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**SPAGHETTI JUNCTION**  
 Richard Rogers  
 outside the old Italian  
 pavilion, which hosted an  
 international exhibition



The harassed lady in black is only half listening. The bulk of what little attention she can spare is spent deflecting an Austrian web-cam crew from mounting the stairs behind her. She turns to warn off a three-man crew from a Spanish architectural quarterly that is inching a little too close, flashes a frosty grimace of disappointment at a plaintive Portuguese journalist, then shakes her head with a deliberate finality at the increasingly belligerent Austrians. Eventually, she motions me up. She grants just the beginning of a smile even as she drops my business card to the floor and flicks it away with the point of her black stiletto. Before I get within 20 yards of the tail, dapper man in the navy blazer and chinos, a bald, thickset man appears, asking gruffly for a copy of the same ID his colleague downstairs has summarily dispatched.

In Venice in early September, there are stars everywhere. Scarlett Johansson and Brian de Palma are holding court on the Lido, while Catherine Deneuve and Josh Hartnett can be spotted at every party in town. But they are just run-of-the-mill movie stars. Here, at the Architecture Biennale, are Venice's real celebrities. Here and only here, Renzo Piano's press people have their own people. The same architects who spend their days hoping for the phone to ring or hectoring the press to publish their projects suddenly find themselves the guests of honour. And the genuine starchitects, like Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, sweet, unstarry, national treasures both, find themselves fêted like film stars wherever they turn.

For the bulk of the visitors who flocked to the Biennale in Venice, this was where the event's star quality began and ended. They were soon hard at work poring over population statistics, weather charts and traffic-flow diagrams. The 2006 Biennale's director Richard Burdett, professor of architecture and urbanism at the London School of Economics, chose 'Cities, Architecture and Society' as his theme. He launched the exhibition with the first of many statistics: "Today, more than half of the global population is urban; by 2050, 75 per cent of people are expected to live in cities." He celebrated the planet population's slide into the urban megalopolis with an »



# Spin city

Between the celebs, the starchitects and the sauna, this year's Venice Biennale sought to sell a road map for urban living  
 Writer Sophie Lovell  
 Photographer Jonathan Frantini







avalanche of aerial views, sound bites, flow-charts and 3-D density models, documenting the overwhelming scale and intensity of contemporary urban growth and decay. As modernist issues of Utopian urban living become topical again, architecture's much-maligned twin, urban planning, has started to blossom once more. What we need, says Burdett, are solutions, models and dialogue for the future of the city. Architects are to look at the big picture again and build social interaction and sustainable growth into their computer-generated visions of the future.

In the pavilions of the Giardini, individual nations and projects invited by Burdett continued his theme with more statistics, talking heads and plenty of statements, but solutions were a little on the thin side. The main problem for all concerned seems to be how to package worthy issues in a contemporary format that doesn't have the visitor switching off rather than being inspired. It is easy, it seems, for architects to flaunt their 21st-century visions in the shape of intelligent buildings, high-rise feats of engineering and supple, organic forms and skins, but making flood barriers, cycle paths, public transport nets and derelict land reclamation sexy takes more than a pie chart.

The debut of the 'Real Time Rome' project from MIT's SENSEable City Laboratory got on the case by presenting population statistics compiled from mobile-phone use in real-time animations. Hot and cold peaks and troughs waxed and waned across transparent screens as Rome was transformed into morphing mountain ranges of density and use that were illuminating in both senses of the word.

### The future of the city

According to Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano

**Richard Rogers (above left):** I think it's important to create a 'belt' around cities by developing former industrial areas. Also, cities have to become far more dense and compact in the sense that in any neighbourhood you should be able to walk to a restaurant. Take Copenhagen, for example: it's a dark city for much of the year, but people still go about their business on bicycles because it's so compact. Good planning will allow families to live in a city and not feel they have to escape.

**Renzo Piano (above right):** We have to take back our cities! The city has become a polarised place where there are rich people and poor people — and there shouldn't be such extremes. Genoa has expanded like an oil slick over the years and hasn't exactly been treated well. Going forward, there has got to be some kind of relationship between the centre of town and the outskirts of town. We can't just expand here and there without some kind of plan, or else what happens is that you get either poor neighbourhoods or neighbourhoods made up entirely of shopping centres.

Another project that successfully presented a rather dry topic was the 'Shrinking Cities' exhibition, curated by Philipp Oswalt, which used a refreshingly low-tech approach. Printed newspaper and photo wallpaper picked out the salient points of the problems of shrinkage in Western cities, such as dereliction, joblessness and community decay, in a way that could be identified with and therefore digested at a personal level by the visitor.

A tried and trusted method used by science museums worldwide to encourage public engagement in intangible issues is that of interaction. The British pavilion exhibit 'Echo City', curated by Jeremy Till, invited visitors to sit at a table and cut out and glue together their own redesign of spaces for the regional city of Sheffield. A playful atmosphere was also to be found in the Greek pavilion exhibition, entitled 'The Aegean, an Interspersed City'. Giant wall-mounted fans simulated the eternal winds surrounding this 'city of islands'. Packing crates stamped with the names of island destinations contained models of car ferries, life-jackets, flip-flops and bottled water. The effect was inviting — you felt you almost wanted to sit on deck and write a postcard — but it was hard to see where the problems and issues of Greek city life came into the picture.

The piratical occupation of the French pavilion by the Exyzt Collective caused the biggest buzz in the Giardini. They converted the classical building into a commune, complete with a bar, a kitchen, an internet hot spot and a cottage industry T-shirt production area. A scaffolding extension onto the rooftop >>



### MEGALOPOLIS NOW

Above, the director of this year's Biennale, Richard Burdett, at the entrance to his exhibition at the Corderie within the Arsenale. Below, in true hothouse spirit, Exyzt Collective in their sauna, part of the commune they created in the French pavilion and occupied for the duration of the show



housed a sauna and a shower for the occupants, who took up residence for the duration. The place was packed with wine-drinking Biennale visitors-turned-comrades; proof of the notion that the way to the citizen's heart is through his stomach — and the Exyzt in-house chef served the best food in the park.

Fun aside, the main purpose of the Biennale is the exchange of information within the international architectural community. One of the few pavilions that really devoted its efforts towards critical and practical solutions to particular inner-city issues was that of Germany. The commissioners, Berlin-based architects Grüntuch + Ernst, concentrated their 'Convertible City' on planned and completed projects designed to regenerate and maintain density in German inner-city areas, binding together the old fabric with the new. They presented 36 projects by the likes of Graft Architects, Realities: United, Arno Lederer and Olafur Eliasson, which all celebrated a return to enjoying the city and its spaces in between.

After the Biennale's depictions of the trials and tribulations of city life and Venice's September crowds, escape started to seem like a priority. Thus the delightfully simple rural architecture of Terunobu Fujimori in the Japanese pavilion came as a welcome respite. His images of little bespoke Japanese tea houses perched in tree trunks, like fairy-tale dwellings, and buildings with curved roofs, clad in copper or cedar scales, and charred wood walls, were the antithesis of the Japanese packed and cramped megalopolis life. They were quiet poems amid the noise, celebrity and confusion. ★