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**Article:**

Aragüez, M., le Roux, H. and Lähteenmäki, M. (2025) Field notes from Venice: Architectural Histories at the Biennale. *Architectural Histories*, 13 (1). pp. 1-40. ISSN: 2050-5833

<https://doi.org/10.16995/ah.25004>

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## Field Notes from Venice: *Architectural Histories* at the Biennale

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This set of Field Notes charts research presented at the Venice Biennale of Architecture through the voices of some of those who contributed directly to its 19th edition in 2025. The editors of *Architectural Histories* invited seven contributors to national pavilions deemed particularly relevant (Switzerland, Peru, Ukraine, Australia, Austria, Italy, Hong Kong) and one contributor to the main exhibition (Kate Crawford) to expand upon the research underpinning their exhibits, offering them space to publish their thinking in a journal of record. Framed by an introduction from three of the journal's editors along with critical notes by Léa-Catherine Szacka and Philip Ursprung, the set of Field Notes illuminates the role of historical research in the Biennale, and the role of such biennale(s) for research in the field of architecture.

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**Keywords:** Architectural Exhibitions; Venice biennale; curating architecture

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## Introduction: History and Research on Display at the Biennale

Marcela Aragüez, Hannah le Roux, Markus Lähteenmäki

The International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, more commonly known simply as the Venice Architecture Biennale, is arguably the most important cultural event of architecture. The national pavilions and invited exhibits are often built upon substantial research, but the Biennale is seldom recognised as a platform for the production and reflection of historical knowledge. Some exhibits present entirely new findings, while others mediate and reinterpret existing knowledge in interesting ways to reach broader audiences. Yet the half-life of the exhibits is most often very short, confined to the premises and duration of the Biennale and the reviews in the architectural press, which usually give no more than a passing line to each pavilion, something that does not serve the research-intensive contributions well. Catalogues of the entire Biennale and of individual contributions exist, but only few exhibition goers have the stamina to carry them home. Although architectural history is not a central concern of the Biennale, there have been some notable exceptions, such as the earliest architecture exhibitions curated by Vittorio Gregotti, Paolo Portoghesi and Aldo Rossi, or the 2014 edition curated by Rem Koolhaas. Nevertheless, the Biennale remains an important part of the field of operation for many architectural historians.

What, then, does the research seen at the Biennale contribute to architectural historiography? What is the role of (historical) research for the Biennale, and what is the role of such an event and exhibition for research? As editors of *Architectural Histories*, we believe that work displayed at such venues as the Biennale deserves more recognition and exposure within scholarly and academic contexts. This is why, at the 19th edition of the Biennale that opened in May 2025, we organised a get-together for colleagues in Venice, as well as decided to provide a space, via the Field Notes feature in *Architectural Histories*, to document and display some of the research that went into the Biennale (**Figure 1**).

As a journal of record that maps current trends, *Architectural Histories* invited a few exhibitors and curators of pavilions who used the Biennale to look at architecture from a historical perspective, or to push the boundaries of how architecture can be critically understood, to contribute a short field note that presents their theme, critical position, method, findings, and arguments. We three members of the editorial team who took part in the preview made the selection of those to be invited to take part, in consultation with other colleagues. We believe that their contributions, though not always only historical in nature, consistently challenge the status quo of the subjects that their pavilions engage with: sometimes by critically reflecting on accepted narratives, at other times by producing contesting objects, or by rethinking how the public is involved in the discourses unfolding throughout the exhibition.



**Figure 1:** *Architectural Histories* at the Biennale. Flyer for the event organised by *Architectural Histories*. Designed by Nene Tsuboi.

The theme of the central exhibition of the 2025 Biennale, titled *Intelligens. Natural. Artificial. Collective.* and curated by the Italian architect Carlo Ratti, did not explicitly encourage historical inquiry. In its search for solutions for the future, the central exhibition rather celebrated progress in a way that often felt ahistorical and lacking in critical analysis. This contributed to a sense of visual and conceptual accumulation, amplified by the largest number of exhibits ever presented at a Biennale in addition to the national pavilions. The result was an experience that, while rich in content, was also often overwhelming and unfocused, evoking a sense of fatigue or even resignation about the future of the built environment. Consequently, compiling the contributors to be featured here in itself became a kind of a curatorial task, just as editing a journal such as *Architectural Histories* often is. The selection was based on the capacity of the contributions to propose new knowledge, some unexpected angle, or a new take on an important topic regarding how architecture and its history can be understood.

Many of the more successful pavilions rely on large gestures of constructing entire spaces, as the contributions that follow explain. The Swiss pavilion resurrects a lost project by the pioneering architect Lisbeth Sachs (1914–2002), active from the 1950s to the late 1970s, imagining an alternative history where Sachs was the architect of the Swiss pavilion rather than Bruno Giacometti, who designed it in 1952. The installation combines archival research, creative translation, and sensory immersion to highlight the often-unseen labour and lived experience embedded in architectural history. The Peruvian pavilion presents a large scaffolding to challenge the usual focus of the discipline of architecture on final buildings, as well as the focus of this year's Biennale on futuristic potentials. Instead, through a bold formal gesture, it turns a gaze to and builds a space in which ancient and indigenous techniques are treated as forms of knowledge. The Ukrainian pavilion centres on four kinds of 'vernacular knowledge' in Ukraine—heritage, emergency, resistance, and female knowledge—spotlighting non-expert reconstruction efforts and architectural practices emerging amid war. Presenting a large hay roof as the cover for an entire exhibition space prompts the viewer to consider how architecture is entangled with defence, care, and survival, particularly because the pavilion presents the work of grassroots collectives, women architects, and DIY drone builders responding to violence and destruction. The Australian pavilion, intriguingly called *Home*, represents place-making and affective ontologies that preceded, and have resisted, colonial erasure. The entire interior of this permanent pavilion presents artworks in a collective gathering space and features

textures that evoke outback spaces, thus combining historical knowledge embedded in material culture and practices of collective gathering.

Other contributions brought together objects, documents and information. Austria's pavilion splits from a common entrance court into two curatorial projects, one on Austrian housing histories and the other about the past and present of Rome, but a Rome whose urban fabric is amended by citizen actions. By creating an archive of 100 buildings with diverse afterlives, it presents a history of self-management of housing stock. A pavilion within the main exhibition in the Biennale, called *Calculating Empires*, is a project by Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler that traces the evolution of and connections between power and technology over five centuries. Presented as an extensive, monochromatic artwork on facing panels, this critical and relational graphic is a reminder of the collective project and its imperial aims. The Italian pavilion explores the dynamic threshold between land and sea, through a diverse array of projects, from student theses to community-driven actions, engaging critically with both historical narratives and contemporary crises. The exhibition is a mutable archive and interpretive device that resists closure, offering a multivocal and generative view of coastal imaginaries. The Hong Kong contribution creates an entire archive by documenting the phenomena of bamboo scaffoldings, ancient, current and vanishing in front of our eyes. In addition to beginning to compile an archive that has not existed, though it should, it also presents a myriad of exemplary ways to creatively interpret and use such documentation.

Before the field notes by exhibitors begin, two critical reflections appear that analyse and contextualise the Biennale. The first essay, by Philip Ursprung, a historian, curator of exhibitions and many-time contributor to the Biennale, focuses on the role of the International Architecture Exhibitions and their potential to present historical research in the field of architecture. In the second essay, Léa-Catherine Szacka, a historian of the Biennale and curator of many architectural exhibitions and biennales, observes the 19th International Architecture Exhibition in relation to previous editions, pointing to the particular nature of research at this year's edition.

In asking the contributors to reflect on their Biennale exhibits and in working with them to develop their field notes, we realise that we have, as editors, added a critical layer through the process of selection and editing itself. So, instead of making any further critical interpretation of the Biennale, we let these field notes speak for themselves as well as for us. These are some of the most urgent notes from the field that this journal maps.

## In Place of Absent Theories: Why the Architecture Biennale Is Fruitful for Research

Philip Ursprung

In the last few decades, the Venice Architecture Biennale and other comparable institutions such as the biennales and triennales in Sharjah, Chicago, Tbilisi or Rotterdam, have evolved to become testing grounds for new ideas, formats and themes.<sup>1</sup> Architecture exhibitions are now mainly mediums of research, so to speak. They are driven by practitioners and theoreticians, educators and students, mediators and administrators. And they are attracting more and more visitors. Initially a humble appendix to the Art Biennale, the Architecture Biennale in Venice today involves almost as many visitors as its older sister, founded in 1895.

