REVIEW

Leslie Lokko's 2023 Venice Architecture Biennale: New Stories to Tell

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By Lawrence C. Davis

We live in an age of cultural and political conflict. Some say this is a necessary and productive agent for needed change. Others argue that we're dissolving the social glue required to solve the unprecedented challenges confronting our planet. The recently opened Venice Architecture Biennale, "Laboratory of the Future," curated by Leslie Lokko, the Ghanaian-Scottish novelist, architect, and educator, is a long overdue examination of the often-brutal history but also positive potential of Africa and its diaspora. The range of issues addressed examine both the sins of the West and inclusive optimistic visions for charting ways forward together. Without being heavy handed, the biennale challenges Western architectural legacies and begins to pick up the pieces scattered by centuries of colonialism, and its continued role in fueling social conflict and ecological crisis. In the process, it introduces new narratives needed to make an environmentally balanced, just, and creative world.

Ideas are the fuel that keep architecture and the design of cities and landscape vital to cultural discourse around the world and across time.

Technique is the other essential side of the same coin for all related disciplines. Lokko's curation, especially in the colossal Coraderie of the Arsenale, where she bravely selects the mostly young and diverse exhibitors, is a powerful, poetic, and hopeful attempt to readjust the conversation to include a continent's undervalued sensibilities and imagination. Her claim is that these are qualities and content we need to wrestle the intense challenges we *all* face. Despite their ability to identify issues and ask questions, most of the installations are not architecture. The 2023 Venice Biennale is missing what the discipline itself customarily has done and must continue to do to materialize program, make space, and illustrate the evolving values so sorely needed in our time. While there are some stunning exceptions, the lack of building, urban, and landscape design projects speak to the eroding agency of the very medium urgently required to address the crises we face.

Since the first architectural Venice Biennale in 1979, the event has attracted both the power players and emerging voices from across the architectural world. They're asked to respond to a prompt, framed by its guest director, that when done right, shifts the discipline's discourse to new and more responsive territories. The Biennale occupies two main sites. The parklike Giardini, at the eastern end of the Riva, is filled with national pavilions, nearly all from Western nations. The nearby second site, the Arsenale, is embedded in the urban fabric of Venice that frames its historic naval lagoon. The aquatic piazza is dominated by the Corderie, more than 300 meters long and originally built to make the long ropes for sailing ships of the Venetian navy. There are other pavilions scattered throughout the city, but it's in this second site where Lokko's selected exhibitors install their work. Both principal locations are packed with images, models, videos, installations, and more text panels than anyone could possibly read.

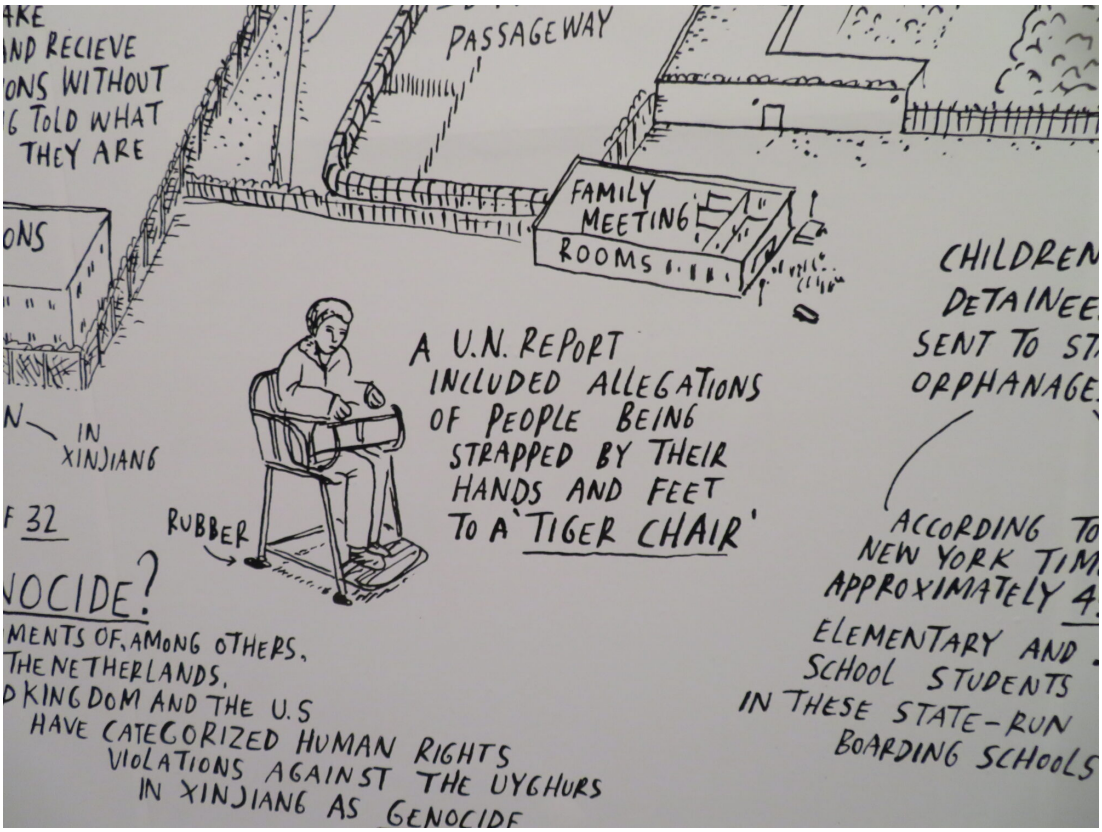
Recently, the festival has become itself a subject of criticism. Travel alone to the event is controversial, with most attendees (including myself) crossing oceans and continents, leaving behind a formidable carbon footprint. At times, the opening events, with their awards, press conferences, and receptions, can feel as indulgent as the Oscars, overflowing with prosecco and spritz. Finally, as with all biennales, this one is massive and, for nearly everyone who visits, overwhelming to absorb.

