

Herald Tribune  
IHT.com  
September 15, 2008

INTERNATIONAL  
**Herald Tribune**  
THE WORLD'S DAILY NEWSPAPER PUBLISHED WITH THE NEW YORK TIMES AND THE WASHINGTON POST NEWSSTAND PRICE: 150 YEN (TAX INCLUDED)



"Study Hall" at the Kanagawa Institute of Technology in Japan, by Junya Ishigami, who created Japan's installation at the architecture exhibition in Venice. (junya.ishigami+associates)

## Visions of architecture, practical and inspired

By [Roderick Conway Morris](#)

Published: September 15, 2008

VENICE: A section of bright yellow natural gas pipe commands center stage at the Venice Biennale's International Architecture Exhibition this year. Sixty-three meters long and 1.2 meters in diameter, it snakes down the Castello Gardens from the German to the Russian pavilion.

Gaasitoru/Gas Pipe is the exhibit of Estonia, and draws attention to the controversial project to construct a direct pipeline between Russia and Germany. The pipe would run

along the Baltic seabed, which could have major political and ecological implications for neighboring countries.

But the Estonian exhibit also highlights the general issue of energy, which will probably be the biggest single factor in how the architecture of the 21st century develops.

There are 65 national pavilions this year (up 15 from 2006) at the Castello Gardens, Arsenale and other venues around the city. (The exhibition continues until Nov. 23.)

The official overall theme this year is "Out There: Building Beyond Architecture," proposed by Aaron Betsky, director of the Cincinnati Art Museum. Betsky has curated the customary signature show of invited architects in the Arsenale's Corderie (Rope Walk). At the entrance we encounter Betsky's vatic statement: "Architecture is not building. Architecture is about building."

Betsky's show consists entirely of post-modernist installations. Visitors new to the exhibition might wonder if they have wandered into the wrong Biennale, and hardened old hands of the visual arts event may experience a sinking sensation of déjà-vû.

However, the national pavilions - which have responded in various ways to Betsky's title - are an absolute feast, enriched by the presence of many bright young contributors as well as talented, independent-thinking veterans, skeptical of modish nostrums.

Japan's charming pavilion was created by the 36-year-old architect Junya Ishigami with the botanist Hideaki Ohba. Ishigami has surrounded the pavilion with diverse, light-as-air greenhouses; Ohba has stocked them and landscaped the site. The interior of the pavilion, apparently all white, on closer inspection turns out to be covered with delicate pencil drawings, envisioning new ways of intergrating housing with nature - a traditional Japanese concern, but here given original, imaginative twists. (The drawings took 20 Japanese students six weeks to execute, working from Ishigami's originals projected onto the walls.) In this space, there are also examples of Ishigami's wafer-thin steel furniture, which belies its sturdiness with an extraordinary impression of weightlessness and near-invisibility.

Fifty years ago, the Norwegian architect Sverre Fehn was in the avant-garde of reconciling building with nature in his design for the Nordic Countries pavilion, which has trees growing through the roof. The pavilion is now the venue for an absorbing retrospective of his career (Fehn is now 84.)

Russia's oil and gas wealth has initiated an uncontrolled boom in building on a grand scale, as local and foreign architects battle it out for lucrative contracts. The Russian pavilion - with a red-and-white checkered floor dotted with moveable trolleys bearing models of edifices already completed, currently under construction or planned for the future - presents this struggle as a "Chess Game for Russia," the outcome of which remains uncertain.

The key question is whether Russia's architectural landscape will be decided by the imported styles of foreign, brand-name architectural practices or local architects, who until recently have had few opportunities to build.

A torrent of words on the subject from interviews with dozens of architects, foreign and Russian (the thoughts of the latter are particularly stimulating), screened in the pavilion and also recorded in three catalogues, clearly demonstrates that this debate has implications far beyond Russia's borders.

The Russian private building boom is taking place in a country where the state still spends little on public infrastructure, and major cities remain linked by dilapidated two-lane roads. Surprisingly, the situation is mirrored somewhat in the United States, where poorer urban and rural areas receive little help from the federal government.

The American pavilion - with the best exhibition it has hosted in years, from which celebrity architects are notably absent - showcases 16 projects from all over the country that illustrate how this absence of the state has fostered a roll-up-your-sleeves, do-it-yourself culture, which is proving fruitful and productive in local architecture.

Projects include a stylish and practical shelter for stray animals in Hale County, Alabama, designed and built with minimal financial resources by eight architectural students; a covered performance space in a San Francisco park, made of 3,000 plastic bottles and roofed with 65 car hoods; and a campaign to preserve for its long-term residents the run-down, historic Third Ward in Houston, which is undergoing gentrification and where nearly 25 traditional wooden houses have mysteriously burned down over the last year.

Housing is a mega issue in Britain, where it is more expensive than anywhere else in Europe apart from Monaco. While the government, which has presided over a decade of unparalleled mass immigration, predicts that millions of new homes will be needed over the next few years, with the current credit crunch, house building has slumped to its lowest rate since World War II. And while the new houses that are being built are on average the smallest in Europe in terms of average room size, of the 10 most expensive houses in Europe, 9 are in Britain.

The architect and writer Ellis Woodman, curator of "Home/Away" at the British pavilion, offers a thought-provoking historical survey of housing in Britain, examining its present ills, and focusing on five national architectural firms that work both at home and in continental Europe, a useful means of comparing the differences of housing cultures. The best-researched and most lucid display at the British pavilion in recent years, the show has already sparked some timely discussion in the British media.

A unique experiment is presented at the Republic of Korea's pavilion. Pajubookcity was dreamed up by a group of communal-minded young idealists in the late 1980s. A thousand sample books and 20 synchronized 50-centimeter, or 20-inch, LCD monitors tell the rather stirring story of this completely new city, built on reclaimed wetlands near the north-south border, which is now the home of 130 publishing companies, 57 printers and binders, and 160 housing units. They now look set to be joined there by the Korean movie industry.

Poland's dystopian vision "The Afterlife of Buildings" won this year's best pavilion prize. It takes six "iconic" contemporary edifices by "star" architects, and imagines by means

of Kobas Laksa's brilliant photomontages what they might be like in around 50 years' time.

With soaring fuel costs, terminal 2 at the Warsaw city airport has been turned over to the factory farming of cattle and geese; Norman Foster's "Metropolitan Office Building" has been converted into a ramshackle "Metropolitan Prison," its courtyard a convenient enclosed exercise space for the convicts; and a glittering skyscraper, fallen into decay, has become a vertical cemetery.

Brazil's response to Betsky's title was to banish architects altogether from its pavilion. In "Non-Architects" the organizers present a kaleidoscopic view of São Paulo - through the voices of 50 residents from every level of society - a city where the pace of construction is so frenetic that building suppliers stay open 24 hours a day.

Spain refused to be bamboozled by Betsky. The organizers' riposte has been to declare that they are actually rather proud of some of their present architecture. They have deliberately chosen for this purpose Spanish architects not necessarily well known outside Spain and from the younger generation.

The Spanish message, too, is that some of the more fruitful seams of traditional and modern architecture have by no means been exhausted. As one of the participants, the Catalan architect Víctor López Cotelo, proposes, the future lies in "combining the rural and the urban, the spontaneous and planned, the natural and the built, the pre-existent and what is to come, so that memory finds its rightful place in the present."