While art depends on exhibitions, architecture could live without. For art, exhibitions are reality; it is where artworks are presented. For architecture, exhibitions are places where the utopian and reality meet; it is where buildings are represented. Unlike art, where the exhibition formats have remained more or less unchanged since the 1960s within the horizon of what is now conventionally accepted as 'contemporary', architecture is still in search of an exhibition format. In a way, every architecture exhibition asks anew what architecture is and what it could be. And unlike the Art Biennale, the Architecture Biennale is less a marketplace for objects to be collected and more a marketplace for ideas to be discussed.

Perhaps this momentum is related to the fact that there is no overarching theory of architecture today.<sup>2</sup> Architecture exhibitions have, to some extent, taken over the role of theories; in other words, they have become the vantage point from which phenomena can be critically reflected and the meeting point where the meaning of architecture is negotiated, described, criticised and modified. In retrospect, it seems that architecture exhibitions began to prosper and achieve a critical impact precisely around the time when architecture theory faded out — around 1980, as symbolized by the iconic *Strada Novissima* at the Venice Arsenale (Celant 1980). One could call this the end of modernist architecture theory or the beginning of postmodernism. But these notions have been hollowed out with the fading of a theoretical horizon.

My hypothesis thus is the following: The stronger the theory, the weaker the exhibitions. The more dominating, or generally accepted, the conceptual grip, the more exhibitions merely illustrate and document what is already clear. On the other hand, the weaker the theory becomes, the stronger the exhibitions get. It seems that exhibitions have a compensatory function — they stand for, articulate, make visible, show something which cannot be said adequately and which eludes the existing concepts. The relevance of the Architecture Biennale in Venice and many other contemporary

architecture exhibits is that they enable one to perceive this openness and freedom. They function, again and again, like the beginning of a play, full of possibilities. They are alternatively bashed and praised, declared obsolete and indispensable.

And why Venice? The Venice Biennale has its roots in world fairs. Founded in 1895, the same year as the Olympics, the Biennale is simultaneously a peaceful competition between nations and a place where common themes are proposed. The anachronism of the national pavilion, reaching back to the heydays of Imperialism and Eurocentrism, stands in contrast to today's international harmonisation of education and a globalized economy. Unlike other biennales, the Venice Biennale is thus subject to both centrifugal and centripetal forces. While the theme and the main exhibition are driven by an individual author and inevitably reflect ideological stances and agendas, the exhibitions in the pavilions cannot be centrally guided. This ambivalence produces a productive tension that at present cannot be dissolved. More than any current theories, it holds up mirrors to the past, present and future of architecture.

### **The Pavilion on Display: On the 19th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale**

Léa-Catherine Szacka

Created at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Napoleon Bonaparte, the Venice Giardini or Giardini della Biennale, the area of parkland which hosts part of the Venice Art and Architecture festivals, were initially used for display in 1895, when the first *International Art Exhibition* of the Venice Biennale opened in what is now called the Central Pavilion (Martini and Matini 2011: 143). Later, the first national pavilion, representing Belgium, was erected in 1907 by architect Léon Sneyens. Following in its wake, 28 pavilions were built in the Giardini by some of the most famous architects in the world, the last one being the South Korean pavilion in 1995 (Mulazzani 2022; Junghyun and Seung-Chan 2025). Today, a lot of these small exhibition venues are getting old and in urgent need of repair. This leads to what I see as an interesting architectural research trend at the Biennale: inquiries on and about the pavilions themselves.

This year, it is the pavilion itself that is on display at the Biennale. Normally containers of exhibitions, the pavilions now serve as content as well. But how is this contributing to the production of architectural knowledge?

While such an overwhelming curatorial tendency may seem new for the Venice Biennale, research on pavilions is no news to us historians. In 2018, Mari Lending and Erik Langdalen, heard that Sver Fenh's Nordic pavilion, initially built in 1958, was to be closed for renovation. This prompted the two professors at the Oslo School

of Architecture and Design to turn to the pavilion first into the subject of a graduate seminar, and later into the topic of an exhibition and publication project. The end result of their endeavour, the book *Voices from the Archives: Sverre Fehn, Nordic Pavilion, Venice*, published by Lars Muller in 2020, is a marvellous voyage into the history of the origins and making of the Nordic pavilion, in my opinion the most poetic space within the Giardini (Langdalen and Lending 2020). It shows how geopolitics, cultural history, material history and display strategies can be read from one single pavilion. But even if Lending and Langdalen's research originated in the Giradini, it was not directly displayed at the Biennale but rather exhibited at the AHO school gallery in Oslo in May 2019 (*The Nordic Pavilion, Venice: A Life of the Building*) and returned to Venice and to the Università Iuav di Venezia in the form of a symposium in September 2022 (*The Nordic Pavilion: Geopolitics in Miniature*). The book can be seen as an interesting precursor to many pavilions at the current Biennale.



**Figure 2:** Danish Pavilion: *Build of Site*, 2025 Venice Biennale. Photo by Hampus Berndtson.

This year, the Danish pavilion, a neighbour of Sverre Fehn's structure, offered a powerful display on the material history, restoration and value of existing buildings, called *Build of Site* (**Figure 2**). Its curator, Søren Pihlmann, explores how rethinking and reusing existing buildings and resources can address some of architecture's most pressing challenges. The exhibition narrates the hands-on maintenance of the pavilion that reuses the resources already present in the building. It challenges traditional perceptions of material value by showing how existing components from past construction projects can be given a new life through an experimental process. Here, the research is less historical,

and the story of Denmark refusing to become part of the aspirational project of a common Nordic pavilion, a tale narrated by Langadalen and Lending's book, is nowhere to be found in Pihlmann's exhibition. Instead of history as a social and cultural exchange, the approach is anchored in material practice and aimed at appealing to the eyes (and maybe even the hands) of the Biennale visitors — whether architects or not.

Not far from the Danish pavilion stands the small blue construction designed by Alvar Aalto and his office in 1956 to represent Finland. This year, the Finnish pavilion's installation, called *The Pavilion — Architecture of Stewardship*, 'aspires to make the invisible visible' by exhibiting decades of continuous maintenance of the pavilion. Delving into labour and maintenance history through immersive multi-channel video projections and sound art, 'the exhibition brings to life the memories embedded within the pavilion's walls'. Again, this is a form of research on display that helps the visitor see architecture in a different light than usual, arguing that 'built heritage depends on stewardship'. Offering a more complex vision of care, the curators of the pavilion studied the network of actors, both architects and non-architects, that share duties, negotiate land, resources, and the built environment, and consider the needs of both humans and non-humans alike.

Switzerland, too, uses the pavilion as a departure point for research, yet in a very different way. It is not about what is there and in need of repair but rather what is not there and is in need of care, i.e., the legacy of Swiss architect Lisbeth Sachs (1914–2002), one of the first women architects in Switzerland. The curators of this pavilion's exhibition, titled *Endgültige Form wird von der Architektin am Bau bestimmt* ('Final form will be defined by the architect on site'), after a quote from Sach's specification about her design for the *1958 Swiss Exhibition for Women's Work (Saffa)* in Zurich, adapt her design and juxtapose it onto the existing Swiss pavilion, which was built in 1952 and designed by the architect Bruno Giacometti. Offering a playful experiment that invites visitors to experience architecture as a living, evolving space, this multi-sensory experience can, of course, also be identified as a form of research.

Another interesting example of research on display at this year's Biennale is in plain sight, on the façade of the Central Pavilion, or the first Palace of Exhibitions in the Giardini. Originally called Pro Arte, the pavilion was commissioned in 1894 by the Venetian Municipal Council and designed by the architect Enrico Trevisanato; its facade, in the so-called liberty style, was drawn up by Marius De Maria and Bartolomeo Bezzi. Over the course of decades, however, this Central Palace underwent numerous additions and transformations, including intervention by well-known architects such as Ernesto Basile (entrance 1905), Gio Ponti (Rotonda 1928) and Carlo Scarpa (Garden of Sculptures 1952). This year, the pavilion is under renovation and closed. Instead, *Constructing La Biennale*, a research project by a group of academics (including Albert-László Barabási,

Michele Bonino Paolo Ciuccarelli and Albena Yaneva) that reveals the ‘behind the scenes’ of the Biennale is displayed in front of it on a layered faux-façade (Figure 3). This scaffold-as-display offers a critical interpretation of both the historical evolution of the Biennale Architettura and the intricate curatorship of the 2025 edition. An example of Yaneva’s famous ‘ethnographies of architecture’, *Constructing La Biennale* uses data — such as team sizes and thematic focuses — to visualise the Biennale Architettura from a historical perspective, spanning 1975 to today.



