

# Save the world!

## The Architecture Biennale

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All houses represent a chunk of environmental pollution. If mankind is not to perish, we must build differently. The Venice Architecture Biennial demonstrates new ideas for a clean future Architecture

by Tobias Timm

Warsaw is a garbage heap. Old washing machines, TVs, furniture, steel girders, cardboard boxes are piled up so high in the streets and front gardens that Marina Mokotów, formerly an expensive and well protected post socialist residential estates is half-submerged in garbage. Yellow excavators plough superficially through the growing pile of scrap, but cars have not been able to pass through the streets for some time.

For the moment this is just a vision, a dystopian installation by the Polish artist, Kobas Laksa, who fantasises about the future of buildings and entire cities. Two Italian architecture students are astonished by the large photo exhibited in the Polish pavilion at the Architecture Biennial in Venice. Even though the idea of scrambling around in a scrap paradise like this is tempting, the young female student says, this image is nevertheless a warning. »We can't go on living as we have done until now. Nor can we simply continue to build in the same way«. Her fellow student nods, looking serious.

And the two of them are right to be worried. If the world fails to change within the next fifty years, the Polish pavilion will have gone under. And Venice will have disappeared too. Not in garbage; but in the sea, the level of which will rise by several metres because the polar ice-caps are melting. As we all know, the climate change is to blame.

But what is the main cause of the climate change? »Buildings, buildings and, again, buildings«, says a man with a bald head and moustache at the Piccolo Teatro, just a few minutes on foot from the Polish pavilion. The man is an economist; his name is Jeremy Rifkin and despite the humid heat he is wearing a suit and tie with a matching handkerchief in his breast pocket. He normally advises CEOs of companies like General Motors or heads of governments like Angela Merkel. Today he, the easygoing agitator, is explaining to several hundred architects and journalists who have travelled a long way to hear him, that houses - beating meat production into second and transport into third place - consume the most energy and therefore are responsible for 30 to 40 percent of the carbon dioxide emissions worldwide. »Buildings will ruin us«, Rifkin preaches, »but they are also our salvation«. Together with the architects he wants to push forward with the »Third Industrial Revolution«. What is at stake is nothing less than the survival of our species. It is all a question of distribution. In future each house ought to function like a small power plant and recover energy with the aid of the sun, wind or waste. So energy is to be democratised, its distribution decentralised and its consumption controlled better. Because, as Rifkin claims, in future power will be distributed digitally and no longer mechanically. Each refrigerator would then only receive as much power as it really needs at the respective time.

To see what intelligent power distribution of this kind looks like, one must go from the Piccolo Teatro back to the Giardini, to the German pavilion. What Rifkin is calling a revolution is demonstrated here by means of a simple device reminiscent of crafts lessons in the fifth class. There is a row of light bulbs on a board, linked by a cable. If one presses the light switch a miracle happens: the lamps shine at different degrees of brilliance at different times although they are all connected by the same cable. Small chips in yellow luster terminals upstream of the individual bulbs control the power feed. In future it will be possible to save up to 40 percent of the entire energy requirements by means of these little chips, according to Matthias Böttger and Friedrich von Borries.

Environmental fundamentalists are out. What is modern today is the efficient optimist

The two are neither economists nor engineers; they are architects and wear the steel-rimmed spectacles so popular among Berlin's digital bohemians. For a few years the eloquent 34 year-olds have been running a small think tank, which they have named Raumtaktik ("room tactics") in a former factory building in Berlin-Kreuzberg. They have written books on urban guerrilla marketing by trainer manufacturers and about the spatial dimensions in computer games. And now they are the General Commissioners of the German pavilion. Over the past months they have been searching for a hundred projects for a better future, twenty of which they are presenting in Venice; the remaining eighty are to be found in the exhibition catalogue.

They include more or less classic architecture projects as well as an innovative school built with clay bricks in Burkina Faso, the conversion of a high-rise air-raid shelter in Hamburg into a source of regenerative energy, or the reuse of a West German store façade for building a library in Magdeburg. However, Böttger and Borries also present ideas that hardly have anything to do with the construction of buildings. In addition to the power distribution chip, for example, there is a hang glider drive system for freight ships and beer brewed with the aid of solar energy.

»Architecture beyond building« is the motto of this year's Architecture Biennial and was determined by its curator, Aaron Betsky. Much to the disapproval of the traditionalists among the visitors, Betsky works with an extended concept of architecture and space. »Most buildings are ugly, useless and wasteful«, he says, »but architecture is beautiful. « Because it can locate us in life; because it creates spaces. Spaces like the plastic bubble by Coop Himmelb(l)au, which is equipped with monitors and loudspeakers that make the heartbeat of the visitor who slips into the machine visually and audibly perceptible. Betsky has had two dozen of these generous space models and installations placed inside the long halls of the Arsenale by such architects as Zaha Hadid, Massimiliano Fuksas, MVRDV and Frank Gehry. Most of them are formal experiments, sculptures that are neither inhabitable nor built out of air-purifying bricks. At all events, they are not going to prevent the polar caps from melting.

»There is no right way to save the world«, von Borries and Böttger say. Like many others of their generation they do not question the system as a whole; they are neither communists nor environmental fundamentalists. They see themselves as tactical pragmatists, as radical opportunists and efficient optimists, seeking to take small steps

on the way to improvement under the motto »Updating Germany«. They are entirely non-ideological in their interest for the economy of attentiveness: How can I get the public to even look at a purposeful project? For example like actor Brad Pitt and the Berlin architects' office Graft, which made their house-building project amid the destruction of New Orleans unmistakably recognisable by means of pink-coloured tents.

