Fundamentals: Expressing Modern Architecture at Biennale Venice 2014

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ABSTRACT

The Biennale held at Venice this year exhibit a strong intellectual challenge inaugurated by the curator Rem Koolhaas. The "Theme" for the 14th cycle is "Fundamentals" in Art and Architecture. This theme will be presented by 40 different countries in the national pavilions. The major issue to be presented this year which is different than other years will be according to Koolhaas, the representation of "architecture" rather than "architects". In addition to this, the main theme for the National Pavilions, which will be the main focus of this paper, is the expression of architecture in different nations during the past 100 years, from 1914-2014. This will be discussed in the shadows of the dilemma of Modernism and National Regionalism. Going through the different stages of understanding 'national' architecture, World Wars, Modernism and then globalization, the theme represents an important challenge for each contributor to express the evolution of architecture in their nations. The paper will be divided into two parts. First is a brief review of the emergence of Modernism and the International dimensions affecting its spread in different communities. Second is the documentation of the Theme of the Biennale, as well as the contributions of a selection of countries. Following that will be analysis of those contributions in relation to the theme as well as to the analysis of two main contributors from the Middle East. The paper concludes by a discussion related to the intellectual outcomes of the contributions and their relation with the national history and Modernism. This conclusion will shed light on how countries in the Middle East precisely relate to the dilemma of representation in the shadows of Modernity.

Keywords: Modern architecture, Biennale, Fundamentals, National identity.

1. Introduction

The Biennale held at Venice this year will exhibit a strong intellectual challenge inaugurated by the curator Rem Koolhaas. The "Theme" for the 14th cycle is "Fundamentals" in Art and Architecture. This theme will be presented by 40 different countries in the national pavilions. The major issue to be presented this year which is different than other years will be according to Koolhaas, the representation of "architecture" rather than "architects". In addition to this, the main theme for the National Pavilions, which will be the main focus of this paper, is the expression of architecture in different nations during the past 100 years, from 1914-2014. This will be discussed in the shadows of the dilemma of Modernism and National Regionalism. Going through the different stages of understanding 'national' architecture, World Wars, Modernism and then globalization, the theme represents an important challenge for each contributor to express the evolution of architecture in their nations.

The paper will be divided into two parts. First is a brief review of the emergence of Modernism and the dimensions which affected its spread in different communities with a brief mention of the main concepts of Critical Regionalism. Second is the documentation of a selection of The National Pavilions of the Biennale, as well as the contributions of a selection of countries. Following that will be analysis of those contributions in relation to the theme. The paper concludes by a discussion related to the intellectual outcomes of the contributions and their relation with the national history and Modernism. This conclusion will shed light on how countries in the Middle East precisely relate to the dilemma of representation in the shadows of Modernity.

2. Literature Review: The Emergence of Modernism and Critical Regionalism

The emergence of Modernism is highly affected by political dimensions which stood behind the need to provide quick, efficient and economic techniques of building. This is relevant especially in the postwar mode and the advancement of technological means. However, the spread of Modernism and its notions, "Forms Follows Function", "Less is more" and "The House is a machine to live in", inaugurated a strong debate between the need to preserve identity and the urge to build faster and "modern".

According to Heynen (1999), the experiences of the First World War had convinced everyone of the urgency of bringing technological and scientific developments under control. The postwar period was seen as an opportunity for a new start, offering the chance of establishing a culture that would guide the process of modernization in a positive direction and to offer "lack of style", (p. 47).

As Frampton (2007) explains, Modern Architecture implied a universality of approach, which generally favored light-weight technique, synthetic modern materials and standard modular parts so as to facilitate fabrication and erection, (p. 248). What further stresses that is what Curtis (1996) implies that after World War I and before World War II Le Corbusier has spoken of the new dwelling as a 'machine for living in', mass producible Dom-ino houses, (p.171). As for Le Corbusier the main five points of Modern Architecture are; pilotis, longitudinal windows, free plan, free façade, and roof garden, (Heynen, 1999, p. 64).

Modern architecture was initially intended to create openness and to provide room for light and sun. Dark cellars should be broken open and vistas opened up. The aim was to create an interchange between interior and outside; private space should be brought into relationship with the public realm. This drive toward openness was premature, however. During the fascist period nothing in the world outside was capable of enriching and improving the interior: "The broad window full of nothing but outside world needs an outdoors full of attractive strangers, not full of Nazis; the glass door right down to the floor really requires sunshine to peer and break in, not the Gestapo", (Heynen 1999, p. 123). Under the social conditions of that time, people's longing for intimacy and security was more than justified, and the openness of modern architecture threatened to become a farce, (Heynen 1999, p. 126).

