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World Expo "goes beyond" limits of Venice Architecture Biennale say architects



Lizzie Crook | 16 June 2025 | 1 comment

Venice Architecture Biennale is regarded as architecture's most important international event – but is this year's edition being overshadowed by the Expo 2025 in Osaka? Dezeen reports.

"The World Expo offers architects a unique opportunity that goes beyond what exhibit-focused events like the Venice Architecture Biennale typically allow," said Marta Roy of Dutch studio RAU Architects, which designed this year's Dutch pavilion at the expo.

"[It] provides a rare platform where architectural ideas can be experienced at full scale, as lived space rather than representation," she told Dezeen.

The founders of architecture studio LAVA, which designed this year's German pavilion in Osaka, said the biennale falls short where "architects exhibit projects and ideas for an audience mostly comprising other architects".

"An expo offers the rare opportunity to ask 'how can we showcase visions for the future and make them tangible for everyday people?'," they explained.

"It has to cater to a much more diverse range of people to inhabit spaces and explore concepts, and allows them to translate speculative concepts into built environments that engage the body, not just the mind."

Rare convergence of expo and biennale

The World Expo is an international event held every five years to allow nations to showcase innovations. In 2025, it is being held on the artificial island of Yumesshima in Osaka Bay, Japan.

This year the expo coincides with the 19th edition of the prestigious Venice Architecture Biennale in Italy – an international architecture exhibition that takes place every two years.

It is a rare convergence of the two fairs, having happened just twice before, once in 2000 and again in 2010.

Expo 2025 Osaka features exhibits by 158 countries, predominantly in the form of temporary national pavilions, designed and built by international architects specifically for the event.

This is a similar approach to Venice Architecture Biennale, where this year there are 66 participating nations showcasing temporary exhibits within pre-existing national pavilions.



The Netherlands Pavilion is among those created for Expo 2025 Osaka. Photo by Zhu



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Carlo Ratti is among the architects to have participated in both events, having curated the Venice Architecture Biennale while co-designing France's pavilion at the Expo.

He cites the temporary nature of the events as their most valuable feature, as it encourages architects to experiment and innovate.

"Expos, the Olympics, and other temporary events like biennials or Milan design week are particularly exciting because they allow bold experimentation in design and architecture," he said. "Temporary events allow designers to take more risks, as structures don't need to endure over the long term."

However, he also highlighted that the ephemerality of the two fairs means that they are also burdened by the same issue – waste.

"All too often, large-scale installations are built for just a few months and then shipped to a landfill," he continued. "The core question is: how can we design for temporary events so that everything can be reused or recycled at the end of its life?"

This is something Ratti has tried to address in his curation of the main exhibition at the 19th edition of the biennale, which prioritises exhibits made with recycled and recyclable materials.



Venice Architecture Biennale takes place in pre-existing national pavilions. Photo by Chris Lane

"To walk the talk, the biennale exhibition design will use chipboard panels from Saviola Group, which are made by shredding discarded furniture," he said.

"At the end of the biennale, those same panels will be shredded again and transformed into new panels, ready for future use. I like to imagine that parts of our exhibition will live on – maybe as someone's kitchen cabinet or bookshelf – for years to come."

These efforts build on measures taken at the 18th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2023, where organisers placed increased focus on sustainability, targeting the international standard PAS2060 – currently the most widely recognised benchmark for carbon neutrality.

The 2023 biennale's curator, Lesley Lokko, told Dezeen this meant her exhibition was made to be "as light a touch as possible".

"The majority of exhibits are digital and drawn," she explained in an interview in the exhibition's lead-up. "Where artefacts and models were made, we worked tirelessly to reduce the impact by having things made locally, reducing shipping costs, and cutting down drastically on the teams required in Venice during installation."

"The architectural typology of the pavilion is truly important"

However, this approach meant the 2023 edition came under fire for its lack of physical architecture, with Zaha Hadid Architects principal Patrik Schumacher labelling the event an "anti-architectural biennale".

"This title is just generating confusion and disappointment with respect to an event that does not show any architecture," he wrote at the time.

"Most national pavilions, including all major European nations like Germany, France, Spain, UK, Belgium, Holland, Norway/Sweden, Finland, but also Japan, Canada, Australia and the USA, refuse to show the work of their architects, or any architecture whatsoever."

Similarly, few significant structures have been erected for the 2025 biennale.

By contrast, Osaka Expo 2025 has seen multiple buildings spring up, including the world's largest wooden structure.

Architect Manuel Herz, who designed this year's Switzerland pavilion in Osaka, said presenting architects with the chance to physically build a pavilion at these events is a rare and invaluable opportunity.



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"The architectural typology of the pavilion is truly important," he told Dezeen. "Most other buildings that we are designing are governed by the pressure of the market and investment instruments, forcing them to be as efficient as possible."

