

Achille Mbembe, *Brutalism*,
Duke University Press, 2024,
200 pp. Paperback € 23,00
ISBN:9781478025580



How can we rethink production in the face of the worsening social and environmental catastrophe brought by capitalist globalization and the metastatic spread of the colonial will? How might we reimagine humanity, transform our mode of inhabiting the planet, and create a new society grounded in the horizon of a common home? What role, then, do architecture and politics play in this challenge? When critical research in these fields grapples with such questions, it is often confronted with multiple impasses. *The project* (the *telos*-condition that signals the essence of, and profound connection between architecture and politics) seems today to evoke more an unutterable void than a productive engine. *The project* is surrounded by a sense of unease and has become quite a rejected destiny, as if the coin of twenty-century philosophy had only one side. This rejection manifests in several dead ends, most notably political asceticism, attachment to pure negative, and a reliance on metaphors. Achille Mbembe's *Brutalism*, first published in French in 2020 and translated into English in 2024, offers a different story. The poetic style is essential, finally restoring philosophy's power to transform life. Indeed, above

all, what is brutal is the reversal on which the essay is founded. Mbembe responds to each of those dead ends with creative thought-images (formula proposed by the author) arising from Africa – long obscured and dispossessed by colonialism: binding energy, circulation, and anticipatory presence.

Binding energies

Brutalism is grounded in these perpetual and creative forces – rooted in pre-colonial Africa and radiating through the planetary transition (or catastrophe) we are now experiencing. They provide the condition for a metabolic, constructive gesture: creating new objects that both celebrate and support encounters with the other, without assimilation. The author manages the rare feat of surviving the dialectic of Enlightenment in an enlightened way. Fully aware of the mythical anxiety that marked the Enlightenment – as Horkheimer and Adorno argued – Mbembe does not counter this by deserting reason and politics. Rather, he envisions a plastic humanity, capable of building and organizing itself through, despite, and thanks to, the excess of the other. What exceeds reason is not a removed outside, nor a self-sufficient good will, but a productive immanent cause. To stand face to face, yet to desire one another, yet to recognize our mutual need: this potential humanity is not the product of mechanistic automatism, nor of political asceticism. It is rather the result of a re-enchanted production of a new combination of matter and energy. In this “cosmos-making” (p. 48), architecture and politics come together to create infrastructures that guide us through our existential challenges. For each individual to understand themselves, we must exist as *societas*, Common, encounter, and exchange.

Circulation

Precolonial Africa, Mbembe argues, is rooted in circulation. This condition extends far beyond and far deeper than contemporary privilege of the ones moving across the planet. Africa was, he states provocatively, digital before the digital. Nevertheless, faced with the selective circulation of humanity on Earth, there is a growing desire to reclaim a supposed original identity and individuality. According to the author, this troubling attachment to “blood and soil” (p. 53) – the

negative of circulation – stands in opposition to the brutalist project and to the development of a new consciousness and architecture of humanity. Instead of retreating into isolated, allegedly autonomous communities, it is essential to recognize that the Self is never self-generated but always constituted through relationships with the Other. What is needed, therefore, are planetary politics that set history back in motion, rather than visions of organic and “pure” communities. Rather than identity, what has priority to Mbembe is the energy that binds, transforms, and propels identities. Their existence depends on their society, on the effort – only apparently paradoxical – to converge in mutually transformative encounters. Once again, it is through plasticity – or what Marx might have called *metabolism* – that humanity can be redesigned, both architecturally and politically, to liberate circulation.

