

Venice 2014 : specualtions on a hiatus in architecture

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VENICE 2014

**SPECULATIONS
ON A HIATUS IN
ARCHITECTURE**

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**Martin Hartung
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In his short piece 'Bare Walls' the Prague-born media philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920–1991) draws out the symbolic architecture of 'homo faber', a species that this expert on communication crisis characterizes as capable of "reflection and speculation", eager to equip its cultural environment with a constantly growing number of things – to cover the nakedness of its walls.¹

According to Flusser, naked walls are altered just as the Christian purity of nature has been transformed into a vast cultural universe. Thus, the bare wall unnoticeably defines the very nature of man's cultural existence, which it partly constitutes: «For everyone living in a culture, it is something taken for granted just as nature is. Therefore, walls are taken for granted. They are taken for granted even by those who build them.»²

With the fifteen fundamental elements of architecture that Rem Koolhaas, the director of the 14th Architecture Biennale in Venice, singled out for its main exhibition titled 'Fundamentals', the architect is breaking open this 'taken for granted' of the built basics, which Flusser describes on a meta-level of cultural engagement. Striving to describe the underlying conceptual structure of the Biennale at its introductory press conference, Koolhaas evoked a 'hiatus' in which «we can think or begin to think». While this conceived pause turned the doors, floors and corridors into communicating elements, it also imposed the regime of silence on the figure of the 'star architect' and his iconic opus: in designing the overarching curatorial framework of the Biennale exhibitions, Koolhaas purposely disregarded «the contemporary as the first condition» to negotiate history.

Within the main pavilion one encounters the display of curiosities related to what should be the most basic architectural technologies, isolated from their usual camouflaging context and made to speak by the virtue of their silent protagonism in a range of more or less known historical episodes and cultural milieus: next to a chariot latrine from the baths of Caracalla in Rome (dated ca. 100–200 AD), marking the transition from defecation as a public act (on benches with simple holes) to a private act, stands the automated Japanese 'Inax Satis Washlet' that connects the individual in need back with the world. A myriad of features from an automatic air refresher to a broad selection of music can be operated by a smartphone app. Next to a vertigo-inducing sequence of newspaper headlines indicating the relationship between the Rana Plaza disaster and the treachery of its collapsing floors, this same 'architectural fundamental' is presented as a sacred surface through the 'Electric Sajjadah' patent in a section of the exhibition titled 'floor: the Muslim praying mat with ornamental decoration that brightens up when turned towards Mecca, powered by rechargeable batteries.

In a collaborative effort between Koolhaas, Harvard GSD students and chosen international experts, such as the Biennale co-curator Stephan Trüby, the 'Fundamentals' show discloses the seemingly mundane artifacts as relational knots in which the whole cultural identities are distilled. «Because I wanted to talk about architecture, I dismantled architecture in its smallest parts», Koolhaas summarized at the Biennale award ceremony on June 7.

The controversy of the seeming lightheartedness with which the sleight of Koolhaas's hand performed this dismantling, however, did not escape attention of 'criticality'-minded visitors, such as Peter Eisenman. The American architect and once-patron of Koolhaas, who attended the Biennale preview to participate in the opening of the collateral event dedicated to the Yenikapi Transfer Point and Archeological Park Project (that he had authored for Istanbul) evoked in his criticism the «grammar of architecture» that was «purposely missing» from the show.³ While stubbornly imposing his famed discourse on architecture-as-language, Eisenman stated that, «if architecture is to be considered a language, 'elements' don't matter. I mean, whatever the words are, they're all the same».⁴ What this ardent advocate of architectural grammar, possibly unintentionally, missed to observe within the complex curatorial architecture of Koolhaas's Biennale is how it subtly demonstrates that the architectural 'fundamentals' produce more than they contain. To clearly read this multi-layered approach,

however, a casual visit to the immensely entertaining inventory of the main exhibition is not enough – for only in the midst of the curating efforts of the national pavilions does the display of diversified ubiquity of elevators, ramps, doors and floors gain its full meaning and its full potency.

