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"An Aquarium of Exotic Architectural Creatures". The Digital Turn as Seen at the 9th Venice International Architecture Exhibition (2004)

"Un acquario di creature architettoniche esotiche". La svolta digitale vista alla 9° Mostra Internazionale di Architettura di Venezia (2004)

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I would like to thank Matteo Cainer, who at the time of *Metamorph* was working alongside Kurt W. Forster, for sharing his memories with me. I would also like to thank Hani Rashid, Lise Anne Couture and Asymptote Architecture for their availability and for allowing me to use the images from their archive; Massimo Scolari for his insights; Giovanni Leoni and Davide Pesenti for reading the article.

1. Introduction

When is the digital in architecture?[1]

On the threshold of the new millennium, Bruno Zevi (1918-2000) was asked to reflect on recent architectural production, and specifically the phenomenon of deconstructivism. The author spoke of this in terms of a liberation that, induced by the development of the "new sciences", had led architecture to overcome "rules, orders, proportions, rhythms, balances, symmetries, repetitive cadences, prescriptive models, modules to be copied, dogmas to be respected". The "old" rules had been left behind, traditional working tools such as "T-squares, set squares, drafting tables, compasses" had been consigned to the attic and people instead worked "with the computer that ignores parallelism, the straight line, the right angle, uniformity and standards". However, the author stated, despite the extent of the transformations taking place, there were not "more than fifty people, including architects and critics, who understood the unprecedented, colossal revolution that took place in the last decade of the second millennium"[2].

If as Zevi argues little was said about the changes taking place in the last years of the last century, in the new millennium initiatives began to flourish to promote a discussion on the introduction of computers into firms and the impact on the architecture of software technologies. At the same time, the theoretical link with deconstructivism was weakening in favour of new theoretical-critical frameworks, but also different genealogies and different 'pioneers'. Between 2003 and 2004, Frédéric Migayrou curated *Architectures non standard* at the Centre Pompidou, an exhibition and a publication of the same name that sought to focus on "the new order" based on "numerical methodologies"[3]. 2004 saw two more conferences at least as significant as Beaubourg's initiatives: in September MIT hosted *Non-Standard Praxis. Emergent Principles of Architectural*

[1] Andrew Goodhouse (edited by), *When is the Digital in Architecture?* (Montréal-Berlin, Canadian Centre for Architecture-Sternberg Press, 2017).

[2] Bruno Zevi, "After 5000 Years: The Revolution", *Lotus International*, 104 (March 2000), 52. In the same issue, the matter is addressed by Charles Jencks with the text entitled "The New Paradigm of Nonlinear Architecture", 80-97. There is still a lack of in-depth historical analysis of the deconstructivist phenomenon, the origin of which is conventionally (but not entirely correctly) traced back to the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition. See Philip Johnson, Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, exhibition catalogue, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 23 June - 30 August 1988 (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1988). A key role in the development and dissemination of ideas on "deconstruction" was played by the publisher Andreas C. Papadakis, who, through the journal *A.D. - Architectural Design* and the Academy Editions publishing house, helped to drive the debate on the ongoing transformations. See in this regard the series of special issues of the journal *A.D.*, edited by Papadakis and respectively entitled *Deconstruction in Architecture* (1988), *Deconstruction II* (1989) and *Deconstruction III* (1990). For a recent overview, see Paola Gregory, *Teorie di architettura contemporanea. Percorsi del postmodernismo* (Rome, Carocci, 2021), 119-182. Also worth mentioning is the series on deconstructivism in the online magazine *dezeen*: https://www.dezeen.com/deconstructivism/ (last accessed: August, 2023).

[3] On display were works by Asymptote, dECOI Architects, DR_D, Greg Lynn FORM, Kol/Mac Studio, Kovac Architecture, NOX, Objectile, OOsterhuis.nl, R&Sie, Servo, UN studio. Frédéric Migayrou, *Architecture non standard*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Centre Pompidou, 10 December 2003 - 1 March 2004 (Paris, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2003). On the exhibition see Aaron Betsky, "The Emperor's Digital Clothes. A Letter from Rotterdam", *Domus*, 867 (February 2004), 2.

Abstract: The essay focuses on the impact of digital design technologies on architecture culture through *Metamorph*, the 9th International Architecture Exhibition (2004). In doing so, it occupies the space where the studies on architecture exhibitions and those on the 'archaeology' of the digital meet. It further places Kurt W. Forster's curatorial work, and indirectly the 2004 Biennale, within the constellation of contemporary events dedicated to critically understanding and historically framing the transformations that led to the emergence of digital culture in the design field over the course of several decades. Combining different types of historical documents, among which those kept at the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC) in Porto Marghera, Venice, this essay also draws on contemporary press coverage. In doing so, it traces the complex debate that accompanied the event staged in Venice, identifying hopes and fears related to the so-called digital turn. Finally, looking outside the exhibition, the aim of the essay is to establish *Metamorph* as one of the milestones in the process that over a few decades has ferried both the discipline and the Architecture Biennale from postmodernism and deconstructivism towards the more profitable 'folds' typical of the early 2000s.

Keywords: *Metamorph*, 9th Venice International Architecture Exhibition (2004), Digital Turn, Kurt W. Forster, Asymptote Architecture

Praxis (24-26 September 2004), while in November it was the turn of *Devices of Design* (18-19 November 2004), held at the Canadian Centre for Architecture[4]. The latter two events were overlapped by the 9th Venice International Architecture Exhibition, curated by Kurt W. Forster and evocatively called *Metamorph*[5]. With integrated content and staging, the Venetian initiative was at the heart of the contemporary debate, offering a cross-section of the professional landscape and identifying critical categories capable of containing the transformations taking place[6] [*Fig. 7.1*].

Of course *Metamorph* was neither the first exhibition to have featured works created with the aid of new technologies nor the first Biennale to do so, as can be seen just by leafing through the catalogues of *Sensing the Future* (1996), *Less Aesthetics More Ethics* (2000) and *Next* (2002)[7]. However, in comparison to the exhibitions curated by Hans Hollein, Massimiliano Fuksas and Deyan Sudjic, the 2004 exhibition emphatically stated with all the means at its disposal that architecture had entered a new phase, that the turn to digital had taken place, that the future was now. Thus culminated – in a rather spectacular fashion – a trend that since the mid-1990s had seen the Biennale's curators progressively abandon "their critical stance towards modernism" in favour instead of staging the "innovations created by a new generation of architects, ready to use new communication and technological tools with unscrupulousness"[8]. This essay captures and exploits the focus on the *novissima* architecture of the 20th century and the debate that accompanied its definition, considering *Metamorph* in its dual meaning of content and container. In fact, on the one hand it is the result of a curatorial work aimed at bringing together the works, actors and challenges of contemporary architecture in one place and in an organised manner. On the other, the exhibition was one of the most significant results of the Biennale's numerous efforts at the turn of the century to regain "a position of world leadership" for the Venetian institution[9]. Finally, at a time of exhibitions,

7.1
Forster Kurt W. (directed by), Metamorph, 9thInternational Architecture Exhibition, Venice, Giardini di Castello and Arsenale, 12 September - 7 November 2004. Poster.
(© Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC)

conferences and publications exploring the digital in architecture, *Metamorph* represented one of the few – and perhaps the only – event organised in Italy on new technology and its transformations. In all these respects, the exhibition has not yet been the subject of specific analysis.

The essay can be placed in the space defined by the overlap of two areas of research concerning architecture exhibitions on the one hand and the 'archaeology of the digital' on the other. With regard to the former, note that exhibitions and shows have become an increasingly popular field of investigation for historians in recent decades. As Léa-Catherine Szacka points out, the study of these projects belongs to the "field of microhistories", as exhibitions are simultaneously a "means of communication and a critical and interpretative architectural project"[10]. Adopting a similar approach in the limited space of an article, the essay tackles an edition of the Biennale that takes place in a particular historical context characterised by an increasingly widespread use of information technology, media acceleration and an aggressive neo-liberal market, greedy for innovation and visibility[11]. The subject of digital technology and its 'archaeology', on the other hand, has also been the subject of various studies, each time aimed at understanding the impact of the medium on the design, production and/or consumption of architecture[12]. Compared to these, what sets apart this work is the attempt to harness the centripetal force of an exhibition, *Metamorph* to be precise, to add a piece to the history of the relationship between architecture and information technology. This story is framed by the larger one of the Biennale, for which the edition curated by Forster was "the first since the institution had been transformed into a foundation" and thus began to actively pursue "increasingly efficient and modern management criteria [...] modelled on the American cultural organisation"[13].

"An Aquarium of Exotic Architectural Creatures" is based primarily on the documentation kept at the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC) in Porto Marghera, Venice, and among other materials includes the extensive press articles produced for the event. Compared to previous editions in general and to *Next* in particular, the coverage had "practically doubled, as did the number of articles dedicated to the review"[14]. Approaching the case study through this media avalanche allows one to trace the complex debate that accompanied the exhibition, identifying hopes and fears about the digital turn. The enveloping and sinuous production, enhanced by the staging, forced observers – as we will see from the newspapers and periodicals of the time – to go beyond the known definitions, adopting words, references and rhetorical figures that had hitherto been foreign to them. These are brought into focus by this work, the aim of which is to view *Met-*

[4] Mario Carpo, "Tempest in a Teapot", *Log*, 6 (Autumn 2005), 99-106.