Those calls for unification, standardization and lack of style emerged the resistance known as Critical Regionalism, which is according to Frampton (2007), is not intended to denote the vernacular, but rather to identify those recent regional 'schools' whose primary aim has been to reflect and serve the limited constituencies in which they are grounded, (p. 314). In addition to this, Critical Regionalism serves to distance architecture both from normative optimization and from the naïve utopianism of the early Modern Movement, (Frampton 2007, p.327).

3. Documentation: The Biennale- Venice 2014: Fundamentals and Absorbing Modernity

The theme assigned to the national pavilions is "Absorbing Modernity: 1914-2014". For this, each pavilion will present its country's unique architectural styles and typologies over the last century. The exhibition in the Central Pavilion named Elements of Architecture comprises a series of rooms each dedicated to the history of a different architectural element, including the balcony, the wall, the door and the window. The Arsenale exhibition, named Monditalia, will collectively represent Italy's architecture and history.

As to the Central Pavilion, Koolhaas (2014) has stated: "Fundamentals will be a Biennale about architecture, not architects. After several Biennales dedicated to the celebration of the contemporary, Fundamentals will focus on histories – on the inevitable elements of all architecture used by any architect, anywhere, anytime (the door, the floor, the ceiling etc.) and on the evolution of national architectures in the last 100 years.

Koolhaas (2014) further implies that in 1914, it made sense to talk about a "Chinese" architecture, a "Swiss" architecture, an "Indian" architecture. One hundred years later, under the influence of wars, diverse political regimes, different stages of development, national and international architectural movements, individual talents, friendships, random personal trajectories and technological developments, architectures that were once specific and local have become interchangeable and global. National identity has seemingly been sacrificed to modernity.

The First World War – the beginning of modern globalization – serves a starting point for the range of narratives. The transition to what seems like a universal architectural language is a more complex process than we typically recognize, involving significant encounters between cultures, technical inventions and imperceptible ways of remaining "national".

By telling the history of the last 100 years cumulatively, the exhibitions in the National Pavilions will generate a global overview of architecture's evolution into a single, modern aesthetic, and at the same time uncover within globalization the survival of unique national features and mentalities that continue to exist and flourish even as international collaboration and exchange intensify.

Each pavilion tells us about the desire to express something of the national character and the prevailing political aesthetic. And it is this idea and what happened to it that is at the heart of the theme set by this year's curator, Rem Koolhaas. The question is posed through the juxtaposition of cities a century ago with their distinctive, bustling streetscapes, busy with architectural detail with shots of contemporary central business districts, the anonymous cityscapes of glass towers and urban freeways that could be Houston or Dubai, La Défense or Doha. The question Koolhaas (2014) poses is: How did this happen? How did these diverse cities absorb this idea of modernity in such a homogenous way, how did one type of architecture attain such hegemony?, (Heathcote, 2014)

That's because modernism, which started as a radical, often political idea about remaking cities for a technocratic, classless age of automobiles and sun terraces, was almost immediately co-opted as a style, a way of expressing taste, fashion and a perceived modernity. The most enduring monuments of modernism are, you could argue, not communal housing blocks or private villas but the elegant mid-century commercial office slabs that inspired the "blandscapes" of the contemporary city.

1:1 model replicates Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-ino, by Rem Kolhaas, Entrance to "Elements of Architecture", Author, 2014

Development of Ceilings through History, Elements of Architecture Exhibition, Author, 2014

After the explosion of national expression and sculptural architectures that occurred around the fin-de-siècle (Arts and Crafts, art nouveau, national romanticism, secessionism and so on), there was actually a period of reaction in which the French beaux arts model, the monumental classical architecture of the academy, became the world's default architecture just as corporate modernism is today. From London and Milan to Washington DC and Moscow, the dominant streetscape of 1914 was influenced more by Paris than by any ideas of local tradition. National romanticism had been crushed by an idea that taste emerged from Paris, much as it also did in fashion or cuisine.