Under the banner of 'Choral Research on Architecture'⁵, the 66 participants in the national pavilions all agreed to contribute to Koolhaas' controversial theme of 'Absorbing Modernity', and for the first time dedicated their exhibitions to the one common topic in this 'Research Biennale', as it was labeled by its president Paolo Barrata. With 'Absorbing Modernity' Koolhaas aimed to collect presentations under a combined narrative, which was neither meant as a «triumph of modernity» nor as an implication that «globalization creates a homogenous condition in the world.»⁶

In a memorable metaphor, conceived to explain his curiosity behind the 'absorption of modernity', Koolhaas compared the impact of modernization policies and technological advances on culture to the blow that a boxer receives from his opponent.⁷ Some 30 years ago, however, in a more politically meticulous observation, he evoked the 'apparatus of modernity' to prophesy the 'imminent segregation of mankind into two tribes: one of Metropolitanites – literally self-made – who used the full potential of the apparatus of Modernity to reach unique levels of perfection, the second simply the remainder of the traditional human race».⁸



Rem Koolhaas surrounded by journalists after the Press Conference of the 14th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia (June 7, 2014 to November 23, 2014) at Teatro Piccolo, Arsenale on June 5, 2014. Photography: Martin Hartung, Mejrema Zatrić.

The incarnation of the apparatus in point was the Manhattan Skyscraper – a particular combination of floors, elevators, walls, windows, toilets and other ten architectural fundamentals that, through a variety of repetitions, consolidated an architectural type. This repeating arrangement has, until well into the 1950s, evoked American capitalist modernity wherever it was built, without any remarkable focus on the specificities of the fundamental elements that it held together.

The crucial role of the repetitions of architectural types within the interplay of modernity and the world's national cultures is presented in the majority of national pavilions – in some more eloquently than in others. In this great variety of examples it is precisely those that show off most clearly the reception of the baggage of institutional references and collective imaginaries carried by these typologies that most suggestively underline the stakes of modernization.

In the British pavilion 'the welfare state baroque' implies the «endgames of British modernism» as the conclusion of a long and inspired reproduction of typologies that span as widely as between the Romanesque makeovers of Stonehenge of Inigo Jones and the democratic designs for the Welfare state.⁹ While in the UK the unique brand of cross-fertilization between historical considerations, science-fiction and social reform endured the assaults of the «american car culture», the German Pavilion displays a symbolically charged case in which a type of the American modernist villa protagonizes the political rejuvenation of the entire nation. Built for the «optimistic post-WWII chancellors» of West Germany, the 'Kanzlerbungalow', situated on the riverside of the Rhine in then capital city of Bonn, became the ubiquitous decorum of the eagerly broadcasted diplomatic gatherings that firmly set the country on the course of capitalist democracy. The detailed 1:1 reproduction of this well-known interior

author opens a series of discussions about styles («modernism, inside fascism, inside neo-classicism, inside the neo-renaissance»), types («But what does the pavilion shelter besides representations, symbols, exhibitions? What does a Kanzlerbungalow shelter besides chancellors and symbols, representations and aspirations, projections and politicians? What are buildings when they do not provide shelter?») and power («If the Kanzlerbungalow is a church of Capitalism, what is a German Pavilion a church of?»).¹¹

While the understanding and disclosure of the power-induced modernity transfers are made a central concern of the German pavilion, the Pavilion of Morocco showcases an unlikely disinterest in the similar topics. Despite the country's decades long colonization history, the actual historical distribution of military forces and creative efforts between the colonizer and the colonized is pushed into the background. Instead, the «Moroccan genius» is recognized in both the radical and experimental approaches inspired by the region and the subversive appropriation practices that transformed the avant-garde projects of late-modernism, such as Candilis-Josic-Woods' 'Honeycomb settlement' in Casablanca, to the point of unrecognizability.¹²