[5] Kurt W. Forster (directed by), *Metamorph, 9th International Architecture Exhibition*, 3 vols., exhibition catalogue, Venezia, Giardini di Castello and Arsenale, 12 September - 7 November 2004 (Venice, Marsilio, 2004).

[6] Under the title *Metamorfosi/Metamorphoses*, Forster's project was officially approved by the Biennale's Board of Directors chaired by Franco Barnabè on 10 October 2003. Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, Fondo storico *La Biennale di Venezia – Architettura* (henceforth ASAC), b. 403, folder 3, "La Biennale di Venezia", mail by Vera Mantengoli, 10 October 2003. Forster's design, or at least a very early version of it, could be the undated document in ASAC, b. 404/2, folder 19, Kurt W. Forster, "Biennale di Venezia, 2004", 7 p.

[7] Hans Hollein (directed by), *Sensing the Future. The Architect as Seismograph, 6th International Architecture Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Venice, Giardini di Castello, 15 September - 17 November 1996 (Milan, Electa, 1996); Massimiliano Fuksas (directed by), *Less Aesthetics More Ethics, 7th International Architecture Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Venice, Giardini di Castello and Arsenale, 18 June - 29 October 2000 (Venice, Marsilio, 2000); Deyan Sudjic (directed by), *Next, 8th International Architecture Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Venice, 8 September - 3 November 2002 (Venice, Marsilio, 2002).

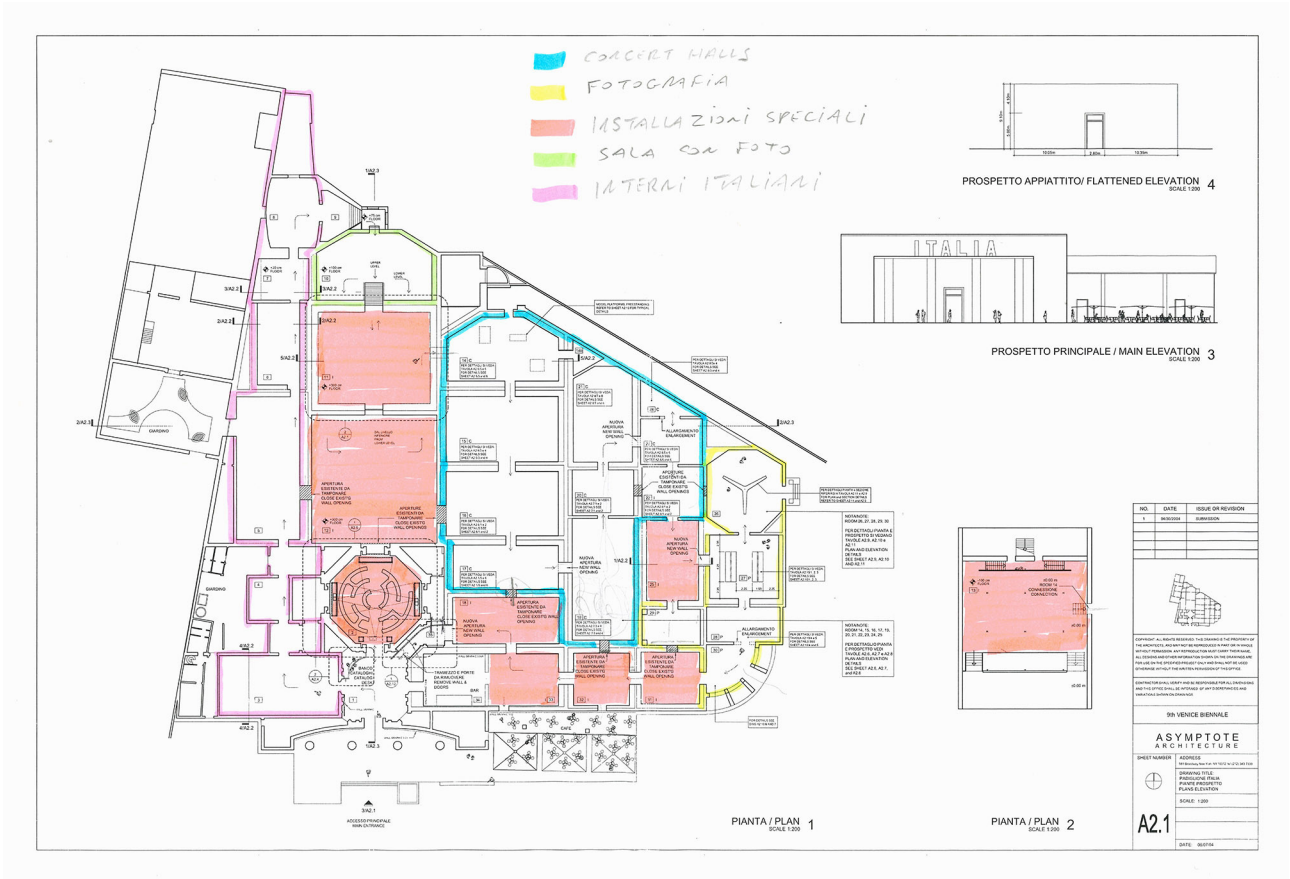
[8] Paolo Baratta, *Il Giardino e l'Arsenale. Una storia della Biennale* (Marsilio, Venice, 2021), 109.

[9] Paolo Baratta, "Relazione sull'attività svolta dalla Fondazione Società di cultura 'La Biennale di Venezia'", *Atti Parlamentari*, 14th legislature, Chamber of Deputies, doc. CLXX, no. 2, submitted to the Presidency on 7 November 2002, 19.

[10] Léa-Catherine Szacka, *Exhibiting the Postmodern. The 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale* (Venice, Marsilio, 2016), 17. On architecture exhibitions, see Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen (edited by), *Exhibit A: Exhibitions That Transformed Architecture, 1948-2000* (London-New York, Phaidon Press, 2018), on the format and the recent dissemination of Biennials/Triennials: Léa-Catherine Szacka, *Biennals/Triennials: Conversations on the Geography of Itinerant Display* (New York, Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2019). The International Architecture Exhibition has recently been the subject of a systematic analysis conducted by the Historical Archives of the Venice Biennale and brought together in the panoramic ASAC (edited by), *Mostra Internazionale di Architettura La Biennale di Venezia, 1980-2021* (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 2021).

[11] For a critical analysis devoted to this production, see among others Douglas Spencer, *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance* (Bloomsbury Academic, New York, 2016).

[12] See in particular Antoine Picon, *Digital Culture in Architecture: An Introduction for the Design Professions* (Basel, Birkenhäuser, 2010) and the project on the "archaeology of the digital" carried out by the Canadian Centre for Architecture: Greg Lynn (edited by), *Archéologie du numérique* (Montréal-Berlin: Centre Canadien d'Architecture-Sternberg Press, 2013).



7.2
Asymptote Architecture (Lise Anne Couture and Hani Rashid), Padiglione Italia, plans and elevations, 6 July 2004.
(ASAC, b. 402, folder 4 © Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC)

amorph as a significant – but certainly not final – moment in a long transformation that began in the 1980s and has seen architecture move from postmodernism to deconstructivism and into the 'folds' of contemporary culture.

2. Accelerated architecture

Visit the 9th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, where flights of fancy will join avant-garde technology through works of the highest level.[15]

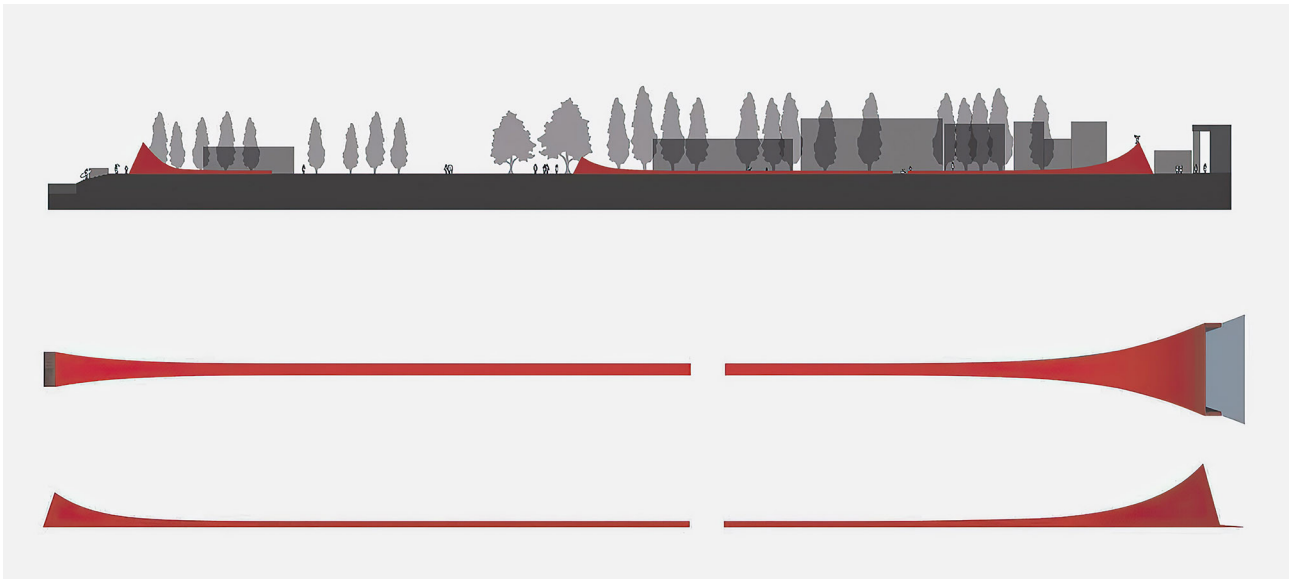
On 5 December 2003, at 10.30 am, an initial working meeting took place at Palazzo Querini Dubois in Venice between Renato Quaglia, head of the Architecture Sector, Kurt W. Forster, director of the 9th International Architecture Exhibition, and representatives of the exhibiting countries. The press release prepared for the occasion identified the current era as one of great innovation, mainly due to the new tools available. In order to stage such "metamorphoses", the Italian Pavilion would host a focus on concert halls, a photography exhibition curated by Nanni Baltzer, a project dedicated by Mirko Zardini to "Italian interiors", and above all several installations specially commissioned by the Foundation ("episodes"), created with the aim of revealing the existence of "new types of buildings, materials, mechanical systems and innovations in the methods of representation, collaboration and construction" [*Fig. 7.2*]. Instead, the Arsenale would provide a narrative sequence through which the visitor could escape "traditional interpretive perspectives" and

