

THE PANDEMIC HELPED CREATE SOLIDARITY AMONG PAVILIONS

Keywords

20/21

Biennale

Association

Adaptation

Interview

1 Pabellón Central

Giardini / *Giardini Central Pavilion*

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2 Arsenale

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As the most relevant architecture event in the world, the delay of the 17th Venice Biennale – from 2020 to 2021 – was evidence of the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic. But this postponement meant not only a pause but also a reformulation of the spirit of this event entitled, in surprising anticipation, “How will we live together.”

PRÁCTICA: Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been many perspectives on the current crisis and the potential impacts within the architectural realm. What is your analysis of the current situation? What references do you think architecture can offer?

HASHIM SARKIS: If we look at it through the Zoom lens, we can see how important architecture has become in defining each person's space and identity. Whether we show the room we are in or some virtual fictive space, we rely on architecture and its representation to locate us in the world and reflect our identity or mood. In that sense, architecture offers a way to amplify our presence and project it across Zoom.



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If we look at it in terms of how we have actually changed our use of the spaces we live in, the pandemic has taught us to see, understand, measure, and re-use space as the means by which we relate to others and how to reconceive space in creative ways to re-establish safe encounters. It has taught us to live in isolation and, in that sense, about the value of living together. It has taught us about scales of association and the importance of the outdoors as a safe haven for meeting others. It has also taught us how sharply socio-economic differences mark themselves in spatial terms as well.

If we look at it from an urban perspective, perhaps we can find the most critical impact and consequences. Cities will be re-examining their services in terms of public health and public amenities, such as schools and clinics, as we begin to ask more questions about the validity of separating working and living areas. Density is no doubt going to be put into question as a coveted condition for efficiency and sustainability. But let us hope that its other benefits, of sociability, cooperation, and public health, will not be neglected. The debates about centralization versus decentralization of services are already growing, and I believe that there will be a serious revision of the trend to privatize infrastructure.

P: Much has been written about the irony and suitability of the biennale's theme: "How will we live together?" Do you expect the circumstances of the previous year will change and influence the responses to this fundamental question?

HS: The pandemic has no doubt made the question I asked in the form of the biennale title, "How will we live together?" all the more relevant even if somehow ironic, given the isolation that the pandemic has imposed. It may indeed be a coincidence that we asked the question a few months before the pandemic. However, there is a deeper connection. The same reasons that led us to ask this question (climate crisis, massive population displacements, political polarization, and growing racial, social, and economic inequalities) have led us to this pandemic. The response of architecture to these reasons will be central to the 17th Venice Architecture Biennale. How we will live together has become even more pertinent, not to say urgent, as a question. When

3 Arsenale
 © Andrea Avezzi.
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I shared the biennale's title with Mary Robinson, she observed, "the only way we can continue to live is if we live together."

Every generation feels compelled to ask this very old question and answer it in its own, unique way. Unlike the previous, ideologically driven ones, this generation insists that there is no single source from which the answer can come. The plurality of sources and diversity of responses will only enrich our living together, not impede it.

We are asking architects this question because we are clearly not happy with the answers that are coming out of politics today. We are asking architects because architects are good conveners of different participants and experts in the building process. We are asking architects because we, architects, are preoccupied with shaping the spaces in which people live together and because we frequently imagine these settings differently than the social norms that dictate them. In that sense, the spatial contracts that we produce with every space we design simultaneously embrace the social contract that willed the space and propose an alternative to it. We aspire to enable the best of the social contract and offer alternatives to improve it.

Hopefully, the question continues to propel us forward and, in doing so, to build on the optimism that drives architecture and architects. Our profession is tasked with designing better spaces for better living. Our challenge is not whether to be optimistic or not. There we have no choice. It is rather how successful we are at transposing the inhabitants to better lives through the 'wish images' that we produce with architecture.

P: In less than a year we have experienced a profound change in our daily habits, from the workplace to our households, from the physical to the virtual. Will this edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale be a milestone in the virtualization of global exhibitions? As you envision a place-based exhibition, how will the virtual realm be explored?