A similarly easy acceptance of the disbalanced power-ratios within the modernization processes, but on the very opposite end of the scale, is produced by the 'hipstery' crowd congregated around the stylishly designed meeting table of the American pavilion's exhibition-project, titled 'OfficeUS'. In an amusing play of references and words, the 'OfficeUS', constituted by the creative individuals from all over the world, ventures to produce a history of US architectural offices' projects across the world. If the meaningfulness of the entire arrangement may appear slightly forced and goofy at first encounter, what compensates is the intriguing link established between the

Center for the Study of American Architecture, and directed by Reinhold Martin, offers an alternative perspective and an unsolicited amendment to the curatorial discourse of Koolhaas. While proposing the importance of the «economic fundamentals» as complementary and determining for the ones of architecture, Martin focuses on housing. Through a range of historical episodes, vividly presented within the exhibition titled 'House Housing', organized entirely without the framework of the Biennale, the seemingly non-symbolic, simple providers of shelter are rendered as profoundly immersed in the cultural imaginaries and «situated in the center of the current economic regime».¹⁴ Just as the fundamentality of Koolhaas' elements was played-out through the repetitions of the workings of appropriation and design, the repetitions of economic systems introduced the infrastructures that constrained those building elements and building types. As Martin notes in the introduction of the exhibition booklet: «House Housing: sets out to show how such laws are written, as stories that form dominant cultural imaginaries. The 'American Dream' closely connected to American economic power and to global housing markets, is one such story. Others running silently in the background of the exhibition include the European doctrine that transnational debt be met with national austerity, and the ambiguous slogan 'Capitalism with Chinese characteristics'.»¹⁵

It was exactly yet another story in the range described here by Martin, that was being drawn out a couple of canals away within the framework of the collateral Biennale event titled 'MOSKVA: urban space'. Organized as a presentation of the Zaryadye Park project designed for Moscow by the US Office Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the event assembled a variety of actors steering the urban transformation process of the Russian capital. Surrounded by the crowd of the designer-clothes-cladded bureaucrats and planners from Moscow's chief architect's office, the real estate developer Dmitry



within the actual German pavilion, itself decisively reformed under the auspice of the Nazi-regime, single-handedly consolidated a powerful narrative on architectural types, political economy and collective imaginary. In the essay entitled 'Your Bungalow is my Pavilion (This Room is an Island)', authored by writer Quinn Latimer for the promotional pamphlet of the German pavilion, the following line opens the text: «Bonn ist nicht Beverly Hills».¹⁰ By paraphrasing this witty, derisive comment delivered at the expense of the Kanzlerbungalow's modernism, the

«architectural and operational transfer» through which the «triumph of US architecture» was effectuated over the last century and on all continents.¹³ The straightforward recognition of the US as one of the main agents of change on the global stage is demanded, in parallel, by another research project that hypothesizes the crucial position of the last century's unchallengeable global power within the transnational real estate networks. Triggered by the 2008 foreclosure crisis, the inquiry authored by the New York-based Temple Hoyne Buell

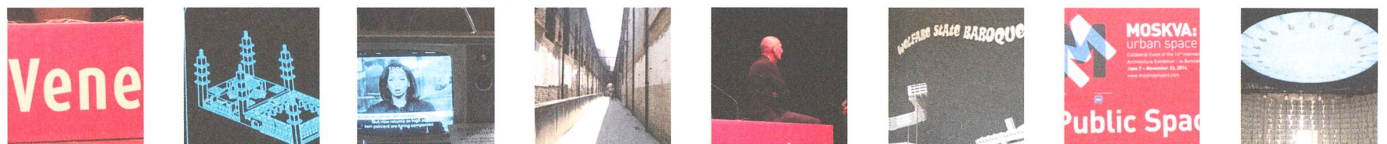
Aksenov – the commissioner and the patron of the project – gave an introductory note. In the perfectly plotted narrative of Mr. Aksenov, the growing Middle Class of Moscow, the young educated crowd, speaks and demands a better quality of life. While overcoming the lure of money that crucially marked the immediate Post-Soviet decade, both the public and the private care-takers start working together to meet the demands of the much-pampered Middle Class. In the press release material of the event, Koolhaas' 'fundamentals' earned yet another