The space tacticians are not the only ones in Venice. Many of the architects and curators who have been invited did not devote themselves to building office buildings or villas when they finished their studies; instead they were occupied with town planning for conversion projects, wave power stations and municipal vegetable gardens. Among them is Markus Bader from the Berlin Kollektiv Raumlabor ("Space Laboratory Collective"). He and his colleagues have hung up a metre-long *Wimmelbild* ( a busy "spot the ..." picture) in the Italian pavilion. It shows an imaginary landscape with drawings of the most important architectural icons and horror buildings in the world, ranging from the Berlin TV tower, via the skyline of Dubai to the Walking Cities that were never built, which the British Archigram group had dreamt up at the end of the Sixties. The space laboratory team have put a table with white stickers by the architectural panorama. The visitors can draw buildings on them, design their own utopias and add them to the architectural panorama. After a few hours, the Berlin TV tower is already to be seen twice on the panorama and the antique temples bear a »For Sale« sign. A protest march is also sketched between all the buildings; »Raumlabor« is on the banner being carried by the protestors in the first row.

»We want to stir things up a bit«, Markus Bader says. The Raumlabor team wants to get people involved in shaping their own town by means of situational actions. A few years ago in Halle-Neustadt they made a hotel out of an empty prefabricated concrete building, turning old wooden doors from apartments that had been abandoned long since into bar counters. They filled the empty Palace of the Republic with 280,000 litres of water and drove around it in inflatable boats. And now the visitors to the Biennale are to draw their own world architecture exhibition and stick it on the wall. The intention is to reduce false needs and produce new wants, Markus Bader explains this from a podium provisionally built up out of plastic boxes in the Dutch pavilion, which serves as the platform for the discussion on what architecture might mean beyond mere building.

The visitors are little interested in learning about responsibility for the environment.

As far as Bader's partner in the discussion, Lorenzo Romito, from the Roman Stalker/Osservatorio Nomade team is concerned, the work of Raumlabor does not go far enough. He says: »The system simply digests this kind of protest«. Yet there are acute problems that really demand a true transformation of the system, especially in Italy. Romito is not referring to the threat that Venice will drown in the floods in forty year's time. He means the growing repression by the Italian state against Sinti and Roma. In a provisional Roma camp on the outskirts of Rome, Romito and his fellow campaigners have built a house together with the residents. They are showing a film of the campaign in the Italian pavilion. »Architecture can be genuine opposition«, Romito says.

By contrast, in the Danish pavilion there is an air of international statesmanship: under the motto »Ecotopedia«; the entire programme is concerned with climate change. »Next year in Copenhagen the Kyoto Protocol has to be renegotiated«, Kent Martinussen, head

of the Danish Architecture Centre tells us. Therefore seven exemplary projects in terms of / for sustainability are being exhibited in addition to bright-coloured photos from different climate zones. Number six is the rock festival in Roskilde. It is because for three days each year the festival is the most densely populated city in the world, according to Martinussen and astonishingly environmentally friendly to boot. Then festival can teach us how to accommodate 75,000 people in a very small space and, at the same time, conserve resources.

Is it possible to save the world with a rock festival? And therefore also save Venice from death by drowning? That's what young architects who have made the journey to Rome ask themselves as they sit in the evening on the Campo Santa Margherita drinking a Sprizz, an orange aperitif, with Venetian students in Caffè Rosso. Are they agents of social change? Will this Biennale go down on record as the turning point like, for example, the predecessor event in 1978, which was devoted to the topic: »Utopia in the Crisis of Anti-Nature«? Hardly. The installations, which Betsy has collected in the Arsenale, are far too self-sufficient in their shapes for that. Furthermore, there are far too many national pavilions which – like for example the British one – are just as little concerned with environmental or social responsibility as the majority of the visitors on the first days. The Spanish architect Enric Ruiz-Geli from the Cloud 9 office in Barcelona had even already set up a manifest for the Third Industrial Revolution, a contract for Venice for architects to commit themselves to the demands made by Jeremy Rifkin. However, only a few colleagues turn up in the Italian pavilion for the improvised signing ceremony. The young, pragmatic architects do not appear to be all that interested in manifests.

In the Italian pavilion Enric Ruiz-Geli himself is exhibiting the model of an artificial wave, which is to be installed on the beach at San Sebastian. A wave power plant floating far away from the coast, is to supply the sculpture on the beach with energy one day: The higher the real waves build up at sea, the more impressively will the work of art on land spew out water. The sculpture is evidence of a spirit of invention: the idea is for big power companies to seek to collaborate with the architect from Barcelona. Because this architect has ideas which engineers would not dare to dream up. Ideas like those, which Borries and Böttger have collected in the German pavilion. We will laugh about some of these ideas in ten years' time. But we will have become accustomed to the power distribution chips in our plugs.

In the evening the Giardini grow quiet. Only a longish tent, which a cosmetics corporation has dumped in front of the entrance like a huge blue sausage, is still rustling away. Inside this »Pop-Up Shop« people can test and buy creams during the daytime. Now there is just a security guard standing in front of it. Inside, big white air conditioning units pump cold air into the tent, which immediately escapes to the outside via large openings in the tent. The blue sausage was most probably also designed by a radical opportunist. Taking it apart would be a small step towards saving the world.