



# Earth, reimagined

The Biennale Architettura presents a post-colonial world conceived by a diverse generation, writes **Jane Cornwell**.

**Two great marble lions** flank the main gate of the Arsenale, a 16th-century brick shipyard where entire fleets were built, and which once symbolised the maritime might of Venice in northern Italy.

Today, its major arteries expensively fortified, the lagoon city retains its grandeur if not its clout: stone buildings with high arched windows still magically appear to float on the water. Pillars on the porches of palazzos – the Ducale with its white-and-pink geometric bricks; the Gothic-style riot that is the Doge’s Palace – rise gracefully toward the (blue, springtime) sky.

The winged lion of Venice still sits atop its granite column in the Piazza San Marco. Saint Mark, the city’s patron, was apparently taking refuge from a storm when he was visited by an angel disguised as a big cat. There are, consequently, lions everywhere: on doorknockers, bell towers, in reliefs on cathedrals.

All of which, given the Afro-centric theme of the 18th Venice Biennale of Architecture – held at the Arsenale, in the pavilions of the Giardini and at several satellite venues – make this centuries-old appropriation of an animal native to Africa even more stark, and frankly bizarre.

“I don’t see many [actual] lions around here,” says Lesley Lokko, a Scottish-Ghanian architect, educator and novelist and the first black curator of the Architecture Biennale, the discipline’s most significant public event. Which, until now, had a consistently Eurocentric, largely white male, bias; in 2021 just one-third of practitioners came from outside Europe and the United States.

This year’s focus is on decolonisation and decarbonisation – the reversing of carbon colonialism – as viewed through the prism of Africa and its diaspora, who comprise more than half of the biennale’s 89 participants. There is an equal gender balance, and a vibe that suggests architectural stars in the ascendancy, given the focus on small or solo practices, and youth.

The biennale’s theme this year? The Laboratory of the Future.

“It is our contention that the rich, complex conditions of both Africa and a rapidly hybridising world call for a different and broader understanding of the term ‘architect,’” says Lokko. “Central to all projects is the primacy and potency of one tool: the imagination. It is impossible to build a better world if we cannot imagine it.”

A coincidence, probably, but of the 22 exhibitions inside the Arsenale’s

cavernous Corderie building, the one that grabs attention first is that of black British multidisciplinary artist LionHeart, who appears, blindfolded and seated, in a black-and-white video projected onto a vast screen near the entrance.

“If architecture doesn’t serve feelings [then] it serves a psychosis,” declaims LionHeart, his name a reclamation, his words confirming the suspicion that this – indeed, the entire biennale – is a space intended to make you go “hmmm”.

Concept is currency in what turns out to be a complex, multi-layered and sometimes overwhelming rethink of architectural practice, where videos, research projects and mixed-media installations take on everything from history, conflict and identity to artificial intelligence, ecology and, in the fictional *All-African Protoport of Brooklyn-based Nigerian-born Olalekan ‘Lek’ Jeyifous* (think a lush and colourful travel complex powered by renewable energy), the destruction of the Western utopia/dystopia binary.

The Spanish-born practitioners at Sydney’s Grandeza Studio present *Pilbara Interregnum*, a cross art-form work that posits Western Australia’s arid mineral-rich Pilbara region as a ‘spatio-temporal battlefield’ mangled by colonial development.

Seven ‘political allegories’ are outlined on film by actors wearing balaclavas and gas masks and firing glitter from guns; among them, *terra nullius* – the legal principle used by the British to settle Australia, and by former prime minister Robert Menzies to justify British nuclear testing off the West Australian coast – and the oh-so-plausible idea of mining/pillaging Mars.

“Let’s think about the ground as a somatic archive... repurposed as critical



archaeological infrastructure ... a collective act for the profanation of imperial myths,” they intone, their word salad garnished with a gilded 3D model of a re-imagined Pilbara, which is laid out on a table in front of the screen – complete with a disembodied hand holding (catching?) a slab of space junk.

Over a canal into the Giardini, where most begin at the exhibition-anchoring Central Pavilion and its 16 African and diasporic practices, among them American community activist/artist Theaster Gates, documenting a decade of socially engaged practice by the Black Artists Retreat in Chicago, and British-Ghanaian Sir David Adjaye – one of the world’s most feted black architects – presenting models of current projects including a National Cathedral of Ghana (Adjaye also designed a beautiful black timber pyramid-cum-relaxation space, the Kwaee Pavilion).

