

## On *Fundamentals*

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*... The role of architecture in these narratives () is substantial, but perhaps not as crucial as architects would hope.*

Rem Koolhaas, *Fundamentals*, 2014

This 14th Biennale struck me as being at the same time schizophrenic and shift and failed... and paradoxically successful, all the same.

Its curator, Rem Koolhaas, has conceived it in four sections; on themes that are so much different that they not only baffle the visitors, but furthermore dilute its message... *if there is to be any message other than this dissolution itself.* The first theme, *Absorbing modernity: 1914-2014*, which was confined to the 66 national pavilions at the Giardini, the Arsenale, and about the entire city; the second one, *Elements of architecture*, destined to the Central Pavilion of the Giardini to be done by the "maître". The third one, on the subject of education, is addressed to students in architecture and organized in conferences, workshops and different exchanges. Finally, the fourth, *Monditalia*, opens the way for the other Venetian biennales (cinema, dance, theatre and music) in order to provide a picture of the present situation of "the Boot", "the current state of Italy as an emblematic condition for a global situation where many countries are balancing between chaos and a realization of their full potential" (as the curator puts it).

After having visited, watched, read and listened till overdose, our observation is threefold.

First, the national pavilions often contradict the standardization of "modernity", suggested so heavily by the curatorial project, and underline the place of the "local" in the declension of a generic "modern"; "national schools", in a certain way, which define their identity features rather remotely from "generic modernism".

Furthermore, architects presented individually follow neither the "generic" path nor any of the "local schools", but rather participate (as they have always done) in an alternative and transversal creation, in a personal and personalized research, referential and creative, technical, programmatic and aesthetic. This way, they produce a different kind of modernity, scholar and/or practical, while participating in the creation of an alternative and often exemplary corpus.

Finally, aside of the politically and market enslaved "institutionalised" architecture as well as of any individual production, one finds there is architecture without architects and there is a vernacular production under the most diverse forms, still alive and kicking, that modern standardisation of the globalised world has not been able to set in orderly arrangement.

These three observations somehow neutralize the curatorial intention, the one concerning integration "in solidum" of the generic "architect" and of the ordinary "architecture"; in the absence of any other idea, it is the red thread of Rem Koolhaas' programme, of which we take over the sad avowal, in the motto, regarding powerlessness in a globalised, financialised and standardised world of triumphant capitalism. As the only way to follow. A pitiful defeat.

Yet obviously completely false, and that is what we are trying to demonstrate throughout the more or less hidden facets of this biennial. Visiting it became to us a sort of a treasure hunting game of chasing the counterexample, the contradiction to the commission, the critique of the "official" argumentation.

## Abstraction

“*elements of architecture*” (*eoA*) is a beautiful and desolating exhibition that occupies the central pavilion of Giardini. Architecture is surgically decomposed in “elements” (as components of a combinatorial and functional game, abstract, precise) nourished and supported by a bewildering sum of information, the notorious *Big Data Base*, relentless argument of the Rem/OMA approach. There is obviously an assured skill in the scenography and in the *mise-en-scènes* and moments of surprise meaning amazement (the constructive combinations of the Yingzao Fashi, for instance, of such mechanical and plastic consistency and able to fabricate “uniqueness” and “identity” with so few elements)...and in the end, we are left with a somewhat bitter aftertaste, as everything on display pertains to *Lego* rather than to “architecture”.

## Modern Mainstream

Several pavilions, (of the United States, the Arabic Countries – especially the Emirates and Saudi Arabia – Germany) adopt the curatorial remarks on the modern banality of a world once multicultural and protean. Other countries take a more or less critical distance, such as Israel, whose pavilion considers with a good amount of self-irony the manufacturing of its own modern heritage (the *sand printer* allegory is a telling example), or the Scandinavian countries, telling the story of the paradoxical exportation of their cultural and constructive model to Africa.

## Modern Heroes

Several countries pay an emphatic tribute to important figures of modernity: The Netherlands to Jaap Bakema, Switzerland to Lucius Burckhardt and Cedric Price and the United Kingdom to Reyner Banham, Derek Walter and Team X. Figureheads of a bustling innovative, critical, fertile modernity. And still current, far from the generic modernity sustained by Koolhaas...a sort of an ironical returning to the days when young Rem discovered Tatlin, El Lissitzky, Leonidov, Guinzbourg, and found himself inspired by them?

## Local Colour

Latin America (Peru, Argentina and Brazil) but also Japan and Korea among others, paint the dazzling picture of modernity creative and ambitious, confident in the optimistic message embodied in this new architecture. It is turned politically instrumental (but has not been architecture always used in this way?), as being the bearer of promises of prosperity and well-being throughout the new programmes and engineering achievements. And quite often of breath-taking beauty.

