



## FOLKLORIC MODERNISM: VENICE'S GIARDINI DELLA BIENNALE AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF ARCHITECTURE

**Joel Robinson**

*This paper considers the national pavilions of the Venice Biennale, the largest and longest running exposition of contemporary art. It begins with an investigation of the post-fascist landscape of Venice's Giardini della Biennale, whose built environment continued to evolve in the decades after 1945 with the construction of several new pavilions. With a view to exploring the architectural infrastructure of an event that has always billed itself as 'international', the paper asks how the mapping of national pavilions in this context might have changed to reflect the supposedly post-colonial and democratic aspirations of the West after the Second World War. Homing in on the nations that gained representation here in the 1950s and 60s, it looks at three of the more interesting architectural additions to the gardens: the pavilions for Israel, Canada and Brazil. These raise questions about how national pavilions are mobilised ideologically, and form/provide the basis for a broader exploration of the geopolitical superstructure of the Biennale as an institution.*

Keywords: pavilion, Venice Biennale, modernism, nationalism, geopolitics, postcolonialist.

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# FOLKLORIC MODERNISM: VENICE'S GIARDINI DELLA BIENNALE AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF ARCHITECTURE

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## Abstract

*This paper considers the national pavilions of the Venice Biennale, the largest and longest running exposition of contemporary art. It begins with an investigation of the post-fascist landscape of Venice's Giardini della Biennale, whose built environment continued to evolve in the decades after 1945 with the construction of several new pavilions. With a view to exploring the architectural infrastructure of an event that has always billed itself as 'international', the paper asks how the mapping of national pavilions in this context might have changed to reflect the supposedly post-colonial and democratic aspirations of the West after the Second World War. Homing in on the nations that gained representation*

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The Giardini della Biennale are among the more remarkable architectural spaces in Venice, not least because they make up the greenest area of the city. These gardens have served as the main grounds of the Venice Biennale since 1895, though the shape of this architectural landscape has continued to change from one era to the next. As the world's oldest and largest international art exposition, the Venice Biennale long predates the present-day proliferation of such biennial and triennial 'mega-events' (Roche, 2003), and differs from those newer ventures in that it utilises freestanding buildings to separate exhibitions according to the nationality of participating artists. While several histories of the Biennale have been written, almost nothing meaningful has been said about the architectural infrastructure of this institution, or indeed



Figure 3.1: Main avenue of the Giardini, looking northeast, and showing the Spanish pavilion in the foreground, the Belgian and Dutch pavilions behind the trees, and the Central Pavilion (the main exposition venue) at the far right.  
Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.2: Viale Trento, or the secondary avenue of the Giardini, looking southeast, and showing (from right to left) the Swiss, Venezuelan and Russian pavilions. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

about the ideological foundations of the landscape in which this most prestigious and well-attended exposition of contemporary art is situated.<sup>1</sup> This infrastructure consists of thirty-odd national pavilions, which were built (and often rebuilt or refaced) in a staggered fashion over the course of the twentieth century. Each of these is owned and administered by a nation, and both the architecture and the artwork exhibited therein are inevitably bound up with a projection of national identity.

As the study of biennial culture or 'biennialogy' expands, Venice's Giardini and its pavilions are becoming a topic of interest. In the little amount of time since this paper was presented at the Open University's 2012 Association of Art Historians conference, more attention has already been paid to them. In 2013, for instance, Diener & Diener Architects organised an exhibition called *Common Pavilions*, which showed photographs of the pavilions taken by Gabriele Basilico; each picture was accompanied by a personal reflection on the pavilion by an architect or other commentator chosen for the task. This has generated further interest, and led in turn to the publication of an exhibition and catalogue of photography, *Pavilions and Gardens of the Venice Biennale: Photographs by Gabriele Basilico*, curated by Adele Re Rebaudengo (2013).

What makes these pavilions exceptional is not just that they were built over one-hundred-odd years in – of all places – Venice. (In the modern era, this was surely one of the least welcoming cities for any kind of building that smacked of foreignness or newness.) They are more permanent than the quickly erected, ephemeral structures that formed their counterparts at the universal expositions and world's fairs. Unlike those national pavilions, which nonetheless served as a model for what one finds at Venice, the Biennale pavilions have for the most part remained; they are fixtures there, which define a particular sense of place, not unlike temples or follies in landscaped gardens. To be sure, a few of the pavilions have been restored or reconstructed from scratch, whether out of pragmatic necessity or due to a change in the way a nation sees itself. After all, 'national identity is always under construction,' as architectural historian Raymond Quek (Quek, 2012, p.209) reminds us; and just like at the world's fairs, the form of these ambassadorial edifices (each adorned with its flag) needs to match up with the most current image of the nation.



Figure 3.3: View looking south toward the British pavilion converted from an older 1897 tea pavilion in 1909 by Edwin Alfred Rickards, and decorated with the banners of the installation *English Magic* (2013) by Jeremy Deller. Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.4: View looking east toward the French pavilion designed by Faust Finzi in 1912. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

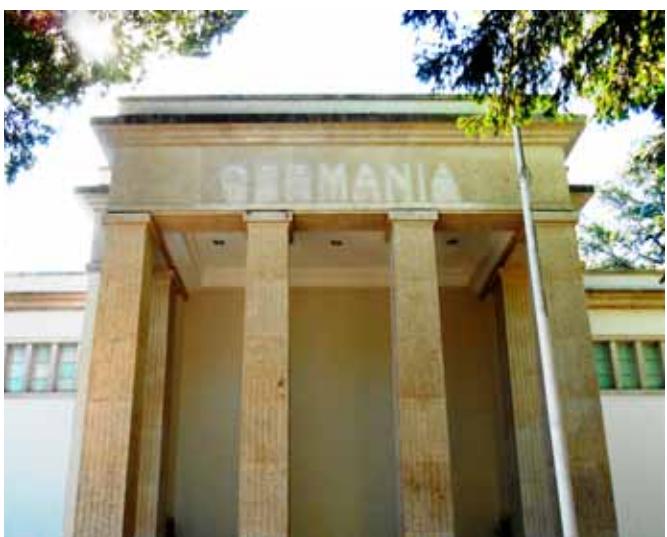


Figure 3.5: View looking southwest toward the German pavilion originally designed by Daniele Donghi as a Bavarian pavilion in 1909, and rebuilt by Ernst Haiger in 1938. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

The key difference between world's fair pavilions and those at Venice's international exhibition of art, then, is that the latter have largely persisted – and have persisted in such a way that they might be said to tell the story of this place. Yet, because these structures have a longer history, as part of a landscape that has witnessed so much change and additional building over the decades, they are a lot more difficult to discuss than buildings that have been constructed for a specific event, in a specific year. Studying the pavilions of a particular world's fair, for instance, offers a more controlled object of inquiry. That might explain, at least partially, why the world's fairs and their pavilions have generally received so much more critical attention (Greenhalgh, 1990; Rydell, 1993; Tenorio-Trillo, 1996; Schrenk, 1999; Mattie, 2000; Morton, 2000; Storm, 2010; Geppert, 2010). Nevertheless, it is the very fact that the Biennale pavilions are implicated in a complex narrative that has now been unfolding for over a century, which makes them so intriguing, and worth a closer look.

The Biennale pavilions are worth investigating for the national image that they project, but also for what they contribute to the concrete fabrication of a supposedly 'international' space for art. Not to be fooled by the rhetoric of international cooperation and peace that was so much a part of the world's fairs, though, one should approach this architectural landscape critically, with a view to digging a little deeper than the stated aims and intentions of the Biennale organisers.<sup>2</sup> Worth considering here is the extent to which its network of national pavilions might reveal, in the sphere of culture, what the geographer Jane Margaret Jacobs in her ground-breaking book *The Edge of Empire* (1996), calls 'the embedded unevenness of power, which is the legacy of imperialism' (p.157). Critics are no doubt aware of how the Biennale 'is marked in its very architectural structure by the inequalities of the colonialist world order' (Madra, 2006, p.526); but precisely how this geopolitical unevenness is manifest in the Giardini is what needs to be explained.

