

Figure 1 Interior view of Chilean pavilion, Biennale Architettura, Venice, 2014 (photo courtesy of Gonzalo Puga Larrain).



Fundamentals: Biennale Architettura
Giardini della Biennale, Arsenale, and
other venues, Venice
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Hopes were high for the 2014 Biennale Architettura in Venice. Curator Rem Koolhaas had announced that the exhibition would not be a fashion parade of the latest architectural styles; rather, it would be a historical show dealing with the “fundamentals” of architecture. Koolhaas had asked that each of the national pavilions address how the country it represented had “absorbed” modernity in the century since 1914. Research was to be as important as display, and the expectation was for a rich variety of narratives from many different places and points of view. One section of the Biennale, *Monditalia*, situated in the Corderia of the Arsenale, addressed developments in twentieth-century Italy through forty individually curated installations devoted to specific moments and locations; the installations were arranged sequentially by latitude, traveling from the extreme south to the extreme north of the Italian Peninsula.

For the national pavilions, the brief was demanding, and not all countries responded to it, some showing only contemporary projects. Of those that did follow the brief, fewer than might have been hoped succeeded in the dual task of both conducting research and mounting a display that communicated an argument or an idea.

At one of the exhibition’s opening events, Koolhaas signaled his exasperation at the widespread failure to follow his instructions when he pronounced architects to be “useless.” But above all, the Biennale was an object lesson in the dos and don’ts of exhibiting architecture—any aspiring curator should have been required to study every pavilion. He or she would have learned, among other lessons, that information overload, indiscriminate data, an excess of wall text, tiny caption panels, and timelines are all fatal to the success of an architecture exhibition. Each was present, in abundance.

Some pavilions, however, successfully combined original research with effective display. For the only entirely textless presentation, the prize must go to the German pavilion, curated by Alex Lehnerer and Savvas Ciricadis. A meticulously fabricated full-scale reconstruction of part of the modernist Chancellor’s Bungalow (the chancellor’s official residence in Bonn from 1961 to 1999) was inserted into the neoclassical German pavilion—the successive modifications of which themselves told a story about Germany’s encounters with modernity. Surprisingly, Germany was the only country to make the pavilion itself part of the exhibit. Chile too achieved a remarkably economical display (curated by Pedro Ignacio Alonso and Hugo Palmarola): a single precast concrete panel measuring 3 meters by 3 meters, a product of the KPD factory donated by the Soviet Union

to Chile in 1971, but also the very panel that had been signed when still wet by President Salvador Allende and the Russian ambassador (Figure 1). Brought to Venice and sanctified in the gloom of one of the Arsenale’s workshops, this truly archaeological relic was latent with the geopolitics of modernity. Deservedly, this exhibit was awarded the Silver Lion.

Against these successes, too many missed opportunities were apparent. Countries with extraordinary legacies of modern architecture, such as Argentina and Brazil, disappointed by making their exhibits overly comprehensive. Others misjudged the context: the American pavilion presented an office-like interior with an open-shelved archive of every significant project since 1945 by an American practice outside the United States. Not only did this display repeat the cliché of the archive-as-artwork, but it also presented the United States’ absorption of modernity as an act of imperialism, without the slightest touch of irony or self-awareness. In contrast, the Russian pavilion (curated by Moscow’s Strelka Institute) was loaded with irony: a mock trade show, marketizing Russia’s twentieth-century architectural achievements. Stands promoted commercial products derived from the works of the Russian avant-garde—the Narkomfin Building repurposed as a wellness center or, alternatively, a juvenile detention center; the Vkhutemas as a branded educational program; El Lissitzky as a design



Figure 2 “Prefab Corp” stand, Russian pavilion, Biennale Architettura, Venice, 2014. (photo courtesy of the Strelka Institute, Moscow/Nikolay Zverkov).

practice skilled in audience motivation (“Environments we design change how your customers imagine their world and interact with your brand”). At the opening, the stands were staffed by actors, young women chosen for their looks and men in cheap suits delivering perfect sales patter, giving the exhibit all the tacky glamour of a real-life trade show. Among the stands was one for Archipelago Tours: “With Archipelago Tours, an interest in Russian architecture becomes a passport to see the world” and “See the world, visit Russian architecture, ensure its survival.” The destinations offered included Great Britain, Afghanistan, and Cuba—but in truth they might have included the whole of Eastern Europe, China, and a lot of Africa.

