

Despite the various exhibitions now devoted to architecture, the Venice Biennale is still regarded as the “main event” and is therefore always highly anticipated and widely attended. What continues to make Venice so important is that it pitches at a very high level, curated as it is by thinkers, writers or architects of international significance. The result is a combination of exhibitions, lectures and side events which takes the pulse of the profession every two years and, at best, acts as a phase-changing moment in terms of new thinking and practice in the architectural field. The 2010 Biennale is one such occasion, with universally positive reviews claiming it is the “most enjoyable Biennale ever”, complementing Sejima’s collection of deeply experiential, thought provoking exhibitions which perfectly capture the zeitgeist of the years since the 2007 financial crisis.

Given the importance of the Biennale, the opportunity for individual countries to participate is a precious one. The focus on the event also means that the individual pavilions are an important platform for architectural communities in each country to present critical positions and current thinking. It would not be going too far to say that these pavilions are a measure of the health of each country’s architectural culture and output, making it imperative that exhibitions are of critical relevance and of the highest standard.

Although I am an Australian architect, the last 7 years of serious engagement with Danish architecture (culminating in my current role as Guest Professor at Arkitektskolen i Aarhus) means that I always look forward with interest (and hopefully pride) to the Danish pavilion, which always features the work of colleagues and friends. Unfortunately, this year’s offering, “Q&A: Urban Questions _ Copenhagen Answers”, is disappointing. As with the 2008 Danish exhibition, titled “Ecotopedia: Walk the Talk”, the organisers and curators do not seem to have understood the responsibility of and potential for exhibitors at this event.

For the second Biennale running, the Danish pavilion has the smell and feel of a trade show. Further, messages are delivered in a smug, self-satisfied and parochial manner not befitting of a significant and mature architecture culture. The lack of a serious critical framework also fractures the exhibition into three unrelated and competing approaches, which undermines the better aspects of the show. Finally, in the context of the intellectual firepower present at the Biennale, it is risky for a small hegemonic Nordic city to claim it can show the rest of the world how to solve its problems.

In an exhibition of this significance, the use of the pavilion as a sort of advertorial opportunity - avoiding the possibility to pose questions or engage in self critique - is unfortunately shallow. In this post-crisis environment, we can enjoy the fact that the time of “one-line” architecture and “buildings on a catwalk” is over. Thus, what might have worked for Denmark in 2002 and 2004 now looks oddly out of place when the Golden Lion is awarded to a self-critical exhibition of fisherman’s huts from Bahrain.

The good news is that I do not believe that the Danish pavilion actually reflects the current state of Danish architecture and thinking, if discussions in and around the opening of the pavilion are any guide. I spoke to a number of the exhibitors, who privately agreed with the view I have outlined here and wished for a more critical approach where the Biennale was not seen as a marketing opportunity. Some of their views are incorporated into this critique. However, this private nature of

the critique is part of the problem. For, in the context of Danish architecture culture, it appears that only an outsider such as myself can make these comments, for fear of professional retribution, being left off competition lists or failing to be invited to the next symposium.

Yet it is this very fear of an open critique that must be overcome if Danish architecture culture is going to regenerate and offer something to the world other than self-promotion. Why not look at the problems of multiculturalism and the real inequality of experiences for citizens across Copenhagen? Or how about an exhibition on the attempts to address the Danish obsession with the “building-as-object”, which has spawned a raft of interesting consultancies, such as Hausenberg, to deal with those marginalised by this approach.

I remain a passionate satellite member of the Danish architectural community and a great enthusiast for the Danish profession. But to show the depth and complexity of this group on the world stage a level of vulnerability, introspection and self-critique is needed. An approach founded in advertising and promotion has no place for analysis or critique. If this latter view persists, my comments here will be cast off as the irrelevant view of an outsider. And the next Biennale will be more of the same.