Conspicuous by their physical absence are three Ghanaian architects, colleagues of Lokko’s, denied visas into Italy without explanation – with the implication they might overstay. “Not all teams are equal,” says Lokko at a press conference, speaking to the hypocrisy of denying African contributors access to a show about Africa.

Elsewhere, among 26 globe-spanning pavilions set into hills, along paths and next to water, ideas around decolonisation

Clockwise from main: A man in Maasai garments walks beneath an installation; ‘Unsettling Queenstown’, the installation inside the Australian pavilion; two lions guard the entrance to the Arsenale in Piazza San Marco. PHOTOS: AP, GETTY

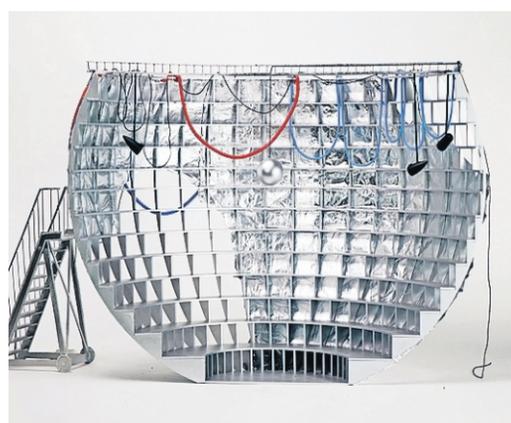
Architect, author and educator Lesley Lokko is the first African to curate the Biennale Architettura. PHOTO: AP



**Need to know**

**The Biennale Architettura 2023** runs until Sunday, November 26. It takes place at the Giardini and the Arsenale, and at Forte Marghera.

Below: A model of the French pavilion, left; suspended at the front of the British pavilion are two steel vessels, ‘Thunder and Şimşek’, by Jayden Ali. PHOTOS: MUOTO, TARAN WILKHU



proliferate. Inside the British pavilion – built in 1901 to invoke an 18th-century Italianate country house – young Britons of diverse backgrounds celebrate this fact with objects such as a futuristic British-Caribbean domino and a *Bone Temple* made from textiles.

Next to the café in the Giardini is an outdoor installation by Ukraine: grassy earthen mounds replicating those that repelled 10th-century invaders and proved effective against Russian tanks last year, here rolled down by kids and sat upon to eat gelato.

The pavilion of Russia, the uber-coloniser, is closed, cancelled.

Lent intimacy by reindeer skins, a mobile library on skis and timber nooks for relaxing, the Nordic pavilion’s exploration of indigenous Sami culture was hotly tipped for the Golden Lion (this is Venice) for Best National Participation. Instead, the prestigious gong went to Brazil for *Terra*, an exhibition staged in a pavilion filled with earth, celebrating the architectural heritage of indigenous and African Brazilians – and refuting the narrative that Brasilia, the capital, was built in the middle of nowhere.

And so to the modernist Australian pavilion, an austere black cube in which a multi-sensory installation, titled *Unsettling Queenstown*, examines namesake settlements across the former British Empire, focusing mainly on the copper mine-ravaged Queenstown in Tasmania.

Suspended from the centre of the pavilion is a copper-tubing model of the belvedere (the upper part) of the town’s Empire Hotel, an Italianate structure that here – hanging over a floor strewn with red gum branches, in a room soundtracked by voices and strafed with images of Country – is an anachronism.

“We’ve chopped the base off the structure, so it is hovering like a spaceship,” says curator Anthony Coupe, a partner at Adelaide’s Mullyoway Studio. “It asks people to rethink structural dynamics, to project their own ideas onto what the frame could be.”

The effect is as eerie and unsettling as it is dramatic and powerful, a ‘demapping’ of colonialism intended to reveal hidden First Nations histories. It is also a repatriation of sorts: an impression of a stone building with colonnades and high arched windows, shipped back, newly see-through, to Venice in northern Italy.

Where, just for the Biennale Architettura, the facade of the Central Pavilion has been reconfigured into a statement about its contents: corrugated metal from a roof cut into deconstructed images of Venice’s winged lion. **L&L**