Architecture and design blog

Lisbon Architecture Triennale: strictly no buildings allowed

From sofas that swallow you up to a 3D-printed coral reef, the Triennale explores architecture beyond building. But is it all a bit too irreverent?

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Financial crisis has an interesting effect on the perception of architecture. When the economy falters, buildings are among the first things to be put on hold, and architects among the first put out of work. The conclusion drawn by some is that buildings are simply not enough: to avoid extinction, architecture must claim renewed relevance by being more than a service for the production of walls, roofs and floors.

What often follows this reasoning is a kind of discipline envy, a desire for architects to be artists and philosophers, anthropologists and politicians, performers and cartographers - anything but people engaged in the tedious irrelevance of bricks and mortar.

In Portugal, where graduate unemployment currently stands at 40% and half-finished construction projects dot the landscape, it is easy to see why those trained to design buildings might question if they are better off doing something else.

“This is the generation of young architects who may ask if they should be designing the architecture of networks and systems, of societies or conversations, rather than buildings,” says Beatrice Galilee, the London-based curator of the third Lisbon Architecture Triennale, which opened this week with the aim of positioning architecture as an “expanding field of critical spatial practice.”

Titled Close, Closer, the three month-long event takes the form of three primary exhibitions, housed in some of the Portuguese capital's most evocative palaces and industrial sheds, along with a bulging programme of over a hundred associated events scattered around the city. With these activities - all free to the public - the Triennale seeks to present architecture as “a force of occupation and transition, a speculator and a fantasist,” as something “exciting and intangible, mercurial and indistinct.”

Participatory publishing ... The 'fanzine machine', by Portuguese collective Friendly Fire. Photograph: Luke Hayes/LAT Photograph: Luke Hayes/LAT

Walking through the dreamy installations, the overriding impression is of nebulous fantasy. In The Real and Other Fictions, curated by Mariana Pestana, a 17th-century palace is filled with a number of "fictionalised re-enactments" of the building's former lives. Over the years, the crumbling pile has been home to the Embassy of Spain and the Legation of Germany, served as the headquarters of a radical anarcho-syndicalists' group, as well as been the base for the Portuguese Association of Landscape Architects. Each of these momentous episodes now provides a tenuous trigger for an installation by an invited artist or architect.

In one room, visitors can join a "parliament" of raked scaffolding seating to discuss a Universal Declaration of Urban Rights and add their ideas to a blackboard. Elsewhere you can help produce an architectural publication in a UFO-like "fanzine machine," or sit through an hour-long play without actors - where you are encouraged to read the script to yourself in front of an empty stage set.

Each work, says Pestana, attempts to "engage the audience in intimate encounters with the space that envelops them." It is an ambition interpreted to the letter by Alex Schweder's Slowly Ceiling installation: two sofas appear to welcome unsuspecting visitors, before swallowing them whole, as the room inflates around their bodies like a malevolent Polanski film set.

Sitting comfortably? ... Slowly Ceiling by US artist Alex Schweder engulfs visitors before ejecting them. Photograph: Luke Hayes/LAT Photograph: Luke Hayes/LAT

There are some fun moments like this, but much of the work is entirely baffling, nor is there ample evidence that these exercises in relational aesthetics have much to do with contemporary architectural practice in Lisbon. “Visitors are welcome to dine, read, play, vote, debate, discuss and even fall asleep,” says Pestana, but it is hard to see quite where the appetite for audience participation will come from when the subject at stake remains so vague.

The narrative theme continues the other side of town in a magnificent former power station, now the Electricity Museum cultural centre, where designer Liam Young has corralled a “think tank” of scientists, technologists, illustrators and authors to speculate on a fictional future city.

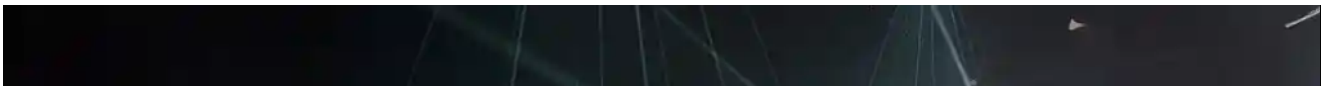
Young's approach - which he teaches in studios at London's Architectural Association and Princeton University - employs the language and aesthetics of science fiction as a means of telling stories about the future in a way he believes more people can relate to.