**Figure 3:** *Constructing La Biennale*. Axonometric drawing of the installation in the Giardini della Biennale di Venezia, 2025. Photo courtesy of the Constructing la Biennale research group.

Since care and repair are probably the most pressing topics in architecture — and in architectural history and theory — today, it is not surprising that the pavilion itself becomes the vehicle, as both object and subject of research, through which urgencies are approached. But this also points to a bigger shift in the history of the Biennale as an ambivalent form of display, both temporary and permanent at the same time. Forty-five years after the construction of the famous *Strada Novissima*, the architecture exhibition in Venice has reached a form of maturity, everything has been tried out, and many curators and exhibitors turn to the idea of working with what is already there. A form of self-reflexivity and research by doing, the pavilion on display speaks to the anxiety of our times.

## Productive Fiction

Amy Perkins

The Swiss Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2025 resurrects a lost pavilion by one of Switzerland's first registered female architects, Lisbeth Sachs, within the 'no woman's land' of the Giardini. As a curatorial team, the members of the architecture group Annexe, Elena Chiavi, Kathrin Füglistner, Amy Perkins and Myriam Uzor, along with an embedded artist, Axelle Stiefel, together present an exhibition where fiction acts as a productive tool. Beginning with the speculative question 'What if it had been Lisbeth Sachs who had designed the Swiss Pavilion?', the curatorial team uses the history of the Giardini, the Swiss Pavilion, built by Bruno Giacometti in 1952, and the archive of Lisbeth Sachs together to inform a new design. By overlaying two contrasting architectures — that of Sachs and of Giacometti— the team create a new spatial constellation — one that lies between memory and imagination (**Figure 4**).



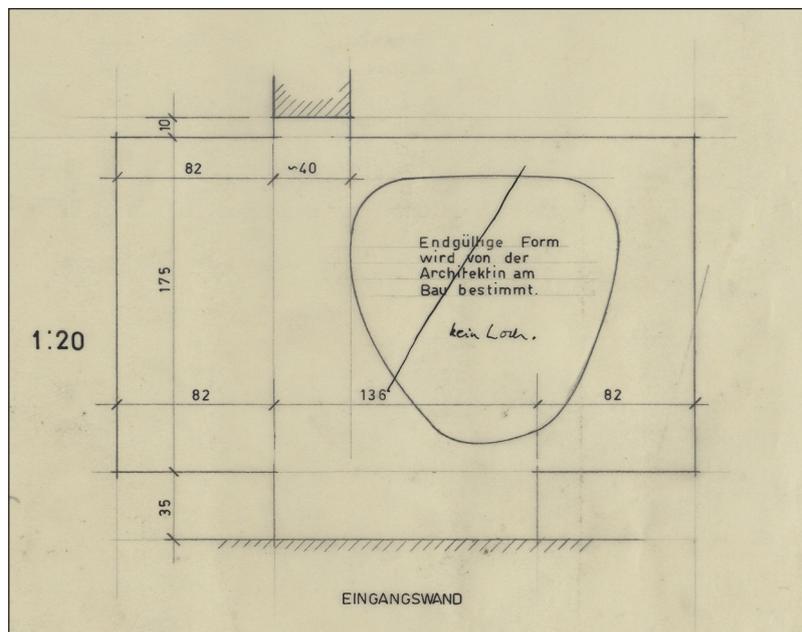
**Figure 4:** Installation view of *Endgültige Form wird von der Architektin am Bau bestimmt*, curated by Elena Chiavi, Kathrin Füglistner, Amy Perkins, Axelle Stiefel and Myriam Uzor at the Pavilion of Switzerland at the Biennale Architettura 2025. © Keystone-SDA/Gaëtan Bally.

The starting point for the project is the Kunsthalle (art hall) by Lisbeth Sachs for the 1958 *Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit (Saffa)*, the Swiss exhibition of women's work held in Zurich (**Figure 5**). The Kunsthalle, which has survived only in the Sachs Archive, integrates innovative and distinctive approach to form, structure,

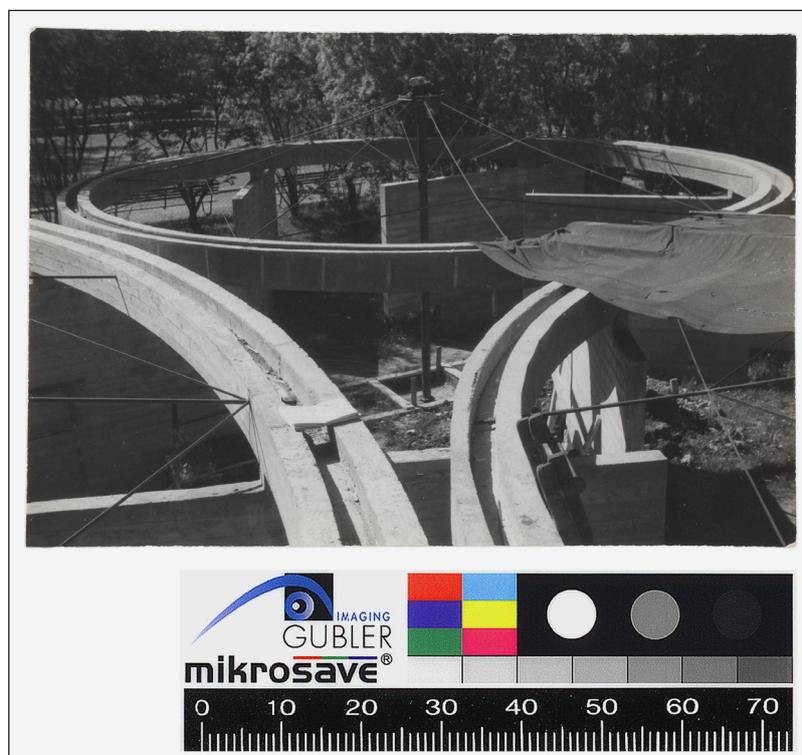
movement and landscape (Figures 6–7). As such, the Kunsthalle acts as a ‘boundary object’ for the project, to use the term the way Susan Leigh Star (Leigh Star 2010) defines it.<sup>3</sup> Sachs’ Kunsthalle thus became a tool for a project of collaboration without consensus (Leigh Star and Griesemer 1989). The archival documents which describe the Kunsthalle are loose enough to allow for interpretation and translation by the different actors engaging with the 2025 exhibition.



**Figure 5:** The interior of the Kunsthalle at the 1958 *Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit (Saffa)* (Swiss exhibition for women’s work) in Zurich, designed by Lisbeth Sachs. Photo courtesy of gta Archiv/ETH Zurich.



**Figure 6:** 1:20 drawing of the entrance wall of the Kunsthalle at the 1958 *Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit (Saffa)* (Swiss exhibition for women's work) in Zurich, designed by Lisbeth Sachs. Courtesy of gta Archiv/ETH Zurich.



**Figure 7:** The Kunsthalle under construction at the 1958 *Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit (Saffa)* (Swiss exhibition for women's work) in Zurich, designed by Lisbeth Sachs. Photo courtesy of gta Archiv/ETH Zurich.

In this exhibition, the plans, letters, photographs, sketches and models related to the Kunsthalle in the Sachs Archive are activated through their translation in the exhibition (**Figure 8**). As curators, we worked with the idea of ‘productive fiction’ (Haraway 2013), where the hypothetical question ‘what if’ provides a creative freedom in the interpretation and translation of the Kunsthalle and its rebuilding within the original 1952 pavilion by Giacometti. Using the notion of productive fiction, we can carefully navigate between historical research, preservation and architectural design — a translation rather than a faithful reconstruction, with the word ‘translation’ used here in the sense of adding oneself into an existing work (Hargreaves 2024; Briggs 2021). Acknowledging, understanding and questioning the histories of references and the conditions from which they derive are anchor points for questions of design. This adds another layer to design, one that goes beyond pure architectural form and function.



**Figure 8:** Installation view of *Endgültige Form wird von der Architektin am Bau bestimmt*, curated by Elena Chiavi, Kathrin Füglistner, Amy Perkins, Axelle Stiefel and Myriam Uzor at the Pavilion of Switzerland at the Biennale Architettura 2025. © Keystone-SDA/Gaëtan Bally.