[13] ASAC, b. 379, folder 2, "Discorso di Davide Croff in occasione della conferenza stampa svoltasi all'Istituto italiano di cultura a Londra", 16 June 2004, 1.
[14] Davide Croff cited in Da. Sca., "Biennale tra progetti e polemiche", *Il Gazzettino*, 9 November 2004, IV. On Next, see ASAC, b. 378, folder "Architettura 2004 – incontro paesi", "Figures of the 8th International Architecture Exhibition – 2002", 5 November 2003, 1-2.
[15] ASAC, b. 379, folder 12, Kurt W. Forster quoted on a flyer with information about the exhibition, n.d.

7.3
Asymptote Architecture (Lise Anne Couture and Hani Rashid), Installation at Giardini di Castello and Massimo Scolari, *Turris Babel*'s thunderbolt (Saetta) on the Italian Pavilion rooftop, 2004.
(ASAC, rif. R 72012 – © Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC)

adopt the role of "witness"[16]. As is evident, the exhibition aimed to offer a snapshot of architecture *hic et nunc*, leaving future historians the task "to discover the inner state of these changes and to deconstruct them as history"[17].
A few months later, a red thunderbolt appeared on the roof of the Italian Pavilion, 7 metres high, metaphorically striking the architecture[18]. Its implications were presented to visitors in the form of fragments placed in the building's central room: three wooden truncated cones with a steel spiral staircase in the centre. The installation was designed by Massimo Scolari and recalled the most mythical of constructions, the Tower of Babel[19]. The violent 'deconstruction' was ideally counterpointed by a long parabolic structure, also red, stretching towards the Italian Pavilion [*Figg. 7.3, 7.4*]. The work had been designed by Asymptote, an architectural firm consisting of Lise Anne Couture and Hani Rashid, whom Forster had identified some time earlier "to do everything related to the exhibition design and at the same time take care of all the graphic aspects (from the website to the catalogues, from the posters to the temporary structures)"[20].

[16] ASAC, b. 378, folder 3, "9. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura, Venezia 2004", press release, 5 December 2003.
[17] Kurt W. Forster, "Thoughts on the Metamorphoses of Architecture", *Log*, 3 (Autumn 2004), 19-20.
[18] ASAC, b. 400, folder *Scolari Thunderbolt*. Documentation shows that the Thunderbolt was built by Stahlbau & Pichler (technical sponsor), while the Tower was built by Habitat SpA. A financial contribution of €35,000 + VAT from the Venice Foundation to the project is worthy of note. The digital modelling was done by Camillo Trevisan.
[19] On the symbolism of the Tower of Babel, see Mark Wigley, "The Translation of Architecture, the Production of Babel", *Assemblage*, 8 (February 1989), 6-21.
[20] ASAC, b. 404/2, folder 13, "Kurt W. Forster to Renato Quaglia", e-mail, 9 November 2003.



7.4
Asymptote Architecture (Lise Anne Couture and Hani Rashid), Installation at Giardini di Castello.
(© Asymptote Architecture)

Conceived as an identifying element for *Metamorph*, the installation was intended to guide visitors, and if necessary could also serve as a bench[21]. It was "completely self-supporting, [and] made of modular marine plywood elements [assembled] on site, while the heads [were] made on site with a metal structure covered with wood panels"[22]. According to Hani Rashid, the work celebrated "the defeat of symmetry, linearity and central perspective in the name of a different way of thinking about space"[23]. The same celebration continued in the spaces of the Arsenale where, in the soft light of the Corderie and the first two rooms of the Artiglierie, the public was catapulted back to the 1980s, when the spaces were first occupied by the Biennale. However, "instead of this *liason dangerouse* with a truly historic past" and with Paolo Portoghesi's exhibition, Forster proposed an interpretation of recent history centred on four figures: Peter Eisenman (1932) and Frank Gehry (1929) on the one hand, Aldo Rossi (1931-1997) and James Stirling (1926-1992) on the other.

> Two of the four reside within a history that was thought to have a future but that is now also gone, while the other two, Eisenman and Gehry, have become the protagonists of the architecture that was slowly but surely taking shape in recent decades.[24]

Referring back to the history of the Arsenale, Asymptote exploited the elongated shape of the available space to transform each room into a kind of ship. The metaphor was given substance by means of MDF panels positioned along the walls according to a layout that traced the outline of a hull. In addition to the narrative function of the whole, the panels served as a support for the illustrative materials, the graphics of which were prepared by the Omnivore studio[25]. The ship metaphor was reinforced by the displays whose complex geometries resembled those of a hull. On the deck of this imaginary ship, on platforms

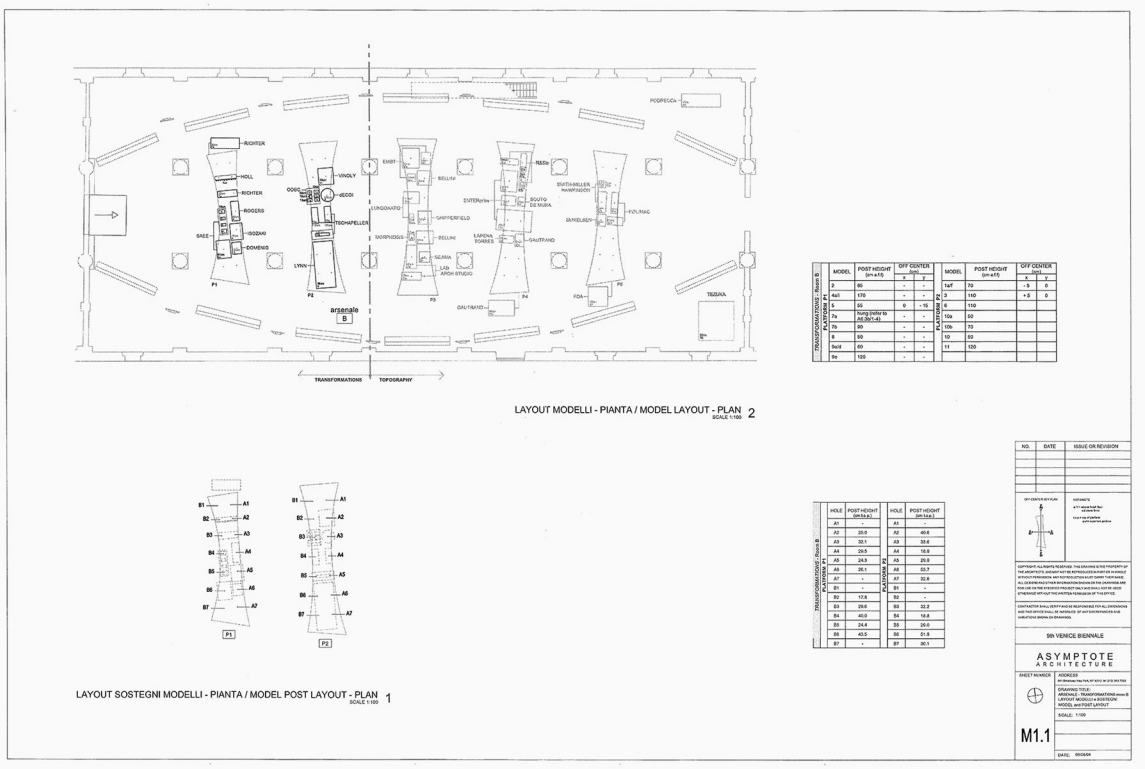
[21] A similar work had been placed in Campo San Biagio, serving as a link between the two venues of the exhibition. ASAC, b. 403, folder 1, Asymptote Architecture, "Progetto per l'installazione da realizzarsi in Campo San Biagio", project rendering and localisation, 30 April 2004.

[22] ASAC, b. 379, folder 19, *9. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura – Metamorph*, Technical and descriptive report, 6 July 2004, 10.

[23] Luca Molinari, "Due Americani nell'altra Venezia", *Vanity Fair*, 38 (16 September 2004), 102.

