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EXHIBITION

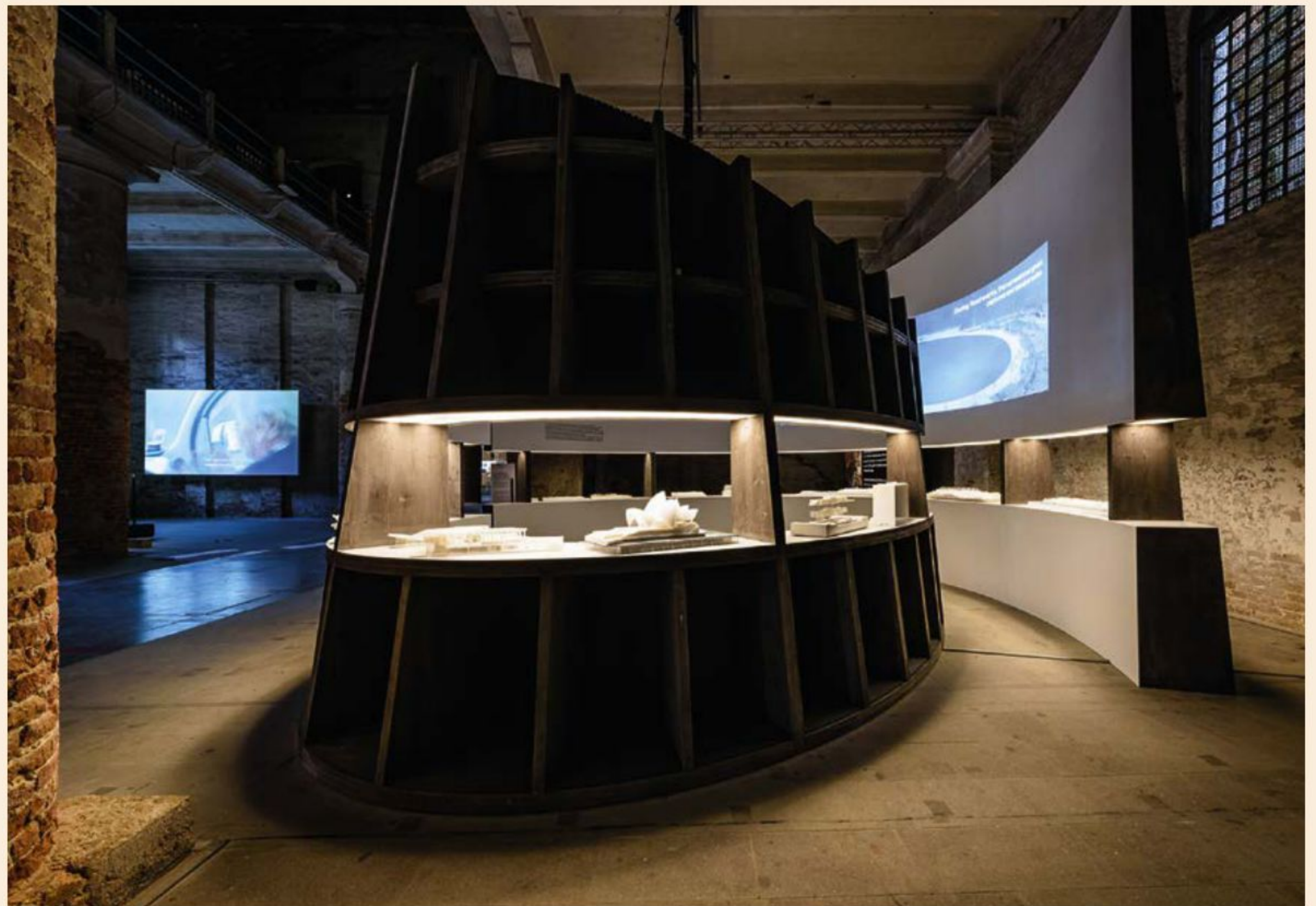
Freespace: Venice Architecture Biennale 2018

Tim Abrahams salutes Grafton Architects for a main show that is unafraid to celebrate the craft of the architect – and dares to do so with thoughtfulness, subtlety and finesse

EVERYTHING YOU'VE READ about the main show at the Venice Architecture Biennale, curated by Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara, is wrong. Far from being muddled, overly polite, confusing, a mess or missing a moral purpose, this vast, highly detailed, often beguiling assemblage of architectural ideas is a profoundly positive, thoughtful experience that suggests the skills of the architect – the capacity to look, record and respond through structure – are in rude health.

