



## FROM THE 16TH INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION

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### DEBATE

#### On the Record with Kenneth Frampton

*Cynthia Davidson, translated and edited by Manuel Orazi*

In an interview made this past May, Kenneth Frampton, recipient of the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the opening of the 16th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, comments on the exhibition and recalls past biennales. Davidson also asks him to look back on his career as an architect, historian, critic and educator in England and in the US, including his experiences with architectural magazines and academic institutions like Princeton and the IAUS. Frampton recalls important readings and intellectual friendships and discusses the idea of critical history and how the word «critical» has been applied in his research, especially as it relates to the ideals of the Modern Movement and the contemporary condition. Frampton states how architectural discourse, particularly writing, is both relevant and essential to constructing and maintaining an architectural culture.

#### For a Critical Biennale. Modernity and History

*Gabriele Mastrigli*

Although not officially declared, the 16. Architecture Biennale of Venice seems to reflect on the legacy with modernity, especially of the post-war period. Among other contribution this approach is evident in the section *Close Encounter*, where 16 architects and scholars have been invited by the Biennale curators Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara to analyze the same number of exemplary projects: from Michelucci's church on the Highway A11, to Luis Barragán's house in Mexico City, from Jean Prouvé's Maison du Peuple to the Beinecke Library realized by Gordon Bunshaft in Yale. Despite the good intentions of the curators, this contribution doesn't succeed in clarifying the role of this references. This particularly evident if we think to the biography of Kenneth Frampton, the architecture historian mentor of this Biennale, awarded with the Career Golden Lion. By claiming – as a provocation – that this edition should have been entrusted to him, the article reflects on the necessity of a critical approach to rethink the more and more too-inclusive and omnivorous formula of the Venice exhibition.

#### Vatican Chapels. In Lieu of a Pavilion

*Maria Argenti*

An undeclared antithesis is what makes the Vatican Chapels at the Venice Biennale such a fecund operation. On one hand the challenge issued by the Holy See to the world of architecture by stripping itself bare to initiate a new discussion of the meaning of the sacred; on the other hand, the attempt-challenge to contemporary architecture to seek the

meaning of what it wishes to represent solely within itself. What emerges is the unresolved node of the relationship with transcendence in an era simultaneously marked by immanence and a widespread and indistinct need for religion. The chapels in the forest on the Island of San Giorgio face one another and establish an almost silent dialogue akin to that of the small chapel by Asplund in the Stockholm cemetery. This is recognisable in the sober silent beauty of the chapel by Eduardo Souto de Moura, in the brutalist expression of Smiljan Radic and – at the extreme opposite – in diverse forms of lightweight construction: from the unsettling play of suspended equilibriums created by Javier Corvalán to the awe-inspiring delicacy proposed by the Brazilian Carla Juaçaba who, with a simple gesture, brings all of the sacredness of Asplund's work outside, into the forest.

#### The Italian Pavilion. A Journey with Architecture

*Fabrizio Toppetti*

The Italian Pavilion, curated by Mario Cucinella, presents the results of a reconnaissance undertaken with exploratory will and operational purpose. It is a journey with contemporary architecture – the examples selected are small and beautiful, while those proposed are outsized and inadequate – through an Italy made of small historic centres and inland territories, some difficult and marginal. From the outset I believed the idea was a winner. The added value of the operation lies in its objective: a focus on architecture and the contribution it can make to the overall quality of the landscape and to our lives. The itineraries were constructed by assembling the interventions presented in the first section of the exhibition (the most convincing), carefully selected after an open call. The resulting panorama is surprising for the overall quality of the projects, the variety of themes and languages and the sensitivity toward context. I believe this work can and must be carried forward to establish a permanent observatory that documents, monitors and supports good architecture. By this I mean architecture capable of positively affecting the quality of real habitats, often far from the spotlight. All of this must be accompanied by good planning, best practices and research.

#### *Line, Light, Locus*

*Elizabeth Bonde Hatz*

The architectural drawing – even in an age over-immersed with images – seems remarkably still to possess the power to move, entice and inform.

The exhibition *Line, Light, Locus* wishes to be a place of repose and reflection in the midst of the Biennale buzz. A celebration of the architectural drawing in some of its diverse aspects: as investigation, as manual, as thinking tool, as craft, as evocative artefact – as dream.

Using pigments prints of original drawings, mainly from Drawing Matter Collections in Somerset UK, ArkDes in Stockholm and private architects, gave a curatorial freedom

to enlarge and reduce sizes as well as avoiding distancing frames and glass: 133 drawings are simply nailed to the walls and easy to touch. From a miniature 1920-ties crayon utopia/dystopia by Chernikhov enlarged to huge canvas size (1,5 × 1,5) to a technical drawing by Francisco Alonso de Santos (natural size) for a community center still on site outside Madrid, the exhibition reflects on Free Space through four notion-sets: Ground/Floor, Temple/Shed, Niche/Stoa and Mind-Space, one for each wall. Key sheets for every wall give information and a reflection on each drawing.