In 1958, the artworks inside the Kunsthalle in Zurich were displayed on radially arranged walls, to be experienced in relation to the surrounding landscape. Translucent membrane roofs, stretched like umbrellas around central supporting columns, created a soft diffuse light. Poles, rings and walls worked in tensile harmony to stabilise the open structure, inviting a fluid movement from park to pavilion. Along with the flowing curtains and meandering audience, the space itself became a performative choreography.

Our translation of Sachs' Kunsthalle at the *Saffa* is both material and symbolic. The original concrete walls and rings are remade in wood, and the lighting system Sachs had devised is transformed into a sound system. Having found no trace of sound in the archive, we use this medium as a way of connecting her generation with ours. By recording the process of reconstructing the Kunsthalle (Figure 9), we offer the visitors to the Giardini a chance to imagine the invisible labour behind the exhibition, but also to imagine, through this reenactment of the building process, Sachs' own experience on site. With the guidance of Axelle Stiefel, and using her training as a multidisciplinary artist, the resurrection of the pavilion through recording as an act of active listening (Lacey 2025) was captured in sound. What the visitor hears are the places, conversations, landscapes and situations that we recorded during our research — a spatial memory of the process.



**Figure 9:** Axelle Stiefel recording on the construction site. Installation view of *Endgültige Form wird von der Architektin am Bau bestimmt*, curated by Elena Chiavi, Kathrin Füglistner, Amy Perkins, Axelle Stiefel and Myriam Uzor at the Pavilion of Switzerland, Biennale Architettura 2025. © Keystone-SDA/Gaëtan Bally.

By allowing multiple architectures to coexist in the same space and by encouraging attentive listening, the exhibition offers an experience of simultaneity — the audience notices both architectural differences and similarities, but also a sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity, since the Giacometti pavilion remains the permanent stage to which the audience returns year after year. This encounter aims to trigger an inner, parallel vision in the audience, opening up a personal, almost dreamlike dimension. The audio component of the exhibition highlights what could not be reconstructed from the archives, and what is very often absent from the documents selected for retention — the lived and embodied experience of those bringing architecture into being.

## The Memory of a Scaffold

Sebastián Cillóniz with Alex Hudtwalcker, Gianfranco Morales and José Ignacio Beteta<sup>4</sup>

*Living Scaffolding*, the exhibit of the Peru Pavilion at the 2025 Biennale (Figure 10), stands at the intersection of both of Carlo Ratti's curatorial calls for the Biennale: the need to recognise the natural, artificial and collective intelligences in architecture while also answering the director's demand for 'One Place, One Solution'. It transforms the scaffold, architecture's essential and assisting structure, from unseen support to an act of architectural reckoning, a living system that navigates ecology, craft and community. The exhibit understands this three-dimensional wooden structure not as temporary support but as a living framework that carries collective memory and potential (Figure 11).



**Figure 10:** Peruvian Pavilion, 2025 Venice Biennale. The scaffold within the pavilion. Photo by Cristobal Palma.

Two ancestral narratives, one nautical and dynamic, the other floating and static, converge in this piece. The first narrative is the building of the Uru raft in 1988 in Punta Negra, south of Lima, where five Spanish expeditionaries, eight Aimara artisans from Lake Titicaca and dozens of volunteers assembled a 10-tonne vessel, 20 metres long and 4 metres wide, atop a rudimentary yet monumental wooden scaffold (Figure 12). The raft that set sail from Callao and reached the Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia 54 days later illustrates a mobile intelligence: the transmission of Andean craft across oceanic frontiers, a feat that is rooted both in memory and myth.



**Figure 11:** Peruvian Pavilion, 2025 Venice Biennale. Inside the scaffold within the pavilion. Photo by Cristobal Palma.



**Figure 12:** Photo in the Peruvian Pavilion, 2025 Venice Biennale. Assembly of the Uru raft atop a scaffold on Punta Negra beach, Lima, in 1988. Photo by Eric Frattini.

The second ancestral narrative is a paradigm of living: adaptive construction, conveyed in the way the Uros's reed islands, floating in a mountain lake 3,810 metres above sea level, are cyclic architectures in need of constant renewal (Figure 13). Their underwater scaffolds, made of timber and totora reed, show how communities navigate fragility, environment and temporality through shared knowledge and practice. Every sixty days, new totora reed layers are added to the island's floor by communal labour, thus continually renewing this inverted scaffold.



**Figure 13:** Photo in the Peruvian Pavilion, 2025 Venice Biennale. The Uros-Titino islands. Photo by Alfonso Cassabone.

At a time when architecture emphasises permanence and the built project, frequently offering a false sense of the stability of the architectural object, this exhibit challenges the discipline's usual standards by highlighting only its supporting structures. The exhibit displays temporality and technique on equal footing with objecthood. This shift foregrounds a genealogical approach to architectural history, one that honours tools, rituals and shared methods as fundamental components of design knowledge, honouring architecture itself. The exhibit thus expands our historical lens and our understanding of what is perceived as architecture today: future researchers will encounter not only walls and roofs but also the live traces of labour, material experimentation and cultural exchange that scaffolded their realisation.

To escape mere formalism, we tasked the scaffold with speaking about architecture itself. It is a system that embodies techniques and thus challenges how we perceive what technique produces. In a Biennale that at times appeared to celebrate more tomorrow's technologies, we chose to root our gesture in yesterday's know-how, so that the motion forward is grounded on a firm footing. The scaffolding's raw timber and visible joinery function as a manifesto: each node becomes a question about what architecture includes, each plank a statement about place and transmission. Visitors step inside its matrix and become part of its unfolding continuity, tracing fingers along grain patterns that whisper of an architecture before buildings, an architecture held in common by its very making, without borders, authorship or end.

In Peru, where urgent needs often eclipse reflective discourse, architectural histories splinter into overlooked fragments. *Living Scaffolding* insists that these fragments deserve centre stage. The scaffold is many, plural, multicultural, just as Peruvian

culture and its architectural lineage are polyphonic. It refuses the tyranny of the single narrative and insists on a scaffolded history: layered, networked, alive.

Hosting *Living Scaffolding* at Venice, itself also an archipelago made of memory and myth, underscores the exhibit's themes of floating intelligence and submerged support. Venice rests on wooden piles: a city-scale scaffold that has borne centuries of habitation. In this context, our installation extends a conversation about environmental fragility, colonial narratives and intercultural dialogue.

*Living Scaffolding* is an invitation: to see support structures as protagonists, to talk about architecture in an architectural event. It reminds us that every building arises from provisional frameworks — physical, social and conceptual — that are rarely documented or retained.

### ***Dakh* (Дакh): (Four Knowledges) of the Vernacular Hardcore**

Michał Murawski, Bogdana Kosmina, Kateryna Rusetska

*Dakh* (Дакh): *Vernacular Hardcore* highlights several kinds of non-expert, 'vernacular' knowledge. The exhibit juxtaposes the *heritage vernacular* of traditional Ukrainian housing — passed down from generation to generation and differing vastly from region to region — with the *emergency vernacular* of grassroots reconstruction collectives, which rebuild homes damaged by drones, missiles and shrapnel in frontline-adjacent regions of Ukraine. In both cases, architecture is produced by non-architects, and responsive techniques are constantly developed to respond to urgent challenges and threats (**Figure 14**).



**Figure 14:** The 'Dakh' roof in the Ukrainian Pavilion, 2025 Venice Biennale. Photo by Valentyna Rostovikova, PRYZM Photography.

The third type of vernacular knowledge highlighted in *Dakh* is *vernacular resistance*. Many people who were previously involved in grassroots rebuilding in Ukraine have either joined the military or re-focused their efforts on various fields of defence-related activities, forming a kind of horizontal military-volunteer complex. One example we highlight is that of KLYN Drones, an FPV-building initiative set up by Kseniia Kalmus, co-founder of Livij Bereh (one of the repair collectives featured in the exhibit). Kseniia was driven to redirect her energies after witnessing the repeated destruction of houses she had helped to rebuild in Kharkiv oblast. KLYN's drones now provide, in Kseniia's words, a 'flying roof' over fragile, static roofs. By highlighting the work of groups like KLYN, the exhibit underscores that reconstruction is not possible without resistance; shelter is not possible without defence; architecture cannot be seen in isolation from the deadly realities of war and the imperative to defend.

