

A Postmodernist Homage: The 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial  
by Zachary Torres

On the top floor of the Chicago Cultural Center, the home base of the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial, one is greeted by a large Hollywood-style sign by the firm Monadnock. It reads, “Make Big Plans,” echoing of the Biennial’s theme of “Make New Histories.” Yet, after spending upwards of six hours exploring the three exhibition floors, I am left wondering where exactly the “new” is to be found. Rather than address contemporary issues of homelessness, climate change, the refugee crisis, and new fabrication technologies, the second Chicago Biennial is mired in a neo-postmodernist curation of pretty collages and objet-touvés.

While certain of the exhibitions can be said to push boundaries — such as SANAA’s *Lake 33rd, Bronzeville* and Adamo-Faiden’s *From Mix-Use to Diff-Use* — the Biennial’s overall atmosphere is one of nostalgia, with countless references to Mies van der Rohe, Superstudio, Le Corbusier, and Adolf Loos. The two linchpin galleries, *Vertical City* and *Horizontal City*, best demonstrate this harkening back to the past. In the former, fifteen architects present sixteen feet high models of “contemporary” proposals for the Chicago Tribune Tower, in homage to the original 1922 competition. Of these fifteen, nine directly reference historical architecture, with six employing the term column to refer to the tower, in the tradition of Chicagoan Louis Sullivan. Barabs Lopes’s golden tower directly references Adolf Loos’s original runner-up Doric column entry. 6a Architects puts forward a slender wooden column created from Rococo panels. Sam Jacob Studio’s model, entitled *Chicago Pasticcio*, is “composed of varied architectural references fused into a new whole,” so that “a new kind of tower is made out of fragments of history.” Yet, this tower is merely Neoclassicist. Others make more recent references: Ensemble Studio’s Big Bang Tower and Kéré Architecture’s “Tower of Babel” both allude to Metabolist structural cores.

*Horizontal City* is likewise composed of about fifteen works, each one a play on the diorama paradigm. Some of these are literal recreations of modernist and postmodernist projects, such as Le Corbusier’s Beistegui apartment in Paris. Sauter von Moos’s *Sonsbeek Readymade* is an homage to Aldo van Eyck’s Sonsbeek Sculpture Pavilion, filled with oversized Pop Art-esque objet-trovés, such as a wine glass and spring. MAIO’s *The Grand Interior* directly alludes to Marcel Duchamp’s double-framed door, erasing architectural mass and defining space with furniture. Then

there is UrbanLab's *A Room Enclosed by Hills and Mountains*, which re-imagines Superstudio's *Supersurface* of the 1970s, complete with the same hippie family cutout.

Numerous other works throughout the Biennial directly draw on the past, and more particularly, a postmodern past. A 1:2 scale model of Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel is reimagined in a playful postmodern style with contemporary scenes drawn on the interior by baukuh and Stefano Graziani. Keith Kramwiede's wallpaper motif, *Visions of Another America*, collages Joseph Dufour's 1814 motif of Parisian monuments with American suburban development homes. Meanwhile, Stan Allen Architect displays a new balloon-frame model mounted on an actual balloon-frame. Yet, no architect is more alluded to than Mies van der Rohe, almost to the point of obsession. Photographs of his Crown Hall and Farnsworth House by various photographers line the walls while curtains hung in the style of his Tugendhat House define alcoves for more photographs of his Lake Shore Drive towers.

The Biennial's rhetoric also looks backward instead of forward. The descriptions of many of the pieces refer to themselves post-modernly as "sculptural objects" (Éric Lapierre's 365 Student Housing tower) or as "as-found objects." Ornamental motifs are prevalent: Barozzi/ Viegga's "structure as continuous ornament" tower, or Studio Mumbai's gold-leafed *Prima Materia* bamboo studies. Ironically, it seems as though Venturi snuck up on the curators as they wrote the texts of these modernist homages, or even upon the architects themselves. *(Not) Another Tower* by Tatiano Bilabao Estudio is a perfect example of Venturian appropriation as it amalgamates thousands of found-objects, including a Buddha head, into the structure. In fact, the Biennial's artistic directors, Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee, are so concerned with seeking the past that they required "each participant to submit three reference images that informed their work." Thus, it would be more apt to name the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial the 1977 Chicago Architecture Biennial.