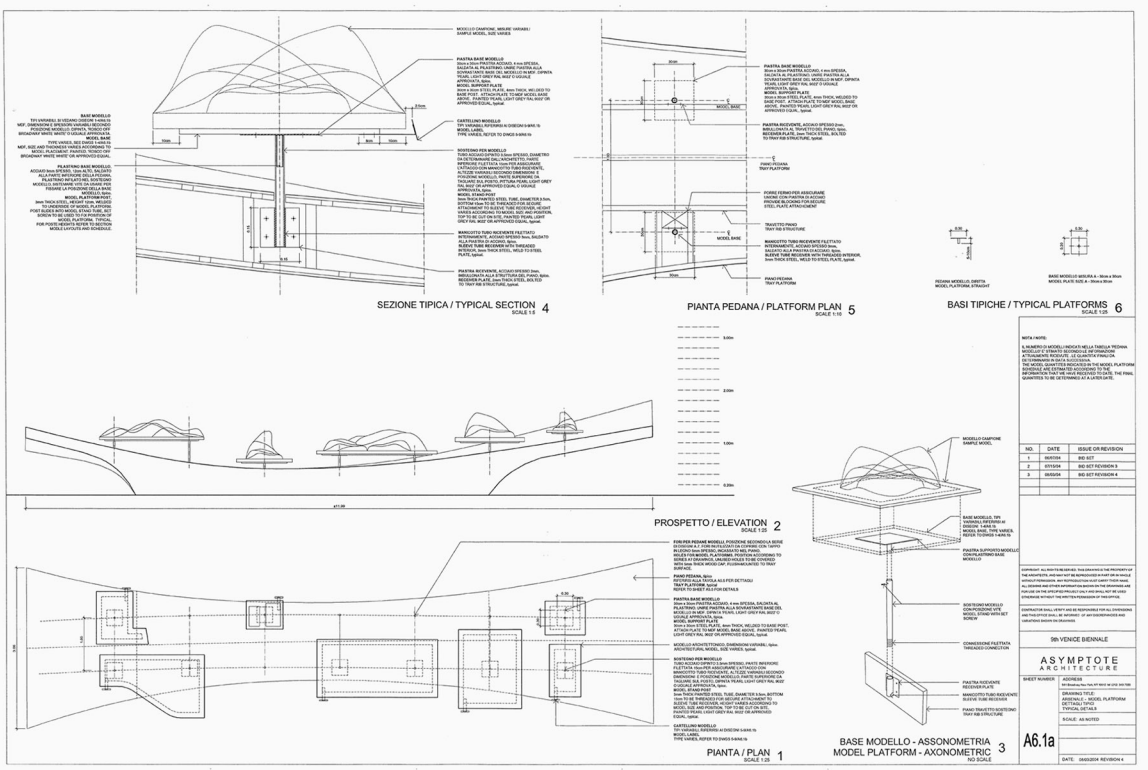
[24] ASAC, b. 379, folder 2, "Discorso di Kurt W. Forster alla conferenza stampa tenutasi all'Istituto italiano di cultura a Londra il 15 giugno 2004", 1 June 2024, 4.

[25] ASAC, b. 403, folder 2, Omnivore, "Flat Works: overview, with guides, specifications", 19 May 2005. In a letter to Davide Croff, Forster states that of all the firms he screened, only Asymptote and Omnivore "have the right qualities" to be hired. ASAC, b. 404/2, folder 19, Kurt W. Forster to Davide Croff, letter, no date (2004).



7.5
Asymptote Architecture (Lise Anne Couture and Hani Rashid), Installation at Corderie all'Arsenale, sections *Transformations and Topography*, 8 March 2004. (ASAC, b. 403, folder 2 – © Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC)

7.6
Asymptote Architecture (Lise Anne Couture and Hani Rashid), Installation at Corderie all'Arsenale, exhibitors, 8 March 2004. (ASAC, b. 403, folder 2 – © Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC)



7.7
Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Aereal view of the Parco della Musica, Rome, 1994-2002.
(Photo by Aldo Ippoliti. © RPBW – Renzo Piano Building Workshop Architects)

supported by slender metal supports, were placed the models of over 200 works[26]. The staging of the Arsenale had been a demanding job, requiring considerable coordination between design and curatorial choices, engaging with the needs of the more than 170 architecture firms that had taken part in the event[27] [*Figg. 7.5, 7.6*].

Reviewing the event for "The Architect's Newspaper", Richard Ingersoll likened the ensemble to an "aquarium of exotic architectural creatures", pointing in particular to the "three beetles" of the Parco della Musica in Rome by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop and Foster and Partner's The Sage Gateshead, which resembled a "sea slug" [*Fig. 7.7*]. Everything, the author concluded, had probably started with a fish: "not Günter Grass' tale of the world-weary flounder, but Frank O. Gehry's love of wiggly marine life"[28]. Despite the naval references and "beastly" oddities on display, or more likely because of them, the event proved to be an unprecedented success. In fact, *Metamorph's* numbers exceeded even those of *Next*, the 2002 edition curated by Sudjic, which sold 101,693 tickets with a daily average of 1784 visitors. In contrast, the 2004 Biennale counted "115,099 tickets sold for a daily average of 2,019 visitors", ranking as "the most attended and commented on of all architecture exhibitions"[29].

A certain continuity between *Next* and *Metamorph* is worthy of note. In fact, several works exhibited in 2002 had been staged again two years later, causing some perplexity, as for example in the case of Vito Acconci's Mur Island or Diller+Scofidio's Eyebeam Museum of Art and Technology[30]. However, the two events were quite different in their objectives: while the first offered itself as an opportunity to explore what "architecture will be in the next decade"[31], the second seemed to eliminate the distance to the future in order to affirm that it had not only already arrived, but had now inexorably transformed the discipline. What Forster staged was "the universal adoption of digital technology", which in his view had reintegrated "the process of invention and construction, allow-

[26] For a numerical comparison, the data from *Next* are provided. The edition curated by Sudjic proposed 150 projects by 90 architects and saw 35 national participations. ASAC, b. 378, folder 3, "Figures of the 8th International Architecture Exhibition 2002", 5 November 2002, 1.

[27] Email from Hani Rashid to the author, 23 December 2022. Matteo Cainer explains that each exhibit had been designed to spotlight the relationships between the architectures on display. Telephone interview with the author, 25 August 2023.

[28] Richard Ingersoll, "From the Belly of the Whale", *The Architect's Newspaper*, 16 (5 October 2004), 8-10.

[29] Lidia Panzeri, "Metamorph, successo che non ha precedenti", *Il Gazzettino*, 9 November 2004, XV. The Foundation's increasing focus on communication and the general public is also confirmed in Baratta, *Il Giardino e l'Arsenale*, 221, 275.

[30] ASAC, b. 381, folder Diller & Scofidio, Denise Frasanello to Paolo Cimarosti, e-mail, 3 May 2004.

[31] Sudjic, *Next*, 15.

ing for an unfettered evolution of its massive potential"[32]. In short, the works exhibited a second time had a different meaning, not one of anticipation but of acknowledgement: the new time in architecture had begun and could be closely examined through "a guided tour of the most recent works"[33]. Many of these had yet to be completed, some had not even begun and several would never be completed. These architectures therefore still existed only in the virtual space they had been conceived in, and as Catherine Slessor noted, "the obvious acid test of such computer-enabled fantasies will be when they finally emerge in the flesh, from behind the seductive gauze of imagineering"[34].

The anticipation in the form of "shiny images that seem to have lost all connection with the harshness of reality" surely could not satisfy the critics[35], but it was certainly excellent material from a media point of view, capable as it was of provoking feelings of amazement, surprise and wonder, to which the success of the event was ultimately due. In the years leading up to *Metamorph*, the importance of the media had also greatly grown due to the refinement of increasingly rapid and pervasive information and communication systems that seemed to have helped transform the noble art of building into a spectacle to be consumed. Reflecting precisely on the new role of the media in relation to architecture, Nicola Sinopoli noted how at this point the real problem seemed to be "the length of time an image stays on the retina"[36].

Opinions on architecture in the exhibition were evenly divided between those who on the one hand lamented a state of malaise in the discipline and those who on the other interpreted the futuristic forms as a new aesthetic that was finally emerging. According to the latter, "far from finding itself in a crisis, [architecture was] reacting creatively and pragmatically to increasingly rapid cycles of change and can thus continue to assert its social relevance. An optimistic, realistic – and also beautiful Biennale"[37]. 'Beauty', we can see, was often the merit of image-conscious clients that were therefore willing to invest in the production of works capable of duly promoting it: extraordinary architecture and "[c]ertainly not everyday things, or rather houses", Alfredo Zappa reflected in the pages of "Costruire"[38]. Indeed, several projects had a strongly representative character, designed as they were to give visibility to their clients: public institutions, certainly, but more often international corporations and global brands[39]. From this point of view, of interest is the inclusion of the Biennale among these clients, which, with its transformation into a Foundation, shed its role as a container and strengthened its role as a protagonist. Among the "special projects" commissioned for the occasion is the one by Peter Eisenman and built in the Italian Pavilion, in the room behind

[32] ASAC, b. 403, folder 3, Kurt Forster to Renato Quaglia, letter, 21 October 2003, 1.

[33] Kurt W. Forster, "Tra labirinto e pista", in Kurt W. Forster (directed by), *Metamorph, 9th International Architecture Exhibition*, vol. Trajectories, 5.

