contemporary city, which the sociologist Saskia Sassen has called complex and incomplete, designers have to expand their professional imaginations by risking the challenges of thinking collectively. The theme of the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, “Reporting from the Front,” challenged architecture to roam on the edges of design, in slums and in temporary communities, and to learn from people on the borders of professional practice. To represent the biennale, its curator, the Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, chose a photograph by the English travel writer Bruce Chatwin of the archaeologist Maria Reiche climbing a ladder to look over the landscape as she studied the Nazca Lines in Peru—a new vision by modest means. Aravena said he hopes that visitors will “expand their horizon the same way that Maria Reiche was going up a ladder and understanding that things could be different.” At the biennale, then, as a visitor you might expect a provocative dialogue about ways that architecture is thinking differently about cities and the role of design and building. You might imagine that this dialogue would draw on the diverse disciplines that address the health and resilience of cities: natural and social sciences, law, public health, and policy, among others. But among 88 participants from 37 countries, there was a remarkably consensual and limited conversation about buildings with little attention to the complexities of cities or the social life within the center or the periphery. Few of the exhibits considered any revolutionary

vision that might expand architecture beyond the building, its materials, and forms, coordinates staked out in practice more than a century ago.

Aravena, at the opening of the London School of Economics’s Urban Age conference at the biennale on July 14, contended that seeing landscape is critical to understanding the world better, and only with that knowledge can architects productively contribute to reshaping cities. This seems particularly potent when given the fact that while cities are growing their populations, they are expanding their physical footprint at even more dramatic rates, with sometimes more than a fivefold expansion of land use with only a doubling of population. This is a landscape challenge. Detroit’s director of city planning, Maurice Cox, suggested a similar focus in an interview featured in the catalog for the U.S. Pavilion. Cox noted, “Between the scale at which the architect operates, the building scale, and the scale at which the landscape architect works in shaping open space is where we have the potential to have a powerful intersection. You can’t do one without the other.” These leaders argue for actively engaging architecture with landscape if architects are to have any voice in the realization of more resilient cities. Nevertheless, although some exhibits acknowledged the urban realm is more than a collection of buildings, few of them actively explore the rich intersections of architecture and landscape in the city or beyond.

Among the few, one of the more intriguing is a project by Horacio Valencia, director of sustainable urban interventions at Empresas Públicas de

**OPPOSITE**  
New Zealand,  
*Future Islands.*



DAVID ST GEORGE AND NEW ZEALAND INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS





**ABOVE**  
Medellín, Colombia,  
*The Articulated Life.*

**RIGHT**  
Canada,  
*EXTRACTION.*

Medellín, to transform the water tanks of Medellín, Colombia, into public landscapes. The images of the project, known as *Unidades de Vida Articulada* or *The Articulated Life*, are moving not because of their architectural intervention but because they are landscapes where people actively gather to be with community and engage with the often invisible infrastructure of the city. Such vibrant public spaces build social resiliency while an understanding of infrastructure can improve public stewardship of resources and systems. This may be incremental but it builds toward a more resilient city. In another Arsenale exhibit, Rahul Mehrotra and Felipe Vera's *Ephemeral Urbanism* questions permanence and change by depicting temporal urban landscapes, often at a remarkably grand scale (think Kumbh Mela in India). Time and the dynamics of change are inherent to landscapes and ecology, and in that light might provoke alternative approaches to material, form, and function in architecture and in urbanism. A dialogue exploring how the dynamic and ephemeral character of landscape and natural systems might be harnessed in such urbanistic responses was missing.

The Canadian Pavilion, produced by the Art Gallery of Alberta, brought another exhibit to challenge the lens of architecture, led by the landscape architect and urbanist Pierre Bélanger, ASLA, and OPSYS as curator, with a team including the architecture firm RVTR and the ecologist and planner Nina-Marie Lister, Honorary ASLA, with multimedia expertise from Studio Blackwell. The exhibit contests architecture's limited view of built environments by

exploring resource extraction in Canadian politics, economy, and landscape. Bélanger and his team suggested that the front of architectural practice might be the ground beneath architecture. After the Canada Council for the Arts closed the Canadian Pavilion for renovation, Bélanger received permission from the biennale administration to construct *EXTRACTION* outside in the Giardini. The closed Canadian pavilion is fronted by a wall of large bags filled with iron ore left over from a failed Canadian mining project in Sardinia, Italy. On the ground midway between the Canadian, British, and French Pavilions sits a milled Corian model of a geological map of the world (at a 1 to 1 billion scale) with a pure gold survey stake at its center. Kneeling on the ground to peer through a hole in the stake, one watches a film of "800 years of empire building," beginning with the Magna Carta and shown through 800 images over 800 seconds. In these images European colonization and the removal of natural resources from the land frame Canada's territorial history. But it is not only a history of Canada. According to research from the exhibition, of the 20,000 mining projects, from gold to gravel, around the globe, today more than half are Canadian operated, with a majority of firms



COURTESY ANIBAL GAVIRIA, MAYOR OF MEDELLÍN. LEFT: OPSYS/LANDSCAPE INFRASTRUCTURE LAB. CC BY-NC 4.0. RIGHT

based in Canada. The influence of these landscapes of extraction extends from the local impacts on human and environmental health to impacts on transnational economies and politics. Landscape is not merely the setting but is also the medium to question territory, displacement, colonization, globalization, and sovereignty.

