

ITALY: THE MAP AND THE CITY

Between Board Game and Global Theater: Exhibiting the Venice Biennale Pavilions

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Entirely absent from histories or discussions of modernist architecture, as either autonomous nationalistic objects or as an assembled discursive project, the Venice Biennale pavilions represent the scope of twentieth century architectural modernism. This compact epic narrative, extending from 1895 to 1995, provides architectural heroes and supporting figures, subplots of war and destruction, and an ever-changing audience. The Venice Biennale pavilions, diminutive and neglected, communicate the vicissitudes of modernism in a condensed and packaged format. They operate as both seasonal pleasure follies and as a permanent extra-urban community, as a diachronic display of modernist evolution and a curiosity collection of autonomous nationalist icons, and as an abandoned museum in a garden and a series of vital containers for contemporary art.

The Venice Biennale began in 1895 as an exhibition of international art held in the Castello Gardens, at the southeast edge of Venice. Its small pavilions, each representing an individual country, perform simultaneously as houses for art and as monumental-miniature embassies. Because of their received status as marginal and ephemeral, and because of their remote location at the far south edge of the treasure-laden island, they are typically overlooked. In 1999 Peter Schjeldahl referred to the Biennale atmosphere as shadowed by "the chronic malaise of the funny little national pavilions under the colossal trees of the Giardini."¹ The art critic Rachel Withers has characterized them as, "Embarrassing reminders of nineteenth-century imperial hubris, ..." ² [they are all 20th c. structures]. Hugh Honour has deemed them "of slight architectural merit, most of them rather 1920ish in style."³ The writer and critic Walter Grasskamp has referred to the collective pavilions as, "... a miniature political landscape of comparable absurdity," "... a grotesque topography," and "strangely strewn dolls' houses of the World's spirit."⁴

The pavilions in their garden setting operate between two standard definitions of the word 'pavilion' - "a summer house or other decorative building in a garden" and "a temporary stand at an exhibition."⁵ This hybrid configuration places the Biennale pavilions be-

tween the permanent museum and the temporary exhibition pavilion. As representative containers, they substitute for the architecture of their origins. Collectively, as an ideal art colony or an embassy row, they chronicle an aggregate evolution of twentieth century modernism.

The Venice Biennale pavilions serve collectively as a connotative inventory of twentieth century architecture. Dominating their denotative function of sheltering contemporary works of art, they display acquired meaning dependent on cultural associations. In his essay "A Theory of Exhibitions," Umberto Eco states, "The architectural product acts as a stimulus only if it first acts as a sign."⁶ In this essay, stimulated by his review of Expo '67 in Montreal, Eco reveals the issues central to reading the Venice Biennale pavilions. He writes, "This continuous oscillation between primary function (the conventional use of the object, or its most direct or elementary meaning) and secondary functions (its related meanings, based on cultural conventions, and mental and semantic associations) forms the object as a system of signs, a message. The history of architecture and design is the history of the dialectic between these two functions."⁷ At the Biennale Gardens denotation is subsumed within connotation. While the Pavilions provide shelter for temporary works of art, their primary utilitarian function is cultural communication, to proffer semantic associations via a series of communicative typologies - always nationalistic and dependent upon the adjectives vernacular, neoclassical, historicist, modernist, ideological, and/or international.

Their systematic and equalizing diminution allows their small scale to operate monumentally while forcing the viewer or tourist to shift their own scale in response. The Biennale Pavilions share an equally reduced scale in relation to each other and to the enormous trees of the gardens. Politically they are also equalized for a brief moment, standing in for diverse countries of varying size and status. Walter Grasskamp writes, "Tiny and vast nations alike may enjoy pavilions of equal dimensions - for the spaces give no reliable instruction as to the relative sizes of the territories represented."⁸

The garden setting for the Biennale pavilions began as the Giardini di Castello, planned under Napoleon when the French occupied Venice. Giannantonio Selva laid out the patterns of vegetation, trees, and walking paths between 1808 and 1812. In 1895 the Biennale was founded by the city of Venice to promote tourism for