A few welcome exceptions aside, the general critical response to the skill and craft on show here has been a mixture of codswallop and axe-grinding. Yes, the name Freespace is woolly. But the facility whereby structures of any kind are built with an inbuilt social function is of vital importance. Should the visitor dare to forgive this exhibition for not being a series of one-liners or vacuous installations, they will find astonishing examples of how architecture can be generous with light, amenity and space.

They might also appreciate how this generosity can be built into the most unprepossessing projects and sites: an important consideration in the economic reality of today. No, it is not a masterplan for an entirely new world. But, in case anyone hasn't noticed, this isn't 1922. And compared to Alejandro Aravena's anti-development, anti-human 2016 Biennale with

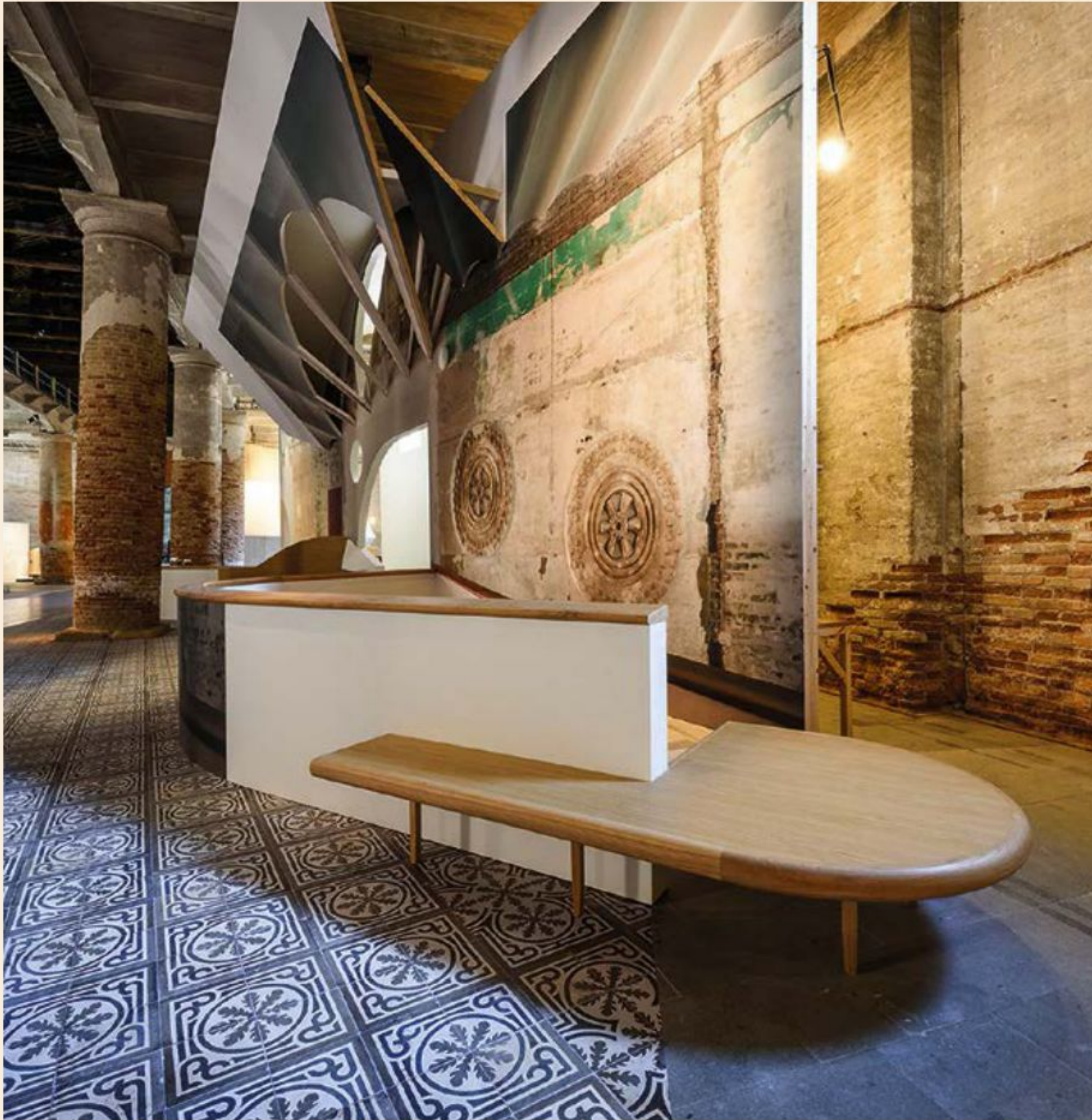


ABOVE Weiss Manfredi's *Lines of Movement* installation features detailed 3D-printed models of buildings and infrastructure