[34] Catherine Slessor, "View", *The Architectural Review*, 1292, (October 2004), 36.

[35] Fulvio Irace, "A Venezia: Metamorph. 9. Biennale di Architettura", *Abitare*, 443 (October 2004), 202-210.

[36] Nicola Sinopoli, "Architettura grandi forme", *Costruire*, 258 (November 2004), 117.

[37] Matthias Boeckl, "A Renaissance of Building. On the 9th Architecture Biennale in Venice", *Architektur.aktuell*, 295 (October 2004), 96.

[38] Alfredo Zappa, "Blob, hyper-pomodori e dintorni", *Costruire*, 258 (November 2004), 122.

[39] Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex. How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World* (London, The Penguin Press, 2005).

7.8
Metamorph awarding ceremony – Leone d'oro for lifetime achievement awarded to Peter Eisenman, here with Davide Croff and Giuliano Urbani, 10 September 2004.
(© Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC)

Scolari's installation. Costing 95000 euros, the project spotlighted the work of the American architect who, already celebrated by the Biennale that year with the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, was in this case celebrating himself through a narrative that "[went] from Palladio to my works, passing through Piranesi and Terragni"[40] [*Fig. 7.8*].

3. Subtle architecture

From subtleties, however, one must move on to broader dimensions.[41]

Despite the solid presence in the exhibition of Peter Eisenman or Frank Gehry, names that were more than well-known on the international scene, the architecture selected by Forster seemed so new that reporters decreed the "death" of the problematic deconstructivism[42]. Once the era of material experimentation and tectonic uncertainty had passed, the time of static precariousness and formal contortions had ended, the period of cuts and slashes had passed, contemporaneity seemed to offer itself as a set of fluid forms "devoid of conflict"[43]. The new production could now have the more reassuring shapes of the National Grand Theatre in Beijing or the enveloping forms of the Mercedes Benz Museum in Stuttgart [*Fig. 7.9*]. And since both these works would be completed just a few years after the exhibition, *Metamorph* could be understood as a catalogue of possibilities, a "supermarket"[44] of offerings for Makoto Sei Watanabe, or for Lucy Bullivant a banquet, "which global capitalism has both made possible and unrealistically desirable"[45]. If any point of contact remained between the works on display and the research of the early deconstructivists, it could be found in the adoption of a new grammar of the building, which then as now questioned the relationship between structure and form. It was no coincidence, Nicola Sinopoli continued, that "the buildings of the metamorphosis [seek] the most varied, functionally ubiquitous, sometimes ambiguous materials, such as plastics, composites, co-extrusions, metal sheets and meshes, down to even improbable materials [...] ready to play all the possible functional and formal games that the project requires of them"[46].
Open to the use of new materials and freed from 'dogma', contemporary production was ready to take off towards as yet unknown destinations:

> Just as the triremes carried obelisks to Rome that documented the power of the empire at home, today Asymptote's metaphorical ships display the new images of media power, commissioned by global political and economic power (and as such insensitive to any place and its

[40] ASAC, b. 401, folder 5, *Installazione speciale di Peter Eisenman presso il Padiglione Italia – Giardini di Castello/Venezia*, 19 August 2004. Eisenman cited in Forster, Metamorph, vol. Trajectories, 24.
[41] ASAC, b. 379, folder 2, "Discorso di Kurt W. Forster alla conferenza stampa tenutasi all'Istituto italiano di cultura a Londra il 15 giugno 2004", 1 June 2004, 4.
[42] Manlio Brusatin, "Sulla morte del Decostruttivismo", *La Nuova di Venezia*, 6 November 2004, 9.
[43] Mirko Zardini, "Archéologues du numérique – Quelques observations", in *Archéologie du numérique*, 7.
[44] Makoto Sei Watanabe cited by Massimiliano Fuksas in Rita Capezzuto, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Stefano Boeri, "Biennale vs. Fuksas", *Domus*, 874 (October 2004), 45.
[45] Lucy Bullivant, "Skin Deep", *Blueprint*, 225 (November 2004), 62.
[46] Sinopoli, "Architettura grandi forme", 119.

7.9
UN Studio (Ben van Berkel e Caroline Bos), Mercedes-Benz Museum, Stuttgart, 2006.
(Photo by Brigida Gonzales © UN Studio)

> specificities), officiated by an architect who is also global, and catapulted no matter where.[47]

And while the final destination of the production on display was not always clear, its origin could easily be found in some global city (or would-be global city), where access to technological and financial resources could be guaranteed. From this point of view, it is interesting to note how in early 2004 plans were made to take the exhibition to China or elsewhere, thus bringing the Biennale closer to possible new collaborations[48].

The overall aspiration of the Venetian institution should be seen in the recent events that were impacting it, first and foremost its transformation from public to private. Since that time, the Foundation had made a "significant effort to seek sponsorships, partnerships and a public" while at the same time undertaking important "actions to cut [...] costs"[49]. The whole operation was so complex that in November 2003 Renato Quaglia wrote to Forster confessing his uncertainty about the Biennale's future[50]. A few months later, with the change of structure from cultural company to Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, which took place with the Italian Legislative Decree of 8 January 2004, the Minister of Cultural Heritage and Assets Giuliano Urbani appointed Davide Croff as president (13 February 2004)[51]. On that same day, the new Board of Directors constituted by Italian Ministerial Decree dated 15 January 2004 and installed on 4 March 2004 confirmed the choice of Kurt W. Forster as Director of the International Architecture Exhibition for the current year[52]. Despite the new structure and the Biennale's willingness "to regain a strategic will for its events [...]", the budget remained a delicate issue and was in fact the cause of some tensions[53]. Addressing Croff in June 2004, Forster accused the management of rigidity, wanting only "to keep the directors on a leash", and of short-sightedness, seeing that "under a minimum level of originality", the Biennale risked gambling its "renommée". A game, that of not going over budget, at which in his opinion "only old-school bureaucrats excel"[54]. At that point, Croff reassured Forster, assuring him that

> everyone at the Biennale is working with the sole aim of maximising its possibilities, respecting tradition and looking to the future. [...] Having said that, we cannot forget that unfortunately the Biennale has serious budgetary limitations that constitute an external constraint. We are trying to overcome this, but this is something new for the Biennale and therefore the fruits of this action are not immediate, even if they are beginning to manifest themselves.[55]

[47] *Ibidem*.
[48] ASAC, b. 384, f. Vito Acconci/Topography, Kurt W. Forster to Vito Acconci, letter, 9 April 2004. The reference to China is probably not a coincidence, given that the first Architecture Biennale of Beijing was scheduled to open in September 2004 as well.
[49] Davide Croff, "Relazione degli amministratori al bilancio di esercizio al 31 dicembre 2003", 12 April 2003, in Giuliano Urbani, "Relazione sull'attività svolta dalla Fondazione Società di Cultura 'La Biennale di Venezia'", *Atti Parlamentari*, 14th legislature, Chamber of Deputies, doc. CLXX, no. 4, submitted to the Presidency on 22 October 2004, 17.
[50] ASAC, b. 404/2, folder 19, "Renato Quaglia to Kurt W. Forster, e-mail, 15 November 2003.
[51] The organisation was transformed from a public body into a private legal entity by Italian legislative decree on 29 January 1998 under the name of Società di Cultura 'La Biennale di Venezia'. At the same time, extensive revisions and reorganisations of the internal structure were undertaken. In 2004 the company took on its current name and became Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia. See Italian Legislative Decree n. 1 of 8 January 2004, "Modifiche ed integrazioni al decreto legislativo 29 gennaio 1998, n. 19, concernente 'La Biennale di Venezia', ai sensi dell'articolo 1 della legge 6 luglio 2002, n. 137", *Gazzetta Ufficiale* n. 10 of 14 January 2004.
[52] Giuliano Urbani, "Relazione sull'attività svolta dalla Fondazione società di Cultura 'La Biennale di Venezia'", *Atti Parlamentari*, 14th legislature, Chamber of Deputies, doc. CLXX, n. 4, submitted to the Presidency on 22 October 2004, 30.
[53] Giuliano Urbani, "Relazione sull'attività svolta dalla Fondazione Società di cultura 'La Biennale di Venezia'", *Atti Parlamentari*, 14th legislature, Chamber of Deputies, Doc. CLXX, n. 5, submitted to the Presidency on 7 October 2005, 7.

The correspondence concluded with an invitation to Forster to prepare a detailed list of all expenses he still intended to incur: "with this information we will try, with the utmost goodwill, to make ends meet, minimising any sacrifices we may have to make"[56]. Comparing the Biennale's budgets in the year of *Next* and in the year of *Metamorph*, apart from the increase in takings from the ticket office (+6.58%) and especially from sponsorships (+145%), it is evident that the expenses incurred in 2004, given all the events that took place that year, were higher (+12.7%), albeit problematic, as the Biennale closed the financial statements with a positive margin of only 293,000 euros[57].