Looking for metanarratives out of so many individual narratives, the first is suggested by a character in Jacques Tati’s 1958 film *Mon Oncle*; Madame Arpel, referring to her house, makes the memorable remark, “It’s modern, everything’s connected” (this clip was shown in the French pavilion). No one country on its own can interpret modernity—events in one country invariably reverberate in others. Take the concrete panel. Developed as a commercial system in France by Raymond Camus in 1949 (a replica Camus panel was displayed in the French pavilion), the Russians took up the system and expanded its

production on a scale Camus never dreamed of, with consequences throughout the world—including Chile. A stand in the Russian pavilion advertised “Prefab Corp,” offering complete vertical integration using precast concrete panels, from planning to design, construction, sales, management, furnishing, and eventual demolition and recycling of the waste into new buildings (Figure 2). “Look at our record,” said the unsmiling salesman. “Sixty years’ experience across five continents, 50 billion square meters of construction completed, over 200 million people housed, 318 plants presently in full production. Financing can be arranged.”

If the precast concrete panel is one example of interconnectedness, another is Africa, to which reference was made in several pavilions—French, Scandinavian, Korean—though only one African country, Mozambique, exhibited a pavilion of its own. France, like other colonial nations, used Africa as a laboratory to conduct experiments with modernity. The Scandinavian involvement is less well known; following independence, many African states looked for advice to countries uncontaminated by colonial pasts, such as Norway, some of whose astonishing contributions were exhibited here. The Korean pavilion (curated by Minsuk Cho, Hyungmin Pai, and Changmo Ahn) attempted the impossible,

to present the Korean Peninsula as a single narrative. The resulting necessarily fragmented picture, incorporating some ingenious research, was awarded the Golden Lion. It emerged that where North and South Korea have had the closest relationship, in architectural terms, is not on the Korean Peninsula itself but in Africa, where each has vied for influence with African states. To make sense of Korea, it seems, one must look not to East Asia but to Africa, and indeed only in Africa can North Korean architecture easily be seen. Mozambique is one of the countries that has been aligned with North Korea, and evidence of North Korean architecture is to be found there—although, disappointingly, Mozambique’s pavilion made no reference to this aspect of the country’s history.

Fundamentals, the exhibition curated by Koolhaas in the Italian pavilion of the Giardini, had also been keenly anticipated. Fifteen different sections presented the “DNA” of architecture, used by any architect, anywhere, anytime: floor, wall, roof, ceiling, door, window, and so on. While the claim that architecture has never before been examined in terms of constructional elements does not stand up, a fresh look sounded promising. But anyone hoping to find an answer to what a door or a window was, is, or might become would

have been sorely disappointed. The exhibits of different elements, each curated by a different team, were a jumble of information and building fragments, a showroom of randomly chosen products, some old, some new, but mostly without any ordering principle or theme. This supposedly “neutral” presentation of data, in the interest of empowering the reader or viewer, has been Koolhaas’s trademark, but in the age of Google, when we can all generate information deluge, we hardly need someone else to do it for us. Quantity of data does not substitute for quality. While some of the sections of *Fundamentals* were reliable and potentially inspiring—such as “Stairs,” based on sixty years of research by the German “scalalogist” Friedrich Mielke—others, without the same depth of expertise, seemed to be random accumulations of data, often taken out of context, sometimes wrong. To abnegate judgment and discernment in the selection of information is no longer clever, it is irresponsible. Most disappointing was the curators’ failure to synthesize any of this overwhelming display of components in such a way as to encourage viewers to think about the mutations in them, and their relationship to “architecture,” along the lines suggested in Koolhaas’s opening proposition. Many people enjoyed this exhibit, but the result was frustrating: indiscriminate aggregation of data is not research.

