

ARCHITECTURE... MORE OR LESS

Without doubt the 7th Mostra has made a favourable impression on both the media and the public. The catchword launched by Massimiliano Fuksas – *Città è less aesthetics, more ethics* – is backed up by collages of video footage, satellite photography, photo-montages and websites. It looks as if infotech and installations are more pertinent than theoretical discourse and traditional displays of models or blueprints in dealing with the question of the future of urban forms.

The 7th Biennale of Architecture in Venice, directed by Massimiliano Fuksas, has achieved its prime objective, which is by no means negligible. The reputedly 'elitist' exhibition has been turned into a media event capable of attracting the general public. In previous years the big Italian and international dailies dealt with the exhibition in a few articles of varying interest and some criticism in the cultural pages, to coincide with the opening. The range of ideas expressed was apt to attract the attention of architects, and the smaller group of people who attend international artistic events held on the five continents – biennales and triennales turn up every year now.

But this year it is significant to note that people began talking about the event long before it was due – even before the projects began to arrive.

Is it the charisma of the exhibition's commissioner? The efficiency of the new press service? Maybe. But there is something to say too for the catchy theme – less aesthetics, more ethics – and the keywords: aesthetics, city, ethics. They have infused life into a vast container of diverse and heterogeneous thought, which is capable of generating a great deal of interest whether it is linked to the world of architecture or not. We are all concerned by life in big cities, by migratory flows in relation to urban space, by questions of responsibility in the construction of our cities, by new research into contemporary space and by the improvement of the quality of life.

Keywords for a media machine

Cleverly, Fuksas has contrived to set into operation a huge and efficient media machine, programmed to engage the interest of the people and arouse public opinion, sidestepping in doing so the controversy that surrounded his nomination as commissioner, which infuriated not a few members of the Italian architectural intelligentsia. His recipe seems to be as follows:

- interventions and selections to mark out the itinerary of the Biennale;
- a website (www.biennale.org) to focus the attention of the world on the city of today;
- an unexpected line-up of guest architects plus the participation of designers and critics, many of them young and by no means well known;
- the all-out use of spectacular and instant-appeal

technologies to ensure the transmission of complex information.

As of the outset it was clear that the new commissioner was aiming on one hand to channel as much energy as possible – however contrary – into a single cultural container, including the issues that have been shaking the foundations of the architectural world in the past few years, and on the other to internationalize debate on themes that are shared and discussed by all. These are easy-to-use diffusion concepts, handled with the assurance of an expert in marketing, and at the same time they evoke ideas that deal with the new and different geography that both visitors and travellers are becoming familiar with. We are all confronted with the new nomadic world system (architectural or otherwise) that became a reality during the 90s, where the Internet is a forum for discussion and confrontation, where research and experience move transversally in different cognitive and visual spheres, and where a rapidly evolving economic order generates the same social realities in extremely diverse geographical and cultural contexts, from Portugal to South-East Asia. The people most involved with it belong to generations that have seen the swift metamorphosis of work cultures, the S.M.L.XI generation that has chosen a different and radical approach to new technologies and their use: an urban generation whose genuinely post-modern store of imagery and trans-national values has already informed major architectural experiments undertaken in Holland, the UK, America or Japan.

Architectural performance

The experimental dimension of architecture on show is strongly influenced by contemporary art, its languages and techniques, and is clearly distinct from the conventional paraphernalia of architectural thought. In its form, it is closer to a performance, and is linked in an ambiguous way to the virtual world as a mode of transmission, even to the point of nullifying the perception of the architectural object itself by a powerfully metaphoric reading of the phenomena under analysis. Research of this type calls seriously into question the traditional concept of the discipline of architecture, which a great many figures from the 'official' cultural scene have clamoured for as a safeguard against the dissolution of architecture into the media.

In the early stages most of the criticism and commentaries were directed at the theme of the exhibition as such – less aesthetics, more ethics – and aimed at finding the key to the reading of this year's event, one of the largest and most complex ever mounted. The exhibition has spilled over from the spaces of the Giardini and the Corderio in the old Arsenal, extending the experiments presented in the central pavilion as if to definitively attenuate the role of this building, which people had come to consider as the core of the exhibition.

With regard to the criticism of the theme, I think it is unlikely that Fuksas intended to make reference to

a subtle philosophical discussion whose roots go deep into the theoretical research of the past two centuries. Instead, I believe he was simply trying to propose two words that give us a handle on the situation that is growing up around us. Neither of the terms in the theme introduces deep theoretical thought on the state of architecture. Rather the Biennale presents itself as a live wire relating the diverse currents and contradictions that are influencing contemporary architecture and culture at large. Even the national pavilions have given free (and at times divergent) interpretations of the theme, amplifying the confusion present on the video wall in the Corderio, which is undoubtedly the epicentre of Fuksas's scenography.

Pandora's box?