interpretation: while the city authorities of the previous eras directed all of their attention to the «masses», «today the person as an individual appears on stage, becoming part of the «Fundamentals» for the development of the contemporary architecture and urbanism».¹⁶ While it might be overtly imaginative to recognize in this evoked «person as an individual» the vague figure of the infamous Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin, who conceived the Zaryadye project back in 2012, it is surely safe to assign this role to the handsome, well-dressed specimen of the booming Moscow middle class. In Moscow, as in other world's metropolises, the nexus between the cultural imaginaries, recognized by Martin in the context of his housing research, and the global real estate products that channel them, is busy at work producing Metropolitanites, a tribe of perfected human species at the bases of global segregation. As if purposely confirming the logic lied out by Martin, the «MOSKVA: urban space» narrator states that «new societal demands entail a number of new requirements» for the typology of the park.¹⁷ If we are to believe in the market-intelligence, some of these demands can be gleaned from the advertising pamphlet of Mr. Aksenov's real estate company RDI: comfort, sustainability, safety, but also – loads of fun.¹⁸ Just as their pioneering counterparts in the US had earned the title of «community builders» in the last century, these entrepreneurs of space in emerging economies are crafting business plans that border on social programs. When the RDI pamphlet states that «We

gallery. Subsequently, an archival movie is played, followed by an unexpected score by performance artist Tino Sehgal, presented live by the archive choreographer and her colleagues in the still dark space of the pavilion. Sehgal, known for promoting process-oriented, immaterial labor with performing choreographers in exhibition contexts, as both transmitters and archivists of his scores, is one of the many contributing artists and architects that the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist brought together to realize the captivating exhibition «Lucius Burckhardt and Cedric Price. A stroll through a fun palace». The exhibition activates the two archives of its protagonists. Highlighted is material around the utopian building project «Fun Palace» of the early 1960s by the English architect Cedric Price (1934–2003), which he conceived together with the theater producer Joan Littlewood (1914–2002), and the practice of the sociologist Lucius Burckhardt (1925–2003), who used to teach at ETH Zurich from 1969 to 1973. Burckhardt not only introduced the unconventional, dialogue-based teaching method of the «Lehr-canapé» at the school, but he also invented Strollology in the 1980s at the University of Kassel – the science of going on a walk as an academic discipline. In the words of Philip Ursprung, who recently revived the «Lehrcanapé» method in the ETH Zurich architecture school, Burckhardt «personifies the possibility of an architectural freedom and independence, which was lost in the economic boom starting in the late 1980s. But his walks with students and a broader audience, trans-

gies», a contribution by Beatriz Colomina and her students from Princeton University to the «Monditalia» section of the Biennale. Within the framework of this exhibition, situated in the long Arsenale building and dedicated to the history and contemporary architecture practices of Italy, «Radical Pedagogies» showcases 65 international case studies of thought-provoking and system-changing forms of education models from 1945 to 1980, which are organized geographically by longitude. Colomina's contribution provides an opportunity for the historically influential education practices to be studied and questioned as to their actuality and practicability through a packed exhibition display of boards and newspapers.

Although Joan Littlewood was not an architect, her take on the developing leisure society of the early 1960s in England would have fitted in the exhibition, as well as the surprisingly related, later teaching methods of Lucius Burckhardt. Littlewood was already in 1964 advocating for a «university of the streets» in the context of the «Fun Palace», along with «the pleasure of strolling casually».²⁴ This playful way of perceiving the world and the built environment, not as prefixed, but with open eyes and a critical mind, fits in Burckhardt's curriculum, out of which came the definition of a need for «design intelligence, intelligence that conveys a dual message: information about the context as well as about the object in question.»²⁵ A socially determined concept of design was formulated earlier by Burckhardt in his influential



design, develop and manage new urban quarters that are fun to live in»¹⁹, they set into motion an entire «perpetuum mobile» of culture, technology, market and bare life.

