

Laboratory of the Present

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Abstract

The Architecture Biennale is entrusted with the mission of being a sensor of the future through a collection of possible actions in the present on a global scale. The 18th Laboratory of the Future Exhibition curated by Lesley Lokko was born with the intention of being a laboratory place, as the title itself declares, but in reality it denies, by deciding not to deal with, a decisive issue for the planning of the future: the city. Lee Kuan Yew's quote in Singapore Songlines "Singapore is a very small place, in a very large, varied and changing world, and unless it is nimble and quick to adapt, it will perish and the people know it", underlines the strength of urban acceleration. The life system of African cities, crazy and incomprehensible, but at the same time contemporary, makes them the ideal case to ask the question: what will the cities of the future be like?

Keywords: city, future, density, absence.

The 7th Architecture Biennale "Less Aesthetics, More Ethics" marked a seminal moment in the trajectory of contemporary urbanism, heralding a departure from entrenched historicist approaches to a realm of exploration encompassing novel formal dimensions and substantive inquiries. It beckoned forth a paradigmatic shift that didn't merely extol aesthetic allure but rather positioned ethics and sustainability as pivotal axes. At its core, this exhibition orchestrated by Studio Azzurro unfurled an audacious two-hundred-and-eighty-meter media wall, redefining visitor engagement through an immersive traverse into the tapestry of modern metropolis—bridging the sensory chasm between sight and sound. Such audacious innovation not only defied architectural conventions but also catalyzed a profound dialectic on essence, proposals, and substance, eclipsing the confines of predefined stylistic lexicons. The inaugural spectacle in 2000 epitomized a watershed moment in global urbanism, spearheading the avant-garde of the planetary urbanization process (Amen & Nia, 2020; Aziz Amen, 2022; Auwalu & Bello, 2023; Gaha, 2023). This exhibition presaged momentous urban fabric transmutations, postulating architecture as a linchpin tool in confronting the edicts of the future. Crucially, it exalted and exalted the celebration of cultural and national heterogeneities as reservoirs brimming with inexhaustible wellsprings of vitality and innovation. This vantage underscored the dialectic between unchecked urbanization in emerging realms juxtaposed against the specter of rapid environmental depletion, delineating a precarious yet fecund equilibrium teeming with vibrancy and creative impetus. Foremost among the exhibition's luminaries, William Alsop fervently championed the notion that cities ought to burgeon as bastions of quality, intrigue, serenity, exuberance, and marvel. Alsop's conception envisaged utopian urban sprawls that serenaded residents with perpetual holiday vibes, constituting a revolutionary ethos that necessitated a reimagining of urban planning vis-à-vis human well-being and felicity. Concurrently, Richard Rogers, in his magisterial tome "Cities for a Small Planet," castigated the political and commercial machinations that oftentimes undermine the sinews of urban progress. Rogers trumpeted the creation of inclusive and secure public commons as sine qua non for social integration, accentuating the imperatives of designing cities not merely as functional infrastructures but as crucibles of community and social solidarity. Moreover, the exposition delved into the tapestry of urban democracy, positing that architectural edifices serving as ideal backdrops for quotidian narratives could metamorphose into physical embodiments of the requisites for a vivacious and participatory civic life. Alain Guiheux and Dominique Rouillard, through their "Architecture Action" project, endeavored to birth tangible utopias within the constraints of the extant milieu, accentuating the social, political, and philosophical import of architecture in broadening societal imagination. Pivotal to the exhibition was an imperative to emancipate from the shackles of aesthetic timidity and audaciously embrace the novel. This ethos underscored the imperative for future cities to be envisaged as veritable crucibles for tackling global vicissitudes through an integrated approach that melds urban praxis 2 (Amen, 2021; Amen et al., 2023; Barone, 2023), political and social advocacy, architectural metamorphosis, and philosophical introspection. Tangible exemplars, such as the urban rejuvenation initiative on Mohammed Sultan Road in Singapore, served as poignant testaments to the transformative potential of self-determination and innovation in metamorphosing blighted neighborhoods into vibrant hubs of nocturnal and cultural effervescence. In a different vein, the 10th Architecture Biennale, titled "City Architecture and Society," delved deeper into the labyrinth of global urban metamorphoses. This exposition foregrounded the exigencies of burgeoning megalopolises and burgeoning urban pressures, necessitating novel stratagems to grapple with the exigencies of the contemporary milieu. Via cinematic projections, photographic montages, and three-dimensional renderings, the exhibition illuminated the urban sagas of sixteen mega-metropolises across four continents, unveiling the kaleidoscope of diversities and peculiar challenges besetting each locale. Themes broached