Lokko's focus on Africa and its diaspora did not come out of thin air. The 2018 exhibit "African Mobilities" in Munich and MOMA's "Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America" in 2021 are two examples of the accelerating interest in emerging African designers and those influenced by its cultural legacies. In this context, Lokko's achievement is her ability to gather this diverse and growing body of work around the idea of "laboratory," a term that accommodates a wide spectrum of subjects and opinions about the continent's past, present and its future. The phrase also suggests that by listening to these new voices, we create a discursive space where we can begin to imagine not only better opportunities for Africa, but for all of us.

There is no better example of this posture than Lokko's own reflective introduction to the Arsenale exhibit, "The Blue Hour." She describes

the time just before sunrise or sunset when the sky takes on a vivid blue tone. For her it's a metaphor for the positive aspects of the time we live in, "a moment between dream and awakening, also considered a moment of hope." The serene start points to the potential of a new beginning that the African frame of reference can help us launch as we rethink an affirmative future.

The poetic beginning puts visitors in a gracious mood as they work through a wide range of analysis, ideas, and attitudes connected to Lokko's theme. This is crucial because throughout the attenuated Arsenale, there is no shortage of critical commentary of the effects of colonialism, ecological destruction, and the continued abuse by past and present globalized economic systems. Sammy Baloji and Twenty-Nine Studio's video, *Aequare: The Future that Never Was*, is a striking example of this type of critique. It's a large-scale video that contrasts black-and-white archival footage of midcentury colonial Belgian Congo with footage of its contemporary remains. Among the memorable juxtapositions is a historic film of a whites-only pool and country club that is montaged with its present state as a ruin and secret play area for children. In her video *Porda* (the Bangla word for "veil"), Anusha Alamgir frames the Islamic hijab as a space of privacy, climate, cultural division, and control. The parody is a tutorial, proposing humorous new typologies for completely covering a woman's body. Nearby, the Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Allison Killing and her Amsterdam firm, Killing Architects, map out, through an enormous complex cartoon mural, the grim story of the Uyghur network of factory detention camps in the Xinjiang region of China. From forced labor and sterilization to possible genocide, the legacy of globally financed abuse, historically associated with Africa, tragically remains in many forms across the world.



An investigation of the Xinjiang detention camps in China, by Killing Architects.