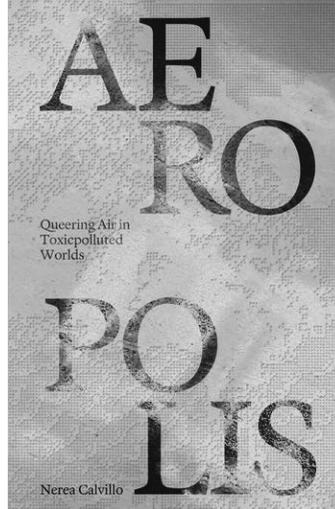
Anticipatory presence

One final thought-image from pre-colonial Africa underpins both the essay and the Brutalism project: anticipatory presence. It makes the author structure the whole reasoning starting from a hypothesis: contemporary global society gestures toward *Planetary Africa*. This echoes some of Lefebvre's most enthusiastic and far-sighted passages. Amid planetary urbanization, he likewise discerned the possibility of a common project and artwork he named “urban society.” To Mbembe, a counterforce to the colonial, destructive, and technocratic order stands latent in the present. Such an animistic stance does not aim to desert reason, nor to suggest mere wordplay or metaphors – which are often invoked in place of the concreteness and feasibility of real-world action. Rather, *Planetary Africa* is a *concrete utopia*, the tangible base for re-anchoring politics in the constructive gesture of a new humanity, here and now. Against combustion, nihilism and technocracy, Brutalism conceives of exodus as re-enchanted production of planetary life and its supporting infrastructures. Nevertheless, at times, it seemed that there is no ambivalence in contemporary technological trends. That they do not embed any anticipatory presence, that currently existing technology is alienation only, pure dominance and obscurity. The brightness of the

entrails that the end of the book celebrates, the potential humanity they are in the grip of, appear as a kind of acquisition after having passed by the ruins. Maybe this process of thinking and narrative is not always the best. The author possesses the strength to withstand the abyss he is confronted with. But what about us? Perhaps we should begin from the end, after having been absorbed only in commenting on capitalist destruction. We might turn to writing about, celebrating, and actively shaping the planetary energetic binding, the bricks and politics of a new common infrastructure capable of realizing Planetary Africa completely. After all, the Latin-derived Italian word for “the West” is *occidente*, which refers to “decline” widely, but also to the setting sun specifically. Could the West find, in Planetary Africa, a horizon where to recognize its own name – not by postponing its etymology but by accepting it, and at last *returning itself* to its non-colonial essence? Perhaps, for us, Brutalism is precisely about exploring this question.

Luca Bertocci
Sapienza Università di Roma

Nerea Calvillo, *Aeropolis. Queering Air in Toxic polluted Worlds*, Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2023, 240 pp. Paperback € 21,00 - ISBN 9781941332788



How to know, visualise, and design with something as elusive as air? Nerea Calvillo addresses these challenges in *Aeropolis: Queering Air in Toxic polluted Worlds*. Combining conceptual work, design, and aesthetic production, she presents us with the plurality of urban air. *Aeropolis* begins with an image that effectively summarises the book's ideas. “Intuitively, urban air is the negative of the city in three dimensions. [...] But the air *is* the city” (p. 15). Although simple, the movement towards the negative of the built environment is a straightforward image to start noticing the non-visible. Starting from this new perspective, Calvillo begins to reflect on the *city as air*. She states that the book aims to de-invisibilize air, not to find a solution for airborne problems, but to make these latter sensible and to “learn to care better for the air that holds us” (p. 7). However, this book also reflects on what it means to build and design with air *physically*. The first two chapters lay the conceptual ground for the second part. However, rather than proposing a new theory, Calvillo contributes some conceptual images helpful in understand-