That the Biennale and its national pavilions present a moral dilemma is undeniable. This is evidenced in the intense criticism that has mounted against it since the late 1960s. Its pavilions have been seen as symbolic structures, rooted in an ethos of nation building, imperial expansion, and fascist bellicosity. Although its organisers sought to distance the Biennale from

2 The world's fairs engendered some of the great myths of modernity, providing the world with a 'proof' of the idea that national borders (and differences of any kind) could be overcome through 'peaceful' commerce and culture, which would in turn facilitate cooperation on the global scale; being modelled on the internationalism of the world's fairs, the Venice Biennale is rooted in this false consciousness.



Figure 3.6: Northeast façade of the Israeli pavilion, designed by Zeev Rechter in 1952.  
Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.7: North façade of the Canadian pavilion, designed by Enrico Peressutti of BBPR in 1958.  
Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.8: East façade of the Brazilian pavilion, built by Amerigo Marchesin in 1964, and based on the original 1959 designs of Henrique Mindlin, Walmyr Amaral and Giancarlo Palanti.  
Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.9: View looking east toward the Egyptian pavilion, originally known as the pavilion of the Arab Republic of Egypt (RAE), and included among the exhibition spaces of the north wing of the *Padiglione Venezia*, designed by Brenno Del Giudice in 1932. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

this reputation after the Second World War, with the usual claims that art was above politics, it eventually reached a critical turning point, and found itself deeply unpopular among counter-cultural circles during the Vietnam War. In the summer of 1968, for instance, artists boycotted it and student protesters threatened to burn down its pavilions, forcing the police to stand guard over the Giardini, and eventually close the exposition.<sup>3</sup> Since then, diatribes against the Biennale's national organisation have become such a cliché that artists, curators and critics (too many to name here) are now effectively beginning to defend it instead; the position is that the national structure of this exposition has inspired a number of site-specific projects that address the geopolitics of the Biennale, and which invite debate about the contemporary problems of nationhood, migration, borders and subalternity, and indeed the complicity of architecture in more abstract, cultural forms of violence.

Curiously, though, it has not been architects showing work at the Biennale of Architecture (occurring in Venice's Giardini in alternating years since 1980), which would seem a more likely occasion for a critical interrogation of the ideological nature of this built landscape, but artists showing at the Biennale of art (including, Hans Haacke, with *Germania*, in 1993; Santiago Sierra, with *Wall Enclosing a Space*, in 2003;

<sup>3</sup> Archival photographs of the summer 1968 occupation of the Giardini by police and protesters provide some insight into how this architectural landscape became such a fraught space between May and July. In protest against the presence of police, artists boycotted the exposition, and the public scribbled slogans on walls, such as 'LA BIENNALE E FASCISTA'. Vittoria Martini (2005) quotes the kind of slogans heard in and around the grounds of the exposition in 1968, e.g., 'Biennale of capitalists, we'll burn your pavilions!'

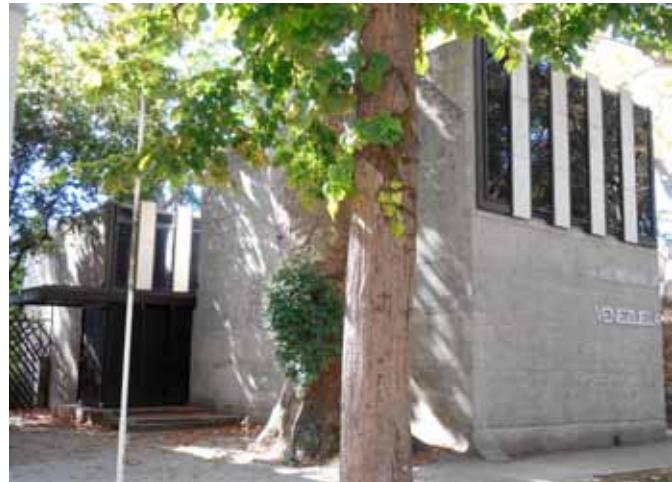


Figure 3.10: View looking west toward the Venezuelan pavilion, designed by Carlo Scarpa in 1956. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

Antoni Muntadas, with *I Giardini: On Translation* in 2005; Steve McQueen, with *Giardini* in 2009; Alfredo Jaar, with *Venezia, Venezia*, in 2013), who have done most to catalyse discussion and debate. In spite of the recent interest that artists have generated in the architecture of this place, however, there has still been little scholarly treatment of these pavilions. Beyond a passing and pedestrian consideration of them by authors whose main interest is obviously the exposition itself (Alloway, [1969] 2010), the pavilions and the architectural landscape of the Giardini remain largely untouched in the academic literature.<sup>4</sup> The following can only be a foray into this territory, which will no doubt be followed by more rigorous treatments.

### National identity in a changing post-war landscape

This paper homes in on the phase of building that occurred in the Giardini after the Second World War. While the early twentieth-century pavilions of the established colonial powers are more familiar, the pavilions of nations that were 'latecomers' within these grounds are lesser known. There were two significant developments in this period. One, modernist architecture became the language of choice, as opposed to the predominantly classicizing, art nouveau or national romantic vocabularies of earlier

<sup>4</sup> The point here is that the pavilions have not been examined in terms of the broader landscape of the Giardini, though it is to be admitted that some of them have received individual attention. Marco Mulazzani's *I Padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia* (2004) documents all of the pavilions, but it remains a guidebook, which treats each building separately, much like the recent Diener & Diener project, *Common Pavilions* (2013). Likewise, Richard J. Goy's *Venice: An Architectural Guide* (2010) lists the pavilions, usefully providing names of architects and dates of construction (and renovation), but stopping far short of any sustained analysis.



Figure 3.11: View looking southeast toward the Uruguayan pavilion, converted from a storehouse in 1958. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

decades; modernism (in art and architecture alike) was promoted as a universal language suited to an exposition that had international pretensions. Two, it was during this period – the 1950s and 60s – that the first pavilions for nations with colonial histories were built, thereby breaking a dominion that had been exclusively European (with the exception of the American pavilion built in 1930); this further helped to propagate an international image of the Biennale. What, however, was the broader significance of these seemingly positive developments? In what ways did they serve to diversify architectural modernism, or suggest alternative modernisms? To what extent did they distance the Biennale from its murkier bedrock in an age of empire – in an era of nationalism and dictatorship – and open up a new chapter in its history?

In responding to these questions, this essay will look in particular at three of the more intriguing pavilions built here after World War II – namely, those for Israel (1952), Canada (1958) and Brazil (1964). Curiously, each of these 'post-colonial' nations used a different kind of architectural modernism here, in keeping with the images that they might have wanted to project in this transnational (or even supranational) context. Admittedly, all three have very different colonial histories, in which relationships between indigenous peoples and white settlers of European ancestry have played out very differently. Even so, these pavilions might nevertheless be studied together inasmuch as their nations occupied a largely peripheral location with respect to the imperial culture of the European metropole. Other non-European nations with colonial pasts, whose pavilions were added to the Giardini in the post-war era, included Egypt in 1952, Venezuela in 1956, Uruguay in 1960, Australia in 1988 and South Korea in 1995. Noteworthy, too, was the addition in 1956 of Japan – a former imperialist aggressor, but



Figure 3.12: View looking north toward the Australian pavilion, designed by Philip Cox in 1988. Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.13: View looking west toward the South Korean pavilion, designed by Seok Chul Kim and Franco Mancuso in 1995. Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.14: View looking west toward the Japanese pavilion, designed by Takamasa Yoshizaka in 1956. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

one that had been tamed if not exactly colonised by American interests after its inhumane pulverisation by two atomic bombs.

It is with great interest that one might begin to investigate the different national identities that these

pavilions have projected, and are perhaps continuing to project, in this ostensibly international context – a context, it must be remembered, that is tainted by the nationalism, colonialism and fascism of modern European history. Attributing specific ideological and/or aesthetic intentions to the nation-states, institutions or architects involved in the construction of these pavilions, however, is not without difficulties. One must proceed cautiously, even when it seems quite transparent that there is a strong correlation in these buildings between the image that they assume and the political system of the nations for which they were built. Finally, in endeavouring to consider a selection of post-war pavilions alongside one another, this paper seeks to investigate how these new structures served to recast the architectural landscape of the Giardini (now taken in their entirety), against a backdrop that saw the decolonisation of Europe's former possessions, the consolidation of the United Nations, and the escalation of the Cold War. Each pavilion may tell its own story, but when studied together, a more intricate choreography might be discerned.