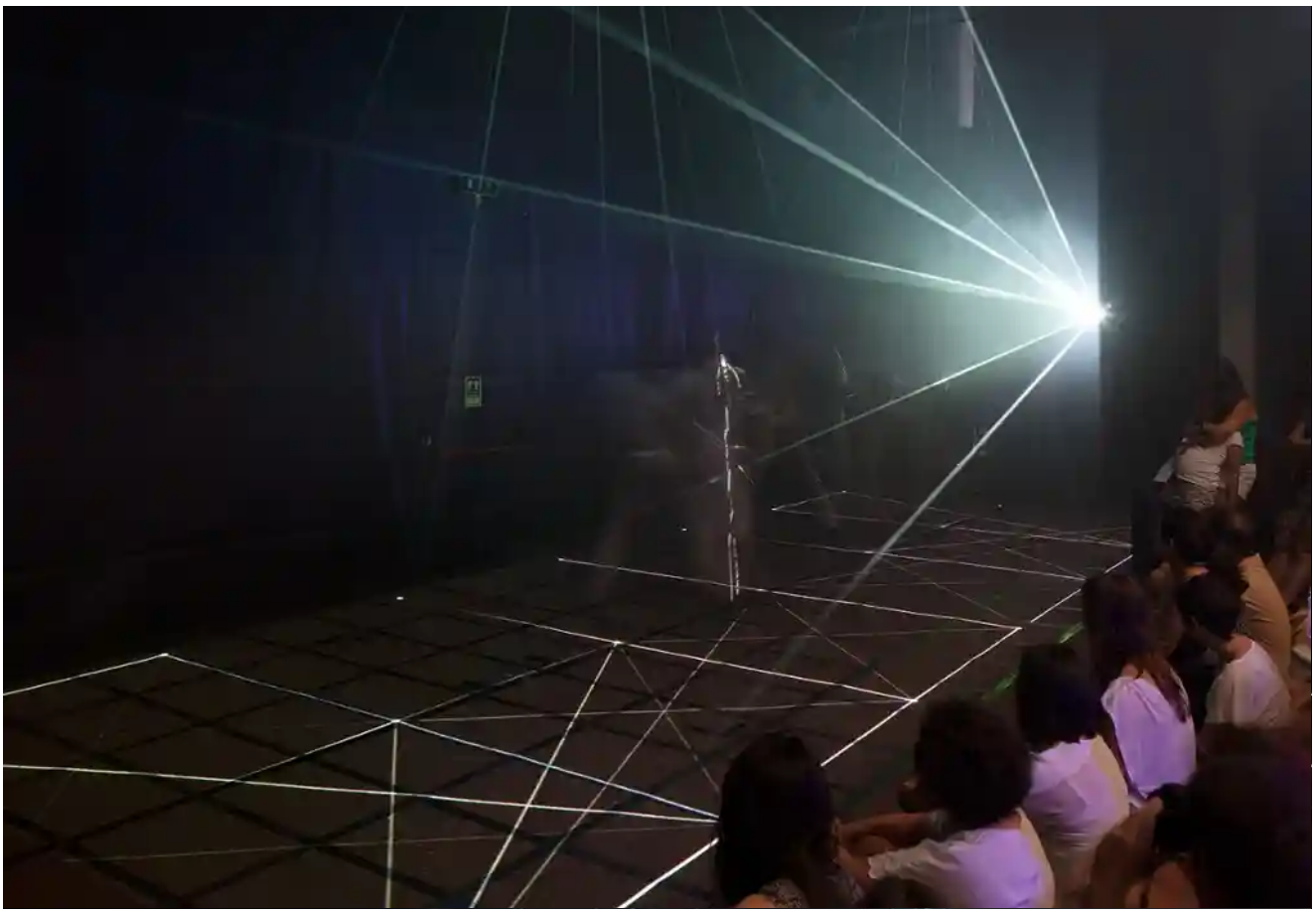
“Architects and the public are so often disconnected from the technologies that are shaping our world,” he says. “We're trying to take tech out of the lab and fictionalise it in a format that people are familiar with, to make it more accessible than the typical architecture exhibition.” It is a logic that relies on the public having a general understanding and interest in sci-fi - a topic that, with its whiff of the teenage boy's bedroom, is as much a turn-off for many as the subject of architecture.

