



Norman in Paris

Paul Finch visits the Foster exhibition at the Pompidou Centre



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The best monographic architectural exhibition I have ever seen is currently at the Pompidou Centre (until 7 August); see it if you possibly can. Half of the centre's top floor is given over to what one might usually call a retrospective of the work of Norman Foster and the various incarnations of the practice he has led for more than six decades. In this case that would be a misnomer, because although it is a comprehensive review of the architect's most significant work, it underscores the extent to which the work, from yesteryear and today, is dealing with the future. It is as much a 'futurespective' as a historical review.

Arranged in a series of seven sections rather than a chronological sequence, all the old Foster favourites are here, plus some you may not have realised had been attempted. The layout, by Foster himself, avoids a simple enfilade by allowing multiple routes through most of the exhibition via the use of angled walls which respond to the orthogonal nature of the rooms by avoiding them.

In what is a coup de theatre, and in contravention of the Pompidou's usual strictures about enclosing the exhibition space to avoid connection with the (assumed) irrelevant external world, Foster shows a line of models of the practice's key tall buildings in front of a huge window which reveals the city beyond. This is both an exhibition design statement and a commentary on the way in which Foster regards the singular architectural object – always as

part of some wider context which informs the design thinking of that object building or structure.

The nature of his thinking is illustrated via an extensive display of his sketchbooks, which Elena Foster encouraged, revealing the inner workings of a designer mind, a record which includes a student essay and hand drawing dating from 1948 – and a pretty good drawing at that. This sort of display is not something that architects necessarily feel comfortable with; the almost unconscious commitment of pen or pencil to paper without any regard to future publication tells us what might be going through the designer mind. An intrusion into privacy, you might say. But in the context of this exhibition it makes powerful sense, providing a glimpse into the personal conjectures that lie behind the formal results that provide the main courses of the exhibition.

The wider context of contributors to the show comprises a wall listing of 10,000 individuals who have contributed to the work on display. Not a one-man show, then, although it would have been appropriate to have heard/seen rather more about the key contributors, past and present, to the extraordinary variety of architectural achievements. As it is, the individual cited on more than one occasion is Buckminster Fuller, whose influence on Foster is generously acknowledged, and whose legacy, along with that of other pioneers of movement and transport, are celebrated via the >>>



unexpected introduction of structures and vehicles, echoing Foster's recent exhibition on 'Motion' at the Guggenheim Bilbao.

One part of the Pompidou exhibition, which Fuller would no doubt have loved, deals with the question of energy provision. Here, Foster relishes displaying collaborative thinking about the use of 'clean' nuclear batteries, of modest scale, which could power a city block for a year before any recharging would be required. If technology has got us into a climate mess, Foster is

saying, then let's use technology to get us out of it, rather than pretending that it doesn't (or shouldn't) exist.

This is serious stuff, and in tune with Foster's increasing willingness to take part in debate and discussion about the future of the world. He appeared at the Venice Biennale, where in partnership with Holcim, he displayed a prototype for a 'temporary' refugee housing unit, the design predicated on the fact that in reality, temporary means on average 20 years. Form follows

function, dealing with a problem of the here and now which pays no attention to colour, creed or nationality – nor to speculations about the digital world of atomised and scarcely physically connected individuals.

In a discussion at Venice, the question of our relationship to each other in the new world of the internet and (potentially) interplanetary futures was brought an appropriate end by Foster, who simply asked, if disconnection and disassociation were so desirable, 'Why are we all here now?'

Foster is appearing the EcoCity event in London, focussed on the way in which we can combine architecture, technology and nature. He can point to the work of his practice, and could modestly suggest that the participants head to Paris if they want to know what he means.

Kengo in Venice

A monographic exhibition of a very different sort, about Kengo Kuma, is on display in Venice (until 23 November), in the Villa Franchetti next to the Accademia Bridge. Titled 'Onomatopoeia Architecture', it comprises an exquisite series of rooms, featuring a selection of Kuma's work via beautifully arranged models, photography and drawings. The work is arranged on the basis of a series of double words which inform the exhibited designs, for example 'solid/void' or 'fluid/soft'.

In each instance, Kuma provides a scribbled drawing, a designer's indication about how the words translate into a type of design approach. The words/scribble/approach are then illustrated in the work you view, a very Japanese combination of materials and ideas.

In marked contrast to most of the ideas on show at the Biennale, Kuma provides hints and suggestions about what is being felt and experienced, not what is being analysed and formulated. It is not a retrospective in the sense of the Norman Foster

show, and it is certainly not an attempt to predict or design for the future, but it is nevertheless and very powerful demonstration of the relationship between culture, idea, form and proposition.

If you visit the Biennale and, like Patrik Schumacher, get tired of the lack of architecture on display, head for the Kuma show. It is an understated reminder of the power of an architectural attitude.

Bladerunner meets Archigram

This year's Venice Biennale is billed as 'The Laboratory of the Future'. The nearest thing I found that would fit the description was in neither the Arsenale nor the Giardini, the main locations for the event. Instead, it was in Abbazia di San Gregorio, next to Salute on the Grand Canal, where the Neom projects is being exhibited (until 24 September).

