SPONTANEOUS INTERVENTIONS (U.S. Pavilion)

Common Ground - La Biennale di Venezia - 13th International Architecture Exhibition

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Originally published on Discolè.com, September 2012

Architectural exhibitions are often elaborate and perplexing visual experiences, burdened by models, boards, diagrams, maps, drawings and renderings galore—a sensory overload of TOO MUCH INFORMATION. Naturally, this year's Biennale is no different. The American Pavilion follows suit… Yet, although showcasing a staggering total of 124 projects, its exhibition design is smart and simple. Embedded into the design is the desire to allow viewers to control their own information consumption.

Projects are exhibited on banners suspended from the ceiling, which can be pulled down for closer viewing. You have the choice to explore the minutiae of singular projects, or to just glance through the banners collectively. When you enter the pavilion, you see only an expanse of uninspired rainbow graphics on rows of banners; but if you do twirls around the space, you will discover the projects on the other side of the banners.

Whether you spend three minutes or three hours perusing the banners inside the pavilion, you will always be discharged to the lounge area at the entryway—an outdoor communal space composed of a series of spongy blocks waiting to be assembled into makeshift stages for presentations and discussions that are part of the pavilion's public programming.

Noteworthy as a prominent theme among national pavilions this year is the desire to focus on local projects and local designers/artists. In this case, the curatorial team implemented an open call for urban intervention projects carried out in the United States.

Interview with David van der Leer
Co-Curator of the U.S. Pavilion (with Cathy Lang Ho and Ned Cramer)

+ CURATION

CWZW:
You work within the Guggenheim, an institutional framework, Cathy is more of an independent critic, etc… How did the curatorial team's different backgrounds shape the initial concepts for the pavilion and the subsequent selection of projects?

DVDL:
It's a different but nice theme to work with and in. Cathy and I have known each other for several years, and we've often hung out in a more social setting, although we always run into each other at architecture events. Cathy realized that she wanted to submit for the Biennale some time last year, and asked us to jump in on it.

We do all come from very different backgrounds. Cathy, I don't think, has made shows before. I have, and Ned has a little bit, and still the two of them have a ton of experience in publishing. I think we're all learning from each other and from the project. In many ways, it's a very complex show that we've created. What we've done is made a selection of 124 participants, selected out of a larger submission of around 430 projects.

CWZW:
Did you think that, during the selection process, you confronted any conflict due to the different institutions (or lack of) that the members of the curatorial team were working in?

DVDL:
Well, actually, how we made our selection was even more complicated. We sat down with our full advisory committee on this: Paola Antonelli, Anne Guiney, Zoe Ryan, Michael Sorkin. We usually all sat down together as a group and went through things together, having reviewed things before, and then discussed what was interesting and not. It's a really fascinating process, because some people find things interesting that you don't… We all sat down together a few times, and we would all make our selections and talk through them. In the end, I thought it was a very fluid, nice process—because it was a good group of people. I think we all had a good experience overall.

In terms of me working for a larger institution, yes, it's always different, of course— For me, it's usually nice to work for a bigger institution. It's good to have the back-up of a museum.

CWZW:
Talk about the idea of the "open call"… The texts pose the projects as critiques of the contemporary city. What's your "critique of the contemporary city"?

DVDL:
We wanted to make sure that there were really projects in the mix as we would have not found otherwise, and unless you have an endless budget and endless time, there's not really another way to do it effectively, because it means you need to start traveling around the country and meeting tons of people. Sadly, this was not possible with time nor money, so I think that the open call was actually a democratic and effective way of getting projects in. There was a lot of enthusiasm, and I think that many people heard about it by word-of-mouth, from across the country. In the end, they're basically from all over the country—many places on the two coasts, and of course from places in between. For me, at least, it was an introduction to a lot of places I'd never been to, but now which I know have many interesting things going on.

In terms of the second part of the question, these projects became a lens for us to look at the American City—fascinating, because you all think you know a little about the American city, but for me as an outsider, my knowledge was limited. We're using these projects to look at developments in American cities over the past 200 years. This is one framework that we're adding to the show, which will appear as a large timeline on the floor. To me, this is an amazing element in the show. I think the American city deserves a lot more attention, from policy-makers, planners, architects, but also from normal citizens. This timeline shows this too, and I think it will be helpful for classrooms afterward. The second part of the show is interesting. The timeline looks at the past and the present of the American City, but what we're also doing is [filmed] interviews with around 30 participants in the show, and asking them to submit statements. They will be shown as the center of the show. We asked them: Can you think about what you've been doing in your city,

as an architect, a citizen, a city planner, and project this forward—what do you think is the future of the American city? A lot of them said, "This is a question about Utopia…" They became very beautiful statements, about what the potentials are, what the challenges are. Some were more poetic, some more activist. How we recorded them was similar to these video messages of Obama, of the Queen of England… So, they're always a little stately. [We asked] People to portray themselves as the new government official, or architect of your city, or whatever, and to make these stately messages. It's beautiful, because they're sitting in these rooms, with the Met behind them or a globe next to them, and they're giving these statements, and it seems so real, and yet is so funny to see.