The fourth knowledge shaping the exhibit is *female knowledge*. *The Atlas of Traditional Ukrainian Housing*, which is the basis for the pavilion's understanding of 'heritage vernacular', is a research project carried out over several decades by three generations of women architects: architect-ethnographers Tamara Kosmina (1936–2016, who is present in the exhibition in the form of an AI avatar); architect-ethnographer Tamara Kosmina (b. 1960), who continued her mother's work; and her daughter, architect and artist Bogdana Kosmina, the creator of the pavilion's installation (**Figure 15**). In Ukraine, reconstruction and resistance would be impossible without the work of women. Among



**Figure 15:** Ukrainian Pavilion, 2025 Venice Biennale. Documentation of the historical structures by three generations of female architects. Photo by Valentyna Rostovikova, PRYZM Photography.

them are contributors to the exhibition, such as Kseniia Kalmus and Ada Wordsworth; co-curator Kateryna Rusetska, activist and co-founder of the Dnipro Center for Contemporary Culture; and Ilona Demchenko, Amina Ahmed, Alina Radomska and every woman in the *Dakh* team, who combine their work in culture with constant actions, including fundraising and the support of the armed forces.

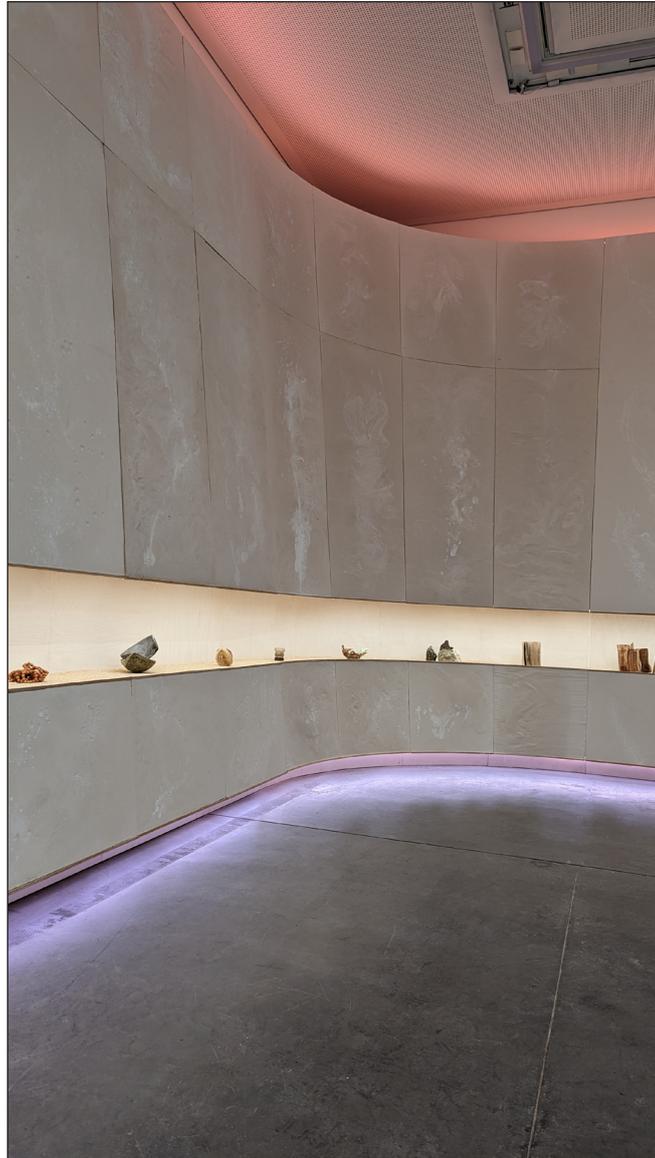
Today, more than ever, reconstruction — and resistance — are forced to take place at the vernacular level. In Ukraine, but also in Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan and beyond, violence against living things, buildings and infrastructures proceeds at an accelerated pace. Its effects are ameliorated by the acts of repair, care and resistance carried out by those on the ground, supported by allies from afar. All readers of *Architectural Histories* are welcome to download a copy of the *Dakh Mini-Atlas* (Murawski 2025) from our project website, in exchange for a donation which will be split between KLYN Drones and KHARPP Rebuild: <https://www.ukrainianpavilion.org/mini-atlas/>.

The use of straw in the exhibition is a reference to *The Atlas of Traditional Ukrainian Housing* (Kosmina), the result of research conducted over decades by the three generations of Kosminas. Straw is significant, as it is a fragile yet extremely resistant material. Its capacity to resist danger and threat, despite its seeming fragility, is a metaphor of the ongoing strength and resistance enacted by Ukrainian people, animals, buildings and environments today. But *Dakh* does not fetishise straw and reed, nor any other ‘traditional materials’. Straw is used to show that Ukrainian reconstruction and resistance are grounded in the deep fabric of society and the commons that rebuilds and resists. However, reconstructing buildings in straw is not a sustainable option today. It is more important to develop an empathic, nuanced attitude to the heritage that exists, which includes concrete buildings as much as straw roofs.

## **Architectural Histories — Home Venice Architecture Biennale 2025**

Michael Mossman

For the 2025 edition of La Biennale Architettura in Venice, the Australia Pavilion presented *Home*, a vision materialised by a group of seven Australian Indigenous academics and practitioners in the built environment. The group, called the Creative Sphere,<sup>5</sup> posed the central question of *Home*: ‘What does Home mean to you?’ In an architectural historiographical sense, this is a premise that recalibrates Home as more than physical architecture and place with a specific address. Home becomes moments, spaces, histories, memories and futures all at once, prioritising values of openness over didactic ideologies of categorised resolutions (**Figure 16**).



**Figure 16:** Australian Pavilion, *Home*, 2025 Venice Biennale. 'Living Belongings', created by architecture students who tell stories of one's own Home. Photo by Michael Mossman.

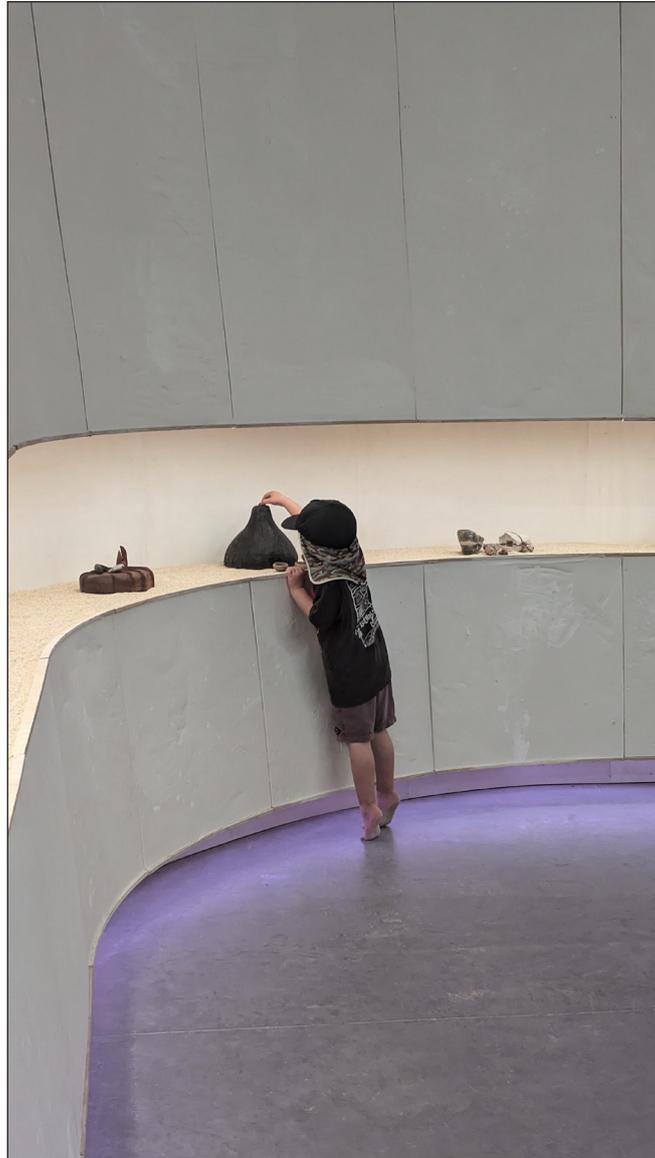
Condensing the key idea of Home means opening mindsets to invite guests to appreciate such a universal question to ground new knowledge in ancient historiographies of collective relationships between all beings as part of many interconnected networks and ecologies. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of the Australian continent, the appreciation and creation of place is deeply interconnected with stories associated with lived experiences, learnings, new knowledge from intergenerational exchange, gatherings and dialogue, and trauma.

