

Tidal wave

“If the Constitution serves as an instrument to build our future, architecture is the art of building the world.” On opening the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale, on May 26, its president Paolo Baratta praised the organizational talents of curator Alejandro Aravena, emphasizing that “this exhibition has obviously been fully understood”. Yet the Chilean architect’s “Reporting from the front” was the subject of numerous interpretations in the Giardini and the Arsenale. Although the Dutch pavilion preferred a literal translation of the Biennale theme by examining the actions of the United Nations in areas of conflict, South Korea favoured a very Ricciotti-style vision of the architect’s struggles, by placing emphasis on the urban and normative constraints with which he must come to terms. Germany focused on emergency structures for refugees. Spain (Golden Lion) looked at transformation strategies on a backdrop of the economic crisis. And France chose to tackle “the front” of reality, far from large metropolitan projects, in peri-urban areas where the architect works as best as he can to transform the ordinary.

For those not interested in eclectic events, the Biennale 2016 is a flop. However, for those who are looking for “tools to demand quality from the architect and the client”, according to Aravena, it is a success. Admittedly, in places the participants were unable to refrain from conventional thinking, or the aestheticization of poverty. Occasionally politically correct, Aravena’s Biennale is nevertheless a convincing illustration of a worldwide change of paradigm for architects. What else does it say other than that redemption no longer lies in top-down commissions, but in bottom-up cooperations? We are looking at a tidal wave of what seemed marginal a short while ago. All around, architects work with local resources and materials, with the civil society and tight budgets, in a climatic, economic, social, and sometimes even humanitarian emergency context. To fear that the architect is nothing more than a social mediator would be to forget that he is capable of stepping into the line of fire to defend his field of action.

Meanwhile, in France, the passing of the law on “Freedom to create, architecture and heritage” (“Liberté de création, architecture et patrimoine”) by the Senate, on its second reading, on May 25, leads to believe that the panorama offered by the Biennale is not just a statement of good intentions. Among the measures, “the experimental licence” (“*permis d’expérimenter*”) will offer an opportunity, in the framework of Operations of National Interest (OIN – *Opérations d’intérêt national*), to exempt “from certain rules in force to favour architectural quality”. What rules and what exemptions? This will essentially depend on the efforts of the city planners and prefects concerned, not to mention the determination of architects. One thing is certain, this “acting licence” (“*permis de faire*”), which could be granted when the law is promulgated, will open the way to a new art of building the world.

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