HS: An epoch does not precede the instruments that it uses. Same for the pandemic epoch. The virtual realm has been there for some time now, and it has helped amplify and disseminate past Biennales. The film *mostra* has been having special exhibitions on virtual reality for a while now. The pandemic has only accelerated the use of such new technologies and their dissemination. Their acceptance as an added dimension to exhibitions, what you call "virtualization of global shows," is very welcome. It adds to the accessibility and to the different ways of viewing architecture. But "this will not kill that," it won't even replace it. It will no doubt complement it in ways that remain to be explored. We are beginning to do that with the projects' sneak peeks and podcasts on the biennale social media. It has only increased the anticipation for the opening!

P: The postponed opening, from May 2020 to May 2021, has offered participants more time and perspective within a challenging year. How has

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this change in schedule affected the curation and organization of the biennale?

HS: It was Paul Valéry, I think, who said that a poem is never finished, it is abandoned. In architecture, the deadline for delivering drawings feels very much like a moment of agonizing abandonment. In a regular year, when the participants usually have about six months to prepare their installations, they tend to rush to finish and build them, and then when they see them, they wish they had more time to refine them. I have been in this situation several times myself! The additional year has allowed everybody to reflect and refine, to do what we do best as artists, we iterate and reiterate. No doubt, the

4 Studio Ossidiana,
Variation on a Bird Cage,
2019-20. Cortesía /
courtesy Studio Ossidiana.



5 Osbourne Macharia, «ГІКОШ: Ejemplo de proyectos fotográficos de arte que involucran al creativo millennial en los asentamientos informales de Nairobi, Keja», 2019. / Osbourne Macharia, "ГІКОШ: Example of Photographic art projects involving the creative Millennial within the informal settlements in Nairobi, Keja," 2019. Cortesía / courtesy Osbourne Macharia.



pandemic has also put some restrictions on manufacturing and installation and on funding, but in general, I think the exhibition has become sharper and more refined.

From a curatorial perspective, and at the beginning of the pandemic, we were regularly asked how we would change the exhibition to address the present conditions. I thought about it a lot, but I felt that the theme shared with the pandemic the underlying causes that led me to ask, "How will we live together?" The theme is the outcome of the many conditions that led to the pandemic, as we discussed before, like climate change, political polarization, and increasing economic inequalities. Some of these issues have been further exposed by the pandemic and, as such, they have made the exhibition all the more accessible and hopefully pertinent.

P: The Venice Biennale has historically been considered as the architectural event with the greatest public attendance in the world. Today, with travel restrictions constantly changing and social interactions greatly impacted, will the experience and influence of the biennale be affected?

HS: Last summer, during the short lull that brought tourists back to Venice, the city witnessed a relative increase in cultural tourism. People came to see this wondrous city and its cultural output. They were eager to see it come out of the crisis. Of all cities, I am not surprised that they wanted to see Venice the most.

This will hopefully be the attitude once people start to travel again. But the architectural biennale has a unique place among architects. It was the first, it is the most attended and it has many workshops and programs for universities around it. I hope that once the situation gets better and without subjecting themselves to any risk, they will gather again in Venice to celebrate architecture and its return. There is nothing that replaces experiencing architecture in person, and there is nothing that replaces seeing Venice.

From a scheduling perspective, historically, about two-thirds of the visitors come to the biennale during the three months of the fall season. We are working to strengthen the public programs during this period, and by then, hopefully, travel conditions will have significantly improved.

P: Participants in the biennale were given the opportunity to change and modify their original proposals to reflect the impact of the pandemic. What are your expectations for the overall responses?

HS: The response has been primarily, "we stay the course." And I have to say it is reassuring. Many were forced to revise the display to meet pandemic safety criteria. These have been developed by the Venice team based on guidelines for museums imposed by the Italian authorities. We abide by them. But thematically, very few projects rethought their content to reflect the pandemic. As with the curatorial position, most



participants felt that the theme and their response were still very pertinent and that the pandemic, if anything, increased the relevance of their proposals. I tend to agree, but I eagerly await the visitors' reaction to this.

6 Atelier RITA, *Emergency Shelter for Refugees and Roma Community*, 2017. Cortesía / courtesy David Boureau @urbamutability. Derechos reservados / all rights reserved, 2020.

p: The biennale is organized across five scales between the Arsenale and the Central Pavilion at the Giardini. These five scales help us observe a wider spectrum, from diverse beings to the planetarium level. As the curator, are you challenging us to abandon our anthropocentric point of view within society?