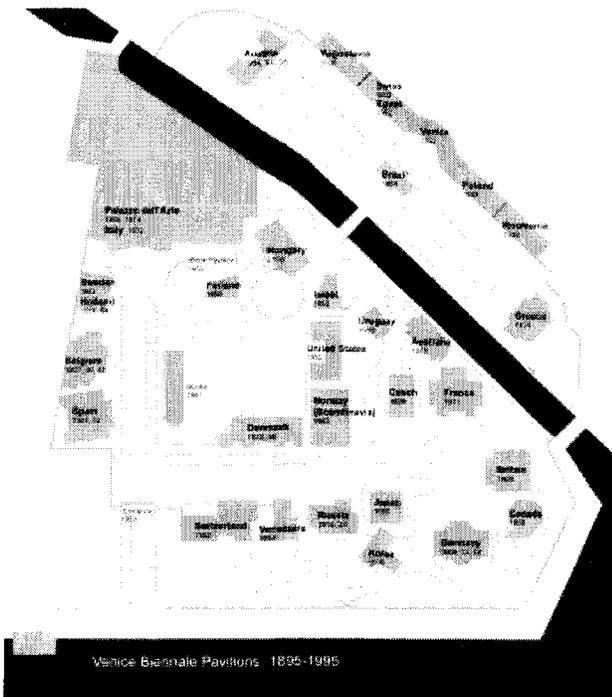


Fig. 1 Map of the Venice Biennale site

the city. The development of the subsequent pavilions can be divided into four periods, politically partitioned by war and revolution: 1895-1914, 1920-1942, 1948-1968, and 1970-1995. Of the 30 extant pavilions, only 17 remain close to their original state. Many of the pavilions have been renovated, re-facaded, added onto, demolished, re-allocated, and/or taken as spoils of war. Adaptation, via hegemony, fashion, or the continuous desire to update nationalistic modernities, characterizes the overall agenda of the Biennale pavilions.

1895-1914

Eight pavilions were constructed between 1895 and the beginning of World War I. Three of the original countries to erect pavilions, all designed by Venetian architects, chose a type of neoclassical nationalism. The first building to be constructed was the Palazzo dell'Esposizione, or Central pavilion, in 1895. Its gesso covered, Roman-neoclassical facade conveyed the imagery of both a pedimented Beaux-Arts temple of art and a tourist fantasy pavilion, as in the sign for Caesars Palace in Las Vegas.⁹ Germany's neoclassical Bavarian Pavilion was built in 1909 by Daniele Donghi. In 1912 it was re-allocated as the all-German Pavilion and mythological figures and ornament were added to its pediment and frieze to project German ideals.

The majority of pavilions built in this first phase employed an identifiable vernacular nationalism. Each was designed by an archi-