ing her way of thinking and designing with the air. First, she pluralises air into *airs*: “Air is sound, radiation, wind, pressure, temperature... it is smell, vision, erosion, communication...” (p. 22). She points out that *airs* across the world are not all the same. The *airs* are ephemeral archives of anthropogenic activities of all sorts: *airs* not only carry pollutants but also traces of cocaine or DNA of zoo animals. *Airs* points to the multiplicity of the aerial conditions and, at the same time, calls for specificity. Among *airs*, it is the city's *airs* that matter most to Calvillo. Therefore, she introduces the term *Aeropolis*. As a conceptual and heuristic tool, *Aeropolis* does many things: First, with the help of Science and Technology Studies (STS), Calvillo underlines how in *Aeropolis*, *airs* are natural-socio-technical urban assemblages, meaning that *airs* are not bounded objects but rather a multiplicity of processes. *Airs* are multiple, always becoming and brought into being by overlapping natural-socio-technical systems. Secondly, *Aeropolis* proposes that we think about air's complexity and its *toxic polluted* character by bringing queer-feminist theory and urban political ecology together. Breathing and sensing *toxic polluted* *airs* are always situated in the specificity of the substance, the materiality and histories of bodies. This highlights how toxicity and pollution practices “are uneven in geographical and historical substance-body relations and how this unevenness reinforces inequality and poverty” (p. 91). To better grasp this, she plays with visualising the world of air: she states that *Aeropolis* is inhabited, literally the *polis* of air. Some inhabitants are organic, like pollen and viruses; others are inorganic, like pollutants and toxic particles. Larger entities that transform or exchange air are instead called *metabolisers*. This image helps readers account for the air's composition and visualise it. Finally, *Aeropolis* is also deployed as a tool to pay attention to how to design and build with air. Accordingly, the last four chapters address a series of Calvillo's spatial design projects that focus on what a visualisation, a construction, and an infrastructure of air can be. Chapter *seeing molecules, affective atmographies* is preoccupied with sensing, measuring and portraying

toxicpolluted air. The chapter is based on the project “In the Air”, which challenges ways of visualising data about pollution. Calvillo proposes to call these new displays *atmographies*, moving from knowing airs to sensing them as affect. The project, as opposed to graphs and charts, redescribes pollutants through a topographical, geo-referenced mesh, allowing for real-time navigation and making the process of sensing air pollution data more intuitive and embodied.

Chapter *touching particulate matter, atmospheric infrastructures* contextualises an installation called *Yellow Dust*, centred around infrastructures of air pollution, consisting of a mist canopy illuminated by yellow lights. The challenge again was visualisation: precipitation and air particles are mostly described in graphs, and the actual material properties of these elements are never represented. Calvillo and her collaborators aimed to make air visible and sensible, to determine if this “feeling” would elicit responses and affects (p. 169). Data gathered around pollution was turned into a mist of yellow humidity, tickling the skin of visitors. While it was conceived as a means to address the toxic air, it didn’t aim to find a solution to it. Instead, it sought to explore other forms of engaging and sensing it, “physically, emotionally, culturally and poetically” (p. 168).

The chapter *holding helium and nitrogen, air design*, firstly expands the notion of air design. Gas attacks, wildfires, and toxic smokes are the result of a precise design intent, as the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk reminds us. In this light, questions of accountability arise. Then, the author focuses on the physical act of designing with air, as seen through two architectural installations for the SOS 4.8 art and music festival. She and her team were tasked with designing an indoor exhibition space that would not alter the existing built environment. They then experimented with air design in two ways: they learned to create space with helium harnessed in silver balloons, and they experimented with smoke as a form of ephemeral architecture.

In the conclusions, she proposes that designing with air (air as a construction material) or designing air (air as an object of design) through environmental mediations opens up other

types of affects with material entities. The intimate process of physically working with air reveals that bodies and spaces co-construct each other, and how architecture can engage with more-than-human entities in processes of mutual training and learning. She demonstrates how the agency of air shifted the way she and her team designed, built, and interacted in space and with one another during the process of designing and building installations.

While the book lacks major new theoretical propositions, the concepts and practices converge on one central point: the city’s air is not a single, bounded object; rather, it is a complex, dynamic process. While these are conclusions reached by many scholars on whom Calvillo relies, the interesting step forward is linking such reflections to design practices. The air, conceptualised and put to work as an active subject, can be seen as an integral part of the design process: Calvillo shows how any design cannot forgo the active presence of air. However, rather than an argument, the book works towards a new sensitivity, as Timothy K. Choy states in the postface (p. 276). The reader becomes more attentive to the “thickness” of air, following the research and design examples of Calvillo.

