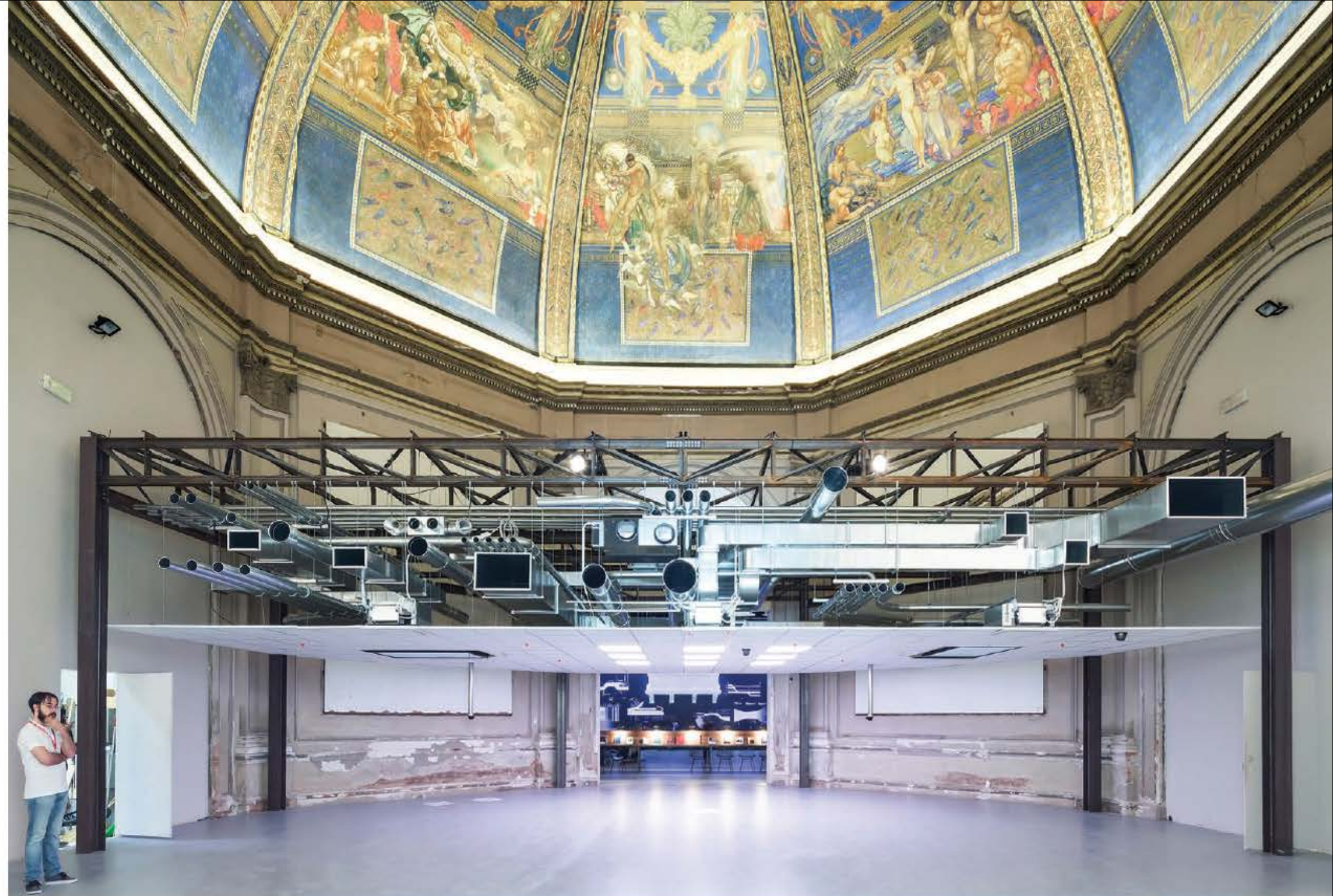




Rem vision

For the 14th International Architecture Biennale in Venice, curator Rem Koolhaas takes visitors through the past century and asks: what have we learned from modernism?

By Catherine Osborne / Photography by Sergio Pirrone



Monditalia

The Arsenale is filled with over 40 installations that explore Italy's rich cultural history, including architecture, film, music, theatre and dance. One sprawling exhibit, which demands at least a day to take in, begins with a 20-metre-wide archway illuminated by Swarovski crystal lights. The festive entry, a riff on Venetian architecture, presents a dramatic contrast to the Arsenale's red-brick setting, from the early part of the 12th century.