Model of the Exhibition and Concept Poster, http://www.dezeen.com/2014/03/11/rem-koolhaas-venice-biennale-2014-more-details/

4. Analysis: National Pavilions and the Modernism Dilemma

Starting with the British pavilion, curators Sam Jacob and Wouter Vanstiphout have demonstrated that the architectural style pioneered by the Smithsons is indicative of a particularly British response to housing and urban planning following the Second World War. In what Jacob (2014) describes as an era which has "seen a shift to a globalised condition of modernity and financialisation", perhaps now we can fully appreciate not only what the Smithsons stood for, but also how an architecture 'for the people' might have now been lost to time. In contemporary London affordability of housing is reaching danger levels. It is possible to argue that, although projects like Robin Hood Gardens were dogged with problems, the fundamental idea behind them is part of what's lacking in the profession today, (Taylor-Foster (a),2014).

The British Pavilion at the 2014 Venice Biennale takes the large scale projects of the 1950's, 60's and 70's and explores the "mature flowering of British Modernism at the moment it was at its most socially, politically and architecturally ambitious but also the moment that witnessed its collapse." The exhibition tells the story of how British modernity emerged out of an unlikely combination of interests and how "these modern visions continue to create our physical and imaginative landscapes." To those who know the UK's architectural heritage, this cultural and social history is delivered in a way which feels strangely familiar, whilst uncovering fascinating hidden histories of British modernity that continue to resonate in the 21st century, (Taylor-Foster (b),2014).

Clockwork' derives from A Clockwork Orange, a famous dystopian film by Stanley Kubrick that used the [then] brand new Thamesmead development in London as a backdrop. 'Jerusalem' – a new Jerusalem as featured in the poem by William Blake, introduces the source code of modernity in England due to the moral outrage with the industrial city, out of which came the plea and ambition to build a 'new Jerusalem' on "England's green and pleasant land", (Taylor-Foster (a),2014).

Overloaded by political dimensions, the British pavilion delivers an important message of the necessity of re-defining Modern architecture. It questions what benefits were gained by the International Style and whether those benefits helped in delivering peace and utopia as previously claimed. The intention was to stress on the importance of actually achieving utopia even without adopting a specific trend, yet, through the blend of different cultures.
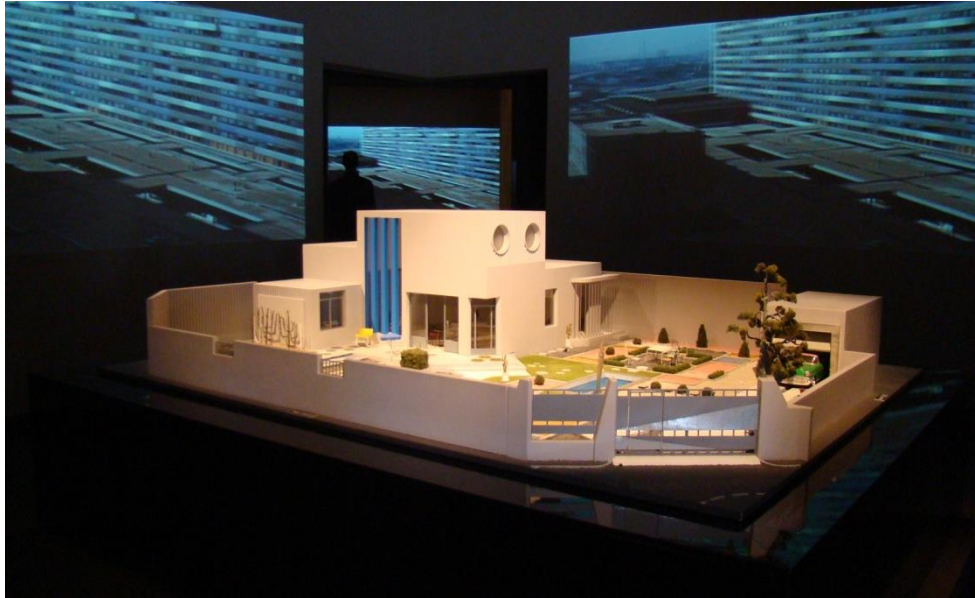

The British Pavilion, Author, 2014

The French Pavilion included a model of Ville Arpel, which was featured in Jacques Tati's famous Mon Oncle, a 1958 film that playfully dramatizes the pitfalls of minimalist design while also revealing a darker side of modernism's social alienation. Curator Jean-Louis Cohen paired Tati's comical critique

with a montage of clips from Jean-Luc Godard films, and a documentary on Drancy, a massive housing complex outside Paris that was built in the 1930s with bunker-ish features. Its notoriety as a failed attempt at mass housing became all too real when the Nazis took it over in 1940, converting it into a concentration camp, (Osborne, 2014).