## Robin Hood Gardens: House and Monument

*Sergio Martín Blas*

Pieces and memories of Robin Hood Gardens have been exhibited by the Victoria and Albert Museum at the 16. Venice Biennale, like remains of a shipwreck assembled by a nostalgic Robinson Crusoe. The housing complex, designed by Alison and Peter Smithson and completed in 1972 in London's East End, is in process of demolition since 2017, after an unsuccessful ten-year campaign for its salvation. The exhibition, related to the acquisition by the museum of a fragment of the complex, is presented under the title *A Ruin in Reverse*, which is attributed to the Smithsons. Yet such expression was in fact first used and spread by a different Smithson, Peter Smithson, in a 1967 article that dealt among other things with the contemporary status of the monument (*The Monuments of Passaic*). In fact it is the problematic identification of 70s social housing estate as a monument or as a museum piece, in combination with the images of its ruin, that unleash the most troubling reflections about the vicissitudes of Robin Hood Gardens and the Victoria and Albert exhibition. Some of the main implications and precedents of the idea of the house as a monument are analyzed in this article, together with the possible permanence or canceling of the traces of modern housing architecture.

## Excess Practices. Michael Maltzan, Social Apartments in Los Angeles

*Alessandro Rocca*

The dialectic tension between the collective dwelling house and monumentalism is a long history which, periodically, re-emerges as a disturbing dilemma, a false problem, therefore, that however becomes true when the mere architectural and typological organization is not sufficient to produce a real architecture. Star Apartments, a social housing complex recently designed and built by Michael Maltzan Architecture in Los Angeles, and exposed at the Biennale di Venezia 2018, find their architectural order if we look at the building choosing our point of view in the spaces comprised between the small apartments and the whole structure. These interstitial spaces are the real center of the project, the elements which give scale and meaning to the whole building.

## Swiss Pavilion: the Sense of Humor of an Uncanny Interior

*Maria Clara Ghia*

*House Tour* is a project that works on the new apartment standard. This typology is timeless, one of the most stable

architectural manifestations from Modern Movement until today. Like imaginary real estate agents, the curators of the Swiss Pavilion welcome us to «visit the house». But a wash of white on the wall is not enough to prevent the onset of hallucinations. Bosshard, Tavor, Van der Ploeg and Vihervaara undermine our way of living. They look for heuristic aspects, and they do it with extreme sense of humor.

The Pavilion is built on what we all consider to be a home. The image of the house is shaped, endowed with depth, prolonged in the third dimension. The game consists alternatively in transforming what is two-dimensional into real space and, vice versa, in crushing the three dimensions on the plane. With dimensional changes, the differences between the bodies moving through the space suddenly become more visible. And time, the fourth dimension, enters the game precisely through the movements of visitors. Movements and bodily sensations. This is not a geometric space, a container of objects, but a lived space, which manifests itself through the significant and affective connotations of things in it.

## Open Form Narratives

*Alberto Iacovoni*

It is in the initial sequence of the Arsenale that are displayed three key architectures to comprehend in its most relevant implications the meaning of *Freespace*, the theme of this 2018 Venice Biennale. These architectures develop the concept of open form, researched, discussed and experimented since the beginning of the last century with different goals and approaches: Diller and Scofidio + Renfro by blurring the boundaries in between spaces and programs, leave room for creative uses and appropriations of the vertical sequence in the Columbia's Vagelos Center in New York, while Talli Architecture and Design give to the dwellers of the Tila Housing Block in Helsinki a simple infrastructure where to build according to the different needs and desires, and Case Design open the process of design to a local and transnational community of craftsmen, workers, designers. These open works require a tool as the video, developed consistently with the stories that they have to tell, as key to enter inside these deeply narrative architectures. Nevertheless, a paradoxical contradiction can be perceived between the openness of these architectures, the richness of relations that they can foster and accommodate, and the perfection of the script to which its characters adhere. This perceived contrast reveals the deepest struggle of architecture, a discipline at the same time autonomous and eteronomous, which builds the objectivity of form on a thought that projects in the future its own economical, political and cultural context.

## Dream Space in the Installations of Atelier Peter Zumthor and RCR Arquitectes

*Gianpaola Spirito*

Among the numerous installations exhibited at the 16th Biennale, whose *Freespace* theme has been interpreted in various ways, two use the word *dream*: that of Atelier Peter Zumthor is titled *Dreams and Promise* and the Pavilion of Catalonia RCR *Dreams and Nature*.