HS: Indeed. But I sometimes wonder whether the challenge to the anthropocentric view is very anthropocentric itself. It is that old desire to find the Archimedian point from which we can see everything without us obstructing the view. But it remains very valid, and increasingly so, especially as we begin to realize that the way we live together affects other beings and affects the planet. The yearning for a non-anthropocentric perspective is a sign of growing empathy for others. This empathy is very strongly represented across the five scales of the biennale. Even at the intimate scale of the body. There is a whole section in the exhibition dedicated to living together with other species. You will be surprised by how many young architects are considering that into their work, and how enriching it has been for architecture. The disposition of the architect is changing, and I think the biennale captures it well.

p: Modern architecture, in part, emerged as a response to the emergency context derived from

another pandemic. Light, terraces, and nature were reinforced in the architecture of the time. What role should architecture play in the upcoming future? What response would you like to see in Venice?

HS: Perhaps the pandemic's spatial ramifications will take time to register in architecture in more than the immediate and short-lived adjustments that we see today.

There are some practices, however, that I hope will stay with us. For example, how restaurants and shops have managed to take over streets and sidewalks and animate them creatively. Also, the increasing appreciation of the outdoors. I also hope that the impulse that has been unleashed to continually look for and invent spaces for socialization in the most creative ways stays with us.

I also believe that the politeness and the consideration of wearing a mask to protect oneself and others if someone has the flu or any contagious illness is something we need to hold on to.

What I wish goes away soon is people's inability to host in their houses and their workplaces. I hope that our hospitality does not get eroded. What I do yearn it may become evident – and therefore an area for further architectural exploration – is the glaring difference in public health between income groups.

We have a lot of work to do as architects and urban planners in imagining how we can improve the health dimensions of architecture in more compact households and dense urban environments. Architects shape the spaces in which people come together. This is partly based on existing social norms, technical requirements, and economic constraints, but there are so many dimensions of how we imagine and shape space that are left for the architect to decide. Part of our ability to imagine alternatives lies in this space of creativity and in how much we can present possibilities

7 PRÁCTICA, «Río
Somes, playa urbana».
*Río Somes: a través de
comunidades y ecosistemas,
2017-presente. /*
PRÁCTICA, "River
Somes, Urban Beach."
River Somes: Across
Communities and
Ecosystems, 2017-ongoing.
Cortesía / courtesy
PRÁCTICA.





of living together that ultimately impact society and change social norms.

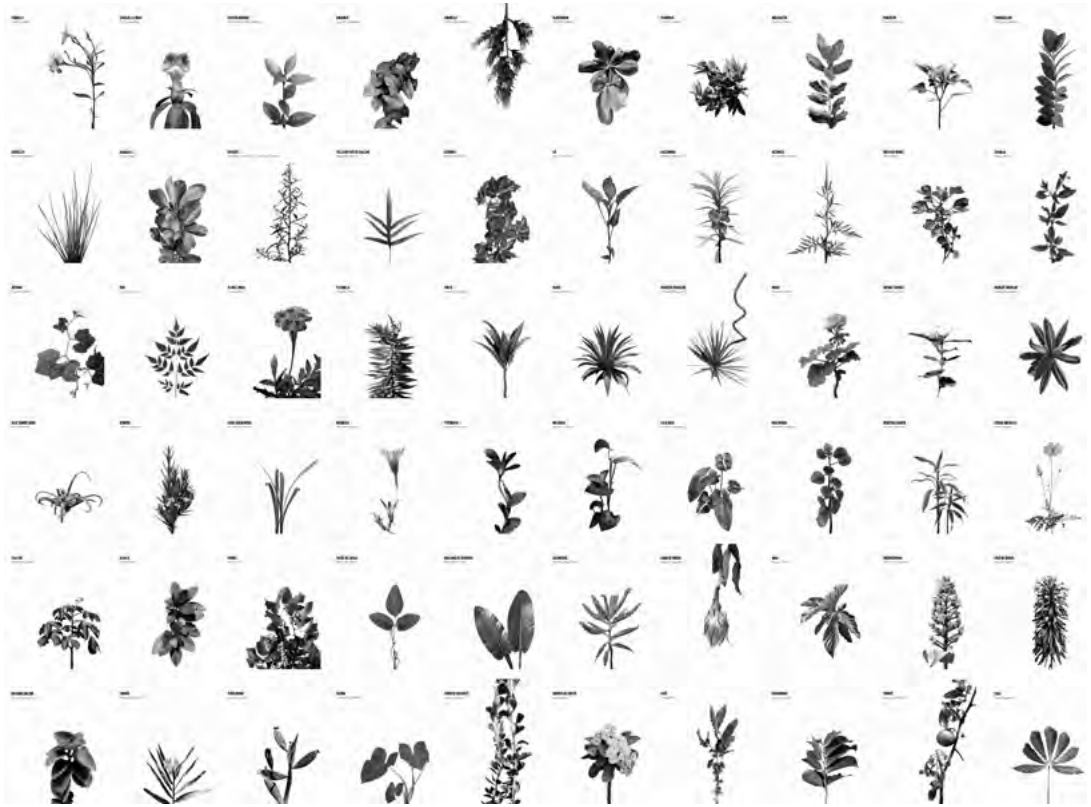
P: The 2021 Venice Architecture Biennale will exhibit the work of 114 participants. The participants, a balanced representation of men and women, come from 46 countries with an increased presence from Africa, Latin America, and Asia. How has diversity and inclusion guided the selection of projects?