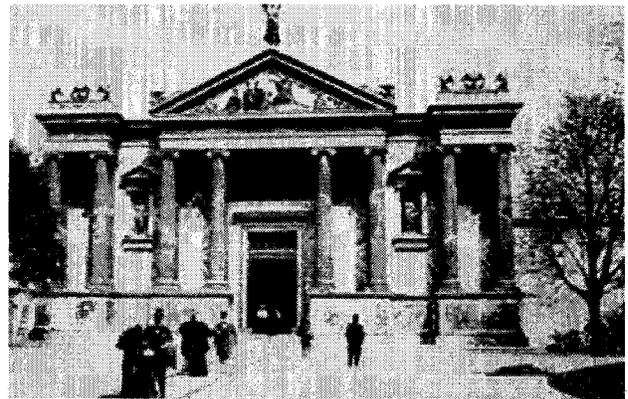


Fig. 2 Palazzo dell'Esposizione, 1895

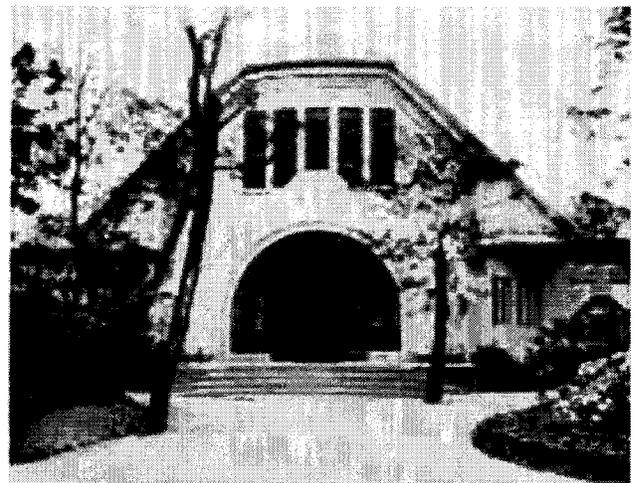


Fig. 3 Hungarian Pavilion, 1909

tect from its home country. The first new pavilion for a specific country, described as a "house of art," was for Belgium in 1907.¹⁰ Its architect, Léon Sneyers, created a domestic scaled Art Nouveau pavilion reflecting that contemporary movement from his home country. The British Pavilion, by Edwin Rickards, was built on a prominent hill at the southern corner of the Gardens. This brick, Italianate, English country house with a white-columned porch simultaneously acknowledged the vernacular tradition of its home country while evoking its titular source, the Venetian villas of Andrea Palladio. The folkloric Hungarian Pavilion contained mosaics on its domestic-scaled facade representing Hungarian mythological tales. The Palazzo dell'Esposizione was given a new, less monumental facade in 1914. The original neoclassical facade was in disrepair, and, rather than reconstruct it, a new, Liberty style form was chosen to renew the image of the Biennale and Italy. Completed just before the outbreak of World War I, the Russian Pavilion suggested Russian Orthodox religious and folkloric traditional architecture.

At the end of this first phase, two groupings of pavilions were established, - Italy, Belgium, Hungary, and Sweden to the north and Britain, France, Russia, and Germany to the south. Britain, France, and Russia had created vast colonial empires and by 1907 had formed the Triple Entente. Like a huge scaled version of the board game Risk, they surrounded Germany in a formation representative of the significant protagonists of World War I, a circumstantial model of world powers.

1920-1942

Between World Wars I and II, representative forms of nationalism and the dominance of Germany and Italy transfigured the development of the Biennale Pavilions. Between 1920, when the Biennale resumed after World War I, and 1942, three types of nationalism characterized the pavilions - historicist nationalism, with references back to specific traditional stylistic architecture; modernist nationalism, emphasizing new forms of nationally identifiable architecture; and ideological nationalism, establishing a show of political power through their primary function of representation. In the latter part of this period stylistic historic attributes began to disintegrate and movement toward abstraction began to occur. "Other modernisms," such as national romanticism, historicist vernacular, and neoclassical Beaux-Arts, reside alongside typically characterized modernist architecture. The Biennale Gardens began to provide a comprehensive survey of western architecture.

Spain, the United States, Denmark, and Greece constructed pavilions characterized by historicist nationalism. Emulating an eighteenth century Churriguersque gateway, Spain's pavilion was encrusted with ornament over a neoclassical shell. The United States Pavilion, by Delano and Aldrich, was established in the middle of the Gardens. Its neo-colonial style and affinity with Thomas Jefferson have been described as "between Monticello and Howard Johnson's."¹¹ Carl Brummer's Danish Pavilion, from 1932, uses a tra-



Fig. 4. United States Pavilion, 1930

ditional form of Danish neoclassical revival derived from the Greek stoa.