Like the ancients' practices that provided foundations for western knowledge systems, Indigenous communities shared existence with more-than-human intangible realms. When we create opportunities for dialogues and relationships between participants who observe collective societal values, community evolves together, with differences.

*Home* give thanks to the tangible and intangible offerings of Country, the Indigenous Australian concept of place, histories, beings, law, memories and futures, for a global audience to appreciate and build relationships within those moments in the Australia Pavilion or long into the future. The invited guest arrives at their own resolutions at their own pace, not through didactics and instructions for how to think, the classic objective-driven process that infiltrates mindsets immersed in modernity. *Home* offers a methodology of self-regulation within an immersive experience of collectivity, through multiple invitations to utilise all the senses as part of the learning journey of self-reflection and subjective engagement.

Architectural histories are appreciated in the stories that become embedded in the physical and tangible propositions of *Home*, to form relationships between the exhibition and one's own stories. My Indigenous worldview is predicated on a deep connection to Country and offering that appreciation to guests of *Home* who may be disconnected from tradition-informed cultural practices. While the elemental objects in *Home* result in a totality of mixed expressions, each element has stories attached to it that enact belonging and relationships with others around it. Learning from the stories of each of the elements forms connections to a guest's stories to inform future directions, along with future decisions that reflect on new appreciations of the past.

The omission of static text in the gallery space privileges an always evolving oral and haptic archive that is encouraged by the cultural mediators who are always present in the pavilion (the term used instead of gallery or museum invigilators). A feature of the exhibition is the Living Belongings section created by architecture students who tell stories of one's own Home to share with others (**Figure 17**).<sup>6</sup> The more-than-visual features activate the spoken word in dialogues between strangers next to each other. Interactions with the Living Belongings creates and embeds a generous offering of dialogue between a visitor's stories and the stories of architecture students. Like Venetian architecture and ornament from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the present day, these are ordinary stories that become extraordinary through interactive dialogue and that resonate for audiences in personal ways. An intimate encounter and the subsequent conversation produce sublime outcomes through an ordinary process.



**Figure 17:** Australian Pavilion: *Home*, 2025 Venice Biennale. 'Living Belongings', ordinary stories that become extraordinary through interactive dialogue. Photo by Michael Mossman.

*Home* recalibrates the historiography of traditional museums and galleries as ever-vigilant gatekeepers of knowledge, with a goal of celebrating basic human interactions and the participatory creation of new dialogue: one about activating the guests' understanding and appreciation of their own Home and the commonalities with the Home/s of Indigenous Australian worldviews and communities. An appreciation of the ordinary, enacting relationships across the other side of the world is deliberate and measured for all to contemplate and celebrate.

## Agency for Better Living at the Austrian Pavilion

Lorenzo Romito

The *Agency for Better Living* exhibition at the Austrian Pavilion of the 2025 Architecture Biennale, was curated by Michael Obrist, Sabine Pollak and me, Lorenzo Romito. It explores two opposite but complementary forms of ‘intelligens’ that resist the urban decline produced by neoliberal policies: the public planning agency in Vienna and the self-organisation agency in Rome (Figure 18).



**Figure 18:** Austrian Pavilion: *Agency for Better Living*, 2025 Venice Biennale. Photo by Hertha Hurnaus.

Josef Hoffmann's symmetrical pavilion of 1934 does not provide any hierarchy for the two approaches to it. By closing the direct access to both wings of the pavilion, entry is only through the courtyard, imagined as a field of tension, in which to host the dialogue in between the top-down and the bottom-up approaches investigated in the two cities, a potential space of confrontation and collaboration for institutional and self-organised ways of living.

For the duration of the exhibition, the courtyard is the place where a series of Assemblies for Better Living takes place. Each month the floor is given over to planners, institutions and social organisations and movements to negotiate, discuss and design together new strategies for city making, on the basis of their different experiences.

From the courtyard the visitor can decide whether to enter the exhibition from Rome or Vienna. A reading of their modern history, along with some selected case studies, represents the two different though complementary agencies of the two cities. The 'Red Vienna' wing is a display of 100 years of public planning for a 'caring city' that through access to housing has granted its inhabitants the right to the city. The wing about Rome shows a city that regenerates itself through epochal thresholds through the struggle for living and inhabitation of the ruins of a time that is reaching its end (Figures 19, 20).

The curatorial work was split in two to give form to the two narratives. Michael Obrist and Sabine Pollack built the Vienna narration, using their long experience as social housing designers and experts. I, together with Giulia Fiocca, developed the Rome narration, using our extensive experience with Stalker, an experimental practice for exploring and participating with emerging social and environmental communities in their self-organised becoming.

The two curatorial approaches, beginning from a common field of interaction and collaboration, shows two different agencies, one top down the other bottom up, allowing the display of diverse languages and methodologies. Each environment follows a 'mythological' narration, introduced by two short movies, providing the historical genealogy through which the two agencies developed and generated innovative forms of living. A series of case studies shows those innovations.

Let us now go deeper into the Rome environment of the pavilion.<sup>7</sup> The Rome exhibition was first constructed in Rome in a space that is the exact dimensions of the one wing of the pavilion, where it was displayed in a space named Mad'O — Museo dell'Atto di Ospitalità. This museum dedicated to the act of hospitality is within a former public building now called Spin Time Labs, a space of 21,000 square metres that was squatted in 2013 and is now inhabited by 150 families from 27 countries. Housing



**Figure 19:** The Rome exhibit in the Austrian Pavilion: *Agency for Better Living*, 2025 Venice Biennale. Photo by Hertha Hurnaus.

coexists with voluntary services for citizens, both social and cultural, from a theatre to a museum and a restaurant, from after-school programs for children, to carpentry and social and health facilities.

Spin Time is one of the seven complex self-organised urban communities presented as case studies in the *Agency for Better Living* exhibit. This Rome display was produced through a collaboration of all the communities presented in it, a process that took a full year.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 20:** Austrian Pavilion: *Agency for Better Living*, 2025 Venice Biennale. Protest and occupation of the dome at S. Signora di Loreto Church, Rome, 2010. Photo by Stefano Montesi.

This urban exploration and shared representation of marginal but innovative forms of living in Rome is held together by a critical understanding of the mythopoetic meaning of World-City, as I propose in the introductory text for the exhibit, entitled 'Rome. Inhabiting the Ruins of the Present':

Rome is a complex life form with an inherent emergent organization that supports a process of spontaneous evolution and self-regeneration, in which the human component plays a central but not dominant role. This hypothesis, rooted in the myth and history of the World-City, is contradicted by the ideology of domination over

the environment and others, which has marked the frenzied 150 years of urban expansion since Rome became a modern capital. The conflict between Rome, the World-City and Rome, the Modern Capital is manifest in the many ruins of failed institutional ventures and in the abandoned spaces generated by land revenue and property speculation. These ruins become territories of the possible, where spontaneous forms of renaturation and civil coexistence have found asylum, developing diversity and demonstrating an unpredictable capacity for co-evolving with the environment.

Re-inhabiting the ruins of modernity, driven by needs and desires that society does not satisfy, allows the emergence of unpredictable ecological and social relationships so needed today to address the transition we are experiencing. This process of urban exaptation — the bottom-up regeneration of places that have lost their original function — self-organized by both human and non-human actors, plays a crucial role in the evolution of forms of living: an evolution that is nonlinear and unpredictable in its outcomes, and that should be welcomed, recognized, and supported as part of a new understanding of architecture and city-making.

### ***Calculating Empires***

Kate Crawford, Vladan Joler

One of the uses of history, especially history pursued on a longer time scale, is to unsettle present certainties and thereby enlarge our sense of the thinkable ... [A]lthough history can no more resurrect dead concepts than it can dead people, it can briefly reanimate them: revenants, who trouble the complacency of the living with their revelations. (Daston 2022, 22)

How can we understand the pervasive power of technology in this moment in history and its role in our lives? How did computational systems develop from historical practices of communication, classification and control, and vice versa? And what are the material impacts of planetary-scale technology on our planet?

In late 2022, the generative AI system ChatGPT was released, and it became the most rapidly adopted consumer technology of all time. Hundreds of millions of people now use AI to search, write and make images. But these systems have already shown a capacity to concentrate power, produce ‘hallucinations’ and misinformation at scale, and fracture a sense of shared reality. Generative AI also has a significant environmental impact, requiring vast amounts of energy, water and minerals. And all of these diverse

impacts — from the political to the material — are difficult to track. They are obscured within a growing culture of corporate secrecy and proprietary information, as well as by the complexities of technical architectures, planetary supply chains, opaque labour contracting and a lack of strong regulation. This makes the political ecologies of contemporary technology notoriously hard to see.