This pavilion sheds light on the political consequences of Modernism. Although the selected model was one of the aesthetically successful products of Modernism, however, the dark fate it faced can possibly destroy those aesthetics. The pavilion aimed to criticize the totalitarian aspects of Modernism, not only as architectural products.

Ville Arpel Model in the French Pavilion, Author, 2014

The Japanese pavilion delivered a very strong message by "In the Real World". The pavilion is divided into two parts, first is a hall with the "roots" of its "Fundamentals", the mentor, where a display by major Japanese architects is created, and the other half is a display of those mentors works "in the real world". Japan aimed to deliver the message that the real base of its culture is the human being, who makes culture, identity and produces and to glorify the real ones behind the creation of its civilization translated in architectural projects.

Glimpses of the two parts of the Japanese Pavilion, Author, 2014

In contrast to the Japanese celebration of the human being, the American pavilion celebrated the "US Studio" through the display of the projects worldwide made by US firms. This display aimed to market the globalization theme America presents as its "Fundamental" as well as send a message that 'absorbing modernity' is created through the firm and through the expansion of the firm's dominance worldwide.

Side of the American Pavilion, Author, 2014

5. Analysis of the Middle East Pavilions in Relation to Nationalism

This part explores two pavilions from countries in the Middle East to show how they responded to the theme. Those countries are Israel and Egypt. The first is selected since its original planning was based on

Modernism aspects, especially the city of Tel Aviv. Egypt was selected due to the strong impact of the dilemma between Critical Regionalism and Modernism present in the Egyptian architectural culture.

Israel is a country that was built with modernism as its guide. It flourished in a particular way and resulted in a unique architectural landscape, not only in terms of singular buildings, but also in the way in which the territory itself was planned. Anti-urban in essence, the Sharon Plan from 1951 gave birth to more than 400 new towns scattered across the territory, (Basulto, 2014).

Neither urban nor suburban, the Urburb is a fragmented mosaic of one hundred years of modernist planning in Israel: early twentieth century garden-cities, mid-century social housing and generic, high-rise residential typologies of the past two decades. These residential mutations dominate the contemporary Israeli landscape, expanding and replacing existing textures, in an endless, repetitive cycle, (Merin, 2014).

The installation explores these themes not only through the data displayed but also through its performative affect. The visitor enters a modernist construction site, filled with automatic machines that sketch on sand, erase, and sketch again. Each scenario takes about three to five minutes, and every printer presents a few scenarios grouped under one theme—overplanning, evolution of buildings, pattern language, and erase and print dynamics.

Israel's Pavilion, Author, 2014

In contrast with the sophisticated and technological model Israel presented, the Egyptian pavilion, selected for being one of the oldest contributors from the Middle, shared an idea of the dilemma between the informality prevailing in Cairo nowadays and the history inhibited within the chaos. Although the philosophy of the pavilion seemed promising, however, two problems were associated with the contribution. First, is the weak technicality of the exhibited material; second is the issue that informality vs. history has been consumed as an idea with nothing new to introduce. This resides in addition to the fact that informality is not relevant to the theme of 'Absorbing Modernity' nor was it materializing any 'fundamental' in the Egyptian conscious.

Egypt's Pavilion, Author, 2014

6. Conclusion

The paper aimed to discuss the theme of the Biennale at Venice this year. This is important because the theme this year focused on the issues of Fundamentals of Architecture, as well the debate around how different nations absorbed 'Modernism' other than any other trend in Architecture.

As exposed in the analysis of the National Pavilions, a group of the main contributing countries focused on the political and economic consequences of Modernism rather than its actual reflections in their countries. This sends a strong message of the totalitarian regard which architecture has to be considered as. Architecture is not merely a building, not even a city, yet, architecture is a worldview, is the lives of people in a certain age, with all the social and political dimensions accompanying that.

As to the countries of the Middle East, the dilemma of identity vs. modernity still resides in the consciousness of the intellects, however, with no strong or effective solutions to present the 'others' point of view. Therefore, it s recommended to enrich this intellectual debate by deep architectural experimental research to extract a unique trend which encompasses the debate in a unique method.

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