

10 things to see in Venice

The Venice Biennale of Architecture opens the doors to palaces and mansions normally closed to the public

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guardian.co.uk | Tuesday September 16 2008 11:17 BST



Art or architecture visitors take in some of the exhibits at this year's Venice Biennale of Architecture. Photograph: John Brunton

The Venice Biennale of Architecture may not be as prestigious as the older and larger Biennale of Contemporary Art, but it still represents a unique opportunity to explore not only the national pavillions of the Giardini, the Biennale Gardens, but also a host of spaces - the Arsenale, palaces, churches, private mansions - that are normally closed off to the public. The title of the 11th Biennale is *Out There: Architecture Beyond Building*, which gives a clear indication that these days the exhibits are just as interesting for the general public as for professional architects and designers. There is an incredible choice of exhibits from 56

countries, plus 25 collateral events. Seeing everything is pretty much impossible, so here are 10 not to miss.

1. Biennale Gardens, British Pavillion

Any visit to the Biennale begins at the Giardini, the sprawling gardens where over 30 countries have their national pavilions. It is not chauvinistic for once to say that the British pavillion is one of the grandest, strategically looking down over the adjoining French and German pavillions. And this year's exhibition, Home/Away, has been acclaimed as one of the best in the Biennale. Five architects - Sergison Bates, Tony Fretton, de Rijke Marsh Morgan, Witherford Watson Mann and Maccreanor Lavington - have been selected to illustrate the particularly British obsession of owning your own house, and examine whether this can function in the rest of Europe. And the questions asked could not be more relevant given the current credit crunch and collapse of the housing market.

britishcouncil.org/biennale/intro

2. Ca' Del Duca, Luxembourg

As you follow signs for Luxembourg's pavillion, you come to what looks like a dead end - a small courtyard with a single tall tree coming out on to the Grand Canal. But a small door at the end leads to the discrete Ca' Del Duca palace, which was built in the 15th century. Luxembourg's exhibition could not be more minimalist - a series of white boards that snake from one room into another. But the idea is intriguing for those who take the time to read about it - four crucial architectural questions answered by 12 different Europeans.

3. Museo Diocenesa Urbis



This collateral exhibition showcases the architecturally influenced artworks of the Venetian artist, [Gaspere Manos](#). There are 150 works on show, and his paintings are bright, vivid impressions of cities around the world. But this is also a brilliant opportunity to discover one of Venice's most

wonderful cloisters, the Chiostro di Sant Apollonia. Built in the 12th century, this is Venice's only surviving Romanesque cloister, and the rest of the building where the exhibition is on view is a former Benedictine Monastery.

4. Corderie & Artigliere

The ancient buildings of Venice's once mighty Arsenale, the Corderie and Artigliere, form a vast alternative exhibition hall for the countries that don't have their own national pavillion in the Biennale Gardens. The space itself is easily as impressive as many of the installations, and it sometimes seems that each exhibit just tries to shock the visitor more than its neighbour. The local press has been delightfully shocked by the Swiss architect, Philippe Rahm whose Meterological installation of hot and cold panels features eight live performers, two of whom are nude. Other exhibits not to miss are those of British designer Nigel Coates, and Living Inhere, a look at the problems of urban architecture in Mexico City.

5. Palazzo Giustinian Lolin, Ireland

You have to navigate your way through a maze of dark, narrow Venetian backstreets to actually find Ireland's exhibition, but it is well worth the effort as the pavillion is housed in a magnificent 17th-century palazzo that looks out on to the Grand Canal. Push through the door and you enter a closed courtyard with a grand well, and The Lives of Spaces is housed in a series of rooms decorated with Murano chandeliers and period paintings on the first floor. It is quite a contrast to the videos, TV screens and minimalist white cubes illustrating nine "lives" of different spaces, through the design, construction, original use and later reuse.

thelivesofspaces.com

6. Chiesa di San Stae, Russia

You can't miss the sumptuous white baroque facade of the San Stae church, and there is a vaporetto water bus stop right outside, so it is easy to get to. Usually tourists wander in to gaze at the marvellous religious paintings, including one by Tiepolo, but for the duration of the Biennale, the interior is dramatically transformed by Bornhouse, an exhibition of 26 Russian and international architects considering the rather weighty theme of "birth", both of buildings and humans. The result is rather stunning, as a glowing creche has been built in the middle of the church, filled with architectural objects like clay, papier-mache, glass and metal

bornhouse.com

7. Campo Della Tana, Hong Kong, Fabrica Cultura

Situated just opposite the entrance to the Arsenale, this typical Venetian "campo", is a small, enclosed square with an adjoining warehouse. It is something of a poor cousin to many of the grand national pavillions, but at least

Hong Kong has retained its sovereignty and separateness from mainland China, which doesn't even have its own pavillion and exhibits in the Giardini as part of the Italian pavillion. Hong Kong has created a colourful, vibrant "Cultural Factory", including not just architects but designers, photographers, performers and writers. Six different projects are presented, and check out the fun T-shirts of Prince Charles and Bill Clinton in the 'Accidental Urbanism" section.

hkia.net

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8. Palazzo Pesaro Papafava, The Bearable Lightness of Being - The Metaphor of the Space
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Another magnificent palace that is usually shut off from the public, the Biennale provides one of the rare moments to explore Palazzo Papafava, which dates back to the 15th century. It is hosting what is termed a "collateral event" organised by the Fondazione Mudima from Milan. This is almost more Biennale of Art than Architecture, where painting, sculpture, photography, video and performance are used to interpret a very conceptual theme, and perhaps not surprisingly, one of the stars of the show is Yoko Ono.

mudima.net

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9. Palazzo Franchetti, The Universe of Jorn Utzon
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Situated just by the Accademia bridge, the Palazzo Franchetti is quite simply one of the most beautiful palaces that line the Grand Canal. Built in the 15th century, it incorporates a stunning mix of Gothic and Byzantine influences, and today is the headquarters of the Venetian Institute of Science, Letters and Art. During the Biennale, visitors can admire both its splendid interiors and a major exhibition dedicated to the life and works of Danish architect, Jorn Utzon, creator of the Sydney Opera House.

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10. Arsenale Spazio Thesis, An Italian Garden in Tianjin
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No one should miss the chance to wander round Venice's historic Arsenale - the shipyard where warships of the Venetian were made and launched centuries ago - which still has a military "no entrance" status for the rest of the year. Don't stop at the Artiglerie and Corderie either, carry on past the huge rusting cranes and boats awaiting repair until you reach the point where a tiny boat ferries visitors across to a new exhibition area, the Spazio Thesis. Inside these industrial workshops is possibly the most magical exhibit of the Biennale, illustrating a classic Italian garden inspired by Botticelli's The Birth of Venus that is actually under construction in the Chinese town of Tianjin.

miniambiente.it

· 11th Biennale of Architecture runs until November 23. Open daily 10am-6pm. Tickets for Giardini and Arsenale valid for two days: €15. Entry to exhibitions in the city of Venice is free, though most are closed on Mondays. labiennale.org