

La Biennale di Venezia

17th International Architecture Exhibition

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How will we live together?

Theme of the Biennale Architettura 2021

We need a new spatial contract. In the context of widening political divides and growing economic inequalities, we call on architects to imagine spaces in which we can generously live *together*:

- *together* as human beings who, despite increasing individuality, yearn to connect with one another and with other species across digital and real space;
- *together* as new households looking for more diverse and dignified spaces for inhabitation;
- *together* as emerging communities that demand equity, inclusion, and spatial identity;
- *together* across political borders to imagine new geographies of association;
- *together* as a planet facing crises that require global action for all of us to continue living at all.

The participants in the 17th International Architecture Exhibition are collaborating with other professions and constituencies - artists, builders, engineers, and craftspeople, but also politicians, journalists, social scientists, and everyday citizens. In effect, the Biennale Architettura 2021 asserts the vital role of the architect as both cordial convener and custodian of the spatial contract.

In parallel, this Exhibition also maintains that it is in its material, spatial, and cultural specificity that architecture inspires the ways we live together. In that respect, we ask the participants to highlight those aspects of the main theme that are uniquely architectural.

Unpacking the Question:

The theme of this Biennale Architettura is its title. The title is a question: How will we live together?. The question is open.

How: Speaks to practical approaches and concrete solutions, highlighting the primacy of problem-solving in architectural thinking.

Will: Signals looking toward the future but also seeking vision and determination, drawing from the power of the architectural imaginary.

We: Is first person plural and thus inclusive of other peoples, of other species, appealing to a more empathetic understanding of architecture.

Live: Means not simply to exist but to thrive, to flourish, to inhabit, and to express life, tapping into architecture's inherent optimism.

Together: Implies collectives, commons, universal values, highlighting architecture as a collective form and a form of collective expression.

?: Indicates an open question, not a rhetorical one, looking for (many) answers, celebrating the plurality of values in and through architecture.

The question, “How will we live together?” is at once ancient and urgent. The Babylonians asked it as they were building their tower. Aristotle asked it when he was writing about politics. His answer was “the city.” The French and American Revolutions asked it. Against the tumultuous backdrop of the early 1970s, Timmy Thomas passionately pleaded it in his song “Why Can’t We Live Together?”.

It is indeed as much a social and political question as a spatial one. More recently, rapidly changing social norms, the political polarization between left and right, climate change, and the growing gap between labor and capital are making this question more urgently relevant and at different scales than before. In parallel, the weakness of the political models being proposed today compels us to put space first and, perhaps like Aristotle, look at the way architecture shapes inhabitation in order to imagine potential models for how we could live together.

Every generation feels compelled to ask this question and answer it in its own, unique way. Today, unlike with previous ideologically-driven generations, there seems to be a consensus that there is no single source from which such an answer can come. The plurality of sources and diversity of answers will only enrich our living together, not impede it.

We are asking architects this question because we are not happy with the answers that are coming out of politics today. In the context of the Biennale Architettura we are asking architects this question because we believe they have the ability to present more inspiring answers than politics has been thus far offering in much of the world. We are asking architects because architects are good conveners of different actors and experts in the design and construction process. We are asking architects because we, as architects, are preoccupied with shaping the spaces in which people live together and because we frequently imagine these settings differently than do the social norms that dictate them.

In that sense, every space we design simultaneously embraces the social contract that willed the space and proposes an alternative to it. We aspire to enable the best of the social contract and to propose alternatives where we can improve on it. A single-family home may ultimately replicate the explicit values and implicit oppressions of the post-WWII nuclear family model, but we have also seen powerful experiments from architects who have challenged the detached house’s familial hierarchies and gender segregations by proposing alternative layouts and degrees of openness.

Hopefully, the question continues to propel us hopefully ahead and, in doing so, to build on the optimism that drives architecture and architects. Our profession is tasked with designing better spaces for better living. Our challenge is not whether to be optimistic or not. There we have no choice. It is rather how successful we are at transposing the inhabitants to better lives through the ‘wish images’ that we produce with architecture.