Visitors looking for solemn declarations, solutions or illuminations will be disappointed. The exhibition (and this is as it should be) does not consecrate any language as a dominant code. On the contrary: it puts forward its own limits, the drama of a culture that is tired out and at the same time faced with profound economic and social changes, not to mention the difficulties of satisfying a clientele already in phase with the new economy and its real time, rather than the canonical 'time' of traditional architecture. Some people might think this is just another play – a smoke – screen set up in lieu of reassuring answers. But I believe that the commissioner has put in a good dose of radical cynicism: people today aren't looking for reassuring answers, nor are they looking for a new way or a new language. It is as if Pandora's box has been thrown open once and for all, a kick-back of the effervescence that has kept us all going since WWII. There is a subtle link between this Biennale and the chronic problems of the now defunct century's modern culture: that of the absolute precariousness of communication between architecture and reality.

The break between the social body and its representative constructions came a long time ago, and we have yet to study it in detail: often, it seems as if the idea of a golden pre-industrial age has been played up far too much to the detriment of modern visual culture, as if to soothe a sense of guilt. Throughout the 20th century, we have seen intermittent attempts on the part of architects and theorists to develop new instruments of mediation with society. *Architektur-reklame*, regionalism, contextualism, post-modernism are among the most recent, and have all sought different terms and languages to re-form the broken link, just as they have all found themselves faced with a difficulty in communicating.

In recent years, these same biennales have tried to amplify their message by obtrusive representations, from the Strada Novissima in 1980 to Scola's large wooden wings designed for the Biennale of 1991 and spread around Venice. A sort of 'theatre of the world' by which, in the form of a metaphor, we are given the ultimate meaning of the state of the art, and which attempts to exorcise the problems and limits



Le Vaporetto français s'avance voilé. Quand esthétique et éthique vont en bateau...

of a culture that is growing more and more marginal with regard to on-going processes.

The preceding biennale of architecture aimed at approaching the problem from a new angle, proposing 'radical' culture as one of the new possible sources or resources that would enable us to face the complexity of the new millennium. But this year's show has exhibited the work of the new 'radicals' almost involuntarily: architects who do not lay claim to having their roots in or a penchant for any avant-garde movement.

The avant-garde's new duds

Here the avant-garde is expressed by the use of new technologies, pushed to the extreme, by a constant spilling over onto the territory of contemporary art, by the feeling of belonging to a new world as yet in the making, and by the consciousness of belonging to the dirty old metropolis, with an accommodating and preening tone pervading it all. Unlike their grandfathers, these 'radicals' have no links at all with social and political protest, and perceive reality via a series of somewhat blurred virtual events. Probably the only exceptions are the Austrian, Swiss and Canadian pavilions, along with the Stalker 'happening', where the dimension of political thought is still perceptible.

The barrage of liquid crystal screens, keyboards, virtual representations and monitors that have

taken over every corner of space, to the point of 'virtually' eliminating traditional paper supports, maquettes, and even architecture as object, no doubt has much to do with a barely disguised sales pitch: the product has to be attractive to sell. But underneath it all we seem to hear a single piercing scream of despair, in the face of uncontrollable reality, world wide.

This incessant and frenetic exploration of new information technologies in present-day architectural research also points to the old communication deficit angst mentioned above, which has come into the new century intact. The rallying call for 'more ethics' might thus be interpreted as a need to consider the economic and social role of the architect today, over and above devices and jargon. All the more so since the acknowledgement of conflicts and contradictions expressed in most of the recent projects on show does not seem to carry an equal force and determination to overcome them. The idea is rather to confront them with processes and methodologies to be re-formulated and renovated.

An international architectural exhibition is bound to present a contradictory round-up of the current scene, encourage debate, and throw light on certain experiments that suggest possible solutions. By setting up a permanent website, this Biennale has opened up to online feedback, and has enabled presentation of works such as that of the A12 Group,

which could have remained on a video support rather than occupy a small space in the central pavilion.

'In everyone on artist', as Beuys said, is a phrase Fukas himself is fond of quoting, almost as if he is trying to promote a new awareness of the architect and his or her role: not as a *deus ex machina* but as a figure living in the real world, capable of thinking about responsibility before taking action. In his writings and public interventions, Rem Koolhaas, who is conspicuously absent this year, is constantly plugging this same combination of the designer of on-going processes, the manager and the creator, as a possible answer to the contemporary condition.

In this case, the powerful feminine poetry of Sejima, the domestic provocation of the Nix group, the literary approach of the French pavilion, the computerized gesticulations of the pupils of Greg Lynn and Hans Rashid, the allusive and professional power of the English pavilion, the fastidious confusion of the central pavilion, the didactic clarity of the Germans and the new and shimmering Atlantis of the Hungarians constitute nothing more than facets of a 'world of worlds', far too big to be contained in a single exhibition. And impossible to resolve, even by the emotional charge of wall of images 280 metres long. But which will have to be faced if we are to go on speaking publicly of architecture in years to come.