None of these criticisms can be made of the French pavilion, curated by Jean-Louis Cohen. The most accomplished national exhibit, it had at its center a model of the Villa Arpel from Tati’s *Mon Oncle*, and around this three thematic displays, all linked by a continuous projection of superbly chosen and edited film clips and historic footage. No other pavilion captured the bittersweet taste of modernity—indeed, few even attempted to acknowledge that the encounter with modernity might have been experienced as anything other than liberating and beneficent. The film clips included scenes from *Mon Oncle* and from Jean-Luc Godard’s *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (1967), footage of Jean Prouvé lecturing, interviews with disaffected occupants of *grandes ensembles*, and then, most chilling of all, footage of the wartime conversion of the modernist 1930s housing scheme at Drancy into a concentration camp for Jews. Nowhere

else in the Biennale did the taintedness of modernity come across, nowhere else its menace. Yet this exhibit was far from negative, for nothing could be more uplifting and inspiring than seeing Jean Prouvé lecture, drawing as he talked. And the final word—advice every curator could have listened to—must be Prouvé’s: “Being modern means never pronouncing the word.”

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Building the Picture: Architecture in Italian Renaissance Painting

National Gallery, London
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Building the Picture explored the fertile architectural imaginary of the Italian Renaissance city-states. Rather than focusing on architectural projects in the usual sense, the exhibition examined the real and imaginary buildings, streets, and piazzas that are depicted in narrative and devotional paintings and in the preparatory drawings that artists made for these works. Located in the National Gallery’s Sunley Room, *Building the Picture* was small but substantial, making good use of the gallery’s permanent collection in combination with some well-chosen loans. It was ordered according to four themes that were taken to be fundamental: constructing the picture, entering the picture, place making, and architectural time.

The exhibition started from the premise that architecture, rather than being something of secondary importance—a support for the main action—ought to be considered in these paintings as a protagonist. Two paintings depicting the Annunciation in the section dedicated to “entering the picture” might serve as examples. In Duccio’s tightly composed panel, the action takes place before a structure that includes both round and pointed arches (a choice that may be of some symbolic import). Far from providing mere scenery, the architectural setting orders every aspect of the painting, defining the relationship between the figures and binding them into a unified whole. The painting once formed part of the celebrated *Maestà* for the high altar of Siena Cathedral, the panels of which are a master class

in how architecture may be employed for the purposes of storytelling, allowing the viewer to enter the picture imaginatively, intellectually, and affectively.

Where Duccio confines his *Annunciation* to a shallow space, in *The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius* Carlo Crivelli creates a street scene that recedes sharply into depth—demonstrating, with breathtaking effect, the dramatic potential of one-point perspective when applied to regular, architectural forms. In the foreground, the Virgin inhabits a sumptuous palazzo, the marbled façade of which is adorned with ornate pilasters supporting a richly carved entablature. The interior of her room is lined with humbler wood, although, like the loggia above it, it also boasts a decorated, coffered ceiling. As the catalog essay notes, the tension between the insistent operation of the perspective system and Crivelli’s delight in architectural surface is palpable across the entire canvas.¹ Architecture does indeed emerge here as a protagonist, seeming to interrogate the nature of pictorial representation itself.

Crivelli’s practice of combining what look like observable elements of the architectural everyday with passages of fantastical and ostentatious display might be taken as indicative of the exhibition’s broader terrain. At times, the visitor encountered extravagant settings such as the partially ruined antique buildings among which Liberale da Verona has Dido meet her end. Elsewhere, a kind of verisimilitude prevailed. The building in which Antonello da Messina’s Saint Jerome is ensconced is a complex architectural fantasy, but it somehow contrives to feel sober and real.

The room in the exhibition devoted to place making included examples of artists fashioning our experience of existing places. The subject in Francesco Granacci’s *Portrait of a Man in Armour* is depicted in front of Florence’s Piazza della Signoria, while Giorgio Vasari, in a preparatory drawing for a fresco, represents a scene of political triumph within the same real setting. Adopting a viewpoint used by Granacci’s master, Domenico Ghirlandaio, both works, and particularly Vasari’s powerful drawing, present the trecento piazza as conforming more or less to quattrocento norms. On the other hand, images of the Temple in Jerusalem, described in the