The more engaged reflections on leisure are at the base of the set-up in the Swiss Pavilion, where many layers of play, from the seriousness of games to the unconventionality of staged entertainment, can be experienced. One of the constantly changing situations in the complex structure of the exhibition leaves the visitors standing in an almost empty room, the only object present being a scale model of Cedric Price's unrealized «Fun Palace», encased in plexiglass on a moving trolley. Suddenly, the lights go off and a barely visible person pulls out from a transparent archive room another trolley with projectors and a DVD player. The female presenter continues moving the trolley as beams of colored light come out of the projector, which is being moved around the encased model, throwing its changing shadows on the walls of the

gressing the boundaries between art and architecture, sociology and urbanism, research and fun, are tools that we can take up and develop.»²⁰ Such experimentation with new forms of pedagogical practice was also a concern of Cedric Price, who was interested in cybernetics and information theory. In a similar vein to Burckhardt, the British architect invented the «Taskforce» program at the Architectural Association in 1960s London, which formalized the right to a say by the students regarding the curriculum in a «signed contract between student and tutor».²¹ This opening of the access to planning links Price's ideas of teaching to his building philosophy that reverberates in his scaffolding framework of the «Fun Palace», as «a socially interactive machine»²². This project for a constantly changing and adaptable leisure and education center shows how its author «understood that the user completes the building and, consequently, that architecture can only be evaluated through its performance [...]».²³ The progressive initiatives of Cedric Price also feature in «Radical Pedago-

essay «Design is Invisible» (1980), in which the sociologist advocated for an awareness of external parameters to design objects. This embedded ecology of thinking is apparent in the simplistic exhibition design of the Swiss pavilion, developed by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, who used to be students of Burckhardt at ETH Zurich in the early 1970s.

The sociological and anthropological aspects of building and design, emphasized in the work of Burckhardt, and the visions of new technological landscapes dreamed up by Price, establish a firm conceptual connection between the Swiss contribution and the «Fundamentals» exhibition: the problem of human-object relationalism is presented in both. While in the «interactive machine» of the «Fun Palace» the faith is put in the emancipatory possibilities of technology, the infinitely less complex fundamental elements of architecture disclose one simple truth – that technological artifacts both enable and impose. How this plays out depends, not

least, on the trends of the times – and ours is, in the words of Koolhaas, one fixated on «comfort, sustainability, security» that substituted for «égalité, fraternité, liberté» of the revolutionary 19th century.²⁶ These same core qualities, which are advertised as commodities in the real estate business ventures, imply the overarching rules of design that permeate the «fundamental elements» and that are imposed on architectural practice by these «community-builders» of our century.

It was a long way, as «Fundamentals» shows, from the heavy gates to the dematerialized security zones: the advancing technologization and individualization roots in an ever increasing need for safety and standardization, which has long ago suppressed the variety of the handmade, such as the one recognizable in the selection of 18th-century window frames that is put on display in the main pavilion. One warning of the exhibition is directed towards the decrease of this formal variety in a growing functionalism of the digital era, in which forces beyond the architect's control, like the global demand for surveillance systems, inscribe themselves in the fabric of buildings. It is a forceful presentation of this kind of trends that the announced hiatus of the Biennale pushes into the foreground. If Rem Koolhaas is right in claiming that amnesia is very much at the core of the digital age, then his call for a pause in the context of the presentation of current building activities is to be taken seriously as oriented against «a flattening of cultural memory»²⁷ and towards a thorough search for meaningful strategies in the context of future design. On the other hand, the historical reconsideration of modernity shows that there is much more to the concept of fun than playing games: from the vanguard project of the «Fun Palace» to the generic business plans for «fun urban quarters» of Moscow, the entanglements between the social and the technological are pre-programmed and conceived in a variety of different ways.