Czechoslovakia, Belgium, and Austria strove for a modernist nationalism in their up-to-date pavilions, representative of specific movements within their respective countries. Otakar Novotny's pavilion for Czechoslovakia was the first to offer a structure representative of an avante-garde movement, Czech Cubism. The Vienna Secession master Josef Hoffmann won the competition for the Austrian Pavilion in 1934. His miniature museum featured an open central axis and fluted stone walls.

Russia, Italy, and Germany enacted specific forms of ideological nationalism in the pavilions they constructed or altered between the wars. The Russian Pavilion was renamed the URSS Pavilion in 1924. Iconic elements such as the letters U R S S, an antenna, a red band, and a hammer and sickle were applied to the building.

As the main area of the Gardens was filling up with pavilion structures, the Venetian architect Brenno Del Giudice planned for an expansion of the Biennale grounds in 1932 across the Canal di Sant'Elena. He designed the Venetian Pavilion, or Decorative Arts Pavilion, to feature Venetian artists. Flanking the central pavilion and its elliptical pergola were pavilions for Poland and Switzerland. In contrast to any pavilions that had come before it, these linked structures were dressed in the official state monumental architecture under Mussolini, as established by Marcello Piacentini. Plastered in a smooth white skin and stripped of ornament, their consecutive arches attempted to unify three individual countries.¹² Further flanking wings for Roumania and Yugoslavia were added in 1938. In 1932 the Palazzo dell'Esposizione received its third facade. Duilio Torres's white plaster trabeated structure proclaimed itself 'Italia' with large-scale applied letters.

In 1938 the original neoclassical German Pavilion was "redeemed and demolished by orders of Hitler."¹³ Germany had claimed the land where its pavilion sat as German property. After Hitler's famous visit to the Biennale in 1934 he had erected the new pavilion representing the national-socialist party. Ernst Haiger's monumental stone pavilion projected the representative authority of Hitler's regime through the standard reduced classicism used for public German buildings.¹⁴ Germany aggressively confiscated the Biennale pavilions of the countries it invaded and controlled, closing the Austrian, Czechoslovakian, Polish, Roumanian, and Hungarian Pavilions. Italy also occupied several pavilions, exhibiting art of the Futurists in the URSS Pavilion in 1936 and in 1942 displaying military propaganda in the British, French, and United States Pavilions. While the ownership and nationalistic status of these kept pavilions was severely transformed, their semantic outward images remained the same. Original national ideals continued to be legible.

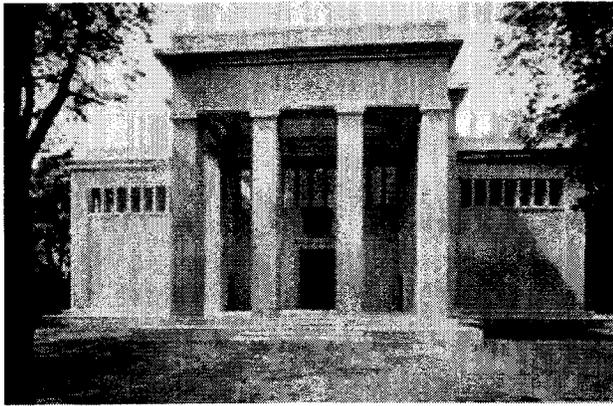


Fig. 5, German Pavilion, 1938

1948-1968

During this time period the individual garden pavilions coalesced into a compact extra-urban community. More infill occurred between existing pavilions, uniting them as a figure-ground reversal of the dense fabric of Venice. Coincident with this collective growth between the end of World War II and the student uprisings of 1968, the new and revised pavilions began to shed their specific nationalistic identities in favor of an international modernism.¹⁵ Identifying letters applied to the pavilions replaced signifying architectural elements such as ionic capitals, curved pediments, relief sculpture, brick walls, domes, and square stone columns.¹⁶ Surfaces evolved from plaster, brick, ceramic, and stone to concrete, wood, glass, and metal. Spatially, in opposition to the standard salon arrangements of connecting rooms in the pre-war pavilions, many of the 50s and 60s pavilions contain flexible or loft-like interior spaces, similar to those artists work in.

In order to collectively "represent the strength of the new age," the Belgian Pavilion received its fourth face in 1948, a curved and dimpled layering of walls by the Venetian architect Virgilio Vallot.¹⁷ The Tel Aviv architect Zeev Rechter's pavilion for the newly independent state of Israel, from 1952, was the first new post-World War II structure. Significantly, this white, stucco, trapezoidal building with an open terraced interior was the first 'international modern' pavilion, simultaneously representative nationalistically of this style of architecture developing in Tel Aviv. Switzerland erected a complex new pavilion close to the Gardens entrance, and Egypt occupied the former Swiss Pavilion. Projecting the significance of erasure as a modernist strategy, Joaquin Palacios provided a new facade for the Spanish Pavilion in 1952, replacing the Churriguersque ornamented original with a simple brick facade with limited relief.

In the early 1950s Carlo Scarpa constructed several buildings and installations at the Biennale Gardens, including a Book Pavilion

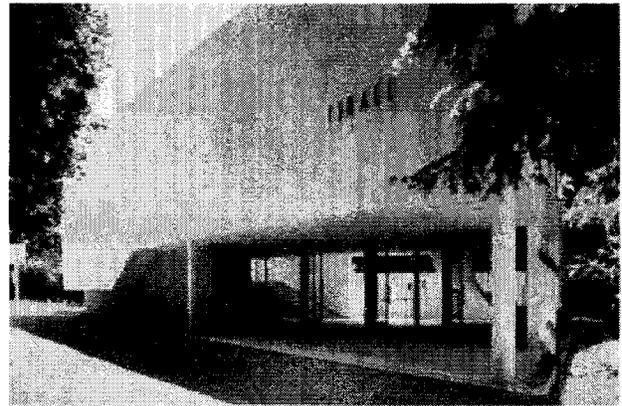


Fig. 6, Israel Pavilion, 1952

and a Ticket Office, which have been demolished. Scarpa's Venezuelan Pavilion, the first from South America, mediates between the innovative and the generic, the monumental and the vernacular.

Forty years after the founding of the original Dutch Pavilion, it was demolished and replaced with a structure by Gerrit Rietveld. His "post-De Stijl" building presents a simple blank face to the Gardens. Alvar Aalto's Finnish Pavilion was prefabricated in Finland and transported to the site. The first pavilion intended to be taken down and stored when the Biennale was not in session, it has remained intact. Although its blue and white color scheme stands in for the Finnish flag, it was later re-allocated as the Iceland Pavilion. Japan's Pavilion is a concrete box on four massive columns. Referencing the concrete brutalism of Le Corbusier, for whom its architect, Takamasa Yoshizaka worked, it appears both stylistically Japanese and international in its form of modernism. In 1958 the Milanese architects BBPR designed the Canadian Pavilion. Having no discernible reference to Canada, it captures two existing trees in glass casings and utilized wood, concrete, brick, and glass. Another advertisement for environmental issues, Sverre Fehn's Scandinavian Pavilion also emphasizes existing trees by carefully enveloping them within its concrete structure.

1970 -1995

Work on pavilions remained at a standstill for 20 years. Between 1988 and the present only four pavilions have been built, one a new Bookshop by James Stirling and Michael Wilford in 1991. Each of the three national pavilions expresses an aspect of its country's regional architecture, engaging national identity with one eye cast to worldwide contemporary architectural issues. Philip Cox's steel-clad Australian Pavilion, built in 1988, recalls an Australian vernacular theme of metal shed domestic architecture. In 1995, Josef Hoffmann's recently restored Austrian Pavilion was creatively assaulted by the Austrian architects Coop Himmelb(l)au. Representing international ar-



Fig. 7, Austrian Pavilion, 1995

chitectural deconstruction and the signature forms of the architects more than Austrian architecture as a whole, it manages to cohabitate with the Hoffman pavilion.¹⁸ The latest new structure, Seok Chul Kim's Korean Pavilion from 1995, can be closed up when the Biennale is not in session, acknowledging the balance between the ephemeral and permanent nature of the Biennale institution.