The current global pandemic has no doubt made the question that this Biennale Architettura is asking all the more relevant and timely, even if somehow ironic, given the imposed isolation. It may indeed be a coincidence that the theme was proposed a few months before the pandemic. However, many of the reasons that initially led us to ask this question - the intensifying climate crisis, massive population displacements, political instabilities around the world, and growing racial, social, and economic inequalities, among others - have led us to this pandemic and have become all the more relevant.

A New Spatial Contract

Five people walk into a room that has only four chairs. Who sits where? They can play musical chairs. That’s one spatial contract. They can also line up the chairs to form of a bench where they all fit together. That’s another. A city decides to build a new subway system. Which parts does it connect and which does it leave out? There may be economic issues, political rivalries, and

technological drivers that guide these decisions, but somehow the layout of the subway system supersedes and becomes a way in which a larger portion of the population connects with each other above and beyond the politics that bind or divide them.

Politics and policies lay out the terms and processes for collective living, but people convene in space, and the space helps shape and transform the social contract they lay out. When Aristotle, for example wanted to describe the ideal democracy, he could not do so without the city. It was very difficult to imagine a society without the spaces that it occupied. Since then, political theorists have often relied on space to explain but also to enable the society they are imagining. From Rousseau to Rawls, the deliberation of people forming society takes place in a space that helps shape the social contract. If a social contract determines the freedoms lost and gained in order for people to enter society, a spatial contract, determines the methods by which people negotiate these freedoms through their spatial interactions. The spatial contract precedes, rehearses, articulates, materializes, invariably enables or resists, but oftentimes supersedes the social contract.

Historians of cities attest to the sharing of walls as being the moment of emergence of cities, the moment when two houses are rethought in order to economize and share. The spatial contract has a singularity in the idea of space requiring a decorum, but it is very plural in the sense that space has a level of simultaneity that can empower multiplicities. Thus, to look at how societies shape their spaces and what decorum of access and behavior are shaped by their spaces could be as important as looking at their codes of ethics themselves.

We continue to inhabit houses and cities built on outmoded ideas of a good life. The architectural resilience of these spaces may have adjusted to our changing needs over time, but by now they have reached the limits of their elasticity.

Our bodies have acquired new prosthetics and, increasingly, the nascent freedom to express fluid genders. They are being diversified and liberated from uniformity, but the architectural criteria of their comfort are still based on standardized approaches that confine the body and detach it from its environment. Our family lives have evolved and diversified, but we continue to replicate *ad nauseam* the model of the nuclear family house along with its embedded biases of hierarchy and privacy. Our social associations have become more diffused and diverse and yet the space of the community is still centered around values of association that tend to be more inward-looking and claustrophobic. Our cities have long expanded beyond the centralized model of separated land-uses and income groups, but we often continue to think of the good city as one with a center, spatially organized societal hierarchies, and with its back turned to the rural and nature. Above all, we have become increasingly aware of the global dangers of our spatial practices, including transportation and environmental controls, but we continue to live as if alone on a passive planet of endless resources. To paraphrase from the singer Prince, we continue to *party like it was 1999*.

We can no longer wait for politicians to propose a path towards a better future. As politics continue to divide and isolate, we can offer alternative ways of living together through architecture. After all, space often precedes, projects, and survives the human conditions that shape it. A spatial contract could constitute a social contract. We are looking for a spatial contract that is at once universal and inclusive, an expanded contract for peoples and species to coexist and thrive in their plurality.

Towards a Renewed Agency for Architecture

The Biennale Architettura 2021 is motivated by new kinds of problems that the world is putting in front of architecture, but it is also inspired by the emerging activism of young architects and the radical revisions being proposed by the profession of architecture to take on these challenges.

Architects are inherently conveners. They synthesize among different fields and coordinate among different professionals and represent them in front of the client. They are the custodians of the contract. But beyond that, architects suggest possible social organizations through the way they arrange sequester, and connect spaces. They also shape the monuments, the memories, and the expressions of societies and groups, creating a common language that enables the public to debate and communicate its experiences and cultures.