Margherita Tess
Humboldt University of Berlin

“Places Journal”, *Field Notes on Repair*, n. 1-8, December 2024

•
P L A C E S

Public scholarship on architecture,
landscape, and urbanism

“There is a space between us. We could say it has a shape. This shape keeps changing. Between us, a mending project.” (Futurefarmers, #8) These closing words from *Field Notes on Repair* (2024) encapsulate the spirit of the series – a nuanced exploration of repair that progressively transcends its conception as a purely material act, to acknowledge its value as a complex cultural, philosophical, and political project. Deepening a discussion at first introduced in *Repair Manual* (January 2024), this eight-installment collection resists reductive interpretations of repair as merely technical, practical, or aesthetic. Over the last few decades, terms like reuse, recycling, recovery, and repair have invaded the architectural debate, wherein, too often, they have been interpreted mainly as superficial material practices – mostly to construct ambitious rhetorics or perpetuating aesthetic researches – rarely interrogating their deeper meanings and potentials. *Field Notes on Repair* marks a critical shift, moving away from this narrow understanding and instead, positioning repair as a philosophical, pedagogical, and cultural act pushing further the conviction that: “such practices are vitally important to our cultures and economies, our ecosystems and ecologies” (*Field Notes on Repair*, Introduction, Editorial Board). This re-positioning, this shift, is achieved by observing the “space between” – between objects, between structures, between people. This “between” becomes both a method and an object of inquiry: a contested terrain through and across which contributors explore the potential of repair as a deeply situated and responsive act. By exploring

in-between conditions, the collected essays move beyond pre-conceptualized assumptions, avoiding mainstream strategies, and digging into the specificities of each situation, of each detected fragment of realities to repair. This approach converts the practice of repair from a static act of restoration into a dynamic field of experimentation – an opportunity, as well as a responsibility, to challenge and reconfigure dominant narratives, to critically mend projects in-between established hierarchies. The relevance of this operation emerges by observing the very historical moment within which this narrative interdisciplinary survey has been nourished and developed: stemming not only from the contemporary mounting planetary crises – ecological, political, economic, and humanitarian – but, importantly, within the turbulent months leading to the 2024 U.S. presidential election: indeed all issues have been released together in November 2024. This critical condition not only permeates the content but also informs the structure of the publication itself: a fast paced and resonant succession of contributions that feel like a collective reflection-in-process. In fact, each issue brings together the contributions of a dozen authors, who combine a selection of images with a short positioning statement: designers, scholars, artists, planners, activists, engage in an interwoven dialogue, where their voices quote, overlap, deepen, critic, and review constantly each other, speech after speech, within an operation that radically confronts, dismantles, and deconstructs any pro-constituted conception of repair, making space for new visions. In this sense, reading through the various installments of this series means encountering a heterogeneous yet shared system of reasonings striving to operate a radical reestablishment of the very meaning of repairing practices in our contemporary multi-damaged world. It constructs and collects a stimulating counter-definition of the practice of repair, in an operation of “repairing repair” which emerges from questioning its very functioning, thus shifting the focus from the *what* to repair to specifically investigating the *why*, *how* and *for whom*. Interrogating the *why* implies refusing the conception of repair as a passive acceptance of a forced reestablishment of continuity with the past,

