

National Pavilion

National Pavilions in the Giardini, a quick look

By Fred A. Bernstein

Like an essay topic posed by a mischievous professor, Kurt Forster's catchall theme for this year's Architecture Biennale, *Metamorph*, left room for widely divergent approaches in the national pavilions. Instead of sending an exhibition to Venice, Russia sent groups of students. The pavilion, ingeniously, became a classroom for weeklong workshops on such topics as "the effects of industrial delocalization," and at the end of each week, the students' projects were displayed on the pavilion walls. Denmark was also in a what-if mode: The Danish Architecture Center sought out the Toronto-based Bruce Mau Design to work with a group of young Danish architects. Mau, a provocateur, posed questions to the group. One question, "What if Denmark doubled its coastline?" was explored in maps and models of a newly crenelated landmass. Another, "What if Greenland was Africa's water fountain?" contemplated melting glaciers to slake the world's thirst. (Identical exhibitions are running in Copenhagen and Toronto, and a summary of them is available at www.tooperfect.com.)

The exhibition in the Belgium pavilion, controversially, focused not on architecture but on its purported absence—in Kinshasa, capital of what was once the Belgian Congo. In a wall text accompanying photos by Marie-Françoise Plissart, anthropologist Filip De Boeck argued that in a decaying city, the human body is the "main infrastructural unit—Kinshasa's only 'building' that

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is constantly constructed and perfected." Some saw the exhibition as patronizing. Nevertheless, the Biennale judges awarded it a Golden Lion for best national pavilion.

The Netherlands approached its topic—how a densely populated country handles sprawl—with maps and statistics galore; like the Belgian entry, this would have been a better book than exhibition if not for an ingenious installation by Traast & Gruson, in which the placement of materials in drawers suggested a domestic-scaled dimension to a global problem. In the Polish pavilion, curator Adam Budak showed pieces by émigrés, including New York's Elizabeth Diller (who lived in Poland until she was six); and Zvi Hecker (who left for Israel after World War II), alongside work by young Polish practitioners. The Swiss installed a single, multiroom installation by Christian Waldvogel: The piece depicted the dismantling of the earth in order to build a better planet, *Globus Cassus*. Waldvogel's photomontages and portentous epigrams could be left hanging for next year's art biennale.

Canada, by contrast, took what seemed a conventional approach—giving its pavilion over



to a single architecture firm, Saucier & Perrotte—but with unconventional results. The firm hung photos of completed works and renderings of a planned Canadian Museum for Human Rights alongside folded-metal sculptures suggested by the building forms. By using the techniques of artists not as an end, but as a means of elucidating architectural ideas, the Montreal-and-Toronto-based firm made a visit to Canada's pavilion as essential to Biennale attendees as a vaporetto. ■

The Dutch Pavilion featured Hybrid Landscapes: Designing for Sprawl in the Netherlands, 1980–2004, curated by the Netherlands Architecture Institute (top). In the Canadian Pavilion (above), architects Saucier & Perrotte displayed an array of recent projects.