

**Ice Cream on Sunday**  
12th International Venice Architecture Biennale  
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At the 12th International Venice Architecture Biennale, it's Sunday, and noticeably quieter at the venues than the three preview days before. There's a feeling of nostalgia and emptiness in the atmosphere that only comes when an enormous, exciting presence suddenly disappears. As I walk calmly toward the entrance of the Arsenale, I see Ryue Nishizawa walking at an equally calm pace towards me, ice-cream cone in hand, his footsteps mimicking those of an absent-minded child consumed by his imagination. I stop him to introduce myself, compelled. Competition for his attention has been high and scant conversations unrewarding, so it's a good opportunity. I thank him for a wonderful few days, that I've enjoyed hearing him speak about his projects, and ask him his own feelings. "It has been a very busy time, and we are very tired," he responds, laughing. "Sejima san is sleeping in the hotel, but I prefer to walk."

Within three hours of landing in Venice, I had my arm around someone I've just met, waiting that little bit too long for a photographer's flash. I'm at the Architizer/Pin-up party at Hotel Bauer, where the glamour of the guest-list is matched by the amount of gold shining in the interior. The conversation can move at only one pace, and needs to be interrupted by another introduction no less than every three minutes to sustain itself. When it's not, and the high-pitched gesturing and excitement is intruded on by an attempt, mostly on my part, to talk about something like architecture, the reaction is cold and awkward. This party is not unfamiliar – but it's DJs, concert green rooms and fashion after-parties that I'm reminded of, not architecture. I don't know it yet, but this atmosphere is to mirror much of my time in Venice; meeting and greeting interrupted by short bursts of taking in some content. A fashionable lifestyle has infected architecture and the outcome is painfully boring.

The first day of the preview is full of genuine excitement. Many exhibits, all the product of months of hard work, are being unveiled. I'm eager to see them, and our hosts even more excited to reveal them. The pace is fast, the plan is to scan today, and revisit some over the next two days.

My plan changes quickly. There are some events on that are too good to miss: a discussion of Wim Wenders' film of the Rolex Learning Centre in Lausanne with architects SANAA, and a presentation of visions for Hong Kong's new cultural precinct in the West Kowloon District by Norman Foster, Rocco Yim, and Rem Koolhaas. Unaware of the projects, I am interested in seeing these people present their work, but admit that I'm interested because they're all really famous architects – 'starchitects', we call them.

The Wim Wenders/SANAA discussion presents the two casts in this play: the party-goers and the ice-cream eaters. Wim Wenders, dressed immaculately, tells us how buildings speak. Elusive but colourful, his explanation is a performance in itself, yet by the end has taken us on a short but enthralling journey through the process of his film, *If Buildings Could Talk*. Conversely, SANAA (Ryue Nishizawa and Kazuyo Sejima) speak plainly. They are short and to the point, clearly stating their objectives and responses. It is not that their work is simple, but that its complexity is resolved to such a degree that they need only give us the tips of icebergs, and the depth of their work grows in our minds beneath these. We imagine a magical building, but one that has grown from very real observations and strategies. In short, the enormous amount of work in the building is implicit, but the final result stands in mesmerising resolution.



The presentation of new visions for the Hong Kong cultural district in Kowloon gives us another important scene in this play. A select group of guests and those involved in the project are lunching before the presentation, which has run late. Outside, a large gathering pushes to get past the tiny Venetian doorway while the occasional few from inside slip out under the mob's gaze. The intersection creates a special kind of chaos, found only where the elevated and the ordinary collide. Those outside seek stridently to connect with familiar faces inside so that they might be pulled in past the figurative gate of the door list. Again, the scene would be familiar were we outside the coolest of nightclubs, but bizarrely it's even more desperate given the lack of scantily clad women and red velvet ropes.

The gateway turns to open, and dozens of people start to crowd in to the tiny space. Dessert is still being served and we celebrate our entrance with a huge slice of coffee meringue and a glass of sparkling. It's wonderful that the crowd has caught the tail end of the lunch: the mixing of the two events somehow dissolves their superficiality.