The first consists of 20 study models, not created specifically for the Biennale, but during the creative process in the atelier Zumthor. For the Swiss architect they are an

indispensable tool because they allow understanding the scale, the physical and material qualities of the place and, observed from different points of view and under different types of light, they put his imagination into motion and suggest the atmosphere suitable for a specific project. The title *Dreams and Promises* means that every project through its model is the promise of a possible space, which can make people reflect, imagine and dream. *Dreams and Nature* by RCR Arquitectes, on the other hand, is an installation that alters the spatiality of the pavilion, giving life to an immaterial atmosphere that envelops visitors and gives them the feeling of being in a dream. Both want to affirm that architecture's aim is respond to human needs, but also to arouse emotions and induce dreams.

### French Pavilion. Autonomy and «Infinite Places»

*Carlo Cellamare*

The contribution aims to resume and discuss the theme of self-organization and re-appropriation of places, which is taken up in the French pavilion at the 16th International Architecture Exhibition, curated by Encore Heureux (Nicolas Delon, Julien Choppin and Sébastien Eymard) and dedicated to *Lieux Infinis / Infinite Places*. Through a very attractive and engaging set-up and above all through the (often evocative) words of the direct protagonists, the theme is developed with reference to ten main case studies. They are not just participatory planning processes, but experiences of production and reproduction of space starting from the inhabitants and from associations and committees of people involved in the social world (for example on the theme of hospitality) or culture and art. These are increasingly relevant experiences in the panorama of recent urban transformation, rich in social meanings and cultural and symbolic values. The contribution, in particular, develops some general reflections, starting from the author's research paths, on some main themes: the relationship between self-organization and daily life, the rethinking of the role of the designer, a renewed political attention.

### Free Space and Barriers that Can Be Crossed: Rahul Mehrotra's Soft Thresholds

*Laura Andreini*

Today, the phenomena of globalisation and immigration have changed contemporary architecture; the project assumes a fluid and non-static connotation, it is presented in continuous mutation and moves along different paths and ideologies that are often hybridised and blend with one other without one language ever dominating over another. In this context, the architect should more than ever imagine and build through the project democratic spatial possibilities in which to live comfortably and improve the lives of everyone. Yvonne Farrel and Shelley McNamara of Grafton Architects, under the direction of the 16th Venice Architecture Biennale, curated by the Irish architects, entitled *Freespace* and in continuity with the previous edition of Alejandro Aravena, provide a valuable social and civic contribution, focusing attention on the quality of a «free space in all senses».

The text highlights the participation of Rahul Mehrotra, an architect and teacher of Indian origin, already

at his third Venetian participation. The threshold, for Mehrotra, represents a sort of separation membrane that can be both physical and symbolic, an element that expands and contracts, becoming connection or separation and therefore an example of parity or inequality.

### Freespace, an Illustrated Story

*Emilia Rosmini, Emiliano Zandri*

It's quite impossible to give an univocal meaning to the term «free space». It would be easier to be transported just by the sensations and images. This imaginary route, based on photo shoots, sometimes in contrast, others in similarity, both elective and formal, tries to define what Moneo would define «the state of things» within the «Venice Biennale». In this condition, the free space becomes the right combination of relationships, patterns and significance, which are changing fast over the time, as it happens in a contemporary city. The architecture should respond to those needs, attitudes and abilities with which humans are moving in a changing city.

Crossing from the generous landscapes of the pampas to the Caribbean deserts, we then entering in a «space» intended as a sense of solitude and meditation, such as the contribution of Álvaro Siza and Toyo Ito summed up by a sinuous and wavy shape. Humans may have found the right quiet, but not yet the right form. In this way, the free space changes again, becomes ephemeral, definable only if in relation with others, interactive, symbol of well being together, the opposite of the previous one. Thus, it's better to conclude this walking in the exhibition, and let observe everything from the Biennale's Gardens.

### COMMENT

#### #morandibridge: Chronicle of a Crash Foretold

*Tullia Iori*

On 14 August 2018, at 11:36 a.m., pylon 9 of Riccardo Morandi's Polcevera viaduct collapsed. The collapse, which involved about 240 meters of deck, caused the death of 43 people. This disaster, marked by so many victims, will have consequences on the history of Italian structural engineering in the coming decades.

The viaduct over the Polcevera was a masterpiece, the most original work of our rich heritage of bridges, the most famous icon of «Made in Italy» structural engineering. It was the first «homogenized» cable-stayed bridge, that is, the first bridge in which Morandi applied what we defined, with Sergio Poretti, his «invention». What's more: Morandi was one of the best bridge designer of all time, unparalleled in Italy and with few rivals in the world. And the collapse is certainly not his fault: he didn't make a mistake in his calculations and he didn't misinterpret the structural concept. So, what happened? The data released by the committees of inquiry still do not allow us certainty but we try to make some credible assumptions. And above all to clarify the good reasons for opposing the demolition of the surviving structure.