and to pursue, instead, the critical acknowledgment of the histories of extraction, colonialism, racial capitalism, environmental degradation, and epistemic violence that these pasts embody. Interrogating the *why* means to problematize the very agency of this practice, outlining simultaneously –as numerous authors such as Rosten Woo, Huda Toyob, Brandi T. Summer, Nicholas Anthony Brown, Simon Sadler, Isabelle Doucet, Curry J. Hackett, Karla Cavarra Britton, Anna Livia Brand, Tania Gutierrez– a sort of warning: repair needs to be observed as a suspected word, even as a dangerous one. Indeed, very often, for many, the past was always broken and, thus, a simplified and superficial interpretation would lead to a perpetuation of injustice conditions. Echoing these positions, Samia Henni, Ozayr Saloojee, and Curry Hackett, to name a few, firmly reject the idea that repair can be simply restorative, instead, arguing that it should serve as a vehicle for political imagination – capable of deconstructing dominant narratives and opening spaces for new geographies, new narrations, and new futures. Repair cannot mean a return point but rather a departing one to build, or at least imagine, something entirely other. During the 2024 election season in the US, the political debate has been saturated with authoritarian rhetoric promises of restoration, calling for “restoring unity” and “returning to normalcy” – masking deep structural violence. In contrast with this climate, *Field Notes on Repair* marks a decisive rupture with these ideas, demanding unsettling and reorientation, aiming to embody not a reassuring practice rather a civic and moral battleground. Here emerges another critical stance: repair is not neutral, it must be rescued from its mobilization in service of nostalgia, preservation, or redevelopment. In this sense, Saloojee exhortation to “refuse those forms of repair and resist that form of care” (Saloojee, #3) embodies a declaration of rejection of complicity, a statement of dissent, echoed along the publication, by a sequence of strong re-definitions of repair: removal, unfollow, a practice in the contradictions between past, present, and future, exploration of messiness, negation, a move toward a sense of belonging, affirmative refusal, nonsolutional way. These definitions, emerging from

problematizing the *why* to repair, delineate an amplified field of action for this practice, an experimental ground that the series further investigates through dismantling the other two interrelated questions: *how* and *to whom*. The collection argues that repair must go beyond surface-level acts of fixing, refusing aesthetic or romanticized notions of restoration, operating, instead, a deeper epistemic reordering through a reevaluation of knowledge, care, value, and temporality. This means to move beyond the mere understanding of what is broken, to record the experiences of those who lived through these breakings. Repair, then, becomes a practice of re-pairing – connecting fragments, histories, and lived experiences – capable not merely of recovering superficial healings, but to displace the recovery process of a radical, long-term, and community-led restoration. In this sense, repair does not aim to operate a clean fix. Still, it becomes a practice of living with the broken, marginalized, exhausted, and even messy: an ethical yet practical method of resistance. As such, repair is always contextual and contingent, requiring an acute sensitivity to the specificities of place, time, and struggle. This attentiveness is embodied in the collection’s wide-ranging archive of practices, which not only moves across multiple scales – from the planetary to that of the capillary in-between urban spaces – but also explores a multitude of temporal, geographical, social, and cultural contexts. In this manner, the observation flows from the restoration of tsunami-damaged ceramics in Japan to Indigenous-led dam removals in the U.S., from grassroots urban interventions in Mexico City to climate-responsive parks in underserved neighborhoods of Toronto, from the Freedom Colonies Atlas in Texas to the Black Moms movement in California, from the critic toward the superficial infrastructure reforms in New York to the rise of visionary projects like Renewable Rikers, from the Mumbai’s informal repair economies (where improvisation, kinship, and resilience form an alternative infrastructure of care) to the narration of the Otomí community’s fight for land and water rights in Mexico City. This succession of cases, which echoes the complex geographies of the authors of this series, gives body to a heterogeneous atlas which, although