There are moments when landscape makes an appearance but is then pushed offstage. The New Zealand *Future Islands* by Charles Walker, displayed in a palazzo off the Giardini, features an array of floating islands with seemingly infinite edges that allow you to see landscape at eye level, from the top, and from underneath. Landscape is implied, and yet the text sticks to discussions of the architecture designed by architects to be placed atop the landscape. *Between East & West: A Gulf*, the exhibit curated by Hamed Bukhamseen and Ali Karimi for Kuwait, explores the idea of an archipelago of 300 islands connected by an expanse of water known as the Gulf. This water body was the source of shared trade, cultural exchange, and commerce that might, according to the curatorial statement, once again serve to create a shared identity, culture, and ecology across national boundaries. Participating architects were each assigned islands on which to contribute to a collaborative master plan representing the region's collective identity. Some attempted to explore the possibilities of farms for producing food, a wildlife preserve, or infrastructure for waste treatment, while others sought to expand investigations of free trade zones and territorial lines. A notable engagement with natural systems was the Eco-Building Machine, intended to bring together international collaboration in the envi-



ronmental management of the Gulf. Nevertheless, the design proposals remain so abstract and theoretical, it is impossible to imagine the projects as real interventions into the actual places that might create such collective identities. In such exhibits, the architects signal that they understand that landscape had the potential to bring about a different approach, but apparently never took the leap that might have revolutionized the response.

Most of the nominally landscape-driven proposals neglected to build on landscape's potential as ecology, or as meaningful place—in other words, as more than a thin surface. *Fuerzas Urbansas*, or *Urban Forces*, in the Venezuela Pavilion, proposed through a series of postcards of urban landscapes that landscape could transcend architecture, but any landscape transformation or ecological possibilities remained unseen. *BLUE*, the Dutch Pavilion, considered how United Nations peacekeeping

**ABOVE**  
Kuwait Pavilion,  
*Between East &  
West: A Gulf*.

**RIGHT**  
U.S. Pavilion,  
*A Situation Made*  
from Loose and  
*Overlapping Social*  
and Architectural  
*Aggregates*, MOS  
Architects, 2016.



buildings might transition to serve as more permanent infrastructure for urban development. Curated by Malkit Shoshan of the think tank FAST, the proposal to use the peacekeeping missions as a catalyst for local growth brought ideas of temporality, transformation, and politics to the fore. In the proposed projects, architecture provided minimal shelter, and it was the landscape that was altered and enhanced. However, the designs were little more than the addition of grass and trees and enclosure, with no reference to the potential to create a more resilient or healthy community in a place that would seem to call for such idealism. Left unexplored was what any of these teams might have produced in partnership with a landscape architect or an ecologist, or a sociologist, for that matter.

So what of the much-debated and derided U.S. Pavilion that took Detroit as its site with the theme of *The Architectural Imagination*? Architects, landscape architects, and planners as well as community activists have engaged Detroit continuously over the past two decades. The curators, Cynthia Davidson and Monica Ponce de Leon, set an ambitious agenda to imagine a different architecture to catalyze a new Detroit. Twelve design teams were asked to address a selected urban landscape in an

imaginative way. Despite the complex sites, landscape and ecology were barely evident. Stan Allen's proposal included a vertical botanical garden, in essence making horizontal landscape architectural by becoming vertical. Pita & Bloom suggested urban plazas as a landscape network. The drawings by MOS Architects showed a lot of trees and grass, but no ecology. The willingness to be imaginative about architectural form was evident, but the willingness to expand the imagination into the potential of the site as an urban landscape was not. Their responses were limited by the conventions of architecture we already know so well. Opening to the other design disciplines would have been a simple start. From the 1st International Architecture Exhibition in 1980, titled *La presenza del passato* or the *Presence of the Past*, there has been a call to critique architectural practice. One must ask if this critique, now in its 15th year, should remain limited to the confines of normative practice. Isn't it time we take a more complex and inclusive view of cities, to follow Reiche's footsteps and see the landscape and the city differently? ●

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