However, visitors to the Biennale did not seem to notice these issues, attracted by the works and intent on exploring new way to describe them[58]. The most critical spoke of "unformed" projects[59], of "hyper-tomatoes"[60], or of "buildings that looked as if they had skin disease"[61]. Others tried to look in related disciplines for words suitable for projects that expressed a "palpable tension between static and moving, shell and bone, liquid and solid, that constantly generates new formal and typological mutations"[62]. With a 'body' of uncertain forms, suspended in an undefined time and waiting for a 'place' with which to measure itself, debates on the new architecture inevitably focused on the 'skin' of the buildings. The *Surface* section grouped works "no longer based on the dialectic of supports and weights, but instead on continuous surfaces, be they folded, curved or layered"[63]. Examples of this were the Mercedes Benz Museum (2002), planned for Stuttgart by Alberto Campo Baeza and never built, or the proposal (which also went no further) for the BMW Exhibition and Sales Centre by Asymptote[64]. Technologies, materials and production processes now also offered architecture the possibility of simulating the softness of a fabric or the flow of a dress. Thus, in their design submitted for the Naples TAV station (2003), Eisenman Architects made explicit reference to the veil of Giuseppe Sanmartino's famous sculpture in the Sansevero Chapel, while in their proposal for the extension of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York the SHoP collective had adopted "unfolding" and "stitching", i.e. "cutting-edge technologies used in both the construction and fashion industries [...] to create architecture with an unmistakable style at an affordable cost"[65]. The transposition of terms that are usually used to describe the qualities of textiles into the field of architecture resulted a few years later in the exhibition *Skin + Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture*[66]. Curated by Brooke Hodge and staged at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the event aimed to showcase the alleged disciplinary convergences between the construction and garment industries by bringing renowned fashion designers

[54] ASAC, b. 404/2, folder 19, Kurt W. Forster to Davide Croff, e-mail, 7 June 2004.

[55] ASAC, b. 404/2, folder 19, Davide Croff to Kurt W. Forster, e-mail, 7 June 2004.

[56] *Ibidem*.

[57] In 2003 the profit was 105,5674 euros. See Davide Croff, Gaetano Guerci, "Bilancio al 31/12/2004", in Giuliano Urbani, "Relazione sull'attività svolta dalla Fondazione Società di Cultura 'La Biennale di Venezia'", *Atti Parlamentari*, 14th legislature, Chamber of Deputies, Doc. CLXX, no. 5, Submitted to the Presidency on 7 October 2005, 17, 34 and 39-45.

[58] Bruno Pedretti, "Verso una nuova specie di architettura? Interview with Kurt W. Forster", *Il giornale dell'Architettura*, 20 (July-August 2004), 3.

[59] Enrico Valeriani, "Il trionfo dello sformato", *Il giornale dell'Architettura*, 22 (October 2004), 3.

[60] Zappa, "Blob, hyper-pomodori e dintorni", 122.

[61] Aaron Betsky cited in Bullivant, "Skin Deep", 64.

[62] Boeckl, "A Renaissance of Building", 97.

[63] Andrew Mead, "Changing world", *The Architects' Journal*, 11 (September 2004), 47.

[64] Forster, Metamorph, vol. *Trajectories*, 266 and 267.

[65] *Ivi*, 241 and 227.

[66] Brooke Hodge (edited by), *Skin+Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture*, exhibition catalogue, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA), 19 November 2006 - 5 March 2007 (London-New York, Thames and Hudson, 2006).

– such as Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto and Issey Miyake – into the field of study traditionally reserved for architects such as Gehry or Eisenman. *Metamorph* and *Skin + Bones* have several projects in common, including for example the Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Max Reinhardt Haus. According to the curator, the rapprochement had begun to manifest itself in the early 1980s, when "designers in both fields" waged a battle "for liberation from convention that involved experimentation with new forms and an openness to ideas and techniques from other disciplines to inspire radically different approaches to design"[67]. Of course, Hodge admitted, "fashion designers and architects may not have adopted ideas of deconstruction for the same reasons or from same sources", but the fact remained that "these tendencies emerged in both practices at about the same time"[68]. Beyond the parallel practices showcased in Los Angeles, there was no doubt that architecture was looking for new words to tell its story, and that in order to "come alive" it was pushing far beyond the known boundaries of the discipline[69].

4. The loneliness of architecture

What about the city?
Where is the city in this exhibition overflowing with projects?[70]

Forster had identified four architects as pioneers of the metamorphosis: Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Aldo Rossi, and James Stirling. All of them had "rearranged the disciplinary landscape of architecture"[71], but Forster's esteem for Eisenman was evident, making Sudjic affirm that *Metamorph* could in all respects be called "the Peter Eisenman biennale"[72] [*Fig. 7.10*]. The statement was not meant in a positive sense, and in fact the former curator went so far as to say that the entire exhibition seemed to be built to pay homage to that one architect. Massimiliano Fuksas, like Sudjic a curator of a previous edition, added his voice to the chorus of controversy, this time criticising the prominence given at the Biennale to the author of the Walt Disney Concert Hall, which however was the only work by Gehry on display. For Fuksas, the presence of the American architect did not exacerbate the earthquake that was transforming the discipline, but simply repeated the thesis already in circulation and "dear to Zevi, who wanted Gehry at the origin of the revolution"[73]. Considering the work of the two and the works in the exhibition, it could perhaps be said that there were at least two evolutions (rather than revolutions): the first, the deconstructivist evolution, had changed the way of understanding architecture, and the second, the digital version, had affected its form. At the time of the MoMA exhibition in

[67] *Ivi*, 11. In the catalogue, the curator makes explicit reference to the exhibition curated by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley. On the MoMA exhibition, see Simone Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus in der Architektur? Eine Analyse der Ausstellung "Deconstructivist Architecture" im New York Museum of Modern Art 1988* (Bielefeld, Transcript, 2015).

[68] Hodge, *Skin+Bones*, 15.

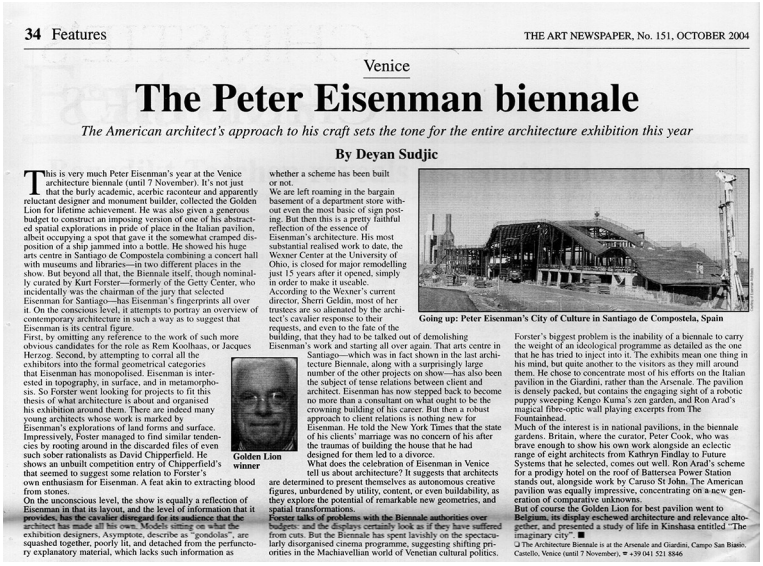
[69] Greg Lynn (edited by), *Animate Form* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).

[70] Paolo Portoghesi, "A proposito della Nona Mostra Internazionale di Architettura della Biennale di Venezia, 2004. Riflessioni sullo stato presente dell'architettura", *Casabella*, 726 (October 2004), 4.

[71] ASAC, b. 378, folder 3, 9. *Mostra internazionale di architettura, Venezia 2004*, press release, December 2003.

[72] Deyan Sudjic, "The Peter Eisenman biennale", *The Art Newspaper*, 151 (October 2004), 34.

[73] Massimiliano Fuksas, "Biennali, fior di incoerenze", *Architettura*, (November 2004), 23.



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Venice

The Peter Eisenman biennale

The American architect's approach to his craft sets the tone for the entire architecture exhibition this year

By Deyan Sudjic

This is very much Peter Eisenman's year at the Venice architecture biennale (until 7 November). It's not just that the burly academic, acerbic raconteur and apparently reluctant designer and monument builder, collected the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement. He was also given a generous budget to construct an imposing version of one of his abstracted spatial explorations in pride of place in the Italian pavilion, albeit occupying a spot that gave it the somewhat cramped disposition of a ship jammed into a bottle. He showed his huge arts centre in Santiago de Compostela combining a concert hall with museums and libraries—in two different places in the show. But beyond all that, the Biennale itself, though nominally curated by Kurt Forster—formerly of the Getty Center, who incidentally was the chairman of the jury that selected Eisenman for Santiago—has Eisenman's fingerprints all over it. On the conscious level, it attempts to portray an overview of contemporary architecture in such a way as to suggest that Eisenman is its central figure.

First, by omitting any reference to the work of such more obvious candidates for the role as Rem Koolhaas, or Jacques Herzog. Second, by attempting to corral all the exhibitors into the formal geometrical categories that Eisenman has monopolised. Eisenman is interested in topography, in surface, and in metamorphosis. So Forster went looking for projects to fit this thesis of what architecture is about and organised his exhibition around them. There are indeed many young architects whose work is marked by Eisenman's explorations of land forms and surface. Impressively, Foster managed to find similar tendencies by rooting around in the discarded files of even such sober rationalists as David Chipperfield. He shows an unbuilt competition entry of Chipperfield's that seemed to suggest some relation to Forster's own enthusiasm for Eisenman. A feat akin to extracting blood from stones.