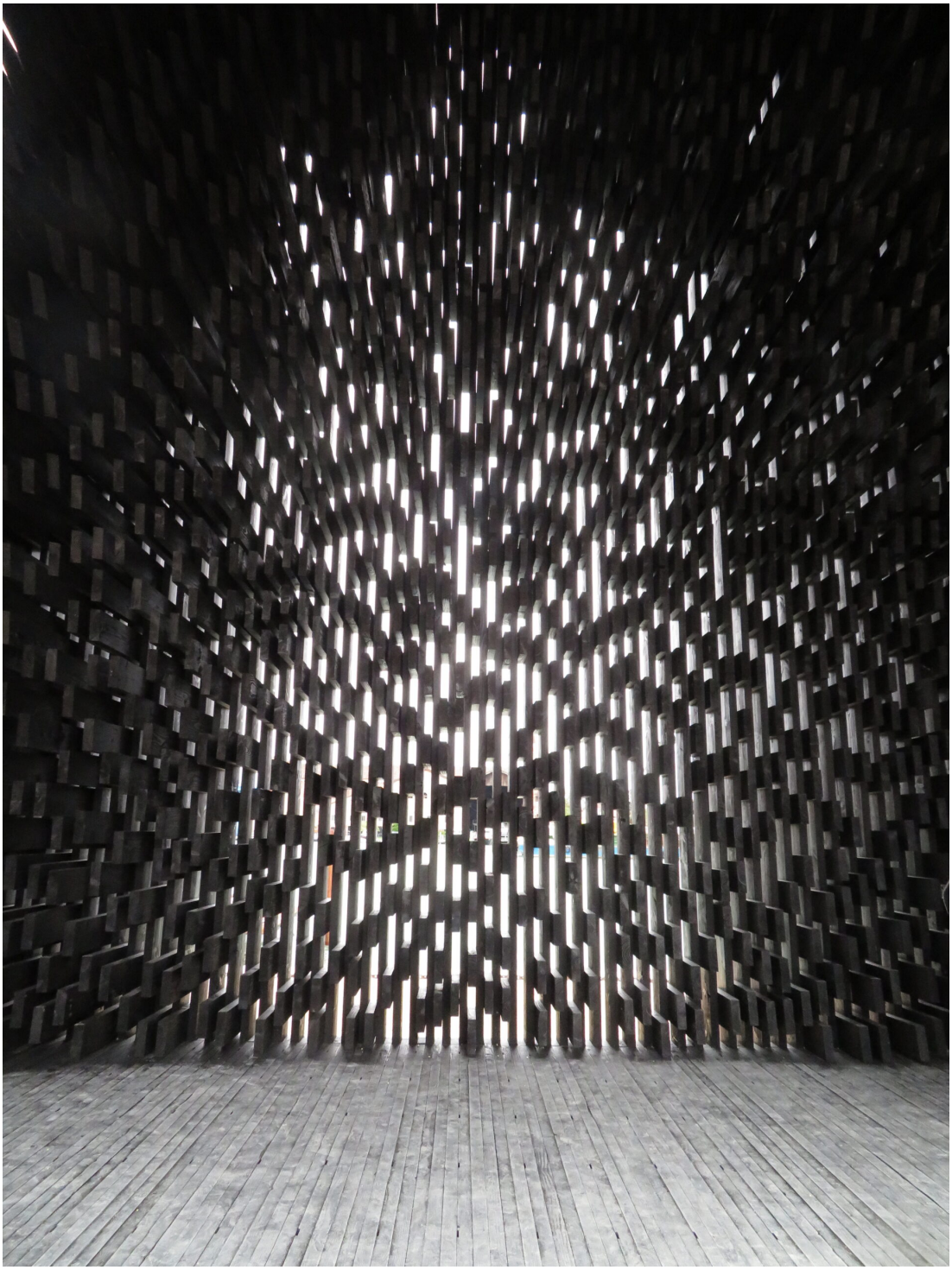
In the Giardini, Lokko's theme was more difficult to find, as were examples of built projects. The one telling exception was the Austrian pavilion, whose full-scale, scaffold-like intervention lay in unassembled pieces, a victim of a rejected building permit by Venetian authorities. Most national pavilions were more installation art than architecture and about ecological and indigenous subjects. The British pavilion came closest to Lokko's thesis. "Dancing Before the Moon" explores the potential of numerous diasporas in the UK and the potential of their everyday social practices to reflect how people change their space and, in the process, evolve new narratives. The six installations are centered on a poignant video by the curators Jayden Ali, Joseph Henry, Meneesha Kellay, and Sumitra Upham that weaves together the many racial and ethnic groups in Great Britain today: Jamaican dominos in Nottingham, Trinidadian Steel drums, Cypriot outdoor cooking, Hindu and Buddhist clothing and beliefs, and many other cultural practices reveal both formal and informal rituals that create new community values and are transforming the shared identity of the UK. Here, cultural alteration of space becomes a rich and optimistic source of new ideas.

