In his critique of the 18\textsuperscript{th} Venice Biennale, Francisco Díaz draws our attention to the blind spots in the social and material processes that underpin our architectural production.

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Quite often, recurrent exhibitions such as biennials, triennials, festivals, and similar events, are confused with fashion shows as if their purpose was to predict trends for the upcoming season. Some audiences visit these shows to discover what to wear and talk about. Others go to see themselves reflected in the selection (and complain when their egos are not satisfied). But in so doing, these kinds of audiences miss the most basic point: these recurrent events are, first and foremost, collective exhibitions. Thus, to search for signs of hope, despair, or hints of the future in them is a misconception. Biennials, triennials, or festivals are just group displays, whether well-curated or not. A good, skillful curator can either introduce us to things we didn’t know about or present a selection of what we already knew in a new framework. Lesley Lokko, the Ghanaian-Scottish architect who curated the 18\textsuperscript{th} Venice Architecture Biennale titled “The Laboratory of the Future,” along with her team, successfully did both [Fig. 01].

The 2023 biennale showcased both the best and the worst of a globalized world. On the one hand, the chance of gathering ideas among countries. However, to assert this, we must differentiate between what Lokko selected and what she didn’t. This distinction establishes a frontier, a border-zone, between the main show and national pavilions.

Let’s start with the latter. As has become customary, national representations decided not to engage in the global conversation. Following a traditional yet uneconomical trend, they moved people and resources to Venice only to say something back to their own countries. Moreover, with few exceptions, many of them only loosely addressed the biennale’s underlying theme—Africa. It was striking to realize that most of the countries with a colonial past (or present) simply eluded their responsibilities towards the African continent and other oppressed communities, using instead this occasion to present a myriad of trendy but evasive issues: mushrooms (Belgium), performance (France), reuse (Germany), data-clouds (Italy), food (Spain), systems (The Netherlands), plastics (USA), or rituals (UK). In this scenario, perhaps the most appropriate topics came from former Latin American colonies like Brazil (earth), Chile (seeds), Peru (the Amazon), or Uruguay (forests), as they share a similar background with Africa. Also, a couple of remarkable European exceptions must be mentioned: the aboriginal Sami architectures presented by the Nordic countries (addressing the debt they have with their own first nations) [Fig. 02], or the surprisingly ironical Latvian pavilion that represented this recurring show as a supermarket where audiences chose among a global offer [Fig. 03]. However, beyond these few refreshing examples, national pavilions seemed out of kilter with this biennale. First, because this version made evident that out the 54 African countries, there are only two pavilions from that continent—Egypt and, since this edition, South Africa—an absence that underscores the visibility problems and opportunity inequalities that this African-themed biennale wanted to stress. And second, because the Venice Biennale is hosted in a country whose Ambassador to Ghana rejected the visas for three Ghanaian participants, arguing that there were “reasonable doubts” about their “intention to leave the [Italian] territory, or State, before the expiry of [their] visa,” and that Lesley Lokko was trying to bring “non-essential young men” into Europe (Art Review, 2023). The curator replied that this situation was caused by “an ambitious career diplomat looking to make her mark with a right-wing government,” and added that, “This is not a new story. [...] It has happened to my family. It has happened to my friends. I think everyone in the global south understands this story only too well” (Lokko, 2023).

But Lokko didn’t intend for this to be the definitive story about the Biennale. She wanted us to see an exhibition that was extremely different from the last three editions, but in a positive way. As it is expected when the narrative does not follow the obvious path, some people complained that there was not much “architecture” in the exhibition, as if this field of knowledge could only be confined to the design of buildings. Unlike these commentators, I saw architecture everywhere. It was visible in the carefully designed floorplan that accommodated the different contributions at the Arsenale [Fig. 04], making us forget the linear, corridor-like shape that, since Portoghesi’s “Strada Novissima” in 1980, had been pivotal in turning architecture installations into a sequence of storefronts resembling the ones found in a shopping mall concourse. In contrast with previous versions, we now had hierarchies, alternative paths, interruptions, resting places, diagonal routes, and, overall, wide spaces. Instead of a long corridor guiding the promenade, this biennale’s layout constantly challenged the spectator. However, it was not a confusing show, since all installations had enough space to be understood with more time and distance. It helped that the number of participants was reduced from 112 in the previous version to 72. With forty fewer guests to manage, there was more time...
01. Maquetas en planta de las diferentes salas de exposición colgadas en el Pabellón Central. / Floorplan Models of the Different Exhibition Rooms hanging at the Central Pavilion. Lugar / Venue: Giardini. © Francisco Diaz.


03. Proyecto / Project: TC Latauka (TC) – Pavilion of Latvija; curadores / curators: Ernesta Cēruša, Ulīks Jaunzemēs-Petersons; Exhibidores / Exhibitors: Inets Mengopis, Tomass Kampars; Comisario / Commissioner: Jānis Dripe (Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia); lugar / venue: Arsenale. © Andrea Avezzù. Cortesía de / Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.


díaz  |  giros infraestructurales  ·  infrastructural turns
Francisco Díaz
<fdiazp@uc.cl>

Architect and master in Architecture, UC, Chile, 2006. MSc CCCP, Columbia University, USA, 2013. PhD (c), Politecnico di Torino, Italy. He was editor-in-chief of Ediciones ARQ between 2014 and 2022. His research focuses on the public dimension of architecture and its points of contact with other fields. In 2020, he curated (alongside P. Brugnoli and A. Peliowski) the exhibition Casa Chilena: Imágenes Domésticas at the CCLM in Santiago. His publications include Patologías contemporáneas: ensayos de arquitectura tras la crisis de 2008 (dpr-Barcelona, 2019), which received an award at the Spanish Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism 2021, and Suelo (Bifurcaciones, 2023). He is an assistant professor at the School of Architecture, UC, Chile.