



Photographer: Werner Spies

VENICE BIENNALE

Reflections on the South African Cool Capital pavilion at the Biennale di Venezia, 2016.

Nicholas J Clarke

Research Associate, Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria, PhD Candidate, Heritage & Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Delft University of Technology.

Photographs by Carla Crafford

I was fortunate to be able to travel to Venice to attend the 2016 Biennale. Visiting the exhibition by my native country was a top priority, especially as it showcased my hometown city of many names: iPitoli - Tshwane - Pretoria - Snor City. In this essay I will explore, from my perspective and understanding, the presence and impact of this South African pavilion at the 15th International Architecture Exhibition (Biennale) in Venice.

The International Architecture Exhibition (Biennale) has, since its establishment in 1980, grown into the most important event on the international architectural calendar. The theme for this year's

Biennale was “Reporting from the Front”. It called for a changed perspective on the role of architecture, resonating with the current consensus that the architectural profession, through its becoming subservient to the Neoliberalist market economy, has lost its larger societal reason for being. This opinion is not mine only but has been vocalised by some highly regarded practitioners, including Rem Koolhaas. He recently stated ... *architecture has a serious problem today.* [1] The theme of the 2016 Biennale was effectively a ‘call to arms’, providing a platform to expose architectural projects that were socially based, problem-driven and have served in the trenches of ... *the many battles that need to be won in order to improve the quality [of the] built environment and consequently people’s quality of life.*[2]

The Venice Architecture Biennale comprises two categories of entries: the country pavilions (in essence ways in which countries express an image to the world; propaganda, if you will) and the curated exhibition of notable architectural projects, chosen to relate to the theme.

It is clear that a number of the participating countries struggled to align the images they would like to project to the world

with the Biennale theme (for instance the self-content smugness emanating from the antipodes who ‘have arrived’: pool-side stories from a continent where the sun always shines, and intricately crafted architectural models floating on cloud-like islands; or the Nordic self-fulfilment which asks: ‘now that we have created a perfect society, where do we go from here?’) Yet some countries, notably South Africa, got it right. Cool Capital stood out from its peers.

The 2016 South African entry was not about architecture, but about citizens, their identity, creating a sense of belonging and activating the ever-emergent city.

Its message was that the citizens of South Africa are free to create their identities, their environments and their futures, and as such it resonated harmoniously with the 2016 Biennale theme. Pieter Mathews was appointed as official curator and was assisted by Carla Taljaard.

The 2016 Cool Capital South African pavilion presented highlights from the 2014 Cool Capital Biennale. This so-called ‘guerrilla biennale’ stimulated the inhabitants of Pretoria, the capital of South Africa, to engage with their environment as an act of taking ownership. That year saw the public in general – including built environment professionals, visual artists, theatrical producers and filmmakers, and learners from various schools – imagine, plan and execute projects, events and happenings throughout their city. These were not curated but were carefully documented to be presented in a catalogue and a documentary film. For the 2016 Biennale, photographs, objects, the print catalogue and the documentary film were all transported to Venice. Here, for 6 months, a hall in the historic Arsenale complex became an extension of the Capital of South Africa, inhabited by the voices, ambitions and creativity of her citizens.

Visiting the Biennale is physically and mentally taxing. Most exhibitions are designed for people to walk through the often pitch-black labyrinthine cavernous halls – turned into neutral black boxes for the occasion – against which blank canvas the chosen narrative radiates its message.

Opening ceremony of the 15th International Architecture Exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia.

Photograph: Werner Spies

The South African pavilion is located in the Sale d’Armi in the Arsenale, a historic building in the Venice dockyards.





Posters placed close to the Venice Arsenale promote the South African Pavilion

Here you, the inquisitive visitor, are expected to absorb the well-lit infographic information panels on display, marvel at meticulous architectural models, reflect ... and move on. At the 2016 Biennale, 64 countries and 88 private practice entries vied for the attention of visitors and the international architectural press, which in turn were eager to be impressed. In this hyper-sensory environment, even the most avid visitor quickly succumbs to mental overload and physical exhaustion.