From the perspective of the individual, even when technologies feel radically new, they gradually follow the same trajectory: they become ambient, quotidian, invisible. We are rarely given the tools to look within the systems: to see how they are made, what they are doing and how much they truly cost over the *longue durée*. Computational technologies have deep roots and unpredictable legacies. They are the result of centuries of industrialisation, imperialism, scientific experimentation, capital concentration, political transformation and cultural acceleration. To see all this at work requires a different kind of map.

*Calculating Empires*, an invited exhibit in the main exhibition in the Corderia at the Arsenale, is a project that aims to visualise and critique tech empires. It merges art and research, science and critical theory in order to track how power and technology have co-evolved over five hundred years. The installation, in the form of panels that together stretch more than 24 metres, addresses the themes of communication, computation, control and classification (**Figure 21**). It illustrates how empires have used technology to centralise power, with thousands of handcrafted drawings and texts that span centuries of conflicts and enclosures. This offers us a way of seeing the technological present by immersing in the past: a genealogical countermeasure to the current *technological presentism*.



**Figure 21:** View of the installation *Calculating Empires*, 2025 Venice Biennale. Kate Crawford.

The timeline of *Calculating Empires* begins in the 1500s for a reason: it was a period when capitalism, European colonialism and the global information ecology began to take shape. New trade routes meant the expansion of European colonisation, and the advances in shipping and navigational instruments enabled the annexation of lands and subjugation of Indigenous populations while introducing new viruses, drugs and tools. The Gutenberg Press laid the groundwork for the emergence of an information ecosystem that would reorganise information power. This layered agenda of Empire expanded and repeated over hundreds of years.

In the 1970s, Michel Foucault used the phrase ‘a history of the present’ to explain the purpose of his genealogical research. He turned to historical accounts in order to shed light on contemporary questions, rather than simply studying the past for its own sake. We followed this genealogical approach by depicting past and present imperial practices to illuminate how power operates through everyday life, to better understand the empires of AI.

As a visual genealogy, *Calculating Empires* allows the visitor to re-interpret the present moment through the lens of the past. The current transformations in technology have concentrated power into ever fewer hands, accelerating polarisation and alienation. If we are to address these urgent challenges — technocratic autocracy, climate change and wealth inequality — we need to see how they are interwoven. In order to have a future, we must first confront our past.

### **Italian Pavilion, Biennale Architettura 2025: *Terrae Aquae. Italy and the Intelligence of the Sea***

Anna Riciputo

The curatorial project of the Italian Pavilion, promoted by the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity of the Ministry of Culture and curated by Guendalina Salimei with Anna Riciputo as Assistant Curator under the title *Terrae Aquae. Italy and the Intelligence of the Sea*, places at the centre of its investigation the dynamic relationship between land and water, understood as both a spatial and a cultural matrix for the architectural articulation of the ‘edge’. The coastline emerges as a critical space of negotiation between nature and artifice, permanence and transformation. To reclaim this margin entails not only rethinking its physical form but also its symbolic, political and ecological significance.

The exhibition configures a spatial ‘odyssey’: a constructed architectural narrative of ascent and descent, marked by walls, piers and belvederes — physical metaphors of the ‘traveller’s labour’, as well as synecdoche of the anthropised and natural complexity of the Italian coastal landscape. All senses are engaged through a multiform apparatus of analogue and digital supports and multidisciplinary contributions (**Figure 22**).



**Figure 22:** Italian Pavilion, 2025 Venice Biennale. The Quadreria displays the work and research of multiple authors. Photo by Luigi Filetici.

Around 350 contributions were selected from over 600 submissions received through an open call. They were first organised thematically and subsequently ‘assembled’ into three overarching groups, each corresponding to a specific exhibition device: Quadreria, Atlas between Land and Sea, and the Research Pier. The decision to adopt an open call system, rather than relying on direct selection, proved advantageous in revealing a broad constellation of projects and research trajectories that had remained largely unknown outside academic circles and peripheral to mainstream public discourse.

The exhibited works range from playful or poetic visions to realised or in-progress interventions, including student theses, public initiatives and community-driven actions. Collectively, they critically address the built boundary between land and sea, challenging both historical narratives and contemporary rhetoric that have sought to stabilise or domesticate this liminal zone. Notably, some of the most articulate and effective responses emerged in academic contexts, where a layered and intellectual reading of the site enabled the transformation of fragility into opportunity.

A core issue addressed in the exhibition is the relationship between the city and the sea, which has revealed a fundamental dichotomy in current design strategies. On the one hand, large-scale approaches tend to envision the coastline as an extended territorial, cultural and ecological architecture — or as a series of public spaces — capable of structuring spatial relations and reimagining modes of inhabiting the edge, both in projective terms and through built works. On the other hand, small-scale devices — such as canopies, pavilions, and walkways — effectively address specific

issues, particularly those related to accessibility, yet such devices often operate as local, non-invasive micro-interventions, carrying a less symbolic and infrastructural weight in engaging with the broader complexity of the contemporary coastline.

Among the younger generations, a pronounced polarisation emerges: some proposals inspired by old avant-gardes propose utopias with a more critical or ironic attitude, while others are minimal, near-invisible interventions governed by environmental ethics but lacking durable or transformative impact. This ambivalence may reflect a broader generational anxiety — a desire to act responsibly within the environmental crisis. In response to the concerns expressed by younger generations, the exhibition addresses ecological issues with rigour. It embraces landscape approaches that advocate coastal renaturalisation as a form of reparative design — where human presence is not withdrawn in retreat but is deliberately reduced to help restore ecologically fragile areas through precise, context-specific interventions.

With regard to ecological and climate-related themes, one particularly emblematic case emerging from the open call proposals concerns the rising sea level. Although widely recognised as a critical issue, it is often addressed through catastrophist narratives, even if there are some submissions proposing concrete scenarios for the protection of coastal and border cities — excluding completed or ongoing projects, which would require a more in-depth, dedicated analysis.

Another significant cluster of proposals shows renewed attention to the genius loci, not only through the use of traditional materials and techniques but also via the reactivation of ancient spatial gestures and rituals. While this sensibility emerges strongly in urban waterfronts or historical contexts, it appears less present in relation to infrastructure. The ‘port as park’ concept — a porous, adaptive and ecologically integrated structure — is still in its early stages and, in some cases, takes the form of exploratory or additive approaches, though emerging large-scale examples are beginning to achieve a meaningful synthesis of urban and ecological functions.

According to these short considerations, the Italian Pavilion’s exhibit manifests as a contemporary, distributed Wunderkammer, where each visitor is invited to assemble their own constellation of meanings. The projects and artifacts are not showcased hierarchically but instead generate multiple trajectories, unforeseen connections and subjective readings. The Italian Pavilion becomes a living, mutable archive — an interpretive device that resists closure, inviting the visitor to inhabit the shifting threshold between land and sea.