Under the same sign of optimistic confidence, the Chilean pavilion tells the fable crazy and sordid at the same time of *KPD* soviet plant of prefabricated housing, transformed into the central stakeout of south-American telephony. And of *Monolith panel*, signed by Allende and transformed later by Pinochet into a catholic icon, with the addition of a Madonna and Child.

In the same vein, Turkey and South Africa tell of the tribulations of a generic modernity, locally submitted to technical, political and socio-cultural deformations, so human after all.

While Gino Zucchi cleverly stages the Milan modernity in order to show in what sense this particular modernity is truly Italian, the robust Polish pavilion points to the hardships of the identity exercise: the monument of Marshal Pilsudski – the very symbol of the homeland – is nothing but a collage of details from elsewhere, Russian and German, French and Roman.

The Romanian pavilion is quite ambitious... yet perhaps not sufficiently. It is one of the few to show in a noticeable way the misdeeds of “modern” industrialisation, not as an ideology but rather as an outrageous practice of the outsize plants and the engendered pollution, of the impersonal and disembodied production... While the spatial device of the “islands” of the pavilion works fairly well as support for the images of an endless construction site, dirty and noisy, the surprise of the “cores” is disappointing: identical “Zen” spaces that do not tell anything of the industrial devastations under the *dictatorship* of modernity, of the massacre of natural and cultural sites, of ecological ravage, of personal sacrifice and drama... Such a pity. It was what one expected to discover in this device: an intimate reaction to the mechanical, free of norms destruction / construction.

### Staging an Approach

Often impressive, his grand skill (I am such a good audience and an old fan of Rem’s...), but this time I have to admit that he’s a bit running on empty. Not only is the idea (the *coa*) too disembodied and abstract, but the entire curatorial message seems hardly acceptable. Most certainly, the modern paradigm has launched the modernisation of a few architectural patterns, of strictly codified programmes and techniques; certainly, it also launched the rapid standardisation of a globalised world, yet it is nothing but a revival, since the Roman Empire and the Arabic World had already achieved this quite some time ago... Considering the facts, the globalised world resists to this standardisation in thousands of ways, and that is what truly matters (to me, at least) and what the Biennale points out, in a certain way, *against* the will of its own curator. The critique of the modern ideal that we believed to read in Koolhaas’ discourse since his *Delirious New York*, and in his architecture of the 90’s has made place not to the resignation but even to adherence to the imperialist programme: he envisions a mechanical world, shaped by the Stars (with him being one of them) and their prototypes infinitely multiplied, where we used to see treadmills of differences, declinations and intelligent adaptations. This feeling is confirmed from “inside” by Wouter Vanstiphout as a commissioner of the English pavilion (*Oublier OMA*, Criticat n°14, Paris, autumn 2014).

### Hot Spots

In the whirlpool of referential understanding and of the representation charm of this Fair there are some moments that surprise and touch by their mocking clear-sightedness.

First of all, the French pavilion which talks in the most abrupt fashion about the sly articulation of the radiant promise of modernity and its stupefying reality in the endless multiplication. A rapidly consumed marriage that may only lead to the hygienist dilution of all differences, of all individual identities in a humanity maybe pacified in comfort and security, but closely supervised and kept an eye on, of an enormous boredom. A thwarted marriage between the dashing (slightly vulgar) Villa Arpel designed by Jacques Lagrange for Tati’s “*Mon Oncle*” and the modern male icon par excellence, the severe housing complex of La Muette, designed by Lods, Beaudoin, Bodiansky at Drancy, soon transformed into a deadly internment camp. The staging of this ceremony signed by Jean-Louis Cohen, commissioner of the pavilion is both masterful and chilling.

Next, the Russian pavilion suggests an out of adjustment view of a provincial fair where the “moderns” compete over a customer turned idiotic by the television propaganda of the commercial liberty. Here they sell, side by side, irreconcilable icons of Stalinist executioners Shchushev and of their Constructivist victims, there the “datchas” proliferate in the birch forests ignoring all ecological norms; here the major building companies wreck the world hand in hand with the populist despots, there we question in the most serious way the place of cultural heritage, institutions, market and nations in our societies...and in our imagination; fierce and accurate.

At last, in an even more devastating and disarming innocence, the “pavilion” of Mozambique, at Arsenale, a delicate double timeline of the “deeds” of modernity upwards, and downwards of the continuous, unstoppable effervescence of vernacular construction, modest in size but unleashed in its various representations, textures and settings, that get out of control and ignore any pattern. There is a striking contrast between the sad mainstream of “modern” and this joyful production that shows, if there were any need, one of the many ways out of a dull and monotonous world.

They hereby joyfully give a triple middle finger gesture to the sad funeral of what once was a rebellious charmer, from now on defender of the commercial shrine, the Rem/OMA icon. Still brilliant, yet for a wrong cause.