Wax dip ... a performer emerges from a vat as part of Digital Artefacts by Dutch designer, Bart Hess. Photograph: Luke Hayes/LAT Photograph: Luke Hayes/LAT

Staged in the blacked-out bowels of the former turbine hall, the scenes of Future Perfect unfold like tableaux in a fairground ghost ride. In one corner, a group of suspended 3D-printing robots, developed by the MIT Media Lab, will soon begin spewing out quick-drying poly-filler, each nozzle working with the others to build an indeterminate digital coral reef. Next door, a laser light show simulates a supercomputer mainframe, with an accompanying soundtrack that responds to visitors' movements. Hanging like a shimmering apparition in the gloom, the highlight of the show is a series of organic prosthetic sculptures by Dutch designer Bart Hess. Suspended like swathes of shed skin, they are the product of a performer being dipped in a vat of water and hot wax - a brilliant piece of drama sadly confined to the opening week.

Young describes these individual projects as fragments of different districts from his imaginary Future Perfect world, the entire thing represented in a styrofoam model of buildings sprouting from craggy cliffs like mutant barnacles. He cites themes from The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy and is keen to point out that the model was made by special effects designers who worked on Blade Runner and Alien - which adds to the sense that this vision of the future is curiously old-fashioned. The imagery of vast inhabitable computer mainframes conjure a particular brand of retro-futurism that seems to have advanced little since Aldous Huxley dreamed up his Brave New World in the 1930s.





Inside the mainframe ... Pushing Boundaries by UK collective Marshmallow Laser Feast. Photograph: Luke Hayes/LAT Photograph: Luke Hayes/LAT

While Pestana and Young's shows take refuge in fictional realms, two further strands in the centre of town attempt to engage with the institutional and public faces of architectural practice. The Institute Effect, curated by Dani Admiss, has taken over a floor of Lisbon's design and fashion museum, Mude, as a temporary base for 12 international architectural institutions - from New York's Storefront for Art and Architecture to Mexico City's Liga gallery and Istanbul's Salt. Taking up residence for consecutive weeks, each group must set a challenge for the next, and make their home using modular furniture in an environment designed by Fabrica, the communications research arm of clothing giant Benetton. It remains to be seen what will emerge, but again it is questionable how far such institutional machinations are of interest to those outside the rarified industry of writing and talking about architecture.

The section of the Triennale most obviously trying to grab the public's attention is organised by Mexican curator José Esparza: New Publics, a programme of lectures, debates and performances, will unfold over the next three months on a big circular stage in Lisbon's Praça da Figueira.

In her opening remarks, as the press assembled on the great tilted wooden disc, Galilee used the nature of the stage to talk more broadly about the theme of Close, Closer. “It's about a generation of architects that are more interested in big

ideas than the details of buildings," she said. "The detail of the wooden boards you are standing on is not as important as the fact that we have put a big temporary stage in the square."

The circular platform was originally intended to tilt with the position of the audience, like a human-powered swingometer, but for practical reasons it now stands on fixed legs. For events during the sweltering daytime, meanwhile, it has been entirely abandoned in favour of the shade provided by the square's equestrian statue. It is perhaps this kind of detail that shows architectural thinking does in fact matter: without it, the bigger conceptual idea is sadly defunct.

Tilted saucer … The Civic Stage in Praça da Figueira, by Mexican architect Frida Escobedo. Photograph: Catarina Botelho/LAT Photograph: Catarina Botelho/LAT

For a Triennale that sets out to ask questions and evolve over its duration, it is far too soon to judge its success. But local architects who attended the opening week feel the theme is timely, and hope it will at least sow the seeds for a long-awaited debate.

"Portuguese architecture really needs shaking," says Lucinda Correia, of Lisbon practice Artéria. "In Portugal we really like to build, and we are taught how to make very good buildings in school. But for the current generation with no jobs, there needs to be something more."

"What we are taught is no longer relevant to the current situation," agrees recent graduate Pedro Snow, of Poligono architects. "If the Triennale breathes in some

international fresh air and changes people's thinking then it will have been a useful exercise."