Okalekan Jeyifous' "retro futurist eco fiction," ACE/AAP.

In the Giardini's Italian pavilion—as is customary, curated by the guest director—Lokko presents mainly installations, but apart from a room filled with large-scaled wood models of elegant public projects by Sir David Adjaye's practice, there again is not much architectural design. However, in this group one also finds Olalekan Jeyifous's "retro futurist eco-fiction," ACE/AAP. The design for an All-Africa Protoport (AAP) is an urbanism made of "indigenous knowledge" systems and intends to engage the entire continent

and its diaspora in a brightly bannered, flashy, modernistic, sci-fi utopia. Jeyifous builds positive and culturally hybrid narratives to imagine an intellectually refreshing, fun and hip, future from the African point of view. It may not yet entirely be architecture, but its sophisticated exuberance speaks to Lokko's claim that "It is impossible to build a better world if one cannot first imagine it."

Fortunately, architecture, as most recognize it, does make a few captivating cameos in the 2023 Biennale. There's the historical exhibit co-curated by London's Victoria and Albert Museum and the Architectural Association, entitled "Tropical Modernism," a term that has been knocking about for a few decades, used to describe midcentury International Style buildings in Africa. A "colonial" style imported from the West, the movement nevertheless attracted a wide range of practitioners and influences. The exhibit focuses on the collaborations between the AA's influential Department of Tropical Architecture and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), in Kumasi, Ghana, and other architects of the region. The group became a kind of practical design laboratory that developed a hybrid architecture combining the cultures of the global North and South. Responding to the hot humid climate of former British West Africa, their work reminds us of the capacity of architecture to offer instructive passive solutions to our current ecological crisis. Innovative adjustable louvers (allowing airflow), wide eaves, and brises-soleils (a device for shutting out sunlight), were all deployed in sophisticated low-tech designs to create large structures for the emerging institutions of a newly independent Africa.



The interior of “Kwaeɛ” by Adjaye and Associates.

The most dramatic example of architecture is found along the edge of the Arsenale lagoon. “Kwaeɛ” (the word for “forest” in the Ghanian language of Twi), by Adjaye and Associates, is a huge distorted triangular prism with two oculi and made of faceted pieces of black timber that pixelate its geometric form, blurring its reading. Phenomenological, haptic, and figural, it seems to be in dialogue with other monuments in the site and across the city. The adjacent aging crane and the more distant Cathedral of San Marco and its famous campanile suggest that Adjaye’s project offers a new African sensibility that simultaneously interprets its own past and existing Western architecture.

The Flores and Prats installation in the Arsenale, "Emotional Heritage," comprises countless model, photo, and drawing iterations of six projects in and around Barcelona where they practice. All of them are interventions into existing buildings. This small body of work captures an important and nuanced reading of Lokko's idea of "laboratory" and the value of a more-established definition of architecture to adapt to challenges and illustrate changing social values. By engaging with older everyday buildings, such as former parking garages or fabrication shops, Flores and Prats give new life to their host structures, as they become new social centers or other collective facilities. In the process the renovations reveal numerous histories of their sites, many not immediately visible. This unexpectedly transforms them into what they call "emotional" space. Here, a more customary interpretation of architecture has the powerful capacity to reconcile an imperfect or obsolete past by advancing the life of a site with renewed relevance and poignancy. Insightful and compelling, the Barcelona practice discovers and uses subtle, but no less fascinating, new narratives through the design of buildings and space, reinforcing, *through architecture*, Lokko's claim that our imagination is the main tool needed to build a better world.

The production of ideas and knowledge is impressive. What's more elusive, however, as has been the case of many recent biennales, is the display of creative solutions to the enquiries that many of these intriguing exhibits pose. One hopes future directors will recognize this missing piece and use the design of buildings, cities, and landscapes to demonstrate their capacity to answer the key questions of the event and construct new stories that will help better define and unite cultures and our larger society beyond.

Featured image: "All Africa Protoport" (AAP), Okalekan Jeyifous. All photos by the author.

TAGS

AFRICA
ARCHITECTURE
DAVID ADJAYE
LABORATORY OF THE FUTURE
LESLIE LOKKO
VIENNCE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE