

The Ground beneath our Feet

Scanning the Architecture Biennale

At Common Ground, this year's Venice Biennale, the fundamental question "what is architecture?" concerns the biennale's director, David Chipperfield, as much as it does Toyo Ito (Japanese Pavilion) and the urban activists (USA Pavilion), according to Anna Sansom. With the big name architects now having cause to take a good close look at the hardships brought by disaster, of both the natural and economic varieties, there has been a decided upturn in the quality of their response. Architecture is being rethought, with the needs of local people and sustainability taking precedence over individuality and egoism.

ANNA SANSOM

What is the 'common ground' of shared ideas that form the basis of architectural culture today? This is the question raised by David Chipperfield, the director of the 13th International Architecture Exhibition, Common Ground, at the Biennale di Venezia. The biennale takes place during a time of soul-searching, partly in response to the financial crisis, which has led to budget cuts, cancellations of projects and redundancies, as well as to a loss of faith in institutions. As the British architect says, "You have the feeling that the climate is changing economically and that maybe we should reflect on where architecture is, and what its purpose and role is, and maybe put more emphasis on community and social ideas and shared ideas, intellectually and physically." Although Chipperfield's career has benefited from big-time commissions (the renovation of the Neues Museum in Berlin; the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai; Dolce & Gabbana stores worldwide, ...), he emphasises the need for architecture to renew its civic responsibility.

"Architecture is becoming a sort of exotic animal intended only for museums, railway stations and luxury housing", he regrets. "And if in the profession we just say, 'Well, architecture can only be in these places', we are like urban decorators, just doing a few things while the rest is in a mess. My concern is that the discussion about architecture over the last 10 or 15 years has been about what architecture looks like as opposed to what architecture is. And we're guilty of that as well, because the dysfunction between the profession and society is not only society's fault, it's our fault for not addressing more seriously these fundamental concerns."

The previous two editions – curated by Kazuyo Sejima in 2010 and Aaron Betsky, director of the Cincinnati Art Museum, in 2008 – were experimental and multi-disciplinary. Chipperfield's edition takes a more traditional and conservative approach, including exhibits by established practices such as Zaha Hadid, Herzog & de Meuron, Norman Foster



DAVID CHIPPERFIELD
Director of the 13th International
Architecture Exhibition,
La Biennale di Venezia
Photo: © Ingrid Von Kruse



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and Jean Nouvel. “We don’t discover any new, young architects in this biennale”, observes the Swiss architect Philippe Rahm. “It’s traditionalising, and a confirmation of quality architecture, but there’s less invention and no risk.” In response to such criticism, Chipperfield asserts that “this is not a [TV] talent show, I’m not trying to indicate who will be the next stars.” He then makes a football analogy regarding his decision to feature today’s leading architects in the Arsenale and the central pavilion: “These people are primary players; they are the ones scoring the goals and influencing the game.”

However, architects outdoing each other for fancy commissions seems passé. While admitting that Hadid is “not my cup of tea”, Chipperfield hopes his colleagues can put their egos aside in order to move architecture forward. “It’s the common ground within our profession that we can all talk more openly to each other instead of ‘I don’t like her work; I do like his work.’ Why not say, ‘I respect what that person is trying to do.’ Secondly, once you can accept that kind of openness, maybe it’s easier to talk outside the profession and have more tools to explain to the community at large what we’re trying to do.”

THE ARTISTS/ARCHITECTS MEETING AT THE DISASTER SITE, 2011 (1)
Photo © Japan Foundation

TOYO ITO (2)
Japanese Pavilion, Venice
Photo: Siegrid Demyttenaere

STUDY MODEL FOR THE RIKUZENTAKATA ‘HOME-FOR-ALL’, 2012 (3)
Photo © Japan Foundation

CUTTING DOWN JAPANESE CEDARS FOR LUMBER IN RIKUZENTAKATA, 2012 (4)
Photo © Japan Foundation



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JAPANESE PAVILION

The impetus to ‘rethink architecture’ was the starting-point behind Toyo Ito’s proposal, ‘Architecture. Possible here? Home-for-All’ for the Japanese Pavilion, which scooped the Golden Lion for National Participation. Praised by the jury for its humanity, ‘Home-for-All’ is a community project made in collaboration with three younger architects, Kumiko Inui, Sou Fujimoto and Akihisa Hirata, and the photographer Naoya Hatakeyama. The team designed a community centre that will open in the next couple of months in the town of Rikuzentakata, which was devastated by the tsunami following the Great East Japan Earthquake in Tohoku.

On display are dozens of scale models made during the seven-month-long research period prior to final design, which feature recycled trees for columns as a key component. The pavilion also includes photographs taken before and after the disaster, by Hatakeyama, a native of Rikuzentakata who lost his house and his mother in the tsunami. To find out what kind of building was needed, Ito and his team met with Mikiko Sugawara from the local community, who introduced them to the residents and helped them find a suitable site. “In Rikuzentakata, people used to have a very strong feeling of being part of a community”, says Ito, “but now people who once lived close to each other are in temporary housing and living far apart. So we wanted to create a place where they can meet, eat together, talk together and spend time together.”

The shock of the earthquake and its aftermath caused Ito to reconsider the responsibilities of his profession and the importance of sustainable architecture. As he explains, “before the earthquake, I would talk to students and other young architects and ask them a very simple question: ‘What is architecture for?’ But after the earthquake, you could no longer just say, ‘Look, I made some beautiful architecture, look at how great it is.’ Because now there are people who are really unfortunate and living in temporary housing, I needed to get faraway from architecture as we know it, and start to get in touch once again with real architecture. I think it is the right moment to rethink architecture.”

Ito first visited the disaster area at the end of March 2011 in order to inspect Sendai Mediatheque, which he wanted to repair “as soon as possible”. Seeing the damage inspired him to design a community centre in Sendai. The centre in Rikuzentakata is the third to be created but the only one for which Ito requested the collaboration of Inui, Fujimoto and Hirata. “The theme was to go beyond individualism”, says Ito. “Last century, identity and individualism were strongly appreciated and respected. But at times it could turn into egoism. So this time we had three people building just one thing. It’s not something that could be turned into ‘I made this.’” Initially, there were a few stumbling blocks. “We didn’t know how to collaborate because we had different, competing ideas”, admits Fujimoto. “Then, gradually, as we had more contact with local people and understood their lifestyles and once the site was determined, we began sharing the situation together and it became smoother.”

Asked about how he felt when Ito asked him to become involved, Fujimoto replies: “Honestly, I didn’t

know what kind of architecture we could make for the disaster area. I was so embarrassed and not very sure. It was a big challenge, and a case of rethinking the fundamental part of architecture – what is architecture? And redefining architecture and reconsidering how to make architecture – big questions.” Fujimoto describes how the two-storey community centre relates to the lifestyle of the local residents, offering flexibility through multiple small, cosy spaces that are slightly divided yet interconnected. There is a sense of pride as the centre approaches completion. “Now the columns are finished, and people look up and say, ‘wow, this is something strange but it is special and fitting for this area.’”

THE JAPANESE PAVILION
Photo: Sergio Pirrone
Photojournalism LLP





US PAVILION

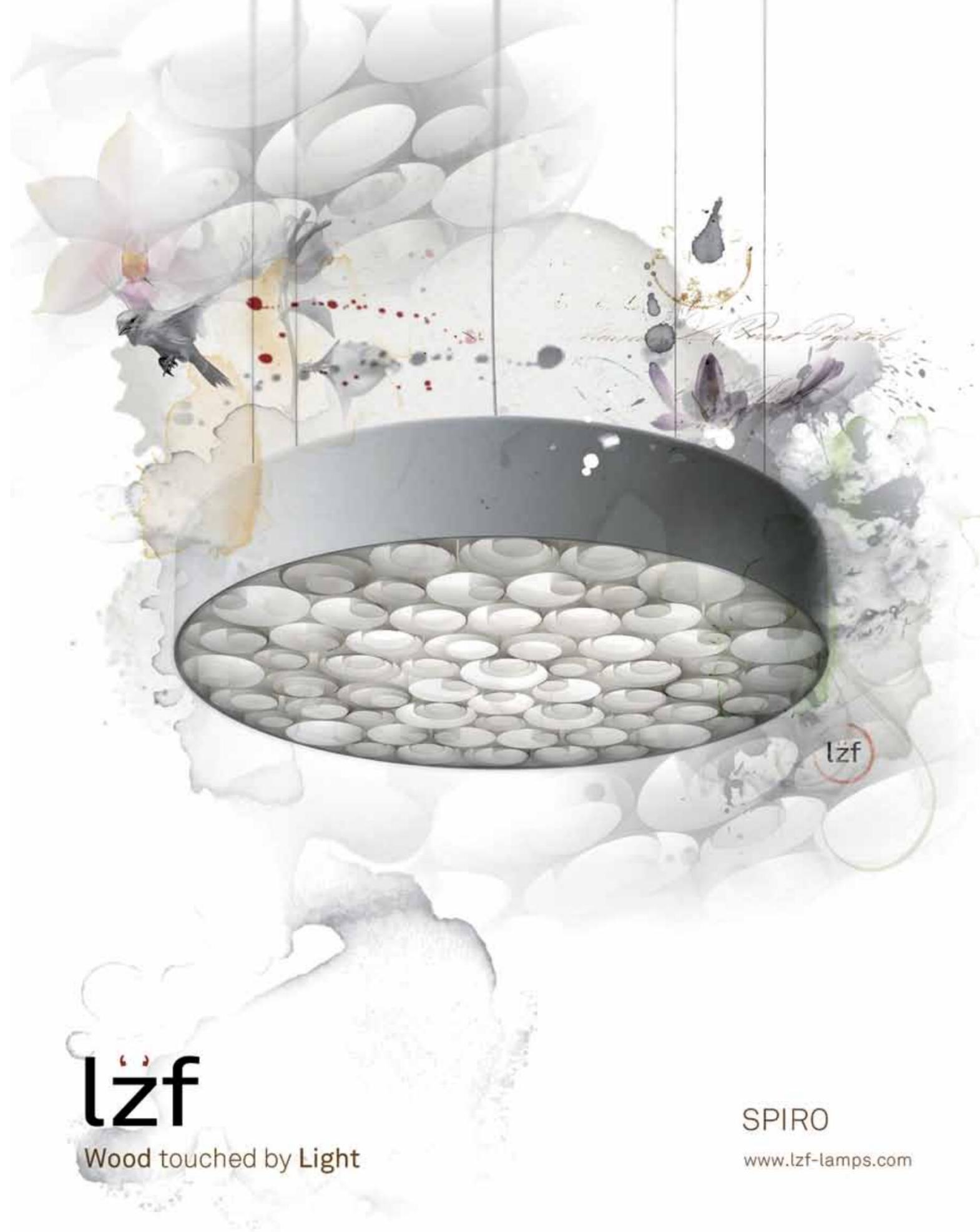
Praised by the jury for “its celebration of the power of individuals to change society in small but effective ways”, the pavilion installation won a Special Mention. ‘Spontaneous Interventions: design actions for the common good’, features 124 grassroots initiatives selected from 450 open-call submissions. The projects are presented as banners hanging from scaffolding. The descriptions, such as ‘guerrilla gardening’ and ‘guerrilla bike lanes’, appear on the front, while coloured barcodes about the level of information, accessibility, community, economy, sustainability, and pleasure appear on the back. As a visitor pulls a banner down, a pulley lifts a counterweight that indicates the problem, and the solution is revealed. But some felt that too many projects were included. “It’s aggressive through the richness of its content”, complains Jasper Sharp, commissioner of the Austrian Pavilion at next June’s Venice Art Biennale. “It almost wants to be a museum exhibition that you could visit for two or three hours. Maybe this is also the intention – to flood and overwhelm you with information.”

Nonetheless, the pavilion compellingly conveys the upswing in urban activism that Ned Cramer, the co-curator, situates in reaction to the financial crisis. “There are thousands of unemployed architects, and municipalities around the country are dramatically scaling back on services and infrastructural development”, he says. “Citizen activists are seizing the opportunity to solve problems in their own communities. It’s most definitely the architectural equivalent of Occupy Wall Street. You can very clearly trace a

line of desire between the intent of the architects in this show, the participants in Occupy Wall Street, and even the Arab Spring protestors and those in Tahrir Square. Here you have people who are being very scrappy, accomplishing things with no budget, often breaking the law to attain goals for their communities.” Cathy Lang Ho, the pavilion’s commissioner, echoes these views. “What we’re really commending here are the people who have managed to get their project funded somehow, get people behind them, and find a team to work with them. There is a heightened desire to be a good citizen. The power really is in the street.” <

‘Common Ground’, the 13th Venice Architecture Biennale, runs until 25 November 2012. www.labiennale.org

THE US PAVILION
Photo: Siegrid Demyttenaere



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