Architects today are rethinking their tools to address the complex problems at hand. They are also enlarging their table to include other professionals and citizens. To effectively take on the responsibilities being presented to them, architects are extending one of their most important roles, as generous synthesizers of different forms of expertise and expression.

But more than ever, architects are called upon to propose alternatives. As citizens, we mobilize our synthetic skills to bring people together to solve complex problems. As artists, we defy the inaction that comes from uncertainty to ask “What if?” And as builders, we draw from our bottomless well of optimism to do what we do best. The confluence of roles in these nebulous times can only make our agency stronger and, we hope, our buildings more beautiful.

Five Scales

The main exhibition of the Biennale Architettura 2021 comprises works by 112 participants coming from forty-six countries with increased representation from Africa, Latin America, and Asia and with comparable representation of men and women.

This Exhibition also includes a series of research *stations* that complement the projects on display with in-depth analysis of related topics. These stations were developed by researchers from universities around the world. They include the Architectural Association, the American University of Beirut, The Bartlett, Columbia University, Cooper Union, ETH Zurich, Ethiopian Institute of Architecture, Building Construction and City Development (EiABC), ETSAM – Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, Harvard University, Hong Kong University, Iuav University of Venice, KIT Karlsruhe, KU Leuven, Rice University, and the Venice Lab, a consortium of research groups at MIT.

The Biennale Architettura 2021 is organized into five scales: three are exhibited in the Arsenale and two in the Central Pavilion. Projects range from the analytic to the conceptual, the experimental, the tested and proven, to the widely deployed. Each of these is in turn addressed through a series of themes and each one is housed in individual rooms of the Biennale buildings and grounds.

The five scales are *Among Diverse Beings*, *As New Households*, *As Emerging Communities*, *Across Borders*, *As One Planet*.

Among Diverse Beings (Arsenale)

- Designing for New Bodies: addressing changes in the perception and conception of the human body;
- Living with Other Beings: foregrounding empathetic behavior and engagement with other beings.

As New Households (Arsenale)

- Catering to New Demographics: responding to changing compositions and densities of households;
- Inhabiting New Tectonics: exploring technologies that enable innovative housing construction;
- Living Apart Together: expanding the possibilities of the apartment building as a collective housing typology.

As Emerging Communities (Arsenale)

- Appealing to Civicness: investigating novel ways for communities to organize themselves spatially;
- Reequipping Society: proposing new forms of social equipment (parks, schools, hospitals, and so on);
- Coming Together in Venice: imagining the future of Venice in light of the challenges of sea-level rise, the pandemic, and changing demographics;
- Co-Habitats: Showing how we do live together in Addis Ababa, the Azraq Refugee Camp, Beirut, Hong Kong, the India-Pakistan corridors, a Lagos squatter settlement compared to one in Cairo and another in Guadalajara, New York, Pristina, Rio de Janeiro, and the Sao Paulo area.

Across Borders (Giardini, Central Pavilion)

- Transcending the Urban-rural Divide: mitigating the growing social and economic differences between global cities and the global hinterland;
- Linking the Levant: negotiating sharp political divisions in the Levant region;
- Seeking Refuge: examining the spatial challenges of forced displacement;
- Resourcing Resources: proposing better distribution of our common resources;
- Protecting Global Commons: bringing the architectural imaginary to engage with endangered treasures such as the Poles, the Amazon, the Oceans, the Indo-Pacific Region, and the Air.

As One Planet (Giardini, Central Pavilion)

- Making Worlds: anticipating and calibrating the future of the planet;
- *Designing the Assembly of the Future*: proposing a speculative more-than-human future for the United Nations;
- Changing Designs for Climate Change: presenting solutions in the face of the global degradation of the environment;
- Networking Space: connecting between Earth and outer space.

In addition to the exhibitions housed inside the Central Pavilion and the Arsenale, the grounds of the Central Pavilion's Giardini and the Arsenale feature several installations that relate to one of the five scales. In addition, the Park of Forte Marghera on the mainland also features five related installations: *How Will We Play Together?*

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