collecting fragmented and apparently non-connected realities – made of *hows* and *whoms* – results as a unique and critical body within which these cases are entangled and in dialogue with one another. It emerges, thus, the aspiration toward a non-reformist repair, towards practices that resist reproducing the *status quo*, overpassing sedimented limits connected with labor – often invisible, feminized, and undervalued – with realities and culture considered minor, with dismissed contexts interpreted as resources instead of domestic spaces, to open paths for reimagining the world. Repair assumes then the power of rendering visible, of giving voice to the other, of re-connecting with our pairs, being them humans, non-humans, abandoned fields, in-between spaces, flea markets, or territorial spaces. In this sense, Jovan Scott Lewis proposes a subtle yet profound shift in language: from “repair” as a verb to “repair to” as a direction: “to repair to implies direction, intimates rest, and speaks to momentum, ultimately offering a notion of reparation that is more purposeful and place-based than “repair” alone [...] it calls for new analyses, perspectives, and principles, fostering spatial and political configurations” (Lewis, #8), it reframes repair as a social and spatial act of alignment rather than mere intervention, as a process rather than a solution. In this sense, *Field Notes* refuses any closure, instead suggesting to embrace daily acts of maintenance, mutual aid, and care, as in the words of Mariame Kaba to cultivate “hope as a discipline,” (Kaba, #7) proposing repair as a method of attentiveness, resistance, and imagination. In an era of political retrenchment and environmental collapse, these voices align with a broader push toward democratizing design – making it more accessible, inclusive, and accountable – achievable not through promising wholeness, but rather through enduring presence, through observing the and co-living with that space between us, whose shape is constantly changing, and learning to mending our lives to coexist with the brokenness.

Mariacristina D'Oria
Università di Trieste

Denise Zmekhol, *Skin of Glass*, United States / Brasil, 79' – 2023



Defined as a “totemic element,” “beautiful, impressive,” and characterized by a “crystal clear purity like a perfect glass prism, very transparent,” the 25-story building that Roger Zmekhol designed in São Paulo in 1968 is today “the great mirror of contemporary Brazil in which everyone must look at themselves.” This powerful and provocative phrase serves as the cornerstone for the documentary *Skin of Glass*, a 2023 work directed by Denise Zmekhol. The film moves between an intimate exploration and a social and cinematic analysis, placing social and economic inequality at the center of the narrative, filtered through the lens of architecture.

The entire work takes the form of an impossible letter, a voiceless dialogue between a daughter and a father who is no longer there. Once, he was a talented architect whose dream was to redesign the profile of a rapidly expanding city. That world, permeated with ideals of modernity and progress, has dissolved. It is from this space suspended between past and present that Denise Zmekhol's journey begins, an immersion into the memory of her family and her father, and, in parallel, a sharp look at contemporary Brazil. The journey concludes in São Paulo, the final destination where the filmmaker confronts her own past, an architectural legacy that has left

an indelible mark. This building, a tangible heritage, has remained as a silent testimony in the city, but instead of representing only success and innovation, it now reveals all the fragilities and contradictions of today's Brazil. The catalyst that initiates the documentary is at once personal and emblematic: Denise Zmekhol discovers that the famous modernist skyscraper designed by her father, once a symbol of the avant-garde in the heart of São Paulo, has been occupied by hundreds of homeless families. This starting point, which merges the intimate sphere with a mundane problem of global scale, becomes the catalyst for an in-depth investigation into the profound contradictions that permeate Brazilian society. The building, conceived as an icon of progress and modernist ideals, has transformed into a “vertical favela,” dramatically reflecting the failure of those very ideals in the face of rampant and systemic inequality. This skyscraper, once an emblem of a bright future, has been transformed into a raw mirror of social injustices.

The film, while starting from a deeply personal premise, moves away from a merely anecdotal approach to embrace a broader and more critical perspective. During her research, Zmekhol gathers and intertwines the testimonies of a multitude of figures who gravitate around the building. The voices of the residents emerge, who, despite living in precarious conditions, maintain extraordinary dignity and resilience. To these are added those of the occupation leaders, who powerfully articulate the reasons for their struggle for the right to housing and human dignity, and of public officials, who often see the building only as a danger to safety and a symbol of illegality. The documentary also includes contributions from academics and architectural historians who discuss its artistic and historical value, placing it within a broader context of urban development and architectural ideals. This plurality of viewpoints offers a complex and multifaceted representation of the situation, highlighting how an architectural work is never a static entity, but a dynamic object, a living entity that embodies and reflects the social and economic tensions of a nation.

