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ARCHITECTURE

Venice Architecture Biennale

Twice delayed and yet more relevant

The event's theme grapples with how we can live better, and together

BY SAM LUBELL

Hashim Sarkis, curator of this year's Venice Architecture Biennale, developed its theme — "How Will We Live Together?" — long before Covid-19 had made us deathly afraid of one another, before the murder of George Floyd sparked worldwide unrest and before flag-waving rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol. His choice, it's now clear, was remarkably prescient.

After the world was turned upside down early last year, Mr. Sarkis's theme — along with virtually every issue being addressed in the show — seemed to grow in stature, complexity and relevance. And through the significant adaptations made by everyone in the exhibition, the response of the biennale itself, which opens on Saturday, has become a case study for how to begin to tackle such questions.

"We now have a different set of eyes for how we see the world because of the pandemic," noted Mr. Sarkis, dean of M.I.T.'s School of Architecture and Planning and an architect with offices in Cambridge, Mass., and Beirut, Lebanon. "But the issues are still the same. The pandemic helped bring them into focus and accelerate the kinds of responses we had been reluctant to make."

Mr. Sarkis, in a video interview earlier this month, noted that while many logistical adjustments were needed to make the fair happen, exhibitors did not change the core of their projects in response to world events. The crisis only made their positions more significant.

For Lina Ghotmeh, a Paris-based architect who grew up in Beirut, Lebanon, reacting to crises like the pandemic has been a way of life. "You have to be creative. You have to find a way to live and to cope," she said.

Ms. Ghotmeh is one of 112 participants from 46 countries contributing to the biennale's central exhibition. Her firm's entry, "Sculpture for Living," expands on her Stone Garden apartment building in Beirut, completed in 2020.

The sculptural, finely combed concrete building, cut by very large openings filled with vegetation, contains widely diverse living layouts and a cultural center at its base.

This mix of elements nod to Lebanon's history of war and violence while creating community (or, as Ms. Ghotmeh put it, "orchestrating life"), celebrating and nurturing local craft, and encouraging outdoor living, nature and a sense of hope and healing.

In Venice, Ms. Ghotmeh and her firm have built a model of Stone Garden that's more than six feet tall. Inside, rooms contain small videos and photographs that display how the building was made, and showcase examples of creativity and resilience in Lebanon.

"We're trying to get back to how we



LINA GHOTMEH ARCHITECTURE

used to construct; out of local needs and common sense," Ms. Ghotmeh said, noting that current development models have become predictable and unsustainable. "As architects we are critical thinkers," she added. "We are able to deal with complexity and understand different disciplines and think of new ways of making and inhabiting the spaces around us."

This kind of work — starting at design but expanding to transform people, places and systems — fills the show. Exhibits, divided into five scales from smallest ("Among Diverse Beings") to largest ("As One Planet"), take the form of films, photos, drawings, plans, models, digital installations, and even entire (albeit temporary) buildings.

They propose solutions to myriad contemporary challenges: addressing overdevelopment in the Amazon with new civic infrastructure (Somatic Collaborative); replacing monotonous, overpriced housing through creative prefabrication (LIN Architects Urbanists); overcoming social and political

polarization by replacing hard walls with open environments (Phillip Beesley & Living Architecture Systems Group/University of Waterloo School of Architecture); and moving beyond predictable, stagnant building through grass-roots urbanism in Taiwan (Field Office Architecture).

Many pieces focus on learning from diverse, sometimes surprising inspirations: from refugee camps in Lebanon (Wissam Chaaya); unplanned conglomerations of buildings in rural China (Rural Urban Framework); artisans in Niger (Atelier Masomi); tribal communities in Brazil (Acasa Gringo Cardia Design); and from the barrios of Venezuela (Enlace Arquitectural).

"There is no one source to answer these questions," Mr. Sarkis said. "The biennale used to be the place where Europe showcased what's good and what's bad; it taught the world."

"Now it's the other way around. It's the world that's coming to Venice to show what it's doing, and how we can learn from it together."

Outside the central exhibition there is much more — upward of 60 national projects, collaborations with international artists and museums, and student work from around the world.

Not everyone agrees that the biennale should be staged during a pandemic. Even some participants questioned whether flying in participants and visitors from around the world makes sense at such a time. Yet it's also clear that orchestrating an event of this scale, in these unforgiving times, has tested and validated Mr. Sarkis's theme. It has also sparked welcome change.

The biennale, of course, was originally set to open a year ago. Organizers then pushed it to August 2020, and finally to May 22, which held only after considerable discussion and monitoring.

Covid precautions are in place: online ticketing, temperature monitoring, crowd limitations and circulation control, among others. Those, along with reductions in travel and other factors, have meant far more online content



ANDREA AVIZZU, VIA LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

than before, and more in-person events are planned for later in the event's six-month duration.

"I think it showed a level of strength and determination to move ahead," noted Roberto Cicutto, who took over as president of the biennale just before the pandemic hit. "We found a way to live with the pandemic and not give up."

A good percentage of the biennale's participants — particularly those from outside Europe — were unable to attend installations, or the opening, and large teams of local builders were employed to help carry out their visions. This, of course, has meant plenty of awkward virtual discussions, and has tested both patience and ingenuity.

Members of the many national pavilions have developed a new level of virtual collaboration by forming what they call the Curators Collective, made up of more than 40 participating countries. The group was initiated by Haewon Shin, curator of the Korean pavilion, who connected most of the members online.

Their virtual meetings, which have occurred at least monthly since March 2020, have not only fostered fruitful discussion and practical solutions, but also brought new elements to the biennale.

These include a student competition to design benches made from discarded pavilion construction inside the Giardini (the Biennale's main exhibition area); a "manifesto" expanding on the questions raised by Mr. Sarkis's theme; and collaborations between countries, like a common installation between the Russian and Japanese pavilions.

"Under the normal procedure we would have been so busy preparing our own pavilions we wouldn't get to talk to each other," Ms. Shin said. "This unique situation made us come together."

Ms. Shin's pavilion is called "Future School," a homelike space designed for in-person and online gathering, learning and exploring. (For both humans and animals — included are a bird bath and carpet space for a pet cat, Mucca.)

On its roof, the pavilion will host a common space for the members of the Curators Collective. "This is our present to the biennale," she added.

"We've continued connecting and exchanging ideas — creating new ideas, seeing new possibilities," Ms. Shin said. "Hashim said architects need a new contract. This is a new contract. A new way of representing our countries."

Overcoming
Left, "Sculpture for Living," by Lina Ghotmeh, a Paris-based architect who grew up in Beirut, Lebanon, will be presented at the Venice Architecture Biennale's central exhibition; Hashim Sarkis, curator of the biennale, said myriad logistical challenges had to be overcome to bring the event to fruition this year.