What a joy it was then to reach the Arsenale, walk up the simple timber stairs into the bright first floor and meet – above large windows overlooking the calm waters of the Arsenale harbour – the simple, electric-globe lit words, “Cool Capital”. This sign, heralding a different take on things, was seemingly haphazardly suspended from the ancient roof timbers

that span a well-lit space. And then, an unashamed multitude of exuberantly painted chairs, each unique, on which to rest a weary frame. The message was clear: *relax, put your feet up and let us show you our world ... our city that we too are now rediscovering and, in so doing, remaking.*

“The exhibition challenged commonly held perceptions of South Africa.”

A number of countries own their own purpose-built pavilions in Venice. Others, like South Africa, rent space in one of the existing buildings of the ancient Arsenale complex or elsewhere in Venice.

Mostly, the common strategy when exhibits are designed is to only use the space as a neutral void (the beautiful neighbour to the South African pavilion, an abstract ship hanging free in space, serves as a good example). In contrast, the South African entry sought to inhabit its hall, integrating with the large timber roof trusses, revelling in the well-worn floorboards, and relishing in the beautifully worn red brick walls which are so reminiscent of the red brick building tradition of our capital. The Mediterranean sun streamed in through large windows, bringing the outside in – such a vital part of South African living. In fact, this way of being – the ennobling of inherited places through taking ownership and modulating them – is what the Cool Capital exhibition and the 2016 Biennale were all about. The exhibition design was located and localised. Cool Capital made *local* (no matter where it is) *lekker*. [3]



The entrance to the South African pavilion displays a photo of Diane Victor's dust drawing of late President Paul Kruger, which was created in the empty Transvaal Provincial Administration Building

“Architecture can be an instrument of a humanistic civilization, not as result of a formal style, but as evidence of the ability of human beings to be the masters of their own destinies.”

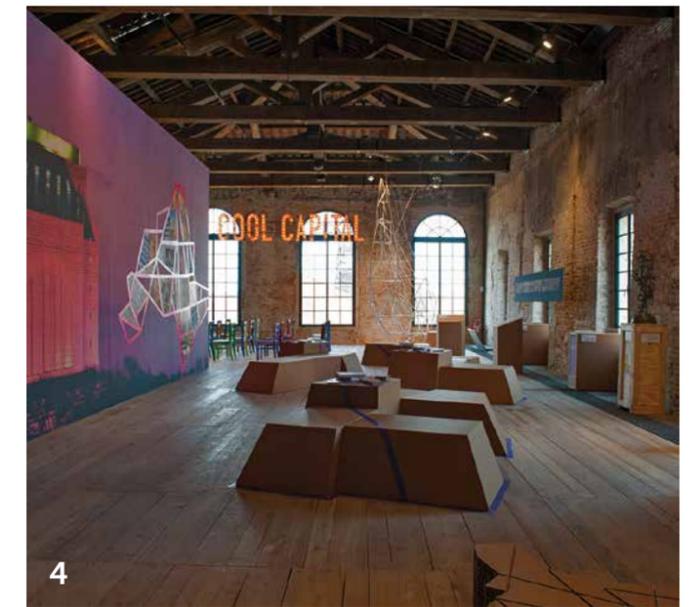
It stands in stark contrast to the 2014 South African pavilion, *Absorbing Modernity 1914–2014*. That exhibit abstracted past architecture and urbanism practice in a very academic manner to highlight the historic role architecture played in creating apartheid in South African society. The 2014 entry obsessed on this past; 2016 took a view to the future. Cool Capital did not disown the past, but rather took it as fact and sought to bridge historic gaps through engaging people from all sides of various historical divides with their shared urban realities.

The exhibition challenged the commonly held perceptions of South Africa. For the tourist, South Africa is the country of the Big 5 and the Safari; the Mother City and the Mountain – the 6-star “tavern of the seas”; for the businessman, mineral wealth, gold, banking and agricultural produce; for the historian and socially aware architect, erstwhile country of Apartheid, division, land of lingering social inequity, informal settlements and poverty.