On the unconscious level, the show is equally a reflection of Eisenman in that its layout, and the level of information that it provides, has the cavalier disregard for its audience that the architect has made all his own. Models sitting on what the exhibition designers, Asymptote, describe as "gondolas", are squashed together, poorly lit, and detached from the perfunctory explanatory material, which lacks such information as whether a scheme has been built or not.

We are left roaming in the bargain basement of a department store without even the most basic of sign posting. But then this is a pretty faithful reflection of the essence of Eisenman's architecture. His most substantial realised work to date, the Wexner Center at the University of Ohio, is closed for major remodelling just 15 years after it opened, simply in order to make it useable.

According to the Wexner's current director, Sherri Geldin, most of her trustees are so alienated by the architect's cavalier response to their requests, and even to the fate of the building, that they had to be talked out of demolishing Eisenman's work and starting all over again. That arts centre in Santiago—which was in fact shown in the last architecture Biennale, along with a surprisingly large number of the other projects on show—has also been the subject of tense relations between client and architect. Eisenman has now stepped back to become no more than a consultant on what ought to be the crowning building of his career. But then a robust approach to client relations is nothing new for Eisenman. He told the New York Times that the state of his clients' marriage was no concern of his after the traumas of building the house that he had designed for them led to a divorce.

What does the celebration of Eisenman in Venice tell us about architecture? It suggests that architects are determined to present themselves as autonomous creative figures, unburdened by utility, content, or even buildability, as they explore the potential of remarkable new geometries, and spatial transformations.

Forster talks of problems with the Biennale authorities over budgets and the displays certainly look as if they have suffered from cuts. But the Biennale has spent lavishly on the spectacularly disorganised cinema programme, suggesting shifting priorities in the Machiavellian world of Venetian cultural politics.

Golden Lion winner

Going up: Peter Eisenman's City of Culture in Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Forster's biggest problem is the inability of a biennale to carry the weight of an ideological programme as detailed as the one that he has tried to inject into it. The exhibits mean one thing in his mind, but quite another to the visitors as they mill around them. He chose to concentrate most of his efforts on the Italian pavilion in the Giardini, rather than the Arsenale. The pavilion is densely packed, but contains the engaging sight of a robotic puppy sweeping Kengo Kuma's zen garden, and Ron Arad's magical fibre-optic wall playing excerpts from The Fountainhead.

Much of the interest is in national pavilions, in the biennale gardens. Britain, where the curator, Peter Cook, who was brave enough to show his own work alongside an eclectic range of eight architects from Kathryn Findlay to Future Systems that he selected, comes out well. Ron Arad's scheme for a prodigy hotel on the roof of Battersea Power Station stands out, alongside work by Caruso St John. The American pavilion was equally impressive, concentrating on a new generation of comparative unknowns.

But of course the Golden Lion for best pavilion went to Belgium, its display eschewed architecture and relevance altogether, and presented a study of life in Kinshasa entitled "The imaginary city". ■

❑ The Architecture Biennale is at the Arsenale and Giardini, Campo San Biasio, Castello, Venice (until 7 November), ☎ +39 041 521 8846

7.10
Deyan Sudjic, "The Peter Eisenman biennale", *The Art Newspaper*, 151 (October 2004), 34

1988, there were still very few firms actively using digital modelling, and it was not until the following decade that computers would really begin to transform the profession. But just 15 years later, in 2004, Forster could state that

> information technology is the new lifeblood of all operating systems in our world. In architecture, the use of this technology is slowly reconnecting the various workers called upon to work in the field. We are beginning to glimpse a near future that will allow all conceptual aspects and all stages of execution of a work to be controlled with a single tool, the computer. But mind you: we do not at all think that a 'computerised' architecture will be the result. On the contrary, we are convinced that information technology unleashes the imagination and potential of construction beyond the hitherto tacitly accepted and ideologically justified limits.[74]

In the interview granted to "Modulo", Autodesk's vice president of the Building Solutions Division Philip Bernstein observed how professionals used the company's products for basically two reasons: either simply to represent their projects, or "at an advanced level [...] to try to do something new or different by exploring some formal ideas until they get what they need". Beyond these "blobmasters", Bernstein went on to say, there was a third level in which we find those professionals who use the new tools "not to explore forms, but to understand how to construct them, how to translate design ideas into actions that will lead to the construction of a building"[75]. One of these worthy of mention here is Greg Lynn (1964). Lynn had started to explore the possibilities offered by the new tools early on and had edited the 1993 monographic issue of "A.D." entitled *Folding in Architecture*[76]. In the introduction to the second edition, the architect identified the beginning of the 1990s as a watershed moment and explained that "what is probably interesting […] is not the theoretical directions of the architects

[74] ASAC, b. 379, folder 2, "Discorso di Kurt W. Forster alla conferenza stampa tenutasi all'Istituto italiano di cultura a Londra il 15 giugno 2004", 1 June 2004, 5.

[75] "Autodesk protagonista alla Biennale", *Modulo*, 305 (October 2004), 907.

[76] Greg Lynn (edited by), *Folding in Architecture*, monographic issue of *AD - Architectural Design*, 63 (March-April 1993).

showcased in the publication but the fact […] that these practices were collected at the instant before they would be completely transformed by the computer"[77]. In the subsequent years, the "digital waves of software-sponsored discourse" pushed the discipline increasingly towards the digital horizon[78]. And just like a ship, the new architecture landed on the shores of Venice, welcomed by Forster and Asymptote. Hani Rashid (1958) and Lise Anne Couture (1959) had also long since begun to make use of design technologies, achieving international fame with their designs for the virtual spaces of the New York Stock Exchange: "not the design of a simple website, but virtual spaces in which to enter and carry out activities and experiences as if in a real space"[79].

In 2004 Lynn was present at the Biennale with three works, none of which were completed, while Hani Rashid and Lise Anne Couture were responsible for both the architectural and exhibition design as well as the corporate image, developed with Omnivore graphic designers. For the Giardini, the aforementioned red installation was built, which stretched towards the Italian Pavilion and climbed up towards Scolari's *Saetta*. At the Arsenale, the duo "laid down uniform formats for the plan and image information of the individual projects and concentrated the models along the entire axis of the Corderie and the Artiglierie"[80]. The staging design, the architects explained, emerged from "computer-generated animated morphic sequences derived from the rules of perspective geometry applied to the actions and dynamics needed to twist and 'tie' spaces together"[81] [*Figg. 7.11, 7.12*]. Lynn's works and Asymptote's spaces represent Forster's staged metamorphosis well and reinforce an observation made by Mario Carpo, according to whom, when speaking of "digital-era architecture", one does not simply mean the use of innovative modelling tools, but refers to works that "could not have been either designed or built without [digital tools]"[82].

In an attempt to give order to the works of the digital era, the space of the Corderie was divided into sections called *Transformations, Topography, The Nature of Artifice, Surfaces, Atmosphere and Hyper-projects*, i.e. names corresponding to as many "design questions"[83]. Having abandoned the typological references ("Museums", "Towers" or "Shops") and functional themes ("Housing", "Work" or "Education"), which had acted as a conceptual framework to support *Next*, the 2004 exhibition seemed to seek new relationships, identifying impalpable phenomena such as light or the topography of the landscape as its interlocutors[84]. However, neither Asymptote's staging nor Forster's categories were able to remedy the general impression of confusion noted by most. "You can't distinguish the works from the authors. You can't tell when things were built, if they were built at all, or are still just plans", lamented Hans Hollein, com-

[77] *Ibidem*.

[78] *Ibidem*.

[79] Molinari, "Due Americani nell'altra Venezia", 102; Hani Rashid, Lise Anne Couture, Greg Lynn, *NYSE Virtual Trading Floor* (Montréal, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2015).

[80] Matthias Boeckl, "A Renaissance of Building. On the 9th Architecture Biennale in Venice", *Architektur.aktuell*, (October 2004), 96. Baratta speaks of the Corderie as a space that challenges the curators "because of their unambiguous direction, repetitiveness, and inescapable monumentality, which often inspires interventions that introduce slalom pathways with bulkheads, walls, diaphragms, aimed at forming successive spaces". Baratta, *Il Giardino e l'Arsenale*, 297.

[81] Hani Rashid, Lisa Anne Couture, "Asymptote, l'architettura di Metamorph", in *Metamorph*, vol. *Traiettorie*, 13.