In 1914, Le Corbusier mapped out his plans for Maison Dom-ino, a three-level house intended for mass production that offered Europe an affordable, relatively quick solution to the housing shortage leading up to World War I. Although it remained a prototype, its stripped-down construction and open floor plan became a symbol for a new beginning, and it laid out the principles of modernist ideals.

Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, curator of this year's biennale – and universally recognized as one of the most provocative thinkers of our times – chose to install a modern-day replica of the house on the Giardini grounds, as a kind of totem to the overarching question that informs the biennale as a whole: what have we learned from modernism? It is a perfect 100-year bracket for asking the question with the benefit of hindsight. We are now fully entrenched in postmodernism, when architects have become celebrities and buildings ornamental objects.

The answer to Koolhaas's provocation is, of course, that we've learned a lot, and nothing at all. Is the ubiquitous drop ceiling – which invisibly controls temperature, lighting and airflow with mind-boggling precision – better than a beautiful domed ceiling painted by a leading artist of the day? One of the two exhibitions Koolhaas has assembled is *Elements of Architecture*, and as the title suggests it is all about architecture – not architects. The galleries are filled with materials that show the evolution of building. One room is devoted to walls; another examines windows; another chronicles the history of the fireplace, the evolution of corridors, the varying widths of stair risers, and so on. By breaking down the components of buildings like distinct chapters in a book, Koolhaas gives us a chance to reflect on the past with a powerful visual encyclopedia at our disposal. The next step is to think critically about what lies ahead. **AZ**



Elements of Architecture

At the entrance to *Elements of Architecture*, one of two exhibitions Koolhaas envisioned for the biennale, two types of ceiling treatments are installed: an ornamental dome painted in 1909, and a typical drop ceiling found in buildings today. The two treatments – one an expression of beauty, the other purely rational – set the stage for the rest of the exhibition, which showcases how 15 building materials, including windows, doors and cladding, have evolved over the centuries.



Maison Dom-ino

This year marks the 100th birthday of Maison Dom-ino, Le Corbusier's answer to the housing crisis leading up to World War I. The open concept home was the state of the art when it was conceived, and while it was never put into mass production it remains a symbol of modernist ideals and principles. This 1:1 model replaces the original's concrete and steel construction with more contemporary engineered timber, and it ships flatpacked. After Venice, the house will travel to other cities, including London and Tokyo.





Canadian pavilion

Arctic Adaptations, by Toronto's Lateral Office, maps out Nunavut – Canada's youngest territory, created in 1999 – and the 25 communities located within its two-million-square-kilometre boundaries. Extreme weather conditions, limited job opportunities and a lack of resources, including such basic services as schools, have made Nunavut one of the harshest places to live in the world.



↑ **Republic of Korea pavilion**
Golden Lion winner for best pavilion, this multi-faceted display curated by Mass Studies mixes installations, art and poetry with photographs and documentary films. Each describes the social and built complexities of the divided nations, including the kinds of monumental structures that are built, and the psyche and ideology of the people. The plan was to have North Korea participate, although, despite "love letters" from the curators, a collaboration proved impossible.

← **British pavilion**
The theme of dystopia/utopia is at the core of Britain's contribution to the biennale, curated by FAT Architecture and Crimson Architectural Historians. The display begins with a mound of dirt framed in fuchsia, a sculpture that signifies the romanticized notion of tearing down the past and building anew. From there, rooms full of posters, videos and pop culture paraphernalia – including Cliff Richard albums and stills from Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* – focus on the 1960s and '70s, one of the country's most dramatic periods of social revolution and unrest.



Elements of Architecture
In a dedicated room, one wall is filled with various window frames gleaned from heritage buildings across Britain, now part of the Brooking National Collection. The main space is dominated by machinery used to polish and test the strength of modern window fittings. The technology has enabled windows to become curtain walls, making sashes and sills a thing of the past.

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French pavilion

In the centre of Modernity: Promise or Menace? sits a miniature replica of Villa Arpel, the über-minimalist house at the heart of Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle*. The classic parody, which won an Academy Award in 1958, pokes fun at some of contemporary design's alienating aspects. It is one of the displays that present four French "misfits" of the modernist era, including Jean Prouvé, engineer Raymond Camus, and Drancy, a massive public housing project outside Paris that became a Nazi concentration camp during World War II.

↑
Israeli pavilion

One of the most provocative yet understated exhibits is Urburb, named for a neologism that describes regions of Israel located between urban centres and suburbs where various small, egalitarian communities have formed. On the floor of the pavilion, four 3-D printers systematically carve out in sand Israel's topography and borders, then smooth over the map before replacing it with a new sketch. The printers are programmed to build and erase the geographic (and political) evolution, year by year, over the past century.