Cool Capital presented a different perspective, that of people who belong, want to make a difference, want to create their own destinies, where – as vocalised by a learner-participant in the documentary screened in the exhibition – citizens ... *do not need permission to appreciate our environment or take care of it.* [4]

The 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale called for instances where architecture is an ... *instrument of self-government ... and a demonstration of the ability of humans to become masters of their own destinies.* [5] The South African entry showed how this can be done, and has been done, in its own capital.

The focus of the exhibit on the capital city of South Africa resonated with the ideas underpinning the Biennale. Cities of which the primary function is to serve as capital are globally thought of as boring; from Canberra to Washington, The Hague to Brasilia, the bureaucratic institutions that created and occupy these cities code them. On the surface, Pretoria is no different from its peers. Long known as ‘Snor City’, a denigrating appellation, the city suffers from a poor national and international image. This exemplifies those processes the Biennale declared war against when the curator stated that ... *the greed and impatience of capital or the single-mindedness and conservatism of the bureaucracy tend to produce banal, mediocre and dull built environments.* [6] Capital cities condense these forces. iPitoli is no different. Cool Capital sought to subvert these forces. The 2016 South African entry started to dismantle this image of mediocrity by creating an alternative, inclusive current identity and future perspective for Snor City.



“Underlining all of this is the question of the role of the architect.”

1.

Cool Capital's insignia is derived from the map of Tshwane. The seductive graphic by Eric Duplan was a proposal for a mural in Pretoria

2.

In 2014, the Voortrekker Monument was lit up in pink for the duration of Cool Capital, as an example of how old symbols can remain relevant in an ever-changing social and political climate

3.

Faceted cardboard furniture invite visitors to pause, page through the catalogue, and spend time in the pavilion

4.

A view towards the harbour, with artworks lining the sides of the exhibition space

Underlining all of the above is the question of the role of the architect, and the 2016 Cool Capital pavilion epitomised how it is changing. Architects as artists are out of sync with the world evolving around them: a threatened species, quite like a polar bear on an iceberg afloat in the seas of global warming. The new role of the architect is that of mediator and facilitator. To quote Paulo Barata, President of the Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, architecture can be ... *an instrument of a humanistic civilisation, not as result of a formal style, but as evidence of the ability of human beings to be the masters of their own destinies.*[7]

The role of the curating architects of the 2014 Cool Capital Biennale, Mathews and Taljaard, was to 'design' the conditions under which an active citizenry could become enthused and engaged. This mirrors the other notable South African entry to the Biennale: the 'enabling structures'[8] of Design Workshop at the Warwick Junction Markets in Durban.[9] Design Workshop created facilitator constructions and spaces for Durban's largest market

complex; Mathews and Taljaard designed an enabling environment for creativity and belonging for Tshwane's citizens.

Criticism? Certainly. The 2014 Cool Capital Biennale too can be criticised for having been a mostly middle-class endeavour, the modes of engagement resonating with genteel visions of urbanity. These can be forgiven seeing the restricted resources with which it was staged, as a consequence of which participation tended to be limited to well-resourced citizens. As such it is an initiative that deserves to be repeated and supported by the government so as to be able to reach more people.

It was also clear that the exhibition had to be staged with a limited budget and suffered visibly from this financial under-resourcing. This disadvantage was turned into a virtue by making clever use of cheap materials and available resources, but the exhibit still could not shake the impression of having had the potential to be more. Despite these handicaps, the 2016 South African Cool Capital pavilion



1. Stone Mandala land art project in Mamelodi by Ke Neil We and Banele Khoza

managed to stand out in a very competitive crowd. It received mention in a number of international reviews and privately published guides to the Biennale, including *The Venice Insider* which lists it as one of the top 12 exhibitions to see at the Biennale.[10]

“Wallpaper* Magazine summarised that South Africa’s participation looks at how active citizens are a country’s best asset.”