In *Skin of Glass*, architecture is no longer a mere backdrop, but an active narrative element. The skyscraper is

not simply a structure of concrete and glass, but a palimpsest on which are inscribed the stories, hopes, and frustrations of those who inhabit it. The documentary invites us to consider architecture in its social function and its ability to act as a critical mirror of the society that produced it. The glass facade, which was originally meant to symbolize transparency and modernity, becomes a fragile and reflective surface, behind which a reality of extreme poverty and a daily struggle for survival is hidden. The building itself transforms into a character, a silent witness to a story that goes far beyond its aesthetics.

The main narrative voice, that of the filmmaker herself, clarifies the author's intent to confront, through the film, a global crisis of which the building is both a victim and a symbol. In a context where squatting is a phenomenon affecting one-sixth of the world's population and where "cities of the future" often turn out to be the inevitable result of policies of inequity, the film's perspective is projected onto a universal dimension. The father's architectural legacy, which at first was a personal search, transforms into an opportunity to reflect on the great questions of our time, such as social exclusion, housing shortages, and the often abyssal gap between urban ideals and their concrete realization. The relevance and impact of the film have been recognized internationally. The film was presented at major film festivals starting in 2023, including the São Paulo International Film Festival, the Mill Valley Film Festival, and the BARQ (International Architecture Film Festival in Barcelona). A significant recognition came at the Milano Design Film Festival, where it won the Architecture Film Award (AFA) in 2024. This positive reception demonstrates that its message, while specific to the Brazilian context, strikes universal chords and invites critical and urgent reflection on the relationship between space, power, and social justice. The film succeeds in this endeavor without ever sacrificing its subjective and uniquely human character, offering a profound and moving look at how a single building can encapsulate the history and contradictions of an entire nation.

Alessandra Lancellotti
Ricerca indipendente

Søren Pihlmann (pihlmann architects), *Build of Site*, in the Danish Pavilion, Official Danish contribution to the 19th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, La Biennale di Venezia 2025. Location: Giardini, Venice.



The Danish Pavilion is located right by the entrance of the biennale in the *Giardini Pubblici*, a green garden once open to the public, now an entry-by-ticket area, home to the majority of the national pavilions participating in the Art and Architecture Biennales. As an architecture fan, the pavilions in the garden are in themselves worth a visit, even without exhibitions. They tell stories of national identities, style and geopolitical (in) balance expressed through architecture – and together they make up a colorful and slightly strange cacophony of architectural languages. For this year's biennale, Danish architect Søren Pihlmann has been appointed as curator of the Danish Pavilion. The starting point of his project is the building itself. The hybrid pavilion consists of a classicist hall designed by architect Carl Brummer in 1932, and a smaller, modernist hall added by architect Peter Koch in 1960. The two main spaces are linked together by a central hallway and a series of secondary spaces, often used for dissemination and information activities. It's not an easy life for a building, being an exhibition pavilion in Venice. Shifting exhibitions every year, wear and tear by more than 100.000 visitors passing through each Biennale, seasonal floodings and general climate change called for a general renovation of the pavilion. That is the starting point of Pihlmann's project. Pihlmann's architectural approach is to transform existing buildings without

adding anything to site and without removing anything from site – and he is using the biennale and the needed renovation of the Danish Pavilion to demonstrate this approach; to *Build of Site*. The concept is a strong strategy for sustainable construction in Denmark, where excess resource use, production and consumption has led to an annual Earth Overshoot Day in March meaning that Denmark spends four times the resources allocated in the planet's annual biocapacity budget. In Denmark, the construction industry is responsible for the generation of 12 million tons of waste, corresponding to 58% of total waste generation and for 30% of all carbon emissions, as a recent publication has discussed¹.