Five years ago, when the financial crisis first erupted, the Venice Biennale responded in a similar way, with the theme Beyond Building. "Architecture must go beyond buildings because buildings are not enough," declared the curator Aaron Betsky, who proceeded to fill the exhibition with bad art, transforming the Arsenale into a gauntlet of inscrutable installations by the ageing architectural elite.

While the Lisbon Triennale has its fair share of bad art, it at least approaches the subject with a more open, questioning perspective and has the potential to develop a life of its own in the programme of public debates beyond the exhibitions' walls.

"It is the most irreverent of the three Triennales so far," says Graça Fonseca, Lisbon's Deputy Mayor for Economy and Innovation - following the 2007 show on urban voids and 2010 on housing. "And sometimes cities need irreverence."

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gruniadreader666 17 Sep 2013 12:50 3

This kind of Archibollocks just won't die will it.

like the Black Knight even when the recessions cuts off all its limbs it still soldiers on misinterpreting philosophy, making bad art and writing enough meaningless scribbling to fill Pseuds Corner for 1000 years.

Please for the love of god Oliver wright about something interesting. Whats Bill Dunster up too? or is Peter Halls new book any good?

Report

deirdremcardle ↪ gruniadreader666 17 Sep 2013 14:04 0

Bill Dunster is still "up to" statin' the bleedin' obvious which inevitably gets reduce to a load of PR twaddle ?

(Alien and Blade Runner weren't about the future they were about people)

Report

tip_truck ↪ gruniadreader666 17 Sep 2013 17:55 7

This is indeed archibollocks. It's even worse than the previous, which was pretty dire as the umpteenth celebration of or the umpteenth opportunity for those who already attract the most attention in Portugal as architects, film-makers or visual artists. But this is just a bunch of kids getting their hands on a pot of gold when the country is rapidly disappearing under neo-liberalism and going about creating this cutting-edge shit on the moronic premise that because architects have no work (especially in Portugal) they should all become hipster cultural agents in a sort of never ending expanded field of vapour that may include anything from doing nothing to perhaps 'designing' effervescent walls and expanding sofas. Obviously, there's no connection whatsoever with what's happening outside, which is Lisbon City becoming a city for tourists and of tourism, the suburbs declining further from the chronic lows sustained for decades, the gaps between the general population and the kind of elite that sponsors this kind of crap extending further (and this includes a huge gap in the quality of housing), the cleavage in every respect between centre and periphery, the incredible mass of motorway tarmac that was laid to keep the big construction contractors happy and now sits half empty, and so on. To add insult to injury, this is sort of a London edition in Lisbon, as a bunch of 'curators' has landed from the former, and taken over, to bring the latter up to speed with the international crappuccino scene and make it look Dalston cool. It's a kind of playground of 'look how cool' vapid ideas served up on a tray of gold monies provided by the financiers who like to associate themselves with the coolness it's supposed to exude (notice that two major sponsors are banks and the other has a quasi-monopoly of concrete production in Portugal). The problem is

that you really want a debate about the reality just outside this fairground (and a participatory debate that gives voice to those who live under those same realities), and neither this landing of a bunch of ill-prepared and ill-informed trendy London kids in Lisbon nor the celebration of X with a film by Y you had three years ago get anywhere near that.

Report

potatoespatatas ↪ tip_truck 17 Sep 2013 19:02

1

Bizarre complaints given the project gave a number of grants to young portuguese offices and seems by all accounts - including the one above - to be entirely broke and not very cool.

Report

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User162643 17 Sep 2013 12:53

0

.....and where's your apostrophe key? Do you know what it's for?

Report

gruniadreader666 ↪ User162643 17 Sep 2013 13:12

4

I presume that was directed at me.

Are you aware there is a reply button?

Report

GusSpinxs ↪ gruniadreader666 18 Sep 2013 0:57

2

I'm with the gorilla on this one.

Report

OffensiveUnsuitable ↪ User162643 18 Sep 2013 8:40

0

If you paid attention to what Gruniadreader666 has to say, rather than focussing on his punctuation, you might learn something. Not that I always agree with him, but he's one of the most interesting & articulate commenters on architecture at the Guardian.

Report

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