The internationally esteemed *Wallpaper** magazine summarised that ... *South Africa’s participation looks at how active citizens are a country’s best asset.*[11]



2. Sixteen hand-painted chairs by learners of Hoërskool Garsfontein form a ‘theatre’ from where the documentary film *DorpStad* can be appreciated. In the background, a travelling sculpture by Rina Stutzer is on display

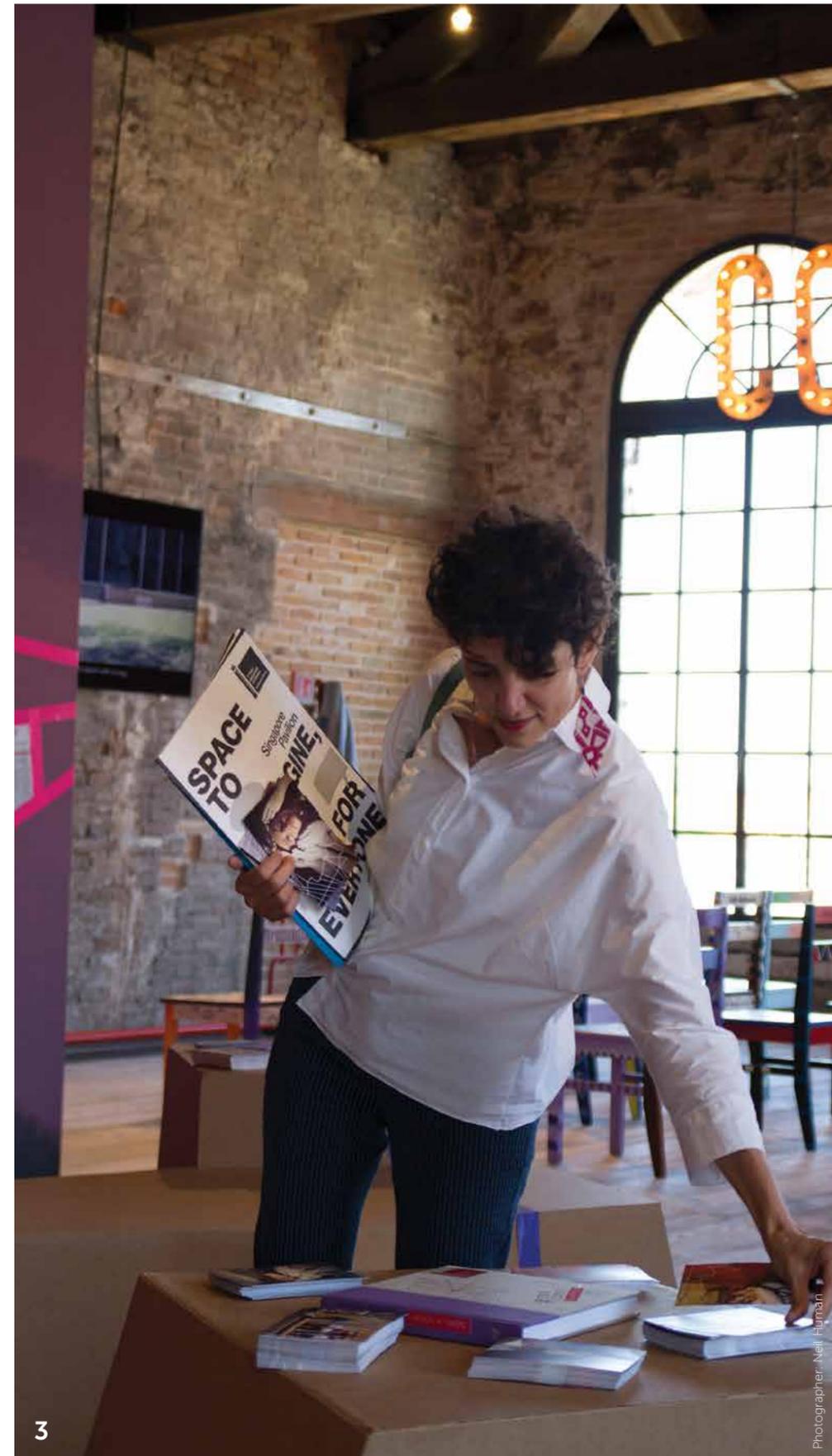
The South African 2016 Biennale pavilion was one of only four entries from the African mainland and therefore constituted an essential voice from the Continent. It certainly contributed to the larger global conversation, which is the aim of the Biennale. Ours was an important message, and our voice was heard. It expressed that it is South Africa’s people, not policy and certainly not architectural icons, that matter. It spoke of how architecture is not sacred and must not demand our servitude, but that it must serve society. South Africa showed people how to make a future that they have the power to decode, take ownership of, and recode places inherited from the past, even if they are burdened by divisive histories. This is an essential message from a continent still dealing with the legacies of colonialism. In this, the South African pavilion presented an important democratising message from the Continent, for both itself and the world. The impact was considerable.

