

In Chicago, an ambitious biennial for architecture banishes the stars and anoints a new generation



Christopher Hawthorne • Contact Reporter

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The inaugural Chicago Architecture Biennial, which opened to the public last weekend with an ambitious collection of gallery installations, performances, talks and tours scattered across the city, does not have an official theme.

The artistic directors, Joseph Grima and Sarah Herda, wanted to keep the exhibition as elastic as possible, the better to accommodate the wide-ranging eclecticism, or maybe the skittish uncertainty, of the current moment in architecture. In a sunny introduction to the catalog they describe their biennial as "an experiment in what is possible" and "a round table at which people of all ages, backgrounds and origins are invited to present their outlook" on the field.

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Still, the specific priorities, preoccupations and loyalties of the exhibition are all very plain to see. So is the Oedipal struggle at its core.

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Anchored by three floors of displays at the Chicago Cultural Center, built in 1897 as the city's first public library and now overlooking the crowds of tourists pouring into Millennium Park, the biennial is eager to mark a major generational shift, a changing of the guard. The architects given pride of place include Spain's Andres Jaque, Mexico's Tatiana Bilbao, Denmark's Bjarke Ingels and Japan's Junya Ishigami and Sou Fujimoto, all born in the 1970s.

The prominent members of an older generation — especially the small group of design celebrities who have dominated the international architecture circuit in recent years — are nowhere to be found. If this biennial were a heist movie there'd be a scene at the end where Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano, Norman Foster, Jean Nouvel and Kazuyo Sejima are rescued from a locked closet

and gasp for breath after the strips of duct tape are ripped from their mouths.

Just as fascinating is the show's relationship with the Architecture Biennale in Venice, still the most anticipated and scrutinized architecture exhibition in the world.

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Grima, an independent curator and former editor of the Italian design magazine *Domus*, and Herda, director of Chicago's Graham Foundation, have organized the Chicago biennial very much in dialogue with and opposition to Venice: It will run on odd years to sync with the Italian show's opening on even ones.

In Venice, the biennale is organized around a series of national pavilions, and it almost always struggles to move beyond or entirely shake off that structure, with its faint colonial logic.

The Chicago show (which despite its lack of a theme does have a cipher of a title, "The State of the Art of Architecture," borrowed from the name of a symposium Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman organized at the Graham Foundation in 1977) has the benefit of a clean slate, of being the first in a new series of every-other-year architecture celebrations. With no existing pavilions to fill, it makes a point of paying close attention to the local on one end of the spectrum and the global at the other while ignoring the national altogether.

Its patron saint, its hip and still-young godfather, is in that sense the architect David Adjaye, now 49, who is not in the biennial itself but hovers above it as a kind of glimmering presence. As an architect who was born in Tanzania to Ghanaian parents, now lives in London and is working across the world — his major projects include the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, set to open on the Mall in Washington, D.C., next year — he personifies the increasingly fluid, nomadic and transnational nature of design practice.

Or, to put it more cynically, he is a new, turbo-charged kind of starchitect.

Adjaye's work is celebrated in an excellent, elegant midcareer survey at the Art Institute of Chicago, just across the park from the Cultural Center. It was organized separately from but nicely complements the biennial.

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It is also timely: Adjaye is rumored to be a leading contender for the job of designing the Obama presidential library, which will be built on Chicago's South Side.

Another of this biennial's efforts to tweak architecture's entrenched power structure came on the

second day of its media preview when the organizers of the Curry Stone Design Prize, founded in 2008, took up the auditorium inside the Cultural Center to announce the 2015 winner.

This was doubly symbolic. The Curry Stone Prize — which this year went to the Hong Kong firm Rural Urban Framework, which works to re-imagine villages in mainland China drained by urbanization — is dedicated to a socially and politically engaged set of priorities that matches much of the work in the biennial.