Neom is an area in Saudi Arabia identified for the creation of what would amount to a new society for the 21st century. About the size of Belgium, its key features are a high-speed rail/utilities/services route, the 'Line' stretching 170km from the Red Sea through three geologies/topographies.

The diagram for the proposition is simple: instead of creating a variety of cities on the European model, with all the necessary road and traffic infrastructure, you created concentrated super-tall urban environments as a series of clusters along the Line; each would house about 250,000 people, 20 per cent of whom would be Saudis, the rest expatriates interested in an a new form of living, which would exclude roads and cars, instead creating 'five-minute' environments where everything you might want (part from travel) would be available.

The three-dimensional version of Neom-World is what gives the exhibition, with its magnificent models, an extraordinary fascination, simultaneously raising doubts about whether, even if desirable, it could possibly be achieved. That is because of the proposed dimensions. At ground level, the line and its settlements,

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>>> would be 200m wide (ok), but 500m tall (honestly). Three linear blocks of 800m each would line each side of the Line, with various route across, internal environments, parks, gardens, homes, offices etc all sitting within the two 'walls' of development on either side.

The client, essentially the Saudi leader, Mohammed bin Salman, is paying reported fortunes to a host of top architects

and designers to bring this dream to reality – 17 of them attending a glittering opening during the Venice Biennale. Thom Mayne's Morphosis has been instrumental in the overall master-planning, with old pals like Peter Cook and Wolf Prix joining the party, along with Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas and a host of others.

There are more conventional peripheral projects (eg moun-



tain tourist resorts) which form part of a wider programme, including BIG and Zaha Hadid Architects, which presumably could be built quicker. However, work has already started on the Line and detailed designs for the first city settlement are under way. It is a 'zero carbon' project; water comes from desalination plants, with the salt used as an admixture for building blocks and bricks.

Can this be real? Peter Cook made headlines during the Biennale by suggesting that the height in particular was highly questionable. Incidentally, not only would the elevations be 500m high x 240m long, but they would be in a form of mirror glass, cleaning technology and engineering for which area all apparently in hand.

The exhibition is so extraordinarily convincing, complete with library feature huge tomes outlining materials, plants and vegetation, and technology proposals, that it is only when you start thinking about it later that you wonder whether this is one of those experiments which you assume will fail, but in the process will reveal what you may be able to do which you would otherwise never have imagined possible. Shades of Norman Foster's Masdar project in Abu Dhabi.

For example, in the case of Neom clusters, could the proposition work at, say, 150m high rather than 500m?

Is this one of those instances where one might observe: 'Better a fertile error than a sterile accuracy'?

Out of Africa

Pliny the Elder's observation, 'Semper aliquid novi Africam adferre', seems appropriate as a comment on curator Lesley Lokko's Venice Architecture Biennale (until 26 November). Something new has indeed come out of Africa to inform this

year's show, not least the huge increase in black faces on the opening days – it felt just like London. More African and African diaspora contributors (50 per cent plus), more younger contributors, more post-colonial analysis and proposition, in some cases tiresome breast-beating and virtue-signalling, but overall this is lively biennale, and I have no hesitation in recommending anyone, especially those who can bring students, to visit over the next few months. It takes three days to see everything properly.

It is true that the guilt-trip examination of historical themes, sins, crimes and outcomes does not necessarily translate immediately into the sort of delightful and provocative architectural designs which one assumes will be central to any architectural exhibition on this sort of grand scale.

On the other hand, like Ricky Burdett's 2006 show on 'Density', Lokko's propositions are designed to provoke thought about the contexts which create architecture, not necessarily the architecture itself. This is surely no bad thing; the question is then how successful is it? My view is that it would have been better to have focused entirely on Africa and the way the rest of the world has viewed, experienced, conquered, colonised, exploited, retreated from and in some cases re-colonised this impossible-to-define continent.

As it is, the attempt to meld ideas about (inevitably) the past with propositions about the future can only be partially successful because the focus is (also inevitably) so wide. An exhibit about what China is doing to its ethnic Muslims is shocking, though not surprising; it would have had more impact had it dealt with China's cynical exploitation of African natural resources through that familiar 19th century tactic of offering railways and finance



(bribes) in return.

Flores and Prats' delightful assemblage of drawings and models was in a way a welcome reminder that this is an architectural biennale, but it wasn't entirely clear in that case how the laboratory meets Africa. This didn't worry me too much, because in my

experience, the relationship of individual elements within the whole of the Arsenale main show is less important than whether those elements are in themselves interesting, and plenty are – particularly a wide range of work by this year's star-of-the-show David Adjaye, who proves you can simultaneously exhibit an argument and a variety of real architecture. Surely a Biennale curator in the making.

There is also plenty to appeal in the Giardini, and the International Pavilion where there is a higher concentration of architectural projects. As ever, some of the national pavilions have failed utterly to respond to the curator's programme, but others have done well. My tips, for what they are worth: Japan, Switzerland, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Belgium and Netherlands.

A final point: it seemed odd to have so little engineering in evidence at a Biennale intended to be a 'laboratory of the future'. Various national curators, unwilling to produce any architecture at all, might think about science as a prompt, rather than art and sculpture. But then how many curators did anything other than arts degrees? ■