Getting-to-the-bottom-of-things is the ultimate speculative enterprise. Piercing through the thick, sticky strata of relationalities we are supposed to reach the reassuring realm of fundamentals - the profound layer of dead-silence where any available argumentation becomes tautological. In the 2014 Venice Biennale, the hiatus evoked by the bipolarity between the social and political complexity of the architectural basics, and the socio-political schematism of the power relations reinforcing modernity, seem to reinstate the famed quick-witted dictum of the «Fun Palace»'s originator: «Technology is the answer, but what is the question?»²⁸

- 1 Vilém Flusser, 'The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design', London: Reaktion Books 1999, p. 78.
- 2 Ibid.
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- 4 Ibid.
- 5 'Fundamentals', official press release of the 14th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2014.
- 6 Rem Koolhaas, Press Conference, 14th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, Teatro Piccolo, Arsenale, Venice, 06/05/2014.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Rem Koolhaas, 'Delirious New York: a Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan', New York: The Monacelli Press (Inc.) 1994, p. 158.
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- 10 Quinn Latimer, 'Yout Bungalow is my Pavilion (This Room is an Island)', in: official pamphlet for 'Pavilion Germania', German Pavilion, 14th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2014.
- 11 Ibid.
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- 15 Ibid.
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- 17 Ibid.
- 18 RDI, 'RDI Turns Inspiration into Real Estate Reality', official promo-booklet for RDI Group, 2014.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Philip Ursprung, 'Reactivating the 'Lehreranapé': Lucius Burckhardt and ETH Zürich', in: Hans-Ulrich Obrist (Ed.), 'Lucius Burckhardt, Cedric Price. A stroll though a fun palace', Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia, 2014, pp. 53–54, p. 54.
- 21 Jacobo García-Germán, 'Cedric Price. The Architectural Association and others, London, UK. 1959–1965 and 1968', available online at: www.radical-pedagogies.com/search-cases/e18-architectural-association/, retrieved: 06/15/2014.
- 22 Stanley Mathews, 'The Fun Palace: Cedric Price's experiment in architecture and technology', in: Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research, vol. 3, no. 2, 2005, pp. 73–91, p. 73.
- 23 See Jacobo García-Germán, 2014.
- 24 Joan Littlewood, 'A Laboratory of Fun', in: 'The New Scientist', 05/14/1964, p. 433. Quoted from Stanley Mathews, 2005, p. 78.
- 25 Lucius Burckhardt, 'Strollological Observations on Perception of the Environment and the Tasks Facing Our Generation' (1996), in: Jesko Fezer, Martin Schmitz (Eds.), 'Lucius Burckhardt Writings. Rethinking Man-made Environments. Politics, Landscape & Design', Vienna: Springer 2012, pp. 239–248, p. 248.
- 26 The Guardian, 'Rem Koolhaas: Architecture has become a total fiction – video', available online at: www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/video/2014/jun/06/rem-koolhaas-fundamentals-venice-architecture-biennale-video, retrieved: 06/15/2014.
- 27 Rem Koolhaas, '14th International Architecture Exhibition / Fundamentals', available online at: www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/news/25-01.html, retrieved: 06/15/2014.
- 28 Cedric Price, in: Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 2014, p. 41.

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Mejrema Zatrić, born 1980, is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta) at ETH Zurich, and holds degrees in architecture from the University of Sarajevo and the 'Metropolis' Program of the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya in Barcelona. Mejrema's research, inspired by the critical urban theory, focuses on the architectural-historical inquiry into the urban transformations of socialist and post-socialist Europe. Her doctoral project examines the theoretical implications and the socio-political underpinnings of the urban research undertaken by pioneering architects in 1950s socialist Yugoslavia.