This overall system of categorization exemplifies modernism's struggle with issues of representation and abstraction - the early twentieth century conversion from the shared language of neoclassicism and specific dialects of nationalism to a lexicon of a collective international modernism, most currently re-recognizing regional characteristics of various nations. As both a precious, stable, wax museum of modern architecture and a vital theme park of gathered nations (like Epcot Center, EuroDisneyland, or Las Vegas hotels), the Biennale Pavilions offer a condensed forum of architectural modernity.

These architectural *Cliff Notes* display the desire for self-conscious newness, a fundamental definition of modernism. They foreground their new appearance over their utilitarian substance. In his book *International Architecture* from 1925, Walter Gropius admits to presenting a "picture-book of modern architecture."¹⁹ Gropius writes, "In order to serve a broader lay public, the editor has largely restricted himself to reproductions of the external appearance of buildings," reflecting the outward signs of the Biennale Pavilions.²⁰ Another theme of twentieth century modernism, the break with the past, becomes evident as one observes a newer pavilion in contextual relation to its predecessors. Genealogical successors pose in contrast to those that came before, making evident the evolutionary progress of the various pavilions.

Conveying their permanence as a tourist site on the island of Venice, and the ephemeral nature of the alterations and renewals they have endured, the Biennale pavilions act simultaneously as representational expositions and mutable exhibitions. They explain them-

selves by exposing and displaying their meaning both collectively and individually. They are exhibitionists, demonstrating a, "tendency towards display or extravagant behavior."²¹

The Biennale pavilions can be seen in relation to the modernist family of expositions, such as the 1851 Great Exhibition in London. At several international expositions from 1876 to 2000; in Paris, Chicago, Brussels, New York, Montreal, and Seville, the pavilion buildings from various countries displayed nationalist imagery similar to the Biennale pavilions, but on an enormous scale and a short-term ephemeral basis.²² The timely demise of these pavilions is typically built in to the forum of their exposition. Unlike the ephemeral condition of the majority of these expositions, the enduring Biennale pavilions physically change or their meanings change in relation to each other. They are demolished, added to, re-appropriated or receive new facades - physically renewing their previous images; converted from historicism to fascism, Art Nouveau to abstraction, Secession to deconstruction. If they remain intact, such as the pavilions for Hungary, the United States, Great Britain, and France, their communicative meanings also convert - from folklore to kitsch, historicism to hegemony, neoclassicism to tradition.

Returning to his analysis of the gargantuan international pavilions of Expo '67, Umberto Eco describes their systems of communication in relation to their size and scale:

The architecture of the contemporary exposition is used to connote symbolic meanings, minimizing its primary functions. Naturally, an exposition building must allow people to come in and circulate and see something. But its utilitarian function is too small in comparison with its semantic apparatus, which aims at other types of communication. In an exposition, architecture and design explode their dual communicative nature, sacrificing denotation to very widespread connotation. If we look at the buildings in an exposition as structures to live in or pass through, they are out of scale, but they make sense if we look at them as media of communication and suggestion. The paradox in an exposition is that the buildings, which are supposed to last just a few months, look as if they have survived, or will survive, for centuries. In an exposition, architecture proves to be message first, then utility; meaning first, then stimulus. In an exposition we show not the objects but the exposition itself. The basic ideology of an exposition is that the packaging is more important than the product, meaning that the building and the objects in it should communicate the value of a culture, the image of a civilization.²³

Inverting the paradoxes identified in this statement, Eco provides an accurate description of the Venice Biennale pavilions. Their utilitarian function is *too big* in comparison to their semantic apparatus. The pavilions are *in scale* to live in or pass through and *out of scale*

as media of communication. The pavilions *do* survive, intact or in mutated forms, perhaps for centuries, but look as if they will last just a few months. The Biennale Pavilions are estranged from what we expect exhibition pavilions to be. Their connotation need not overwhelm their denotation. They are in scale physically as well as temporally. The paradox dissolves in a synthesis of product and packaging as they project an inter-national performance between board game and global theater.