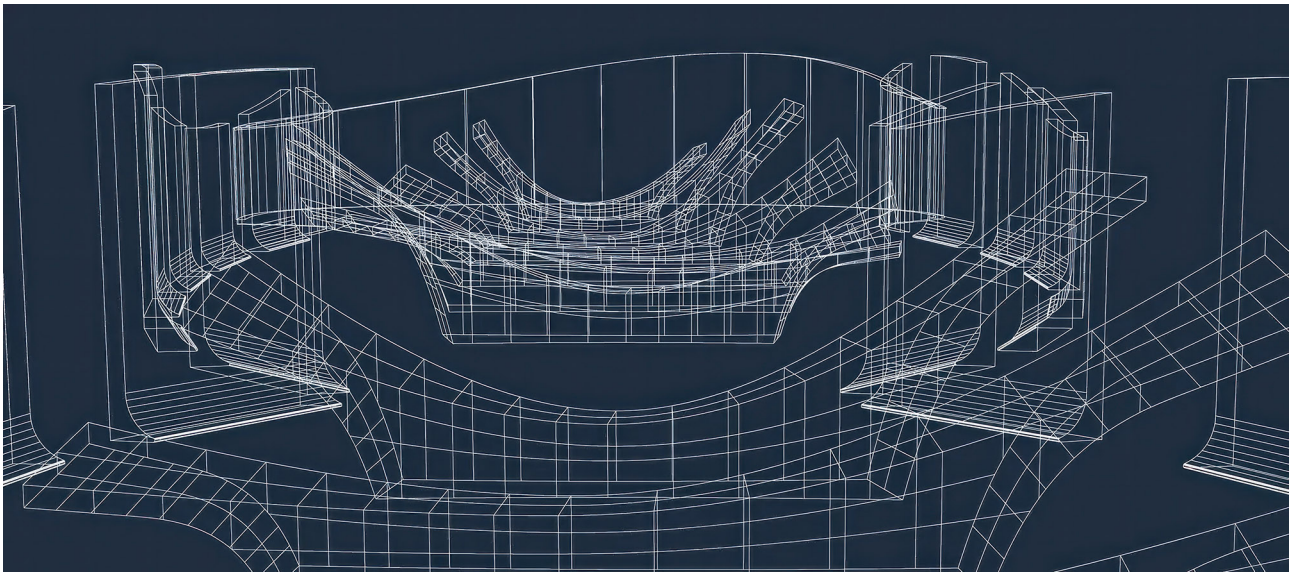
[82] Mario Carpo (edited by), *The Digital Turn in Architecture (1992-2012)* (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 8.

[83] Valentina Croci, "L'evoluzione corre veloce", *Ottagono*, 173 (September 2004), 142. It is interesting to note that the "design questions" were identified before the projects that were supposed to support (or otherwise) the curatorial thesis. Telephone interview by the author with Matteo Cainer, 25 August 2023.

[84] Sudjic, *Next*, 10-11.

7.11
Asymptote Architecture (Lise Anne Couture and Hani Rashid), Staging at the Corderie dell'Arsenale, 2004.
(© Asymptote Architecture)

7.12
Asymptote Architecture (Lise Anne Couture and Hani Rashid), Computer elaboration for the staging at Corderie dell'Arsenale.
(© Asymptote Architecture)



paring the Arsenale space to an overstuffed trunk[85]. The image of abundance, when not also of excess, renders the state of the discipline at the beginning of the new millennium well and the conditions under which professionals worked: "[t]heorists who attracted packed halls only five years ago are now facing empty seats. […] There is a general sense that architecture theory has run out of gas, that the exciting venues are elsewhere: computers, new technology, and, now most important in this boom economy, building"[86]. The intoxication caused by the meeting of digital and economic possibilities was harshly criticised by Paolo Portoghesi, who in *Metamorph* saw "the image of a disciplinary epidemic"[87]. However, what seemed to trouble the Roman architect the most was an apparent deafness of contemporary production to the urban context and the reasons of the city that only a few years earlier had played a key role in Fuksas's *Less Aesthetics, More Ethics*[88]. In fact, the question that many asked at the time was precisely the one asked by Portoghesi: what about the city? Stirling and Rossi's work could undoubtedly have given appropriate visibility to the subject, but as far as the exhibition was concerned Portoghesi's question, typical of the Italian debate on architecture, found no answer in the event curated by Forster.

5. Conclusions

> *We are not convinced by the futuristic styles that are fashionable today, but we are certain that digital culture will gradually help us enter a new way of thinking about the space of our future lives. Interactivity, advanced computers, non-linear geometry and many other aspects of contemporary culture are pushing us very far away from the old idea of modernity.*[89]

As is well known, the Corderie dell'Arsenale welcomed visitors to the Biennale for the first time in 1980, on the occasion of what is conventionally known as the 1st International Architecture Exhibition[90]. With his Strada Novissima, recalls Adrian Forty, Portoghesi "wanted the installation not just to invite more reflection on architecture itself, but to encourage people to think, through architecture, about other things in the world"[91]. Regardless of the controversy that accompanied it and some famous critiques, *Metamorph* offered then and still offers many opportunities to reflect on the state of architecture and 'other things in the world' at the turn of the new millennium.

As is evident, the metamorphoses staged by Forster could not ignore the possibilities offered by digital design technologies. However, contrary to what Zevi wrote, the pioneers of the "new sciences" had not exactly "consigned [the old

[85] Capezzuto, Obrist, Boeri, "Hollein vs. Biennale / Biennale vs. Fuksas", 45. Interviewed a few years later, Forster preferred to speak of "an ocean of possibilities". Kurt Forster interviewed by Aaron Levy and William Menking (New York, 26 February 2010): Aaron Levy, William Menking, *Architecture on Display: On the History of the Venice Biennale of Architecture* (London, Architectural Association, 2010), 112.

[86] Mary McLeod, "Theory and Practice", *Assemblage. A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*, 41 (April 2000), 51.

[87] Portoghesi, "A proposito della Nona Mostra Internazionale di Architettura della Biennale di Venezia", 4.

[88] Fuksas, *Less Aesthetics More Ethics*.

[89] Asymptote cited in Molinari, "Due Americani nell'altra Venezia", 103.

[90] ASAC, *Mostra Internazionale di Architettura. La Biennale di Venezia 1980 -2021*, 40.

[91] Adrian Forty, "Foreword", in Szacka, *Exhibiting the Postmodern*, 9.

tools] to the attic". Zaha Hadid used to start "from huge hand-drawn drawings that [were then] explored through software and transformed into buildable models" and "Gehry works in the same way, but from models"[92]. While on the one hand Forster's exhibition confirmed Gehry and especially Eisenman as pioneers, on the other hand we cannot but observe that another generation of architects was also present at the Venice Biennale, the next one, for whom the computer did not represent a point of arrival or support, but the beginning of design and research work. And so while the architecture of the digital turn certainly included the research of the so-called 'deconstructivists', it was mainly establishing itself in the works of younger professionals who had taken their first professional steps using those tools. Adopting the aforementioned thesis of Mario Carpo, according to whom in order to speak of digital architecture it would be necessary for it to have integrated information technology from its conception, one could therefore identify the 2004 Biennale as the place where, ideally, a handover or at least a meeting between the 'pioneer' generation and those that followed took place[93].

Despite their importance, computers and software alone could not explain *Metamorph*'s architecture. From this point of view, at least two other elements have to be taken into account: the needs of the new economic elite whose ambitions (and financial transactions) had a decidedly supranational dimension and the expectations of an audience that had now become global. A host of new patrons had begun to plough the international scene in search of a visibility, the magnitude of which was unparalleled in past eras. Deprived of its most established interlocutor, the city, the architecture of metamorphosis made complete sense only if it was also (and perhaps above all) understood as a media product, as reassuring as a beautiful image or as soft as the fold of a dress. Balancing the overall disengaged impression of architecture in the exhibition, the awards at least partially contributed to highlighting the discipline's ability to still deal with the most problematic issues of recent history, as in the case of Günter Dominig's The Nazi Party Rally Grounds Documentation Centre (Nuremberg, 1998); to offer itself as a tool for the redemption of degraded urban areas, as in the case of the Esplanada Fòrum by José Antonio Martínez & Elías Torres Architects (Barcelona, 2004), or to create a place of art and interaction for the citizens of the new millennium, as in the case of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa (SANAA) (Kanazawa, 2004).

Twenty years after the exhibition, we can observe that the use of digital technologies is now as fully integrated in the work of designers as in all areas of everyday life. Today, therefore, *Metamorph* may seem extremely relevant, yet

[92] "Autodesk protagonista alla Biennale", 907. As Gehry himself confirmed, interviewed by Greg Lynn: Lynn, *Archéologie du numérique*, 25-34.

[93] Carpo, *The Digital Turn in Architecture (1992-2012)*, 8.

it appears more distant than ever. After 2004 the bombastic tendency of that architecture faded, eventually clashing with quite different economic conditions and social needs. On the one hand, the great recession of 2008 put a brake on the most futuristic works, postponing many of the projects that seemed certain to be built. On the other hand, there was an increasing focus on environmental and social sustainability that is still the focus of many contemporary challenges. To try to understand the path taken by architecture and the Biennale in the following years, one need only read the titles of a few subsequent exhibitions. There one would discover a renewed focus on the social role of architecture (*People Meet in Architecture*, 2010), the importance of sharing (*Common Ground*, 2012), the need to rediscover the fundamentals of the discipline (*Fundamentals*, 2014) and, as Lesley Lokko tried to do this year, to bring the many who had hitherto been left on the margins into the Biennale circuit (*The Laboratory of the Future*)[94].

[94] Kazuyo Sejima (directed by), *People Meet in Architecture, 12th International Architecture Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Venice, Giardini di Castello and Arsenale, 29 August - 21 November 2010 (Venice, Marsilio, 2010); David Chipperfield (directed by), *Common Ground, 13th International Architecture Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Venice, Giardini di Castello and Arsenale, 29 August - 25 November 2012 (Venice, Marsilio, 2012); Rem Koolhaas (directed by), *Fundamentals, 14th International Architecture Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Venice, Giardini di Castello and Arsenale, 7 June - 23 November 2014 (Venice, Marsilio, 2014); Lesley Lokko (directed by), *The Laboratory of the Future, 18th International Architecture Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Giardini di Castello and Arsenale, 20 May - 26 November 2023 (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 2023).

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