## Hong Kong in Venice: Can the 'Archival Impulse' Be Projective? Can the Tectonics of the 'Tradition' be Modern?

Ying Zhou

The 2025 edition of the Hong Kong Pavilion, *Projecting Future Heritage: A Hong Kong Archive*, has deliberately taken an unprecedented 'historic' turn. Instead of new developments, the exhibition displays an archive of the seemingly everyday. Inside the former warehouse spaces across from the entrance of the Arsenale, 21 white cabinets of archival drawers open to reveal measured drawings, scaled models, institutional documents, records, artefacts and ephemera of everyday buildings and spaces in Hong Kong (Figure 23). The researched buildings and spaces are presented through multiple media as well as 'raw' archival materials, which in turn comprise an archive of the everyday. Each exhibit within the exhibition focuses on one of the spatial types and is developed by different teams of architects and scholars. These titles give an idea of the extent of the exhibits: 'By Us for Us: Future Proof Narratives of a Third Housing for Hong Kong', by Guillaume Othenin-Girard and Kent Mundle, on co-op housing; 'Social Condenser Extraordinaire: Hong Kong's Municipal Services Building', by Fai Au, Ying Zhou and Hongshan Guo, on multifunctional public types; 'Public Housing Paragon: Choi Hung Estate' and 'From Sea to Hill: The Living Heritage of Wah Fu Estate', by Daqing Gu, Vito Bertin and Man Han and the Hong Kong Housing Authority respectively, exploring two well-known public housing estates that are soon to be demolished; 'Made in Kwun Tong: Between Type and Territory', by Su Chang and Frankie Au, on modern-era industrial complexes; 'Curb-Scale Hong Kong: Infrastructures of the Street', by Sony Devabhaktuni, on everyday infrastructures of the city; 'Airport Urbanism: Remaking Hong Kong, 1975–2025', by Max Hirsh and Dorothy Tang, on the spatial consequences of the airport; and 'Multiple Mansions', by Eunice Seng, on the unique Hong Kong architectural type of the 'composite building'. Even though the buildings and spaces are from different time periods and are of different scales and types, they were chosen for the civic conceptions with which they were realised in the post-war decades until the Handover (1950s–1990s). Perhaps because of their everydayness and ubiquity (Hirsh 2016; Seng 2020; Devabhaktuni 2023), though certainly recognisable to those who live in Hong Kong, the quiet disappearance of these buildings and spaces for new developments invites little notice. By showcasing this collection of overlooked architectures under threat, at an international platform such as Venice, the curators of *Projecting Future Heritage: A Hong Kong Archive* hope to highlight their value, still often unseen in Hong Kong.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 23:** Hong Kong Pavilion. View inside the Archive Space. Photo by Oliver Law, 2025.

Not only have the architecture and materials on display shaped contemporary Hong Kong's cityscape, but, more importantly, their conceptualisations and realisations also represent a past era of civic aspirations (Zhou 2025), which under today's executive-led neoliberalisation no longer exists. The format of the archive offers both a conceptual as well as formal framework for the presentation of these buildings and spaces yet to be considered historically significant. A space for the conservation of selected and valued parts of the past, the archive here catapults its contents of focus forward in time, divulging what remains today as 'future heritage'.<sup>10</sup> In Venice, opening the archival drawers reveals the what could be regarded as the Rieglian *age value*, *historic value*, and *use value* (Riegl 1903), values imparted on existing buildings to validate their worthiness for preservation, based on their old age, contribution to history and current use, and thus a way to protect them from demolition. The exhibition even highlights the 'environmental values' of some of these buildings, showing their climate adaptiveness that make their preservation, rather than redevelopment, environmentally sustainable.<sup>11</sup> All of these values are invisible under existing institutional frameworks. Additionally, creating such a local archive and making it visible globally may, as the Pritzker-winning architect Wang Shu proposed during his visit to the show, motivate the building of an actual archive that would document more thoroughly the architecture and urbanism in Hong Kong.

For an anomaly in the post-war euphoria of new nations, Hong Kong's contemporary relationship with the archive, itself loaded with colonial-era dispositions (Mbembe 2002), could be fraught. Rather than this relationship leading to a wariness about the

preservation of the spatial productions of the past, it was the imperative of economic growth that has compelled the sidelining of values that historical buildings and spaces may harbour. That only a few monographs exist of the first generation of locally trained architects who were active in the production of many of these buildings and spaces and that there is otherwise little record of their output demonstrate the circumstances against which these spatial productions took place.<sup>12</sup> Simply put, too many buildings were built during the city's era of rapid growth in the 1970s and 1980s, all more gleaming and glamorous than the ordinary buildings showcased in the exhibition. The imageability of progress and prosperity, especially in those rapidly urbanising parts of the world that include Hong Kong, is one based both on relentless erasure and 'renewal' as well as on a tectonics of industrialised materiality. The more ordinary spaces and structures that this exhibit focuses on have thus far remained in the shadow of the gleam of the skyscrapers and shopping malls.

The tectonics of futurity, underpinning the exhibit of the Biennale's central pavilion *Intelligens. Artificial. Natural. Collective*, is put into dialogue in the Hong Kong Pavilion with the installation piece 'Staging the Archive' by Guillaume Othenin-Girard, Kent Mundle, Charlotte Lafont-Hugo and Gilles Vanderstocken. This iteration of a traditional Hong Kong scaffolding designed for the courtyard is built using the age-old circular-economy technology of tied-joint bamboo construction (**Figure 24**). The seven Hong Kong bamboo sifus, or masters, who were brought to Venice to erect it, were a crucial part of the piece. In three days, they constructed the amphitheatre-like space using the same the logic as scaffolding, which is seen today everywhere in Hong Kong's urban spaces (and in Chinese cities until only a decade ago), but will soon be phased out, as announced by the government in March 2025. A physical manifestation of the archive, rather than a separate object dedicated only to the courtyard, its conceptual link is made visible by two pieces shown inside the archival drawers and also as projected films. In the 'Archive of Bamboo Scaffolding for Hong Kong's Constructions', Oliver Law and Ying Zhou compile nearly 400 photos of buildings under construction with bamboo scaffolding from three construction magazines published between the 1930s and 2020s. Together with *Bamboo City* by Ji Xiang, a contemporary film of the scaffolding in the city, they show the malleability of the ancient technology and the knowhow of its construction that made possible all the skyscrapers that make today's Hong Kong.

Deliberate in the bringing together of the overlooked ordinary buildings of Hong Kong to Venice, the exhibition underscores the extraordinariness of these highly intelligent outputs and the agency of architecture in their productions. Through the format of the less formally spectacular archive, the public exhibition is activated as a lived experience for knowledge production.



**Figure 24:** View towards the Arsenale from the Bamboo Installation of the Hong Kong Pavilion.  
Photo by Ying Zhou, 2025.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This text has evolved out of my longer article 'Beyond the Contemporary: Why I Like Architecture Exhibitions More Than Art Exhibitions' (Ursprung 2025).
- <sup>2</sup> The absence of an overarching theory provides much room for the discussion of concepts, what Mieke Bal (2002: 22) calls 'miniature theories', and has opened architectural discourse to anthropology, sociology, philosophy and many other fields of knowledge.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use and become strongly structured in individual-site use. They may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation. The creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds' (Leigh Star 2010).
- <sup>4</sup> This Field Note was written by Sebastián Cillóniz with contributions from the curatorial team of the Peru Pavilion at the 19th International Architecture Exhibition of the 2025 Venice Biennale. The team is composed of Alex Hudtwalcker as lead curator and Sebastian Cillóniz, Gianfranco Morales and José Ignacio Beteta as associate curators.
- <sup>5</sup> The Creative Sphere's co-creative directors were Dr Michael Mossman, Emily McDaniel, Jack Gillmer-Lilley, Elle Davidson, Bradley Kerr, Kaylie Salvatori and Clarence Slockee.
- <sup>6</sup> The Living Belongings section was created as part of a course, Home: Country as Creative Process, at the University of Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning.
- <sup>7</sup> I'd like to thank here my colleagues in curating the pavilion and the Austrian Minister of Culture for providing room for a narration of Rome that could have hardly taken place today in any Italian institutional frame.
- <sup>8</sup> Rome Research Team: Stalker and the SUN Scuola di Urbanesimo Nomade with IURmap, School of Herat, Scomodò in collaboration with Forum Territoriale Parco delle Energie, Quarticciolo Ribelle, SpinTime Labs.
- <sup>9</sup> The curatorial statement is on the webpage dedicated to the *Projecting Future Heritage: A Hong Kong Archive* exhibition (last accessed October 15, 2025).
- <sup>10</sup> A dissection of the meaning of archiving of architecture was recently tabled in Yaneva (2020). Since the 1990s, the 'archival impulse' in the parallel discipline of visual art, to which architecture owes its own turn, has also been influential (see, e.g., Foster 1996; Derrida 1996).
- <sup>11</sup> Two of the exhibits in the Hong Kong Pavilion highlight the ventilation qualities already designed into some of the modern-era buildings. Eric Schuldenfrei, Jay Jordan, Sze Chun Liu and Marc Downie show the airflows of diverse public types of Hong Kong buildings in 'Airflow Archetypes: Visualizing Ventilation Phenomena in Hong Kong's Public Buildings', and in 'Social Condenser Extraordinaire: Hong Kong's Municipal Services Buildings', Hongshan Guo reveals the difference between the air quality of newly-sealed buildings and that of the natural ventilation of the same buildings as they were built.
- <sup>12</sup> The curators and archivists of M+, Hong Kong's museum for visual cultures, can attest to the lack of documentation. With the passing of the likes of Chung Wah-Nan and Szeto Wai, from the prolific post-war generation of architects, their design archives become dispersed.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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