Before examining what these pavilions reveal about the image of their respective nations within the transnational arena of the Giardini, it would be useful just to recall some of the existing literature on nationalism and national identity in modern architectural culture (McNeill and Tewdr-Jones, 2003; Jones, 2011; Quek, Deane and Butler, 2012). Here, the architectural historian Lawrence Vale's classic study *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* ([1992] 2008) is particularly helpful. Vale makes a critical distinction between three categories that are normally blurred by the monolithic term *national identity*. The first is the *personal identity* of the statesperson or governmental body commissioning the project, which might dictate its design, or at least intervene in that process somehow; the second is the *subnational identity* of a group that may compete for validation of its own architectural representation above that of other groups assimilated under the nation-state; and the third is *supranational identity*, or 'identity in the eyes of an international audience' (p.60) – the image that a nation wants to project to the world at large or when building abroad.

When looking at architecture of the kind found in Venice's Giardini, all three of these elements will need to be borne in mind, especially as exposition pavilions are typically designed to downplay differences and tensions between these. But rather than aiming to reconstruct a universal meaning, which does not exist for the simple reason that meaning is fluid, one should seek to lay bare the power struggles and competing interests manifest in any attempt to convey national

identity. Vale writes: 'Although there may be some well-intentioned search for a unifying national symbol, normally the choice of symbol, if examined, reveals other structural, social and economic tensions' (p.54). After exploring these tensions in regard to the three above-mentioned pavilions, the broader significance of the post-war architectural landscape in which they made their appearance can be addressed.

There is one further point to be made here though, for attendant on any discussion of national identity in architecture is the question of whether local vernacular expression, or a language that is more meaningful internationally, should be pursued. Of course there is a third way, which consists in the impulse to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory pursuits. Taking his cue from the philosopher Paul Ricoeur's essay 'Universal Civilization and National Cultures' ([1955] 1965), and using a term coined in 1981 by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, Kenneth Frampton (1983) theorised a 'critical regionalism,' pointing to post-war practices that he took to be resisting the homogenizing pressures of architectural modernism. Regionalist positions like Lewis Mumford's have been used to critique modernism from the very beginning, but it has only been in the last couple decades, with the rhetoric of globalisation, that the debates over locally inflected architectural practices in the face of an ostensibly flattening uniformity have intensified (Colquhoun, 1997; Nalbantoğlu, 2000; Eggener, 2002; King, 2004; Perera, 2010; Richards, 2012), and that it has been recognised – contrary to the dominant narrative – that the regional or vernacular has in fact always been 'a constitutive part of the modern' (Umbach and Hüppauf, 2005, p.23).

Given that the image of a nation (or nations) is at stake in Venice's Giardini, one could reasonably assume that the question of how to reconcile the global and the local, i.e., internationalist and regionalist vocabularies, has been paramount whenever a pavilion has been built here. These tensions too, then, need to be borne in mind here, as does the fact that the Giardini – as will become apparent – are not any specific place at all, but a transnational diplomatic limbo of sorts; segregated from the city's older fabric, they are a liminal or heterotopian space, or what the ethnologist Marc Augé (1995) refers to as a 'non-place.' Such a deracinated place is of course physically incompatible with any regionalist engagement with locality; this non-place would appear to prevent the pavilions from being anything other than what Frampton derogatorily calls 'scenographic' façades. However the conflict of 'universal civilisation and national cultures' has been dealt with here, one suspects that the British critic Lawrence Alloway may have been correct when



Figure 3.15: View looking east toward the Israeli pavilion, such that it appears behind the American pavilion. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

– deliberating over the ‘folkloric, classicizing, and international’ styles present within these gardens – he dismissively conjectured that ‘perhaps all the pavilions are, to some extent, folkloric’ (p.140).

### Israel’s Bauhaus Vernacular

Israel applied for a spot in the Giardini just two years after the partition of Mandate Palestine. Officially opened in 1952, its pavilion scuppered earlier plans from the late 1940s for what would have been named a Palestinian pavilion.<sup>5</sup> Remarkably, that same year also saw Israel’s adversary, Egypt, enter the Giardini. Egyptian artists were among the first non-Europeans to show work in the main exposition palace of the Biennale, almost from the very beginning; but the Arab Republic of Egypt (RAE) had now obtained its own permanent space. Still, this was inside the Padiglione Venezia, a large generic classicizing structure dominating the island of Sant’Elena (across the canal from the main grounds), which had been designed by the Venetian Brenno Del Giudice under the fascist regime. The Israeli pavilion, by contrast, was a free-standing entity built by an Israeli architect, Zeev Rechter. Not coincidentally, it is located next to the pavilion of the United States, which was the first country to recognise Israel’s sovereignty. The pairing is as significant as the disjunction in style is conspicuous.

<sup>5</sup> The proposal for a Palestinian pavilion was advanced again in 2002, but as the Italian government did not recognise this nation, it was rejected, and reported in the press as verging on anti-Semitic provocation. See Jean Fischer (2009), who recounts a number of the strategies since used by curators and artists to intervene in the institutional infrastructure of the Biennale’s architecture so as to give the question of Palestine a greater voice.



Figure 3.16: View looking east toward the American pavilion, designed by Williams Adams Delano and Chester Holmes Aldrich in 1930, showing part of a site-specific installation above the pediment called *Triple Point* (2013) by Sarah Sze. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

Unlike its neighbour, built in a nationalist Colonial Revival language just prior to the emergence of the ‘international style’ in America, the Israeli pavilion seems to proclaim the post-war triumph of architectural modernism over classicism. The pavilion for the United States is noteworthy not just because it was installed in the Giardini under Benito Mussolini’s dictatorship, but because it reveals how in 1930 it was still possible to build public monuments in a style that harked back directly to Thomas Jefferson’s neoclassical house on the Monticello estate. By the 1950s, however, the so-called ‘international style’ was the preferred language for the construction of



Figure 3.17: View looking west toward the Swiss pavilion, designed by Bruno Giacometti in 1952. Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.18: View looking north toward the Austrian pavilion, designed by Josef Hoffmann in 1934, and restored by Hans Hollein in 1984. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

important public buildings and diplomatic structures in the North Atlantic sphere, including the new United Nations Headquarters in New York, designed by Wallace Harrison and Max Abramovitz. Somewhat anachronistically, though, the Israeli pavilion does not resemble the 1950s modernist gravitas of the UN building so much as it does the lightweight Bauhaus experiments of the 1920s.

Indeed, compared to the other pavilions built during this decade (e.g. Bruno Giacometti's ground-hugging brick-clad Swiss pavilion, 1952; or Takamasa Yoshizaka's elevated monolithic *béton brut* Japanese pavilion, 1956), Israel looks highly incongruous. It is even more of an anomaly than was Josef Hoffmann's 1934 Austrian pavilion – usually acknowledged as the first modernist building in the Giardini, but still very classical in its symmetrical plan and elevation. With its unadorned white walls, flat roof and lightweight and asymmetrical trapezoidal shell, cut open in one corner to allow for a glazed porch defined by *pilotis*

(and with its three split levels, curving stairwells and suggestion of a Corbusian *promenade architecturale* on the interior), the Israeli pavilion is a curious throwback. It is a throwback to the 1920s and specifically to



Figure 3.19: View looking east toward the Israeli pavilion. Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.20: View looking west toward the Israeli pavilion. Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.21: Interior view of the Israeli pavilion, with part of a site-specific installation in the foreground called *The Workshop* (2013) by Gilad Ratman. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

the kind of thing seen at Stuttgart's legendary 1927 Deutscher Werkbund exhibition on the Weissenhof housing estate. The pavilions at this exposition modelled prototypical dwellings, and showcased the new building style, five years before Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson used the space of New York's Museum of Modern Art to canvass modernism as the 'international style,' i.e., a style befitting America's incipient image of itself as a global capitalist superpower.