Nevertheless, there are progressive works on display. Most notably *Lake 33rd, Bronzeville* by SANAA in collaboration with the IIT College of Architecture; *From Mix-Use to Diff-Use* by Adamo-Faiden; *Parking & More* by HHF Architects; *Robotic Craftsmanship: Making New History with Traditional Materials* by Archi-Union Architects; *Cosmic Latte: Architecture Beige Manifesto* by Jürgen Mayer H. & Philip Ursprung; *The Ethics of Dust* by Jorge Otero-Pailos; and *Make New Hutong Metabolism* by ZAO/ Standardarchitecture. These push conventional architectural notions in relation to contemporary issues of development, technology, and theory. *Lake 33rd*, for example, imagines a new kind of campus for IIT composed of unique

mountainous structures that serve equally as public parks and classroom and recreational space for the college and community. *Parking & More* likewise incorporates future development into an elegant parking garage in Basel's former industrial zone. *The Ethics of Dust* develops a new latex material gathered from the dust and pollution accumulated on ancient monuments during cleaning. Meanwhile, *Robotic Craftsmanship* applies new technological fabrication methods to traditional Chinese ceramics, carpentry, and masonry in order "to reinvent the expressive possibilities of building surfaces." Most radical of all though is *Comic Latte: Architecture Beige Manifesto*, which states, "We want to locate a new architectural paradigm. 'Cosmic Latte' shows the big in the small — and the small in the big. It is a cosmology of the architecture of our time." And yet, the manifesto still offers no insight into what this new paradigm could be.

Many of these more progressive works also still allude to the past. *Parking & More* cites Cedric Price. *Make New Hutong Metabolism* preserves the traditional Beijing courtyard typology, and *From Mix-Use to Diff-Use* employs cartoonish speech bubbles in the style of Venturi. So what makes them different from the other exhibitions? What makes them seem more progressive? Perhaps it is the difference between mimicking history and being inspired by it. The majority of the Biennial's works are postmodernist testaments to the past and offer little in terms of novelty. Yet these few later works possess a unique quality in that they do not directly copy the past's forms, but adopt its ideas for today's world. *Make New Hutong Metabolism*, for example, is not building traditional hutong houses, but breathing new life into them with contemporary forms and programs, while *Robotic Craftsmanship* employs new digital modeling and fabrication on traditional materials to generate textural massings. Indeed, there is a fine line between inspiration and mimicry, and of the nearly 200 projects on display, it is these seven that navigate it fluently.

One work in particular speaks to the Biennial's obsession with history. *Portraits I-VI*, curated by students of ETH Zurich and the Accademia di Architettura Mendrisio, ironically collages and juxtaposes drawings, images, and photographs of various architectural monuments and historical moments onto a salon wall that curves forward, as though buckling under its own allegorical weight. A mirrored floor reflects the wall back upon itself, as though to say that history is a reflective cycle. Yet, *Portraits I-VI* is not an homage to the past; it is a commentary on the influence of history in contemporary design. History should not weigh us down, but inspire us to push forward.

In a rapidly changing world, I struggle to justify the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial's reference to a past that seems ever more divorced from our contemporary politics and lifestyles. Charles Waldheim & the GSD's *Heliomorphic* is the only exhibit to discuss climate change, yet offers no practical solutions for sustainability. There is no mention of the refugee crisis, and housing takes a back seat to the generation of majestic models and aesthetically pleasing collages. The Biennial is a pastiche of historical references that attempts to spawn a neo-postmodern movement detached, just as the original was, from the needs of contemporary society in favor of pretty colors and gold-leafed materials. Now is not the time to be nostalgic for a past that has failed to meet the needs of a globalized world.