Pihlmann has led an extensive transformation process to adapt the pavilion to meet future needs, by reusing what is already there. Huge chunks of cut up concrete floor is transformed into typical exhibition elements such as tables and podiums, while other elements like the original limestone tiles and wooden window frames have been carefully dismantled, studied and assessed to determine their future use. Some will be reinstalled, others will be crushed and casted into the new flooring. In portfolios, the visitors can study drawings of the original pavilion, the renovation process and details of what it will look like, when the renovation is completed in 2026. In that sense *Build of Site* tackles the eternal dilemma of architecture exhibitions head on. How can one exhibit architecture – an artform that is at its core to be experienced, in full scale, on site, in context, in use? The pavilion is a paused process, put on hold for the six months duration of the biennale, meaning that the pavilion has a *real* purpose, it is not merely a representation of architecture, it is architecture.

Stepping into the Koch Hall of the pavilion has a dramatic, almost aggressive feel – its floors are gone and bares open a crater, in which the visitors can find footing while watching a short film about the approach narrated by Pihlmann himself. The spatial experience is strong, physical, but slightly compromised by the narrative film, complete with the logo of the producer in its corner. It breaks the barrier between experience and representation, and reminds the visitor that it is in fact an exhibition.

The Brummer Hall is calmer, more classic, it showcases the materials, experiments and drawings on tables made of the broken-up flooring from the pavilion – neatly organized in piles, stacks and containers in such an aesthetically effortless way as only an architect could do it.

The pavilion's aestheticization of the process, the broken up, the worn, the unfinished, the rough without a doubt makes a healthy addition to the aesthetics palette that clients and users in Denmark (and in similar contexts) normally chose from when constructing. Talking to peers from other, less economically privileged, parts of the world, the pavilion also has connotations of an aesthetic that they've had to live with without a choice. In communities that haven't had the extremely high standards of comfort and security that Denmark has, a more polished finish is understandable and sought after. Just like it's cool to wear ripped jeans – if it's on purpose.

When reading the sympathetic texts and credits it's evident that Pihlmann's way of working is extremely collaborative. It celebrates and relies on the skills of architecture and art historians, students, craftsmen, researchers, engineers, artists and technicians, it is through this interdisciplinary work that innovation emerges. It might be through interdisciplinary collaboration that all good architecture emerges, one could argue. As such, it seems a little old school that Søren Pihlmann himself is being portrayed in the exhibition film and media as a sole protagonist - a starchitect. It risks building on the notion of the architect as an artist, an auteur, with a vision coming from within himself. That type of architecture seems to have played out its part – at least for now.

The radical approach of Pihlmann could mark a shift in Danish architecture. It challenges conventional notions of beauty, value, and quality, as well as what is considered permanent or temporary, strong or fragile. This perspective paves the way for truly sustainable construction. By focusing on locally abundant resources, existing building stock, and regenerative materials, this approach could significantly reduce the negative impacts of the Danish building industry while reshaping perceptions of attractive architecture. If architects can find creative, innovative ways of reusing

what is already built and generate beautiful, people-nature friendly, dynamic environments from it – as Pihlmann demonstrates – it might point to a great sustainable future for the profession ahead.

Contributors to exhibitions:

Royal Danish Academy – Institute of Architecture and Culture; University of Copenhagen, Technical University of Denmark, yasuhironakada STRUCTURE, Gjerulff & Lassen A/S, M+B Studio, Spazio Legno Venezia, Oxara AG, Studio Gisto.

Cover credits:

Hampus Berndtson Build of Site.

Ingeborg Hau

Royal Danish Academy – Institute of Architecture and Technology

1- Kanafani, K., Magnes, J., Lindhard, S. M., & Balouktsi, M. (2023). *Carbon Emissions during the Building Construction Phase: A Comprehensive Case Study of Construction Sites in Denmark*, "Sustainability", vol. 15, n. 14, Article 10992. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151410992>.