

The nature of 'Freospace'

By CAROLINA A. MIRANDA

VENICE, Italy — The Venice Architecture Biennale is a bit like being in a big city, where your every want and need can be satiated.

Want to see architectural models floating in a giant pool? Check. A room cleverly divided by a single, swooping sheet of paper? Or bulbous inflatables that look like giant amniotic sacs? All good.

There are 60-plus national pavilions in the exhibition — all exploring some facet of architecture related to the biennale's central theme, "Freospace."

Uruguay takes on the nature of space in prison. Poland is displaying models of historic architecture floating in that aforementioned pool. And Denmark is presenting a lightweight, webbed material for building temporary structures.

Here are seven of the biennale's most intriguing pavilions:

Israel

A Solomonic divide

The Israeli pavilion looks at how public spaces that are purportedly shared can function as sites of delicate political tangos — in this case, five contested holy sites in Israel held dear by Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Titled "In Situ Quo," the exhibition is an incisive look at how places such as Rachel's Tomb, the Cave of the Patriarchs and the Western Wall are shared — or not — under strict protocols often overseen by the Israeli military. The show includes a fascinating color-coded 19th century model of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, hand-painted in wood, showing how its functions are divvied up by various religious groups. Other elements include unrealized plans for Jerusalem's so-called Walling Wall (including concepts by Louis Kahn and Isamu Noguchi).

It's a clear-eyed pavilion that holds up a mirror to petty divisiveness — and the sort of thing that should have resonance well be-

yond the world of architecture.

Curators: Deborah Pinto Fedda, Itat Finkelman, Oren Sagiv, Tania Coean Uzziell.

Great Britain

Every man is an island

Enter the British pavilion and you will find room after empty room. That's because this year, the curators haven't installed anything in their building; they've installed around it, draping the structure in a massive scaffold. Climb the steps to the top and you'll find incredible Venice views and the peaked roof of the pavilion peeking through the scaffolding like an architectural island. And in true British style, tea is served.

"Island," as the installation is called, is certainly a nod to Britain's geographic state. But it also serves as a metaphor. In the age of rising seas, the scaffold provides an image of a building submerged. It also channels political isolation, a purposeful encircling of space — Britain in the age of Brexit. It's a simple statement with a tremendous amount of bite — likely why the installation picked up a special mention for national participation by the biennale jury.

Curators: Caruso St. John Architects and Marcus Taylor.

Estonia

Honoring history

Say the word "monument" and you'll likely conjure images of generals atop gallant steeds or bas reliefs proclaiming battle heroics. These structures can often seem immovable, but they are not. The fall of a regime or the fall of an idea can be quickly followed by a quick round of statue-toppling. (Think: Confederate monuments in the American South.)

The nature of monuments and their permanence is explored in "Weak Monument" at Estonia's pavilion. The show opens with a story about the Estonian village of Torma, in which a statue of a

kneeling warrior was placed facing east or west, depending on where the village concluded its greatest threats came from.

It's a comic arbitrariness highlighted by the pavilion's principal installation.

Located in a small, decommissioned baroque church, the curators have blocked all views of the altar with a temporary concrete wall. A park bench placed before it invites visitors to take a seat and contemplate the rear of the church. Monuments, it turns out, are all about the direction we happen to be facing.

Collaborators: Tom Avermaete, Toomas Paaver, Klaus Platzgummer, Margrethe Troensegaard, Charlotte Grace, Sandra Mälik, Erik Hermann, Pavel Bouše.

United States

Citizens of the world

What does it mean to be a citizen in the era of globalism and the internet? The United States pavilion's "Dimensions of Citizenship" raises those questions at various scales — municipal, regional, global and galactic — examining the complicated notion of how we define space within a group and how these don't always obey our established political boundaries.

Among the most intriguing installations: "Cosmorama" by the group Design Earth that explores how outer space might be defined by nation-states and big business, and a video presentation by several collaborators, including Diller Scofidio + Renfro and the Columbia University Center for Spatial Research, that looks at who does and doesn't have access to electrical power around the world.

Among the stark juxtapositions: Poor rain forest villages lie in darkness while mining concerns are brightly lit. Houston's lights bounce back after a major hurricane; Puerto Rico's do not. Citizenship does not mean equal access to resources.

Curators: Niall Atkinson, Ann

Lui, Mimi Zeiger

Chile **Stadium city**

Too many architecture exhibitions are like reading a book on a wall: exhausting combinations of schematics paired with endless architecture-speak. The Chilean pavilion is an example of how a complicated urban phenomenon can be beautifully rendered as architectonic sculpture — and be more engaging as a result.

"Stadium," as the installation is called, features a room-sized sculpture made of pressed earth laid out in the shape of a stadium. But on its surface is the imprint of a city. It looks both like an ancient relic and a brutalist work of contemporary art.

The piece was inspired by a 1979 event, in which the regime of Augusto Pinochet gathered 37,000 inhabitants from marginal communities in Santiago's National Stadium to offer them title to lands on which they had squatted — the space of a city defined by one blustery act. (Video on one wall shows Pinochet acting the part of benevolent dictator.)

It's a charged piece, given that the stadium was also used as a place to jail and torture dissidents during Chile's 1973 military coup. But it's the use of material that ultimately makes it so powerful: earth — and the histories and

bodies that it bears — as the foundation for everything we build.

Curator: Alejandra Celedón

Switzerland **House beautiful**

The biennale is a serious place full of serious architectural ideas. Which makes Switzerland's wickedly humorous pavilion — devoted to the universal blandness of the contemporary home — a welcome respite from all the over-complicated high-mindedness. Not that it sacrificed ideas for wit: the pavilion was the winner of the biennial's Golden Lion Award.

"**Swizzera 240: House Tour**" looks much like any prototypical dwelling: white walls, wood floors, monochromatic counters — of the sort that have become a de facto part of the real estate open house. But as you proceed through the space, the architects begin to toy with scale: Average rooms lead to oversize doors that lead to hallways that shrink into "Being John Malkovich" proportions.

It's a joyful play on space — one that takes the world around us and turns it into something downright Escher-esque.

Participants: Alessandro Bosshard, Li Tavor, Matthew van der Ploeg, Ani Vihervaara

Egypt **Free market**

For "Freespace," Egypt's national pavilion analyzes the ways in which Cairo's sidewalks and streets are appropriated as sites of informal commerce, where vendors gather to sell used clothing, old electronics, furniture and food. "Robabeccial," as the show is titled, features detailed analyses of how these spaces are used and how, despite efforts to clear them, they quickly return.

But it tells this story in a deeply humane fashion. Dangling from the ceiling are dozens of objects — including, pots, pans and an old drum — acquired at informal markets in Egypt.

And on one side of the space, a worthwhile short film captures a day in the life of an ambulatory junk peddler, a charming man who ends up on the receiving end of a tattered painting he admires so much that he finds himself reluctant to sell it.

The pavilion doesn't propose "solutions" to the "problem" of informal selling. Instead, it seems to posit that this centuries-old system works best when left untouched. That junk peddler? Architects and urban planners should be designing for him too.

Curators: Islam Mosleh El Mashtooly, Mouaz Abouzaid and Cristiano Luchetti

carolina.miranda@latimes.com