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WHY ARE THERE (ALMOST) NO AMERICAN ARCHITECTS IN THE 2016 VENICE BIENNALE?

Alejandro Aravena, the curator of the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, “Reporting from the Front,” claims that the 15th architecture exhibition “offers a new point of view” and is about “listening to those who are able to gain perspective and are in the position to share knowledge and experiences, inventiveness and pertinence, with those of us standing on the ground.” Except for a structural engineer working at the ETH Zürich in Switzerland; Gary Hustwit, a filmmaker working with the Norman Foster Foundation on a droneport for Rwanda; and Harvard’s Rahul Mehrotra (with Felipe Vera) who works on projects in his native India; there are seemingly no “new points of view” from America that address its urban issues and contribute to an international debate. The lone U.S. representative is Auburn University’s Rural Studio and it takes nothing away from its profound and important contributions to say that it offers little new or urban solutions. The largest number of official delegates in Aravena’s biennale comes from Europe, Mexico, and South America, while the majority of the rest are from global developing countries. The United States has never dominated the biennale, which began as an Italian and European event, but it has always had significant representatives (excluding, of course, those in the U.S. Pavilion) and had curator Aaron Betsky in 2008.

Is Aravena (who taught at Harvard from 2000-2005) unaware of developments in American architecture? Or does he simply believe the most exciting new ideas are emerging from developing countries and think its time to focus on work from the southern hemisphere? Biennale president Paolo Barratta, who has a significant presence in the formulation of the concept and direction of the biennale, said that the image of this biennale—a woman on a ladder gazing across a desert horizon—is the counterpart to the one chosen for the 2015 international art exhibition, “All the World’s Futures.” The art exhibition was curated by Okwui Enwezor, who wanted to open up the event to artists in under-represented, developing countries, largely from the southern hemisphere.

Barratta also said that previous architecture biennales were “characterized by an increasing divergence between architecture and civil society” and the 2016 edition would examine whether there exists “phenomena that show trends that run in the opposite direction.” This biennale—he promises—seeks “positive images of change” geared toward civil society and it is worrisome that the U.S. has so little influence in this global debate. Is it that American architects are providing solutions that emerge only from our unique codes and industrialized materials? Or are the solutions offered so corporate in nature that they cannot have applications outside the developed world? A partial answer to this question might be hinted at in the 2016 U.S. pavilion, where highly professional proposals make claims about technology, but are not strong in their political or social agendas. **WILLIAM MENKING**



UPGRADES TO FORD FOUNDATION BUILDING ARE APPROVED

A-FORD-ABLE

On April 19, the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) approved the \$190 million renovation to the Ford Foundation Building at 320 East 43rd Street. The building, designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates with its iconic atrium by designer Dan Kiley, has been largely untouched since it was completed in 1967. In 1997, the LPC designated the exterior, atrium glass walls, and garden of the foundation headquarters as official landmarks. The new upgrades are mostly focused on bringing the building up to code and will be conducted by Gensler with Bill Higgins of Higgins Quasebarth & Partners as consultants, while Raymond Jungles Studio will handle the plantings.

This undertaking will include doubling conference space and dedicating two floors to other nonprofit organizations, creating a new visitors center, art gallery, and public event spaces, and reducing Ford’s own office area by one-third.

Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, said, “This means more accessibility for people with disabilities; [and a place that is] more open to visitors and the public, including a visitors center and art gallery; more open to our colleagues and sister institutions through expanded meeting facilities; and a more open working environment for our own staff to encourage collaboration and reduce hierarchy.”

However, at the presentation in April, commissioners and Historic District Council (HDC) director of advocacy and community outreach Kelly Carroll had reservations. Carroll pointed out that many of the buildings the HDC reviews have little evidence of their former glory, while the Ford Foundation still retains its original brass doors, planters, modernist tile pavers, and signature indoor-outdoor flow—a rare gift. “An approval [to remove features] today can easily be a regret a generation from now,” she said. In particular, she voiced concerns over removing planters—which are currently ADA compliant—and suggested that the team look into automating the bronze doors rather than tossing them.

Others, such as Tara Kelly of the Municipal Art Society, expressed similar concerns and suggested more greenery on the facade and entrance on 42nd Street.

In the end, commissioners voted to approve changes. The renovation is expected to be complete by 2019. **OLIVIA MARTIN**

MATHEWS NIELSEN AND WEST 8 TRANSFORM GOVERNORS ISLAND

The Hills Have Slides

On April 9, 1776, General Israel Putnam of the Continental Army fortified Governors Island with mounds of earth to stave off the encroaching British Army. Now, Dutch firm West 8 Urban Design & Landscape Architecture and local landscape architect Mathews Nielsen are essentially emulating Putnam’s plans to create an undulating, playful topography.

Known as “The Hills,” the project comprises four mounds made using recycled construction debris that form a rolling landscape with grassy slopes. Rising up to 70 feet, the tallest, “Outlook Hill,” will offer panoramic views of

the Statue of Liberty, New York Harbor, and all five boroughs.

The project is part of West 8’s master plan for the Governors Island park, encompassing 87 acres. The Hills adds 10 acres of greenery to the island, including 43,000 shrubs and more than 860 trees. At 38 feet high, the aptly named “Slide Hill” will feature four slides, one of which will be the longest in the city.

A “granite scramble” will also run through the site using blocks that once made up the island’s seawall. The scramble will link with other paths on “Discovery Hill,” which will be lined with a series of site-specific artistic installations.

“The ‘granite scramble’ presented a unique opportunity to recycle precious granite from the seawall, enriched with the scars of history,” said Adriaan Geuze, one of the founders

of West 8. “We were convinced that this pile of granite rock offered the chance for a degree of informality throughout the park; the granite is laid out for seating, climbing, and pleasure.”

From an ecological perspective, the scheme contributes significantly to the vicinity. “By adding a minimum of soil above the salty groundwater, the park can perform as an ecosystem with the gradient of fresh brackish water,” said Geuze. “On top of this, hundreds of indigenous plants have been planted, and the island has been seeded with wild flowers, which creates a micro-biotope for millions of insects, and attracts birds.”

“Pleasure, journey, lightness, and playfulness” formed West 8’s initial approach and “a collective decision was made to avoid the cliché playground and to look for a form that could expand play beyond just children.” **JASON SAYER**