Soon the tables are packed away and seats arranged for the presentation. After a short introduction by a member of the Hong Kong government, the speakers are introduced; Norman Foster, followed by Rocco Yim and Rem Koolhaas. As Foster begins to speak, the most incredible thing happens: dozens of people (not press) hold cameras high, photographing him. Quickly, I get my camera out to snap the crowd. I can understand their impetus – it's rare to hear Norman Foster present his work – but I'm shocked by their reaction. Is this really the kind of thing you photograph? Listen! It doesn't matter what he looks like! I feel as though in its perversity, it tells us something profound: the architect is the object, and they have solicited fame as their shadow. Absurd, obsessed fame.



That evening, a friend and I plan to go to the Australian cocktail party at the Penny Guggenheim. We haven't been invited, but this barely registers in our minds. We plan to dance our way through the entrance spouting a list of half-names and convoluted stories; that's the way these things work, right? The response to our smoke-screen is, by comparison, drab and unimaginative. "It's 90 Euro a ticket," she says plainly. We try a few more dance-moves but the finality of her speech is jarring, and we dedicate our energy to leaving with dignity.

We settle on one of Venice's many bridges with pizza and beer, swapping stories of the day. The mood marks a departure from the stage and a return to reality, but it hits with crushing force and I realise an uncomfortable truth; I have become the party-goer! The storm of socialising has drawn me into the periphery of fans and fame. Distant from myself, I want more parties, spectacle and revelling. Insecurity blankets me tonight, and overwhelms my more honest intentions. I know I came here for the architecture, but the milieu of fame and fans is infectious. It's taken me down and plonked me with the hungry mob. It's an insatiable appetite, where only more people, higher intonation and further ridiculous antics will feed it, but nothing will cure it. I am lost in it. It takes me the evening to calm down, remind myself of who I am and why I came here, and decide to be alone tomorrow, see if I can recover the architect in me.

For my resolution, the second day is much more rewarding. Lost in thought rather than fast-paced conversation, time passes a little more slowly. Ideas build and dissemble in my mind as each exhibit pulls in its own direction. As they pass my eyes, my mind is pleasantly engulfed, my pen scrawling wild ideas prompted by the wealth of information displayed. Thankfully, a critical viewpoint returns.

That evening we head to the Penny Guggenheim again for a cocktail party. The Americans are hosting, and the shiny invitation lets us pass through the gates with ease. We soon find ourselves in a brutal conversation with a New York publisher, sparkling rosé in one hand, puff pastry in the other. I notice how quickly the information is exchanged while his eyes constantly check for potential beyond us. Who are you, what do you do, and what can I get from you: speed dating for the professional. With a zero score, and equal disinterest from our side, we gracefully part, nothing won, nothing lost. Cold business for a balmy night. Across the courtyard, the same characters multiply. There are those lost, those who hunt and those who wait for offerings, but all eyes are aloft seeking something better. Party-hard networking is nothing new, but when did it become masked in a fashionable cloak? From the PA, rapper Dr. Dre reminds us, "Things just ain't the same for gansters." Which Californian architect's iPod is this music coming from?

In the midst of the cool hunting ground, in the Pollock gallery, I find a gem. From appearances, they're mother and daughter, and I introduce myself to get their story. The whole family is here, living for a month in Venice to set up father Philip Beesley's exhibit in the Canadian Pavilion. All hands are on deck, son, daughter, mum and dad. I'm awed by their humility: I've found the only people to talk to with a story to tell that hides no agenda, whose presence seeks no attention. A family bond stands out like an oasis at this event. I agree to meet them the next day, eager to hear more of their working holiday and hoping to find ties to a less fame-obsessed culture.

As we are horded out of the event, a prominent Australian architect grabs my arm to let me know a surprising piece of information. "You know about this Dutch thing?" he says. "At the entrance to the Giardini, go past the café, there's a low fence. Jump over it, go towards the Korean pavilion, at the back of the Dutch pavilion, one o'clock!" He vanishes with the same speed as he appeared. I can barely stop laughing to write it down. An illegal architecture party! This I have to see! Is it more fans or has the ingenuity of the profession crafted something genuinely cool?