In coming from Europe, for me, the situation here is slightly different from other places. Some of the interventions (as found in the show) can be found in various places in the world, but the context of course makes them stand out, or more relevant. What I see with many of these interventions is that people are actually very ambitious and very passionate about actively changing their city, which is slightly different from European conditions that I've seen… There are many amazing things happening in Europe, but I've been impressed with the enthusiasm with which many of these projects have been made. The belief to really make change is beautiful.

CWZW:
There are projects that operate more on a conceptual level and projects that operate on a more tangible, "pragmatic" level. Conceptual projects, conceptual architecture, is often critically viewed as frivolous. How do you gauge the "efficacy" of projects? Do you gauge efficacy on what is really implemented or evidenced?

DVDL:
We realized that we liked them more practical, but that it was good to stir up conversation. All of these projects in this show have been executed already, they're not conceptual in the sense that they only live in the brain or live in just a set of drawings, but all have been active in urban space. Even for the ones that are more abstract, or living more on the art side of things, it's important to realize that those also can help… There's a project taking place in Raleigh, and this project started as a critique of people not walking in the city. This young designer began a campaign around the city trying to direct people how to walk. It was, basically in some sense, a public art project, but it got taken over by the city after a few days. And so, it was incorporated into the city policy… even things that may seem initially more ephemeral can be helpful and mean something on a much broader level.

+ EXHIBITION

CWZW:
Can you talk a little bit about Spontaneous Interventions being less of a "conventional exhibition" and more of a spatial intervention within the pavilion? Architecture biennales/exhibitions tend to gravitate towards lots of information on boards, sensory overload, which can be one-sided, only accessible to architects or people in the field. How do you feel about this?

DVDL:
A very relevant frustration for architecture curators like myself. It's difficult to make compelling architecture shows. What we've done is this case is worked physically with the architecture of the pavilion. It's a slightly pompous building, it wants to be much more than it really is, so it is has this structure with wings and then these columns. In the end, it's small for what it wants to be, which is fascinating. It feels slightly off, which is also a nice thing to play with. 124 projects could have ended up as endless drawings on the wall, which is what usually happens in these kinds of shows. What we've created for this show with FreeCell—the architects of the show— as well as with Erik Adigard in San Francisco, our graphic designer, is a layout that is based on 124 banners hanging in the space that you can pull down. These banners are nice, because of course, you expect to see projects immediately when you walk into the pavilion, but instead you don't see anything at all. We've color-coded the panels in the front, so it almost feels like you're in a medieval castle with its colored flags. When you pull the banners down, you see the photos, stats and details of the projects. So all this information is all included in the show, but in a much more appealing way because of the exhibition design.

And then about the timeline I'd mentioned before—timelines can be dreadful things-- but Eric Adigards made this amazing floorscape that becomes a labyrinthian timeline that takes control of the different decades of American planning. In the central space-- I hope it will be as humorous as we're building it now-- we're asking people to deliver these stately messages of what the American future will be like. It's quite large-scale, so when you open the front door,

you will see [projections of] peoples' mouths, nose, and part of their eyes, delivering these stately messages. You see these faces in the context of the flags and such, so

I think that in terms of exhibition design, it's quite something, it's quite exciting. So in this show, there is also a lot of information… I probably come from the same family of thought as you. If you want to, you can spend hours in the show, reading everything and seeing everything-- but if you skim through it, I think it's a very compelling system too.

+ ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE

CWZW:
David Chipperfield says that "the ambition of *Common Ground* is to reassert the existence of an architectural culture…" What does this "culture of architecture" mean to you, how do you place architecture as its own exclusive discipline? How has architecture evolved to be more multidisciplinary?

DVDL:
I actually think that our project goes beyond architectural culture—it incorporates artists, it incorporates designers, and also everyday citizens. It has an engagement in public space that can come from so many different angles.

Architecture as exclusive is problematic-- I think architecture needs to be incredibly inclusive, much more than it is right now and learn much more from other disciplines. Architects need to learn that it's not just about trying to do everything yourself, as taught in school, but in some cases there are people who can do things much better because they're specialized in other things. I think the key thing about architecture is also collaboration.