

The thirteenth Biennale of Architecture in Venice has turned out to be an exceptionally strong edition, against many odds. To name just one, this year's theme would hardly narrow down contributions, so chaos might rule.

A strikingly strong Biennale

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Artistic director David Chipperfield's call for commonality has indeed provoked a very wide range of presentations, but they prove more coherent than foreseen. Many of them are socially and environmentally driven, and many emphatically surpass the self-interests of the profession or - in the case of the national pavilions - the country. The central exhibition, divided over the Arsenale and the Central Pavilion in the Giardini, is the most exciting. It parades a host of political statements about the face and use of public space, such as Norman Foster's dazzling multimediatic *Gateway*, Crimson's striking tryptichs of so-called new towns around the globe, or Olafur Eliasson's highly abstract representation of the fact that 1.6 billion people in this electronic world live without access to electricity.



copying is okay

Less loud, but equally striking is an open defiance of modernity, a first in the history of the Biennale on this scale. It ranges from poetic contributions that advocate tradition and historic continuity (a huge wooden Irish vessel, re-interpretations of Piranesi) to a straight plea for copying good concepts (the Villa Rotunda from London's Architectural Association, Hans Kollhoff's models).



transgressions

Compared to the many strong and well-defined voices of the central exhibition, not all national contributions reach the same level, and their nationality is questionable, if sometimes deliberately so.

Some countries reach out beyond their own borders to fill in Chipperfield's jointness. The British Takeaway presentation, for instance, is a research of foreign solutions to English spatial problems. Russia prides itself on the open Skolkovo Innovation centre project, almost fully designed by foreign architects and contrasted with Russia's former scientific secrecy.

flatscreens

Yet, the relevance of national presentations remains intact. Some countries, often outside the architecturally dominant western hemisphere, have grabbed their chance to present their own, less well-known top-architects. Korea's many flatscreens are well worth watching.

not so Greenland

And some national pavilions present a national case of world-importance. Perhaps the most eloquent of these is Denmark's. The Danish pavilion is fully dedicated to the plight of its home-ruled constituent Greenland: a vast, long-neglected part of the world, suffering ecological and economical problems, while architecturally underdeveloped.

With a beautifully crafted wooden table matching the outlines and the convex shape of the peninsula, visitors are welcomed. On the walls, clear facts and figures tell Greenland's story. In the next room, one virtually enters its territory, complete with a dropping temperature and a smell of fish. Two wallcovering videos stream the harsh daily outdoor life of Greenlanders. A lifesize, fully furnished wooden cabin provides extra contrast. The call for new spatial solutions in this huge emptiness is made urgent and tempting at the same time.

must-see

In short, this Biennale is one to go and see for yourself. The Golden Lion awards are well-argued if disputable. But the real reason to go is the infinite number of runners-up.

La Biennale Architettura 2012 di Venezia is on till 25 November of this year.