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# QUESTIONS ON CITIES, ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIETY

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CUADRO DE  
**MÉXICO**

**LONDON**

**NEW YORK**

**JUST WHO WILL SAVE THE  
WORLD & SUCCESSFULLY  
MANAGE ITS EXPANDING  
METROPOLISES?**

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*You may have found answers at the 10th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale. Directing this year's edition was Richard Burdett, professor of Architecture and Urbanism at the London School of Economics and architectural advisor to the mayor of London.*

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TOKYO



CARACAS



BERLIN



SÃO PAULO



Comprehensive and complex, the "Cities, Architecture and Society" exhibition at this year's Venice Biennale addressed the social potential of urban change. Featuring 16 cities across the world in the Corderie with many more featured in over fifty national pavilions in the Giardini and the Arsenale, fresh perspective was given on population, size, density, distribution of income, age and ethnic groups as well as urban forms, communications and capital flows.

It's all fascinating but somewhat frightening. A century ago, roughly 10% of the world's population lived in cities. Today more than half of the people living on the planet have moved to urban areas. Within decades, up to three quarters of the world's population will live in cities, many of them in mega-cities of over 10 million people, especially in the urbanizing regions of Asia and Africa. The exhibit followed the endless growth of cities including São Paulo, Caracas, Bogotá, Mexico City, Los Angeles, New York, Cairo, Johannesburg, Istanbul, Milan, Turin, Berlin, London, Barcelona, Tokyo, Mumbai and Shanghai. So how is this future being met? Architectural and urban design projects show significant physical responses to the emerging

social, cultural and economic trends and how these interventions affect everyday life for their inhabitants.

Cities are like living creatures – they evolve. Case in point: London, the world's oldest mega-city, which is now experiencing a renaissance. Several large-scale urban projects including the masterplan for the London 2012 Olympics games by Foreign Office Architects with EDAW and Allies & Morrison illustrate the sustainable way to help this growth. As Burdett says, "The shape we give society affects the daily lives of those who live, work and play in cities across the world. As architects, planners and city makers we are engaged in making the very infrastructure that makes social interaction or repression possible."

The historical presence at the Giardini, the Biennale's gardens which face the sea, offered broad views of the numerous (and sometimes contradictory) aspects of global architecture. Here each country showed its vision of the "contemporary city," from the realistic analysis of the problems to the most surreal and provoking architectural projects. The Canadian installation, created by Vancouver based architects Pechet and Robb, inserted into the Pavilion a gigantic orange sweater as a metaphor for the protective shell of an interior living that can satisfy all the senses. The project, called "SweaterLodge," evokes Native sweat lodges – temporary structures built with the purpose of ritual purification and socialization.

Another installation presented the question "What will be the future of Cairo?" but without an answer. Rather, the Egyptian Pavilion deftly illustrated the contrasts between the modern age and the historic past of a town with 17 million inhabitants, making it the largest African metropolis today. With their well-known sense of rationalism and problem solving, Germany presented "Convertible City," a visual demonstration of possible combinations of past, present and future for European cities that, unlike the new Asian and South American metropolises, are still strongly conditioned by history and tradition. In contrast, a more philosophical approach informed the Japanese exhibition. Like a Zen exercise on surrealistic architecture and the unconscious side of the cities, curator and architect Terunobu Fujimori with his Roadway Observation Society (ROJO) has created an architectural and urban movement, famous in Japan but still unknown in the rest of the world. Aimed at discovering unusual (and often obscure) urban landscapes, the exhibit was the most intense expression of the 'urban unconscious.'

"Arctic Cities" was the enchanting theme of exhibits from Finland, Norway and Sweden. Three small towns – Kiruna, Oulu, Tromsø – called "Cities of Water, Snow and Ice," respectively, illustrated the extreme living conditions and the brave architecture required to meet such elements of nature. Thanks to a fine photographic documentary, South Africa shared the transformation of its metropolis post-apartheid and the challenges it faces to successfully create architecture and urban plans that follow the wide social project of integration. "After the Flood: Rebuilt on a Higher Land" was the theme of the

Unites States Pavilion. Extraordinary photos by Michele Goodman illustrated the frightful effects of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, and the results of the competition promoted by Architectural Record for the reconstruction were a manifesto for a kind of architecture much closer to the environment.

China, which now holds the record for expanding cities, focused its exhibition on the conflict for the application of traditional Chinese culture to the development of contemporary cities. Here, spectators saw the works of Chinese architect Wang Shu, who is researching traditional architectural elements and materials like clay bricks and their possible influence on contemporary architecture, and artist Xu Jiang, whose abstract contemplations highlighted the strong debate between modernization and tradition that divide Chinese architects.

Two collateral exhibitions, "Città di Pietra – Stone Towns" and "Città di Porto – Towns with Harbor," addressed the specific problems of old cities where the ancient architecture (often made of heavy stones) weighs down modern development and those towns where the harbor is the heart of city life. Spanning 15 towns, from Oslo to Helsinki, Capetown to Sydney, the projects re-study the geographic, social and economic relationships of these regions and the specific challenges they re-studied.

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In "Conversation With..." by Richard Burdett and Ellis Woodman, architects and designers such as David Chipperfield, Norman Foster, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Leon Krier offered their perspective on the growing (and often unseen) political aspects of architecture, which have been critical in defining the quality of the cities of the future. "I look at what is happening in this moment in the cities as a tension or a deadlock between two main sides: public and private. I don't think that in this field, architects and urban planners can ply a big influence," said Rem Koolhaas, underlining that in the big scale of urban development, architects have lost power while contractor companies and politicians make development plans and strategies.

So who will save the world and successfully manage its expanding metropolises? Architects are only part of the answer. Until then, the Venice Biennale has opened its doors to even more questions, aiming to find solutions, one city at a time.

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words / patrizia scarzella

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