encompassed the specter of breakneck urbanization in South Asia and along China's littoral fringes, the tapestry of internal migrations within Latin American conurbations, the fissures of social unrest in African urban agglomerations, and the reverberations of post-industrial transformations in European and North American cityscapes. Cities such as São Paulo, Caracas, Istanbul, Bogotá, Mexico City, Los Angeles, New York, Cairo, Johannesburg, Berlin, London, Barcelona, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Mumbai underwent critical scrutiny, unveiling a tableau replete with contradictions, tensions, and latent potentialities. The exhibition underscored the disjuncture between urbanization and commensurate economic growth and infrastructural investments, particularly acutely in the Asia-Pacific region. This imbued the investigation into the state of global cities with both a problematic impetus and a propitious trajectory, with a concerted focus on the imperatives of fostering more equitable and sustainable urban development. Subsequent iterations, namely the 15th and 17th Architecture Biennales, further plumbed the depths of urban futures, contending with the specters of burgeoning urbanization, climate upheaval, and social disparities. Through a prism of critical introspection and proactive engagement, these biennales pondered the pathways to nurturing inclusive and sustainable urban ecologies, advocating for the decolonization of urban spaces and a redistribution of resources. Rem Koolhaas, with his trenchant perspicacity, posited that "Junkspace"—the residual urban sprawls that pervade contemporary cityscapes—ought to be valorized as a repository of latent potentialities. Meanwhile, the work of the Assemble studio interrogated the role of citizens as co-creators of the urban tapestry, foregrounding the imperative of active community participation in the gestation of efficacious urban blueprints. A salient chapter in the annals of the Architecture Biennale is etched by the curation of Lesley Lokko. The 18th Architecture Biennale, unfurling in 2023, heralded a seismic shift in perspective. Lokko, an architect and wordsmith of Ghanaian-Scottish lineage, pivoted the focus of her curation toward the clarion call for the "Decolonization of Space." Lokko's invitation to architects, urban planners, and artists was a summons to delve into the intricate power dynamics that have intricately woven the fabric of modern cities, effectively unraveling and challenging entrenched Western paradigms of urban development. Her insistence on amplifying voices from the margins, embracing narratives emanating from the Global South and historically marginalized communities, served as a clarion call for inclusivity and representation within the architectural discourse. Through her curation, Lokko sought to carve out a space where architecture transcends its conventional boundaries, emerging as a potent tool for fostering social justice and redressing historical grievances, all while placing an unwavering emphasis on sustainability and environmental stewardship. Critiques directed at Lokko's curatorial approach were, in many instances, emblematic of a broader intellectual discord. While some contended that her endeavor to confront multifaceted issues—ranging from colonial legacies to climate exigencies—through the prism of architecture was commendable, others opined that such an approach risked straying into the realm of theoretical abstraction, divorced from the practical exigencies of architectural practice. However, amidst this divergence of opinion, there was a resounding acknowledgment of Lokko's pivotal role in catalyzing a much-needed conversation, one that shone a penetrating light on oft-overlooked societal fault lines and systemic injustices. The exhibition itself served as a veritable tapestry, interweaving a myriad of projects that tackled the complex interplay between environmental sustainability, urban resilience, and social justice. Among the myriad exhibits that dotted the landscape, perhaps none garnered as much attention as the visionary project by Francis Kéré. As the first African architect to ascend to the hallowed echelons of the Pritzker Prize, Kéré's oeuvre stands as a testament to the transformative potential of architectural innovation rooted in local context and community engagement. His project, a harmonious fusion of time-honored traditional techniques and cutting-edge modern innovations, emerged as a beacon of hope in the African architectural landscape, offering a compelling vision of sustainable, resilient, and culturally resonant built environments. Yet, amidst the cacophony of voices and visions, there lingered a palpable sense of yearning—a collective aspiration for a more profound and holistic narrative of architecture, one that transcends mere aesthetics and functionality to grapple with the existential questions of our time. What remains conspicuously absent is a conscious reckoning with the role of the city itself—a narrative where the city emerges not as a mere backdrop but as the protagonist in a grand, unfolding epic. The themes explored are undeniably timely and pressing, yet they remain ensconced within the confines of the present moment, devoid of a forward-looking gaze that dares to envision the city of tomorrow. In the final analysis, Lokko's Biennale stands as both a testament to the transformative power of architecture and a poignant reminder of its inherent limitations. It is a rallying cry for architects and urban thinkers alike to transcend the boundaries of convention, to grapple with the complexities of our world with courage and imagination, and to envision a future where architecture serves not only as a reflection of our society but as a catalyst for its transformation.

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