In the 1930s, this new building style had been transplanted from Germany to Mandate Palestine, in what the historian Daniel Monk has called 'an aesthetic occupation' (Monk, 1994 and 2002). This style was practised by a circle of avant-garde architects, who were reacting against earlier efforts to formulate an authentically Jewish architectural expression there, and which they saw as resulting in an unsatisfactory Orientalizing eclecticism. They were all trained in Europe and sympathetic to the Zionist cause. Among them was Rechter, the architect of the Biennale pavilion. Originally from the Ukraine, but educated in Rome and Paris, Rechter is considered one of the seminal figures of Israeli modern architecture. In 1949, just two years prior to the Biennale commission, he had won the highly prestigious competition to build Jerusalem's International Convention Center, the Binyenei HaUma, or Building of the Nation as it is commonly known. With this project, as well as Tel Aviv's national courthouse and Mann Auditorium, and a number of kibbutzim and residential blocks, he contributed to the definition of modern Israeli architecture as it is known today.

What was in America being promoted in the late 1930s and 40s as the 'international style,' then, was being presented as a vernacular in the emergent state of Israel. It was not just the Tel-Aviv circle, though, which construed this as a regional language specific to the culture and climate of the Middle East. The Nazis also identified the modernist vocabulary of flat roofs and white walls with the Mediterranean, and specifically Palestine, as a well-known 1934 photomontage attests. This image was publicised as propaganda by the Nazis, who were eager to lambast the architectural modernism of the Stuttgart Weissenhofsiedlung as Semitic, foreign, un-German; they did this by visually transposing this estate to a foreign Mediterranean landscape replete with Arabs and camels, so that the message of the photomontaged image was clear: modernism was alien to Germanic culture. By mid-century, then, the new building style had in the Palestinian context assumed the look of a 'bauhaus vernacular' (Monk,



Figure 3.22: View looking north toward the Czechoslovakian pavilion, designed by Otakar Novotný in 1926. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

1994), and was closely linked with a burgeoning Israeli nationalism.<sup>6</sup>

This not only explains the seemingly anachronistic presence of a 1920s Bauhaus vocabulary in the post-war gardens of the Biennale, but also shows how the new state of Israel sought to capitalise here on the vernacular and international associations of its pavilion. The use of an international modernist language in the Israeli pavilion is thrown into sinister relief when seen next to the pavilion built in 1926 for Czechoslovakia, similarly positioned in proximity with those European nations that vouched for its legitimacy; this was an equally young and conflicted state at the time, and the architect of its pavilion, Otakar Novotný, employed a pared-down quasi-functionalist aesthetic to communicate progressive democratic and social ideals in this supranational setting, which entirely belied the subnational identities of Czechs and Slovaks. By contrast, though, the Israeli pavilion, wholly foreign to the utopian moment of the Weimar Republic and the Bauhaus culture that it casts a superficial glance back at, is void of any such ideals; it is all image or instrument, for the much less benign task of imposing Zionism on the map of Palestine at a particularly critical moment, when the fledgeling state of Israel was engaging in conflict on all of its borders.

This is no longer just the 'aesthetic occupation' of which Monk writes. Since this structure now physically occupies the supranational space of the Biennale rather than Palestinian land, it might be more apposite to see it as a form of 'symbolic violence.' It performs a

6 The term 'bauhaus vernacular' was only coined recently by Daniel Monk (1994) and Gilbert Herbert (1995); but architects of the Chug would surely have realised they were vernacularizing modernism; for other critical views on this process in Israel, see Alona Nitzan-Shiftan (1996) and Amir Peleg (2002).

Figure 3.23: Canadian pavilion, showing part of an installation called *Music for Silence* (2013) by Shary Boyle.  
Photograph: Joel Robinson.



symbolic violence inasmuch as it denies the existence of this region's subnational identities. On the surface, then, this is an architecture that bespeaks the freedom, openness and universality of the 'international style,' i.e., the 'American style.' Yet, it is disingenuous to talk of style here, as if it were something untainted and innocent of politics. For while the Israeli pavilion may not appear as belligerent as the classicizing monumentalism that infiltrated the Giardini under fascism, its enlistment in a form of cultural imperialism (not to say cultural genocide) is not dissimilar.

### Canada's Indigenous Primitivism

From the very beginning, Canada had artists showing work individually at the Biennale. It only officially entered as a nation in the same year as Israel, albeit inside the main exposition palace at first (Paikowsky, 1999).<sup>7</sup> It did not acquire its own pavilion till 1958, when funds for building it were provided as part of the Italian government's 'peace settlement' (Reesor, 1995, p.17). In high contrast with Israel, Canada had been relatively autonomous as a nation for some time – since 1867 to be precise, when a self-governing confederacy was established. Even so, the location of Canada's pavilion on San Antonio's Mount (named after

<sup>7</sup> In contrast with the other case studies here, namely the pavilions for Israel and Brazil, there is already a body of literature on Canada at the Venice Biennale, some of which touches on the pavilion and its reception in the media; see Carol Harrison Reesor (1995), Sandra Paikowsky (1999), Valentine Moreno (2010) and Elizabeth Diggon (2012). However, only Michelangelo Sabatino (2007) really describes the architecture of the pavilion.



Figure 3.24: View looking east toward the Canadian pavilion, which was built immediately southwest of the British pavilion. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

one of the churches that was demolished here to make way for these public gardens) next to – or rather in the shadow of – the British pavilion, is a reminder of its perpetual colonial standing, and the fact that prior to this Canada's participation in international expositions was largely underwritten by its place in the empire.

Like the Israeli pavilion, whose placement behind the American pavilion was every bit as telling, the Canadian pavilion was initially bound up with the question of this country's national sovereignty. To be sure, this was obviously more of a cultural sovereignty, vis-à-vis threats that were now perceived to be coming from south of the border rather than across the Atlantic. As others have observed (Reesor, 1995; Paikowsky, 1999; Sabatino, 2007; Moreno, 2010; Diggon, 2012), the



Figure 3.25: View of the entrance to the Canadian pavilion.  
Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.26: View from the interior courtyard of the Canadian pavilion. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

Canadian pavilion cannot be discussed without close reference to the so-called Massey Report, written in 1951 with a view to laying out the tactics of cultural protectionism, and spelling out the significance of the arts in the projection of Canada at home and abroad. Several passages in this report are quite remarkable, inasmuch as they specify for instance that, in addition to military defences, 'our cultural defences equally demand national attention; the two cannot be separated' (quoted in Paikowsky, p.9).

The man who headed the Royal Commission on National Development of the Arts, Letters and Sciences, which is the body that had produced the Massey Report, was no less a diplomat and figure of power than Vincent Massey. During the Second World

War, he had served as the country's delegate to the League of Nations, and when Canada first started participating in the Biennale, he was not only chair of the National Gallery in Ottawa (between 1948 and 1952), but also Governor General. This is worth bearing in mind when considering that the Canadian pavilion was realised under the aegis of the National Gallery. For, while it is generally acknowledged that the degree of involvement of the National Gallery (and more generally, the federal government) in the design and building of the Biennale pavilion was fairly minimal, it cannot have been completely negligible.

This pavilion is unique in that it was not designed by a national (like most of the venues up to that point), but left to Italian architects, and specifically Enrico Peressutti of the Milanese firm BBPR. BBPR, whose other members included Lodovico Belgiojoso and Ernesto Rogers, had banded together in the early 1930s to serve the fascist state's corporatist vision for architecture and the city, before disabusing itself of that ideology, after its founding member Gian Luigi Banfi was murdered in 1945, in the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. Peressutti designed a modestly sized pavilion, fitting the plot that was offered. It integrates different materials – a concrete pillar in the courtyard, inclined iron beams, and walls of brick, wood and glass. More unusual though is its vaguely helical plan, organised around a large tree that had to stay there by law. It is surely the least orthodox structure in the Giardini, and quite likely 'a reaction to the monumental and imperialist impulses of the architecture associated with Mussolini's Fascism and to



Figure 3.27: View looking southeast toward the Hungarian pavilion, designed by Géza Maróti in 1909. Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.28: View looking east toward the Finnish pavilion, designed by Alvar Aalto in 1956. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

the surrounding neoclassical pavilions', as has recently been suggested (Drouin-Brisebois, 2011, p.78).