"No, it is not a masterplan for an entirely new world. But this isn't 1922"



IMAGES: ANDREA AVEZZU



LEFT AND BELOW

Flores & Prats' installation is based around their project to rework an old co-operative club in Barcelona into the Sala Beckett theatre



BOTTOM LEFT AND

LEFT Presences by Niall McLaughlin Architects – a turntable featuring models of the communal spaces found in the practice's projects

its call for a regression to the barbarism of the hut or the poverty of the favela, any claim for architecture as a tool of progress is welcome.

It is a subtle show, certainly. It makes a bold statement in favour of model-making, not just celebrating the craft of making worlds in miniature but also radically updating it and testing its boundaries. American studio Weiss / Manfredi used 3D printing to create radio-sized versions of Galata Bridge in Istanbul, the Khaju Bridge in Isfahan

and Argasen Ki Baoli in New Delhi. In so doing, it explored the potential of infrastructure to host sophisticated patterns of uncontrived human interaction across sites that are civic amenities, and that host both work and leisure. Niall McLaughlin Architects' turntable of models explores the environment not as a prelapsarian world upon which we humans impinge at our peril, but as a condition we can use architecture to make the most of. The past becomes contiguous with the present rather than dominating it; surreptitiously, the megastructure finds favour again.

Across this great hall, which in the past has been divided up into rooms full of mist or interrupted by clumsy pseudo-buildings, there were models, models and more models, but in such variety as to be compelling. Many were enhanced with ►



LEFT AND BELOW

Paredes Pedrosa's installation, titled *The Dream of Space Produces Form*

kind of process of extraction. Public utility is carved out of the monumental block or the mundane streetscape.

What does this say about architecture today? Something profound and quite important. Tom Wilkinson, writing in the *Architectural Review*, rejects McNamara and Shelley's use of the bench around Florence's Palazzo Medici as an example of how public facility can be extracted from private commission. Instead, Wilkinson suggests this is merely an example of 'monetising public space'.

This is untrue, in part and in totality. People of course sat on the benches waiting to bank with the Medicis during the Renaissance. But this was only for a small part of the day (and a miniscule moment in the overall lifetime of the building). In the evening and during weekends, such spaces were free to be used as the public wished.

Making reductionist historical points, dividing the world into clearly distinct realms of state and private with loaded moral emphases on each, is harmful for making and understanding good architecture. The exhibition celebrates the ingenuity with which architects play the hand that they are dealt, rather than foolishly imagining them to be the salve of society's crimes. With these boundaries clearly defined, *Freespace* makes for a profound statement about what architecture can achieve. ♦

new technologies; on occasion films were projected on to them or they became set designs, as was the case with a series of intricate works for Flores & Prats' already famous Sala Beckett. These were not simply models for determining structure but vessels for exploring atmosphere and theatricality. So were Peter Zumthor's series of chest-high landscapes in miniature, exhibited in the Central Pavilion of the Giardini.

For all our dissatisfaction with the architectural icon, the criticism that this show lacked showstoppers is hypocritical. Those who didn't let their eyes adjust to the scale, or didn't spend enough time on it, frankly deserved to be disappointed. Certainly, McNamara and Shelley ruthlessly confine each architect to an alcove and resist any subversion to this rhythm, and why not? Every creative, from the designer of a local football team's website to David Chipperfield, will always try to bend the rules if they think



"Those who didn't let their eyes adjust to the scale frankly deserved to be disappointed"

they can get away with it. The overall effect may be a tad rigid but, conversely, it forces each architect to create a universe within each space. Madrid-based Paredes Pedrosa, for example, uses layers of laser-cut plywood to emphasise the linearity of works such as its library in Cordoba. This is not simply an aesthetic gimmick, but rather an analysis of how public space is achieved by a