In the meantime, our newly formed entourage heads to the Italian after-party, which promises the grand floor of a 17th century palace with "Wyborowa Vodka, the true spirit of architecture, dressed by Frank Gehry." Arriving, I am amazed to see every inch of an alleyway packed with a writhing mass of bodies 20 metres long and centred on the doorway we need to get to. Never – not in any circumstance – have I seen a more animalistic crush at the entrance to a party. How has this arrived in architecture? Our party of five tumbles through the chaos, linking hands to keep in tow in a test of physical strength, until it's too late to turn back. Three door-lists later, we are on our way up the stairs to the promised land. Surprisingly empty and sparsely furnished with more promotional material than people, the atmosphere is dead. It's a marketing wasteland. We head to the bar, settle on a lounge overlooking the Grand Canal and enjoy a good laugh. Once the party fills up, the atmosphere wanes even further. This party could be anywhere, for anything. From one conversation, I remember, "You drink as much as you can and try and sound intelligent." We decide to leave. Architecture obviously has enough of a lifestyle to host branded events, and scarily, they succeed. The people are drunk and the feeling in the room is chaotic, none of the things I like architecture for.



Leaving is just as difficult, with hundreds of people pressed tightly against glass doors and their accompanying security guards. We eventually get out, and head towards Giardini, hoping to find a smaller crowd in a more interesting space. The walk is thrilling, finding our way through Venice, accompanied by the insights of our local historian and stories of Biennales past from our German artist. However, news from ahead cuts our journey short: there are police lining the entrance to Giardini and architects have been warned away. Is the myth better left intact?

At the Canadian Pavilion, Beesley's work astounds me with its thousands of intricate parts, hung carefully in formations, breathing and twitching, that take us to a different universe where form, sustainability and feedback suggest an entirely new way to view the world. What I keep thinking is how a work of this magnitude would only be possible through a team so dedicated they are indeed family. No room for show ponies in this project. I meet with the family behind the pavilion, where a garden setting hosts a conference space, reminiscent of family gatherings in a backyard. Talking with them, the connection between the work and the family is clear. The laser cutter occupies the basement of their house and neighbours wonder at the strange smell of burning plastic. Their story sits in stark contrast to the cocktail party where we met.

The Biennale is famous for raising questions about the future of our cities and the future of our role as architects, but what about the future of architects as people? As a culture within itself? Like aspiring rockstars see their goal in the sky, the culture of 'starchitects' begins to equate being famous with being a good architect. Around it, a lifestyle bursts which has little to do with architecture and everything to do with fans. For me, architecture is cool. It's profound and limitless, and that makes it cool. Can the appeal of architecture exist solely outside this? My time in Venice tells me it can, that it's well beyond beginning.

The Biennale opening, at first glance, attests to a culture that sees success in terms of fame, and the lifestyle that goes with it. It is an all-too-familiar notion that in the fashion industry, the right parties, people and image can propel small-talent designers to success: good work is overlooked by those who shout louder from higher places. While publicity is a valuable part of any industry, including architecture, scenes like those I witnessed might suggest that the shouting is overtaking the genuine content it publicises. Since when is there room to market Vodka brands (thank you Frank Gehry) to architects? If the market research is there, I am not alone in my observations. In the grip of this phenomenon, I almost forgot at times to look at the work beyond the faces in front of it. It took the three full days to battle with fame and its pretensions, push through to the work and connect with something truly extraordinary – the exhibition itself and the people behind such immense bodies of work. Leaving, I take with me a phrase with irony at its core. Do more work.

The real people here aren't pushing to get into parties or clambering for free drinks. They're tired from doing the work, or enjoying their time with those that support and inspire them, or eating ice-cream as they wander away spare moments. Their centre is their work, not the parties and events that surround their success. It seems that architecture now has within it an enormous culture of people, press notwithstanding, that came for the glamour of parties and a glimpse of their stars. As a lifestyle becomes a part of a profession it is important to remember, and equally difficult to distinguish, which is the periphery and which is the core, and to know – which is your reason for being here?

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