The Canadian pavilion is among a number of post-war structures in the Giardini that is typical of a gradual shift away from the internationalist rhetoric of 1930s modernism, toward regionalist positions, and a consideration of the specific context or culture of a place. Regionalist inclinations were not entirely new in the Giardini, as the Secessionist character of the Hungarian pavilion (1909) and the Byzantine aspect of the Greek pavilion (1932) demonstrate; but these were eclectic historicist in style, and likely perceived with disdain by the more progressive architects that designed pavilions here after the War. One of the more exemplary post-war indications of a progressive regionalism here, for instance, is Alvar Aalto's Finnish pavilion (1956); with its walls painted in the colours (blue and white) of that country's flag, this is a deeply nationalistic albeit abstract reinterpretation of the wooden vernacular of Karelia, a region fought over

between the Finns and Soviets during World War II. Like the 'bauhaus vernacular' of the Israeli pavilion, though, this is once again a strangely transplanted regionalism. It has nothing to do with the context of Italy or Venice, of course; rather, it is all about supranational projection, with a form of scenography or image-making that is introduced here because it is deemed to be representative of national identity.

As one of the more peculiar works of architecture in the Biennale grounds, Canada's pavilion has generated comparatively more interest than most of the other buildings in the Giardini. One of the points of debate here concerns the intentionality of its image. With its octagonal footprint, and its conical elevation of criss-crossing beams, it has been seen as the cliché of an 'Indian' teepee or wigwam, albeit using the techniques and materials of industrialised Europe.<sup>8</sup> This was certainly recognised at the time, with the critic Lisa Balfour of the *Montreal Star* complaining that because 'it imitates the lines of an Indian wigwam' (Balfour, 1966), it could not have been a less satisfactory space for displaying art (and paintings in particular); she was no less critical in her article for *Maclean's* magazine, 'Our Image in a Venice Wigwam' (Balfour, 1966, p.72). Nor was this image lost on commentators outside Canada; in 1968, Alloway wrote rather condescendingly that 'Canada has built an intricate wigwam out of glass and wood' (Alloway, 2010, p.141).

It is only in the more recent scholarship that positions about whether and how intentional this was are conflicted, with Sabatino drawing on BBPR's interest in vernacular expression, indigenous traditions and a primitivist aesthetic in his account of Canada's 'Wigwam in Venice' (the title of his 2007 article), and Elizabeth Diggon pointing to the lack of concrete evidence for this inference (in her insightful 2012 dissertation examining the diplomatic and cultural objectives of Canada at the biennials in Venice and São Paolo). Yet, the absence of hard testimony that the National Gallery or Peressutti himself sought to mobilise indigeneity in the pursuit of a national image does not at all make this a crude hypothesis, as Diggon suggests it does (p.11). On the contrary, the Massey Report, which counseled the development of a regionalist language in architectural culture, actually gives credence to the suggestion that this pavilion was meant to convey aboriginality.

Moreover, when one recalls how Canada had already been concerned with representations of 'Indianness'

<sup>8</sup> Although 'First Nations' or 'First Peoples' are generally the preferred terms used to refer to Canada's indigenous populations, 'Indian' is actually still the legal appellation used by the Canadian government.

and 'Indian' relations as early as the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, and had indeed already been putting aboriginal culture on display at such expositions so as to promote tourism, the Biennale pavilion's resonance with native building traditions seems less of an accident. (It was certainly no accident at Montreal's Expo '67, less than a decade later, in the designs for the Canadian pavilion and the Indians of Canada pavilion). Although Peressutti was Italian, one can conceivably imagine him considering the origins of the pavilion typology in the mobile tents of Roman and Crusader times, and appreciating the analogy between these Eurasian structures and North American nomadic dwellings, with which he would certainly have become acquainted on trips to Ottawa and New Jersey, where he had lecturing responsibilities (Sabatino, p.6). Yet, it hardly matters at any rate, for the evidence is clear enough that the wider populace did in fact perceive a wigwam in the Canadian pavilion, and take this as the image that Canada wanted to project.<sup>9</sup> One of the other images that comes to mind, especially when seen next to the classicizing structure of the British pavilion, is that of a fortress on the colonial American frontier.

Rather exotic in the Venetian context, the primitivism of this pavilion was, upon its construction, either praised or mocked. Interestingly, though, it was not questioned (just as the indigeneity mobilised at world's fairs was not questioned) in light of the Canadian government's unspeakable record of cultural genocide, its expropriation of indigenous lands, its prohibition on certain cultural and spiritual practices, and its ruthless assimilationist policies. Without the least concern for the deeper politics of representation here, one journalist merely observed: 'It is rather as if three teepees had been pushed together to form the core of a combination post-office, souvenir stand, and service station somewhere near the U.S.-Canada border' (Hale, 1966). Artists and curators, for their part, have continued to whinge more about the tortuous space of its galleries, which were not at all like the standard 'white cube' for displaying work. Not until 1995 did the government even select a First Nations artist to represent Canada in its modernist teepee.

In contrast with Israel, the Canadian pavilion does not (at least not in such a blunt way) put indigenous

<sup>9</sup> The fact that the Canadian pavilion is still seen as a wigwam, moreover, is evidenced in Josée Drouin-Brisebois' catalogue essay for the 2011 Canadian pavilion, and in the architectural conservator Dinu Bumbaru's short reflection on the Canadian pavilion in *Common Pavilions* (2013), where he writes that it offers 'an evocative hybrid between the First Nations' movable houses and the brickscapes of cities and industries seamlessly connected to the gardens in a way that is distinctive yet respectful of the neighbours.'

identity under erasure, in favour of that of the settlers. Rather, this construction appears to colonise the representation of 'Indianness,' reducing, homogenizing or essentializing one aspect of aboriginal building tradition, and projecting a form of primitivism onto that nomadic type of architecture. To what end does it do this though? If the Canadian pavilion cannot be accused of eliding indigeneity, it is perhaps instead what the historian Kim Dovey, writing about attempts in the Australian context to construct something that might be called an aboriginal architecture, has called a 'signifier of reconciliation' (Dovey, 2000, p.5). This would be, in other words, a 'signifier' that serves to displace or silence any questions about what a richer, more polyvalent aboriginal identity might be, and absorb the markers of that identity into a Western narrative, which ultimately serves to validate hegemonic relations.

### Brazil's Tropical Modern

The Brazilian pavilion was originally designed in 1959 by the firm of Henrique Ephim Mindlin, Walmyr Lima Amaral, and the Italian émigré Giancarlo Palanti, but only realised in 1964, under the direction of the Venetian Amerigo Nino Marchesin.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the Israeli and Canadian pavilions, several hands were involved here (nationals of both Brazil and Italy), and the building might be said to register this intercontinental exchange. Of the architects involved, Mindlin and Palanti were well-established, having struck up a partnership in 1955. Mindlin was a prolific architect, but outside Brazil was best known for his canonical survey *Modern Architecture in Brazil* (1956), introduced by Siegfried Giedion and published in German, French and English, with a view to broadcasting the nation's contribution to architectural modernism for an overseas readership. Before relocating to Brazil in 1946, Palanti had studied and taught at Milan's Polytechnic, practised with formative and influential rationalists like Franco Albini, and worked on the magazines *Domus* and *Casabella*. The choice of these architects, then, could not have been more suitable.

Latin American participation in the Biennale could of course be a topic of study in itself, illuminating how nations in this particular region utilised culture in the

<sup>10</sup> Mindlin was a prolific architect, but outside of Brazil is perhaps best remembered for his two-decade survey *Modern Architecture in Brazil* (1956), introduced by Siegfried Giedion and published in German, French and English, with a view to broadcasting the nation's contribution to architectural modernism overseas. Palanti was a well-established architect prior to his move to Brazil in 1946, having graduated from and taught at Milan's Polytechnic, practised with rationalists like Franco Albini, and worked on the magazines *Domus* and *Casabella*.