"The pavilion – by being a temporary structure and part of a certain 'spectacle', to paraphrase Guy Debord – can escape this regime or practice of efficiency and rationalisation," Herz continued. "The pavilion is a point of experimentation."

Architect Lina Ghotmeh, who designed the Bahrain pavilion in Osaka, shared a similar sentiment, claiming that creating physical pavilions is where the value of the expo lies.

"At an expo, architecture is both medium and message," she said. "Architects here don't just display ideas, they realise them at full scale, engaging visitors physically and emotionally."

In contrast, the biennale generally presents architecture as content – models, installations, drawings – inviting contemplation but not always direct inhabitation.

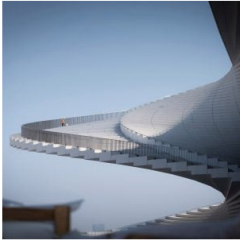
Expo pavilions, Ghotmeh believes, are an important way of feeding architectural innovations into the mainstream.

"The expo can catalyse partnerships and technologies that endure long after the fair's gates close," she said.

Expo 2025 signals "new era of circularity"



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Despite its emphasis on physical construction, the issue of waste is explored widely at Expo 2025 Osaka, with the majority of pavilions designed for disassembly and reuse.

Among the demountable pavilions at this year's expo were Herz's globular Swiss Pavilion and Ghotmeh's boat-like Bahrain Pavilion.

Masterplanner Sou Fujimoto's vast Grand Ring, the world's largest wooden structure which encircles the site, is also designed to be dismantled and repurposed.

"This edition [of the expo] was for me an occasion to signal a new era of circularity in architecture, circular-economy pavilions and inclusive placemaking," Ghotmeh reflected.

"I am hoping we will look back on 2025 as the moment when renewable materials, local craftsmanship, and digital means coalesced to produce pavilions that were repurposed without a trace – proof that architecture can delight the senses without burdening ecosystems."



The Grand Ring is among the demountable structures at this year's Expo. Photo by Lizzie Crook

Ratti's collaborator on the French pavilion, Thomas Coldefy, agreed that this year's expo will be "remembered for shifting the focus toward environmental, social, and generational responsibility".

"Many pavilions seem to prioritise demountable, lightweight structures that support sustainable strategies such as modularity, reuse, and minimal environmental impact," Coldefy said.

"There's a clear effort to engage with the temporary nature of the expo through thoughtful construction methods."

Architect Trey Trahan, who designed the expo's USA pavilion, said this shift in focus towards reuse is likely to have been influenced by the traditions of the host nation, Japan.

"I think the sensibility of Japanese building traditions has permeated a lot of the pavilions this year," he explained. "The highlights to me are the buildings that celebrate material and circulation as core features in how they express themselves."

"It is too easy to say that World Expos have lost their importance"

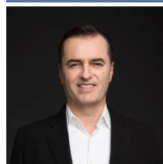
Those concerned about the environmental footprint of these events may question the need for them at all in the digital age.

Yet, Herz argued that the expo serves as a reminder of the importance of bringing people together physically at a time of escalating global discord.

"It is too easy to say that in our times of international media, the internet and easy intercontinental travel, World Expos have lost their importance," he explained.

"Maybe it is exactly in our current times of increasing global tensions and misunderstandings that every opportunity to meet physically in a shared location, and to celebrate a certain spirit of openness and cosmopolitanism, is precious and significant."

This was the overarching goal for this year's expo masterplanner Fujimoto, who told Dezeen his vision was to foster "wonderful unity" amid global instability.



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"does not show any
architecture" says Patrik
Schumacher

"At the expo, we have a gathering space, gathering of the entire world, in a sense, of so many different people," Fujimoto said in the lead-up to the event.

"And if you meet like this, together, then we understand more," he said. "This format, I thought, is very precious, especially in this crisis of the global situation."

This view is shared by Ratti, who said both the Venice Architecture Biennale and World Expo are needed to highlight the role of architecture today.

"Despite recent cracks in global collaboration, we're all still aboard the same planet. And architecture can – and must – help us fix Spaceship Earth," he reflected.

"I hope the legacy of Expo 2025 won't be defined by style, unlike a century ago, but by something more profound: how architecture can help address the major challenges of our time," he said.

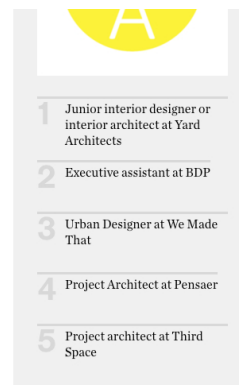
"These are the questions that will also be at the heart of the 2025 Venice biennale."

The main photo is by Lizzie Crook.

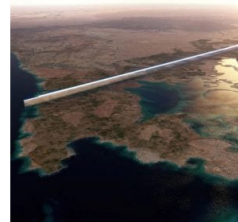
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