The 2016 South African Cool Capital exhibition revealed that the battle for the future is playing out on the Front.

We have fought in the trenches and brought news from the *Front*.

And it was *good news*. •

3. A visitor to the pavilion helps herself to a catalogue and postcards featuring Cool Capital projects



References

ARAVENA, A. Rationale. In: International Architectural Exhibition, & Aravena, A. 2016. *Reporting from the front: Biennale architettura 2016, 28.05-27.11 Venice*. Venice: Marsilio Editori, pp. 18-23.

BARATTA, P. Introduction. In: International Architectural Exhibition, & Aravena, A. 2016. *Reporting from the front: Biennale architettura 2016, 28.05-27.11 Venice*. Venice: Marsilio Editori, pp. 14-17.

BUDDS, D. 2016. *Rem Koolhaas: Architecture has a Serious Problem Today*. FastCompany. <http://www.fastcodesign.com/3060135/innovation-by-design/rem-koolhaas-architecture-has-a-serious-problem-today>. [Accessed 22-12-2016].

HUMAN, N. & NIEMANDT, C.J. (dirs). 2015. *DorpStad. Unwrapping a Cool Capital*. [Video recording]. Executive Producer: Mathews, P. Pretoria: Enaba Productions.

INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL EXHIBITION, & ARAVENA, A. 2016. *Reporting from the front: Biennale architettura 2016, 28.05-27.11 Venice*. Venice: Marsilio Editori.

KOOLHAAS, R. Closing keynote for the 2016 AIA Convention. In: Budds, D. 2016. *Rem Koolhaas: Architecture has a Serious Problem Today*. FastCompany. See: <http://www.fastcodesign.com/3060135/innovation-by-design/rem-koolhaas-architecture-has-a-serious-problem-today>. [Accessed 22-12-2016].

MAKIN, A. & TAFULENI, A.E. From Police to Policy: The Transformation of Warwick Triangle from the Most Dangerous into the Most Lively Part of Durban. In: International Architectural Exhibition, & ARAVENA, A. 2016. *Reporting from the front: Biennale Architettura 2016, 28.05-27.11 Venice*. Venice: Marsilio Editori, pp. 74-75.

STATHAKI, E. 2016. World tour: the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale's national participations. *Wallpaper**. See: <http://www.wallpaper.com/architecture/we-tour-the-globe-through-the-2016-venice-architecture-biennales-national-pavilions#ccTEpAR85QSOAYk1.99> [Accessed 22-12-2016].

The pavilion was set up in-situ fashion and, with generous assistance from the Italian construction company WeExhibit, was completed in record time

- [1] Koolhaas, 2016.
- [2] Aravena, 2016: 20.
- [3] *Local is lekker* is a South African saying meaning: local is good, nice, tasty.
- [4] ENABA Productions.
- [5] Baratta, 2016: 15.
- [6] Aravena, 2016: 20-21.
- [7] Baratta, 2016: 15.
- [8] Makin & Tafuleni, 2016: 74.
- [9] This was located in the main building of the Giardini.
- [10] See: <http://www.theveniceinsider.com/12-exhibitions-2016-architecture-biennale/> [Accessed 22-12-2016].
- [11] Stathaki, 2016.



la Biennale di Venezia
15. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura
Partecipazioni Nazionali



arts & culture

Department:
Arts and Culture
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

The 2016 South African Pavilion at la Biennale di Venezia is proudly sponsored by the Department of Arts & Culture