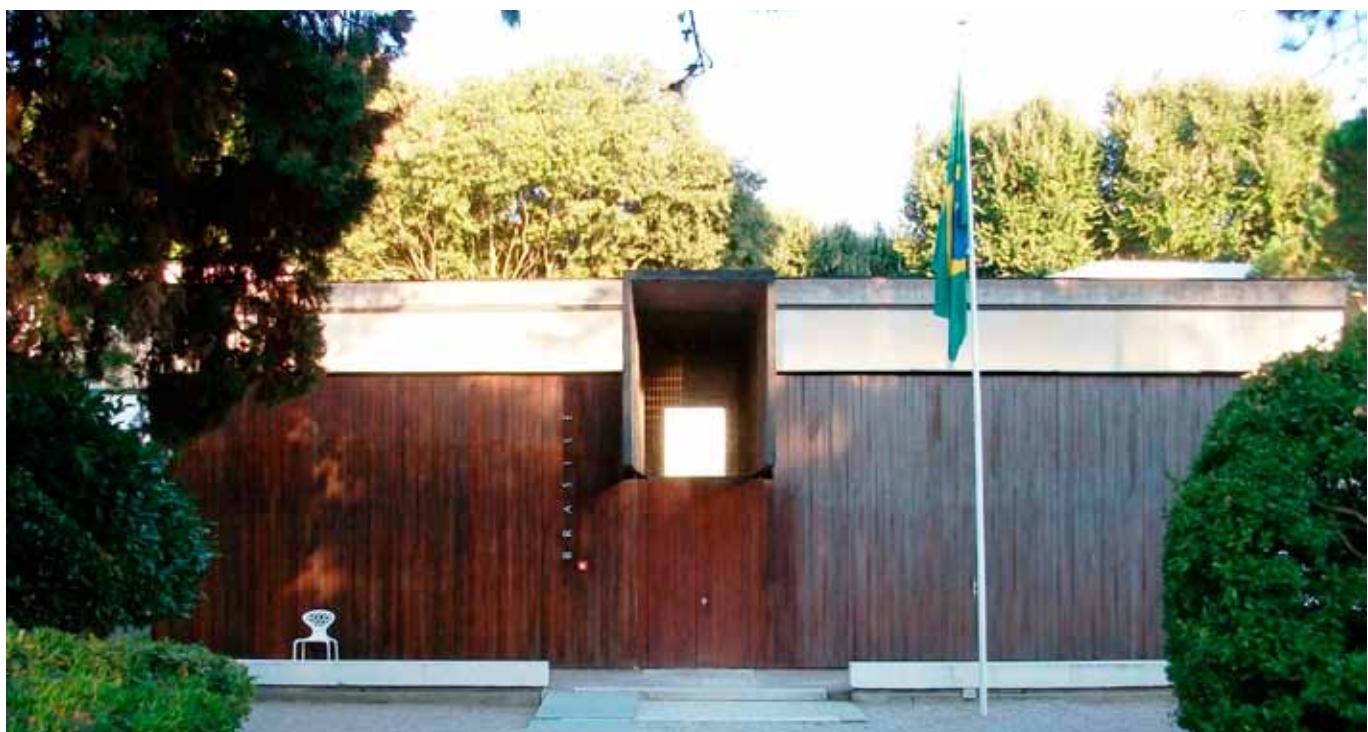


Figure 3.29: View looking east toward the Brazilian pavilion, from the bridge linking the Giardini to the island of Sant'Elena. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

construction of national identity. Quite predictably, the more influential or wealthier nations acquired representation early on, with others joining only afterward. Argentina was the first to participate, from as early as 1901; Brazil and Mexico only showed artwork from 1950, Venezuela from 1956, Bolivia and Cuba from 1966, Columbia from 1968, and Chile from 1974 (when the Biennale was mobilised to protest the regime of Augusto Pinochet).<sup>11</sup> None acquired their own pavilions, though, until after the Second World War. Venezuela, a resource-rich nation in the grip of a dictatorship, was the first to build its pavilion in 1956. Uruguay was granted permission to convert an existing storehouse for use as its pavilion in 1960. Brazil, with its socialistic democracy under threat by Cold War plotting, completed its pavilion just before the military coup of 1964. Brazil's was the last of the pavilions to be built here prior to the radicalism of the late 1960s and 70s, which led to a hiatus in construction till the end of the century, at which point Australia and South Korea acquired pavilions.

Like many of its continental neighbours, Brazil had obtained its independence long ago, in 1822 to be exact. By the time it built its pavilion in Venice, then, there was no question of needing or wanting to assert sovereignty, either political or cultural, as had been the case with Israel and Canada. Yet, there was the

<sup>11</sup> Only much more recently, starting in the 2000s, have Peru, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Panama, Haiti, and Honduras begun to participate.



Figure 3.30: View looking west toward the rear of the Brazilian pavilion and gardens. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

question of national identity, which had been an on-going point of concern among Brazil's elite, and which acquired different answers in architectural form, from the classical through the neo-colonial to the modernist. From the first great international expositions, Brazil had been keen to exhibit its modernisation to the world, and sought to build its own autonomous exposition buildings for this purpose. At such events, Latin American countries sought to project European civilisation and progress, even while the reality was that 'they were placed in ambivalent locations, closer to the colonial pavilions than to the European countries, and were asked to display exoticism and originality to satisfy the demands of the mass spectacle' (Dussel, 2011, p.604).



Figure 3.31: View looking east across the Sant'Elena Bridge toward the Brazilian pavilion, with the Padiglione Venezia just visible behind it. Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.32: View looking south across the gardens of the Brazilian pavilion, with the Padiglione Venezia on the left. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

By the 1930s, with its Old Republic now toppled, Brazil was being increasingly romanticised as a 'land of the future' by European artists and writers (Zweig, 1941). It was perceived as a liberal utopian *tabula rasa* of new possibilities. As such, it attracted high numbers of immigrants and curious visitors. Incidentally, it was the Italian émigré and entrepreneur Francisco (Ciccillo) Matarazzo Sobrinho who would in 1951 establish Brazil's own international, large-scale, recurring exposition, the São Paulo Bienal – the second of its kind after the Venice Biennale. With the visits of Le Corbusier in 1929 and 1936, and architects like Rino Levi, Gregori Warchavchik, Roberto Burle Marx, Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer and Affonso Eduardo Reidy pioneering the new building style, the sway of Beaux-Arts classicism and neo-colonial academicism receded (but not without a fight), and Brazil began to absorb architectural modernism, to the point that this has been perceived as the nation's vernacular style; nowhere else did modernism 'achieve the scale or depth of dissemination across social strata that it reached in Brazil' (Lara, 2009, p.48). As in Israel then,



Figure 3.33: View of the beam dividing the interior galleries of the Brazilian pavilion, showing the installation of the exhibition *Inside/Outside* (2013), curated by Luis Pérez-Oramas and including the work of Max Bill, Lygia Clark, Hélio Fervenza, Odires Mlászho, and Bruno Munari. Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.34: View of the beam defining the entrance to the interior galleries of the Brazilian pavilion. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

modernism had been long accepted as a national style by the time Brazil built its pavilion in Venice; but this was a very different kind of modernism.

In the Giardini, the location of the Latin American pavilions seems to have been more the result of where there was leftover space. Venezuela was allocated a rather central plot of land, on one of the main axes, between the Russian pavilion and the recently built Swiss pavilion. The pre-existing structure that became the Uruguayan pavilion was situated in a rather unpropitious area, as one might expect, on the bank of the canal that divides the main gardens from the island of Sant'Elena. In the original plans, the pavilion for Brazil was meant to double as a bridge that would cross the canal, thereby connecting the main grounds with the island. In the final design, Marchesin appears to have retained its character as a kind of passage if not a

bridge, but repositioned the building; he placed it solidly on the island itself, and on axis with both the older bridge and the central ingress of the Padiglione Venezia.