HS: When I was first appointed, the media presented me as a “Lebanese architect.” I am indeed a Lebanese architect, but the fact that this part of my biography made it to the headlines moved me and made me aware of the responsibility I had towards expanding the curatorial point of view to include other cultures and perspectives. Part of it was a conscious effort, but the theme itself drove the other important part. The search for diverse, meaningful, and creative responses to the question led us to identify a relatively younger group of architects from a geography broader than usual. There is no one source from which we will find the answer to the question “How will we live together?” And, as ancient as this question is, every generation needs to answer it in its own way. In selecting the participants, I was only listening, carefully listening, to the voices of this generation, and articulating the values of diversity and inclusion that we now hold so high thanks to their commitments and persistence.

P: The pandemic has not only changed our relationship with the built environment, but also with the greater context. How has the pandemic changed our relationship with the territory? Do you envision new approaches to density or cohabitation?

HS: As the Second World War was raging, urban planners were thinking hard and anticipating radical changes to the way we live and to the future of cities. Some

8 *Arquitectura Expandida, La casa de la Lluvia [de ideas], un espacio comunitario para cultura y medioambiente. Barrio La Cecilia, distrito de San Cristóbal, Bogotá D.C. Proceso de autoconstrucción, 2012-presente. / The House of the Rain [of ideas], a cultural and environmental community space. La Cecilia neighborhood, San Cristóbal District, Bogotá D.C. Self-building process. 2012-ongoing.*



9 Enlace Arquitectura,
«Compendio de 60
especies», *Diccionario
etnobotánico de plantas de
los jardines de La Palmera*,
producido como parte
del programa Proceso de
Integración de Cararas,
2018-2020. / "Compendium
of Sixty Species,"
Ethnobotanical dictionary
of plants from gardens
in La Palomera, *produced
as part of the program
Integration Process
Caracas, 2018-20*.
Fotografía / photo: Jaeson
Montilla, Gabriel Nass.
Edición de imagen / image
editing: Jaeson Montilla,
Sergio Dos Santos,
Gabriela Álvarez. Courtesy
Enlace Arquitectura.

strongly believed that we would abandon cities and use the expanded and increasingly rapid transportation networks to connect. Others felt that cities needed a major overhaul and that their destruction during the war necessitated a return to the city.

In the aftermath of the war, both tendencies, urbanization and suburbanization, happened simultaneously. There is every indication that this will be the case after the pandemic, not because the cities have been destroyed but because there are many new desirable qualities of living together in both directions that have emerged during this period, and that will probably be hardened into our post-COVID-19 life: the rural revival (albeit generally by the wealthy), increased co-dependency among age groups, and among neighbors, and more responsible travel.

There is another trans-territorial dimension that I would like to highlight in this biennale, which is the desire to transcend national boundaries. The dialogue that has emerged among the national pavilions' curators has been an unintended but really heartwarming consequence of the delay. Indeed, a further welcome elaboration of the title. In a way, this dialogue preceded the pandemic because of the theme. I had encouraged the national pavilions to think of themes that transcended national boundaries, and indeed some pavilions were reaching out to others to work across borders. The pandemic has helped to create a sense of solidarity among the pavilions instead of competition. **ARQ**



10 Olalekan Jeyifous y Mpho Matsipa, *Geografías líquidas, bordes líquidos*, 2020. / *Olalekan Jeyifous and Mpho Matsipa*, *Liquid Geographies, Liquid Borders*, 2020.

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