More pointedly, the ceremony was held in the heart of the city where the Pritzker Prize, the best-known honor in the field and one not typically known for daring choices, was founded in 1979 and where the Hyatt Foundation, which sponsors it, is based.

In significant ways, though, this biennial lacks the courage of its patricidal impulses. It can't quite decide if it wants to smash the idea of an architectural establishment into bits or simply announce that a new one is ascendant.

This uncertainty is particularly acute in the anchor exhibition, inside the Cultural Center (which like most parts of the biennial is free). There is a careful and very effective balance in these galleries among photography, video, architectural models and full-scale prototypes, including a little street of residential designs on the top floor by Bilbao, the New York firm MOS and others. Fujimoto presents tiny models on simple black stands — a kind of architectural tasting menu.

The investigations of technology and digital culture also come in smartly measured doses. Grima and Herda push back against the eccentric, insistent architecture of the Cultural Center, installing work in its courtyard and stairwells and across its front facade.

There are all kinds of indications in this biennial of the forces shaping contemporary architecture; the show puts an emphasis on the ad hoc, the resourceful, the collaborative, the open-ended, the temporary, the socially and environmentally conscious and the formally subtle. Housing is a strong point.

Grima and Herda have mostly banished form-making for its own sake. They carefully encourage — coax along — the field's renewed interest in history. The participating architects also grapple in a creative range of ways with the powerful legacy of the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who lived and worked in Chicago from 1938 until his death in 1969.

Yet the basic format of the exhibition is borrowed directly from Venice and international shows like it, with each firm given a little patch of wall or floor space and allowed to present a single project, idea or provocation. The names might be different, and the approach slightly less formal, but the structure is familiar. Ingels and Ishigami have simply been slotted in to replace Hadid and Foster.

It is only once it gets beyond the Cultural Center that the exhibition really finds its voice. In collaborating with the African American Chicago artist Theaster Gates, who opened a new South Side project, the Stony Island Arts Bank, on the biennial's opening weekend, Grima and Herda found a productive way to step outside architecture's hothouse of generational and territorial rivalries.

The biennial also sponsored a competition for a series of small pavilions along Lake Michigan. The most ambitious is an appealingly spare combination of cross-laminated timber and chain link, a distillation of Miesian and L.A. School influences, by the Rhode Island firm Ultramoderne.

A bigger blast of fresh air was provided by performance pieces organized by the architects Jaque and Bryony Roberts and the artist Santiago Borja. Jaque (pronounced HA-kay) mounted a funny, charmingly low-tech and in the end sharply political tribute to "Powers of Ten," the famous 1977 short film about perspective and scale by Charles and Ray Eames.

Roberts, who is based in Los Angeles and Norway, worked with Chicago's South Side Drill Team to fill Federal Plaza, a public space in the Loop overseen sternly by Mies buildings, with performances choreographed by Asher Waldron. I expected a staged, even canned collision between absolutist Germanic modernism and contemporary culture, or between whiteness and blackness; what I discovered was closer to a three-dimensional essay on various approaches to symmetry and precision.

Those parts of the biennial, for all their inventive energy, felt peripheral to the central exhibition. The performance pieces were held only during the opening weekend, while the show at the Cultural Center will be up through Jan. 3.

I left Chicago thinking of a fairly well-known photograph from the late 1970s, taken around the time Tigerman was organizing that Graham Foundation symposium, of the father-and-son novelists Kingsley and Martin Amis.

In the picture, Martin is all brooding attitude and youthful rebellion, his hair long, his jeans tight and his collar oversized. Kingsley, standing next to him, is taller and a good deal more imposing, at least until you notice that his arm is in a sling.

Like this first Chicago Architecture Biennial, it's a portrait of a generation gap but also of a certain labored and difficult kind of continuity — and maybe a lesson in how tough it can be to distance yourself from your father, even when he's hobbled and not quite the force he once was.

To paraphrase Gertrude Stein by way of Watson and Crick, DNA is DNA is DNA is DNA.

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