Unlike the Israeli and Canadian additions, which rejected the classical symmetry of the early twentieth-century buildings as too autocratic, the Brazilian pavilion is exceptional in being the only post-war structure to recuperate symmetry. Two rectilinear volumes – the front one smaller than the rear one – are bisected by an imposing concrete U-shaped beam; this marks the ingresses at front and rear, divides the exhibition space into four rooms, connects the outdoor areas at either end, and reinforces the pavilion's axial alignment with the pared-down rationalist façade of the building behind it. This symmetry is also characteristic of Sant'Elena's Austrian and Greek pavilions built in 1934, positioned so they are facing each other at either end of the Padiglione Venezia. Even so, by virtue of its conspicuously awkward location blocking the monumental vista of the latter, Brazil's post-war pavilion would seem to take up an agonistic relationship vis-à-vis the fascist texture of the Giardini, which is especially pronounced here. About this relationship, the artist Regina Silveira (2013) contends that this pavilion 'ended up turning its back to them [the neighbouring pavilions], while completely destabilizing the classical spatial arrangement they bore to each other.'<sup>12</sup>

In its severity of form, Brazil's exhibition building approaches a post-war Brutalist version of the nearby Austrian pavilion, which is similarly rectangular in plan, skirted at the top with glazing, and bisected by an open-air corridor. Its affinity with certain concrete structures built in Brazil around this time – such as Lina Bo Bardi's MASP, or Museum of Art São Paulo (1956–68) – has also been noted. Yet, the only *béton brut* here is in the cornice and the visually arresting horizontal beam, which is otherwise tempered by a façade decorated with the vertical wooden slats that would normally appear imprinted in the unpolished concrete surfaces. Historical photographs suggest that it was originally clad – at least at the rear – with rustic tiles or bricks, where a white plaster only appears now. Glazing – originally clear, but now replaced with frosted glass – stretches around the ceiling of the larger volume to the rear. The terracing and reflective pools that are discernible in the plans, but which today only hint at the hard landscaping and the kind of planting that was intended for the site, are another frank reminder of what has sometimes been referred to in the literature

<sup>12</sup> Incidentally, around the same time (between 1962 and 1968), Carlo Scarpa similarly destabilised the equilibrium of the central pavilion's façade, with a series of screens that disrupted its fascist symmetry.



Figure 3.35: View looking northeast toward the central section of the Padiglione Venezia, immediately behind the Brazilian pavilion. Photograph: Joel Robinson.



Figure 3.36: View looking northeast toward the Austrian pavilion. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

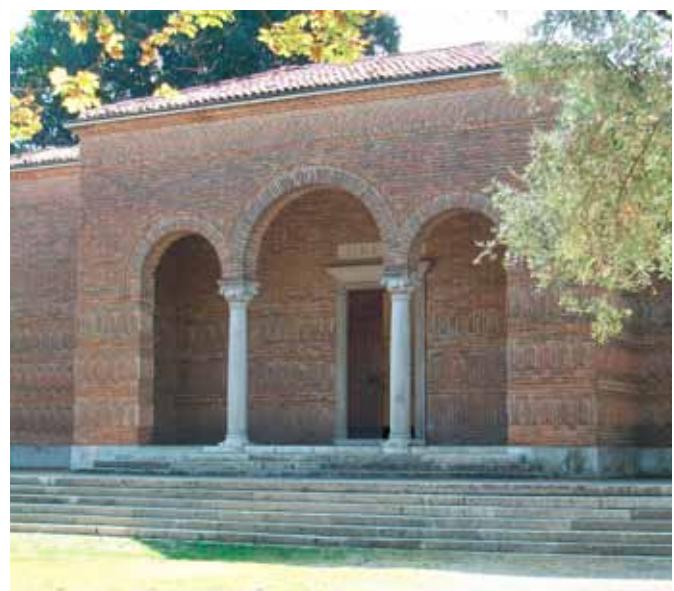


Figure 3.37: View looking southeast toward the Greek pavilion, designed by M. Papandreou and Brenno Del Giudice in 1934. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

as Brazil's alternative of 'tropical modernism'.<sup>13</sup> (This, however, is in spite of the fact that the pavilion boasts none of the more stereotypical features of Brazilian modernism, including sun-breakers, or *brises-soleil*, and the curvilinear surfaces popularised by Niemeyer.)

The discourse on the tropical in architectural modernism dates to the 1950s, but even before this architects had sought to reconcile the modernism of Bauhaus teachings and Le Corbusier's 'five points' with regions of the world exhibiting very different topographic and climatic traits, and where different forms, materials and techniques had been used. Brazil in particular developed an indigenous modernism that looked inward as much as outward, anticipating the later debates over *critical regionalism*.<sup>14</sup> Where its neighbours still looked largely to Europe (and more recently, the United States) as the exemplar of international modernism, architects here aspired to a hybrid regionalism. Behind this, in part, was the utopian dream of sociologist Gilberto Freyre ([1933] 1964), whose vision of a racial democracy – however naïve – pointed the way to a very different configuration of sub-national identities (predominantly aboriginal and black) in art and architectural culture, where these were indeed celebrated and mobilised in the service of mid-century nationalism.<sup>15</sup>

Contrasting the pavilions of Venezuela and Brazil at the 1939 World's Fair serves to bring this distinction into the spotlight. Venezuela had commissioned the local New York firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) to design its 'international style' pavilion. The result communicated nothing of this country's complex multiculturalism. By contrast, Brazil enlisted Costa and Niemeyer to show off the hybridism of its newly invented architectural tradition. This 'tradition,' as scholars have argued, was an avant-gardist language that simultaneously responded to climatic and topographic

13 For a discussion of tropical modernism in the Brazilian context, see Aleca Le Blanc (2012); for a more general account of the discourse of tropical architecture as it emerged in the 1950s, see Hannah Le Roux (2003). As Le Blanc explains, there were critics of tropicalism; but the Brazilian modernists exploited its exoticism in the promotion of their work overseas, fusing it with architectural modernism to broadcast national identity.

14 Citing Keith Eggener's (2002) critique of critical regionalism, Fernando Luiz Lara (2009) suggests that Brazil's vernacular modernism is the opposite in that it is not something theorised in the metropole and imposed, from the centre to the periphery, but emerges in the latter, adapting modernism to the locale rather than adapting the locale to modernism, in 'a much more complex process of transculturation' (p.42).

15 On the topics of cultural miscegenation and Brazilian nationalism in the 1930s, see Styliane Philippou (2005).

circumstances, and looked back to the Brazilian baroque of the eighteenth-century. The latter was a particularly calculated manoeuvre; it meant that the modernists' claims to reflect Brazil's rich architectural history and mixed cultural identity were that much stronger than those of their academic competitors working in the Beaux-Arts or neo-colonial languages (Lara, 2002).

In the Giardini, roughly two decades later, Venezuela also employed a non-national, the Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa, to design its pavilion. Like the several other buildings that Scarpa built for the Biennale in the 1950s, this series of interpenetrating volumes reveals a post-war Italian preoccupation with the 'organic' architecture of America's Frank Lloyd Wright, who was revered as the harbinger of a more democratic architectural language in the wake of fascism. Like the World's Fair pavilion, it projects an unspecific placeless identity; but this, of course, is a particular kind of identity in itself. It communicates that Venezuela is part of a progressive international community, which is ironic (or perhaps not ironic at all) because it was a military *junta* at the time. Brazil, which would seem the better candidate for inclusion in such a community prior to the 1964 coup, does not neglect its ethnic diversity. It attests to that country's indigenisation of modernism, signaling a hybridity that is not just an aesthetic descriptor but arguably a means for dislodging 'the structures that place central cultures above the peripheral' (Hernández, 2002, p.83), and demonstrating this for the world.

### Folkloric Geography in the Giardini

Having introduced three of the more remarkable buildings added to the Giardini in the post-war era, consideration can now be given to the broader significance of this evolving patchwork of pavilions.

Writing about these pavilions in his book, *The Venice Biennale, 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl*, the critic Lawrence Alloway observed how they fall into three stylistic categories: 'folkloric, classicizing, and international' (p.140). By the end of his brief two-page survey of the pavilions, however, he seemed unimpressed with such categories, not to say unimpressed with an architecture as banal as nationalism itself, and concluded: 'In truth, perhaps all the pavilions are, to some extent, folkloric' (p.140). *Folkloric* is of course the adjectival form of *folklore*, defined as the traditional stories, beliefs and customs of a people or community, which have come down to them through generations.

The *folkloric* would seem to be Alloway's dismissive catch-all for a host of more familiar terms in

architectural history, including *national romantic*, *historicist*, *eclectic*, *populist*, *vernacular* and *regionalist* – all of which have usually been construed as other to the internationalist aspirations, streamlined appearance and democratic affectation of modernism. Yet, unlike these terms, which may suggest erroneously that identity is somehow innate, the term *folkloric* actually seems the most honest and accurate, in that it calls attention to the fundamentally ‘invented’ or ‘imagined’ character of nations and identities (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Anderson, 1983). It underscores how architecture participates in the building of the traditions and narratives that are central to the formation of nationhood (Bhabha, 1990). The *folkloric* does not refer so much to a style, then, as to the coded aspect of the architecture. This is what Umberto Eco (reflecting on the pavilions of Expo ’67 in Montreal) called the secondary function of architecture as a communicative medium, an instrument for the construction of meaning and identity (Eco, [1987] 1997, p.204).