NOTES

- ¹Peter Schjeldahl, "Festivalism," *The New Yorker* (July 5, 1999): 85.
- ²Rachel Withers, "Allied Forces," *Artforum* (May 1999): 80.
- ³Hugh Honour, *The Companion Guide to Venice* (New York: Harper and Row: 1966): 263.
- ⁴Walter Grasskamp, "No-Man's Land," in Klaus Bußmann and Florian Matzner, *Hans Haacke Bodenlos* (Venice: Edition Cantz, 1993): 51.
- ⁵*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1995.
- ⁶Umberto Eco, "A Theory of Exhibitions," (1967) in *Travels in Hyperreality*,), trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1983): 297.
- ⁷*Ibid.*, 298.
- ⁸Grasskamp, "No-Man's Land," 51.
- ⁹See Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972).
- ¹⁰See Romolo Bazzoni, *60 Anni della Biennale di Venezia* (Venice, 1962): 88.
- ¹¹Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1968): 18.
- ¹²These interconnected pavilions would have been an ideal entry in *The International Style* book and exhibition.
- ¹³Quoted from Bazzoni, *60 Anni della Biennale di Venezia*, 91. (The original German Pavilion was by a Venetian architect.)
- ¹⁴Several political interventions would later be made on the pavilion itself, such as Pfeiler von Günter Uecker's column of spikes in 1970, Joseph Beuys's hole drilled through the floor into the canal in 1976, and Hans Haacke's jackhammered floor in 1993.
- ¹⁵Perhaps a true International Style, without the style.

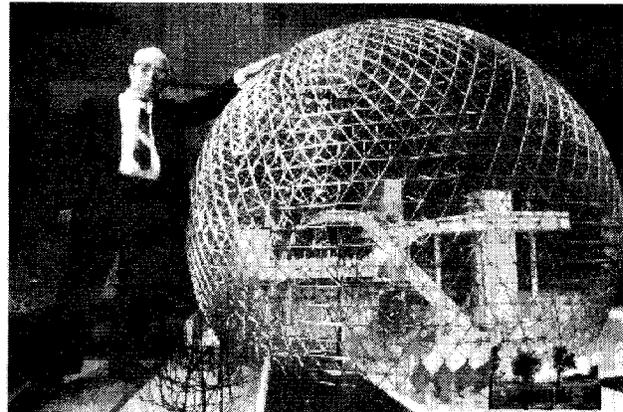


Fig. 8. Buckminster Fuller's United States Pavilion for Expo 67 and the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 1930

- ¹⁶The application of signage to a building is similar to Hitchcock and Johnson's suggestion for the use of signage as a replacement for traditional ornament in International Style architecture. "Lettering is the nearest approach to arbitrary ornament used by architects of the international style." See Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1932): 74.
- ¹⁷From a statement by Emile Langui, Director of fine arts and administer of public instruction for Belgium. Quoted in Bazzoni, *60 Anni della Biennale di Venezia*, 88.
- ¹⁸Its restoration took place in 1984 under the direction of Hans Hollein. See Hans Hollein, ed., *Josef Hoffmann, The 50th Anniversary of the Austrian Pavilion, Biennale of Venice* (Salzburg: Druckhaus Nonntal, 1984).
- ¹⁹Walter Gropius, *International Architecture* (München: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925): 5; as quoted in Werner Oechslin, "The 'New' and Modern Architecture," *Daidalos* 52 (June 1994): 115.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, 115.
- ²¹*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1995.
- ²²See Erik Mattie, *World's Fairs* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998).
- ²³Eco, "A Theory of Exhibitions," 299. My italics.