Curiously, however, Alloway does not see modernism in any privileged light, but submits that it may just be another variety of the *folkloric*. The pavilions of Israel, Canada and Brazil appear to corroborate this view. The question that now arises (having worked through the case studies) is whether Alloway’s term *folkloric* might feasibly be extended to the Giardini as a whole, inasmuch as this architectural landscape is also coded. To be sure, this is not at all to impute any grand design to this place. It has already been pointed out that the national pavilions were built here at different times, and often renovated in later years, meaning that there could never have been any masterplan of the kind that was used to lay out the universal expositions. Even so, it would be disingenuous to see this landscape as a hodgepodge, haphazardly formed over the last century. By homing in exclusively on the 1950s though, when most of the post-war buildings appeared, one can inquire into how far the introduction of pavilions built by post-colonial nations (in a modernist language inflected by regionalist concerns particular to the nation) served to reconfigure this transnational space, and give rise to a (potentially) different narrative of global order.

To determine the extent to which the architectural script of the Giardini was rewritten during this time, it would be helpful to sketch this landscape as it stood prior to mid-century. This was not just any landscape of course. Not only had it been laid out under the imperial rule of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1807, after the deposition of Venice’s Most Serene Republic and the destruction of a vast ecclesiastical heritage in the city’s Castello district. Following the Risorgimento, these

gardens became a locus of civic pride and nationalist sentiment, visible in the statuary that was accumulating there. Founded in 1895, the Biennale took after – albeit on a smaller scale – the universal expositions that were then being staged throughout Europe, and which engendered the not innocuous ‘fairy tale’ that national borders can be transcended by ‘peaceful’ exchange, be it commercial or cultural.<sup>16</sup> The first Biennale pavilions were those of Europe’s chief powers, many of whom had already hosted their own grand expositions, and were thus very aware of the capital to be gained by building national pavilions at these kinds of events.

From the beginning, the Giardini were an eclectic space, and one of the few in Venice where modern architecture could take root. They were some distance from the older Gothic fabric of the city, and could therefore become a cradle for what the historian Shearer West called a new ‘post-Republican “modern” Venice’ (West, 1995, p.407). The majority of early twentieth-century pavilions were built in a classicizing or national romantic language, which had already been utilised in the universal museums of the nineteenth century; but given that these were garden pavilions rather than civic monuments, the more experimental Art Nouveau had also been an option, especially as Liberty was being proposed in some quarters as the young Italy’s official national style. With the ascendancy of fascism, the gardens were used to propagandise Mussolini’s imperial ambitions, faintly echoing Napoleon’s own motivations. By the time of Hitler’s state visit to Italy in 1934, which included a tour of the Giardini, the austere classicism of the newly proclaimed Empire had been used to rebuild the main exposition palace and construct the Padiglione Venezia on the other side of the canal.

When the Biennale resumed after the interruption of the Second World War, this landscape and its pavilions were perceived as tainted by fascism, and an imperialism that was increasingly ostracised as a drawn-out process of decolonisation began. Unlike the big universal, colonial and empire exhibitions of the past, where the pavilions of colonies often featured alongside those of imperial powers, the Biennale had included very little representation of the colonies; fine art was still perceived as something only Europeans (or non-Europeans trained under Europeans) were capable of making. Even after the war, when a token number of post-colonial nations were allocated space in the Giardini for their pavilions, the premise was that it was

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the British filmmaker Steve McQueen, on the occasion of showing his thirty-minute two-screen projection *Giardini* at the 2009 Biennale, used the term ‘fairy tale’ to describe this architectural landscape.



Figure 3.38: Central pavilion, formerly known as the Exposition Palace 'Pro Arte', originally built in 1894 but redesigned (in its current form) as the Italian pavilion by Duilio Torres in 1932. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

the art of their settlers rather than their indigenous populations that would be represented there. Only in the 1990s did that change. In the meantime, though, the Biennale largely ignored an emerging postcolonialist critique, and instead participated – inadvertently or knowingly – in the neo-colonialist cultural politics of the Cold War.

The way in which the Biennale of the 1950s was embroiled in propagandistic exertions that equated artistic and intellectual freedom with the capitalist West has recently been studied by Nancy Jachec (Jachec, 2007). Under Mussolini, the state had usurped control of the Biennale. As such, when the Christian Democratic government rose to power after the War, it was able to marshal this institution against the encroachments of a radical left-wing on the one hand, and on the other, utilise it with the aim of consolidating Western Europeanism after the isolation that Italy had suffered under fascism. This had the effect of pitting the ostensibly progressive and international art of countries with membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) against the ostensible cultural stagnancy of the Soviet-dominated Eastern Bloc. It was by no means an ideologically neutral institution, then, which saw the entry of new pavilions into the Giardini over the next two decades. The sociologist Ulrich Beck's turn of phrase that architecture is 'politics with bricks and mortar' (Beck, 1998, p.115) is probably nowhere more applicable than here.

Echoing the words of Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), the historians Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoglu and Wong Chong Thai define an architecture of postcolonialist substance as 'a space of intervention into those architectural constructions that parade under a universalist guise and either exclude or



Figure 3.39: View looking northeast toward the south wing of the Padiglione Venezia, and showing the Romanian pavilion. Photograph: Joel Robinson.

repress differential spatialities of often disadvantaged ethnicities, communities, or peoples' (Nalbantoglu and Thai, 1997, p.7).<sup>17</sup> However, the post-war appearance in the Giardini of a number of token pavilions dedicated to postcolonial countries does not constitute a 'postcolonial space' in these terms, but instead makes up what might be called a folkloric geography. For, as Patricia Morton writes in 'The uses and abuses of human geography' (2011), in regard to world's fair pavilions, architecture has not only represented 'geographically-located difference as historically immutable and fixed,' but 'has often employed geography indiscriminately and monumentalized racial and cultural difference in the service of nationalist and imperial regimes' (p.805).

Although the post-war Giardini projected a more inclusive, democratic, egalitarian image, and endeavoured to rub out everything that tarnished the first half-century of the Biennale, theirs is still fundamentally an 'imperial internationalism' (Mazower, 2009, p.191). This is a term that the historian Mark Mazower has used to describe the founding ideology of the United Nations, which for all its anti-colonialist rhetoric effectively existed to preserve the hegemonic relationships and imbalance of power that defined the older global order of the early twentieth century. Art is perhaps nowhere more tainted by this form of imperialism than at ostensibly international events such as the Biennale, and the architecture of display

<sup>17</sup> Homi Bhabha's oft-cited formulation of postcolonialism is that of a discourse that might 'intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give hegemonic "normality" to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities and peoples' (Bhabha, 1994, p.171).

in Venice's Giardini, like most spaces for the 'civilizing rituals' that Carol Duncan (1995) has theorised in connection with the West's grand universal museums, has been largely conservative in orientation and far from ideologically neutral. As Chin-Tao Wu observes in regard to such events: 'In postcolonial times [...] when military occupation is no longer acceptable or legitimate, it is the absence of force rather than its presence that marks out hegemonic domination, in particular in the sphere of art and culture' (Wu, 2007, pp.384–5)

One might suggest that the value of these gardens and pavilions today – usually so unremarked upon – consists in how they can be made to illuminate the role that architecture has played in 'imperial internationalism.' After all, the geopolitics of architecture are quite pronounced in this supranational setting – that is, once one begins to ignore the festive atmosphere of the Biennale, and ponder the significance of its buildings. For better or worse, the moment for burning these pavilions down has long passed, and the Giardini are now a part of a global heritage industry, visited by throngs of tourists, and just barely guarded against decay by the various ministries that preside over them. Still, there is a responsibility to look at this place more closely, and to understand how the essentially *folkloric* aspect of the architectural modernism of its pavilions might serve to expose the *folkloric* geography of this place, and decentre or provincialise modernism in the interests of a more cosmopolitan perspective.

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