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Learning from Global Architecture Exhibitions: Resource Efficiency, Vernacular Intelligence, and Social and Environmental Advocacy



Courtesy of Walkmakers

Written by Nour Fakharany Published on May 25, 2024

Over the past year, architecture exhibitions have significantly addressed pressing global issues such as climate change, resource scarcity, and social advocacy. According to the Harvard Graduate School of Design, architecture exhibitions can foster dynamic engagement with contemporary issues, serving as platforms for experimentation and critique. These events, such as the Venice Architecture Biennale, Sharjah Architecture Triennial, Milan Design Week, and Concéntrico, serve as essential platforms for creatives to showcase and explore new ideas. Moreover, they have been instrumental in addressing the urgent challenges posed by the climate crisis by promoting sustainable practices.



Presenting a diverse array of topics, products, discussions, materials, and solutions, the exhibitions have become pivotal in today's environmental and social context. For example, the Venice Architecture Biennale 2023, curated by Lesley Lokko, explored themes like decolonization, sustainability, and the future of architecture, showcasing contributions from Africa "as a laboratory for the future." This focus aligns with a broader trend of integrating local and global perspectives to solve ecological and social issues in the built environment. Additionally, the rise of the Global South's involvement in these discussions has been notable, as seen in the Biennale's emphasis on African architecture and in the success of the Sharjah Architecture Triennial, which has influenced exhibitions worldwide.

The concept of "doing more with less" has been a recurring theme throughout the year's exhibitions, reflecting a mentality emphasizing innovation and efficiency. This approach is evident in architecture exhibitions over the past year, exploring three main themes: resource efficiency and circular economy, vernacular intelligence, and social and environmental advocacy. Whether it is exhibitions reusing materials, highlighting the potential of circular economy practices, projects using vernacular materials to inform sustainable construction methods, or projects addressing critical social issues such as housing affordability, urging architects to rethink what they make and at what social, financial, and global costs, these exhibitions serve as learning points that shape our collective future.

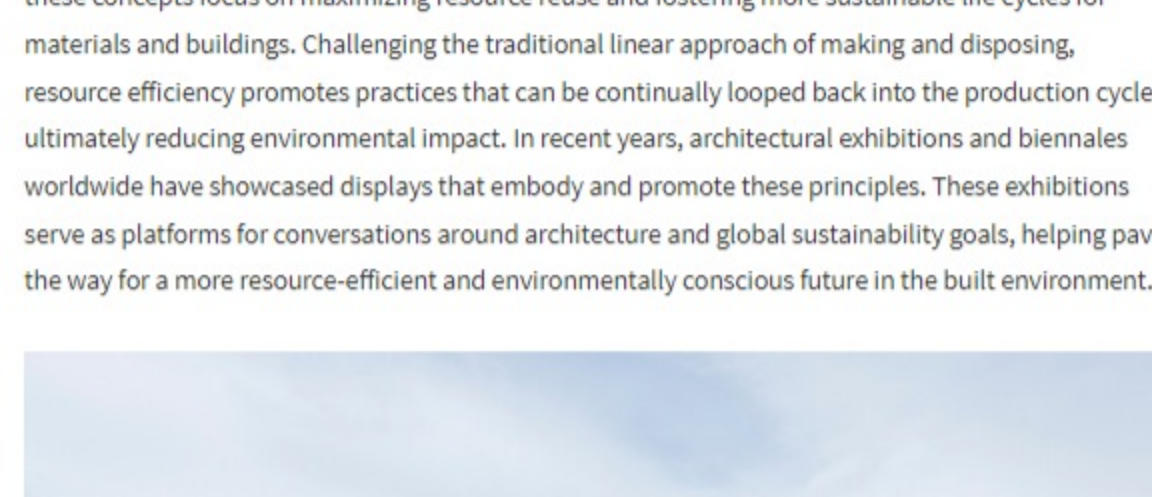
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Resource Efficiency and Circular Economy

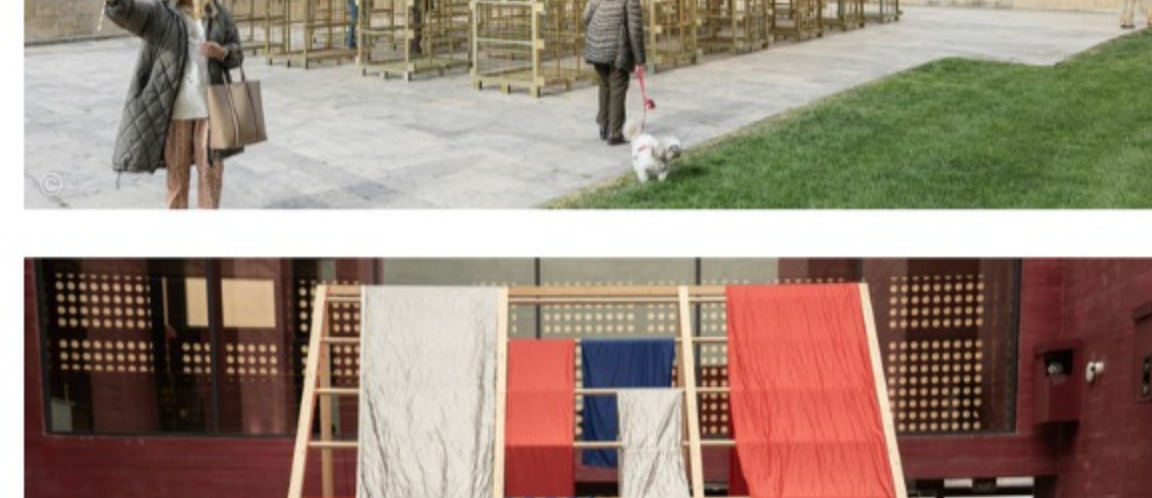


In today's climate, the contemporary architecture landscape is increasingly influenced by resource efficiency and circular economy principles. Emphasizing a broader global push towards sustainability, these concepts focus on maximizing resource reuse and fostering more sustainable life cycles for materials and buildings. Challenging the traditional linear approach of making and disposing, resource efficiency promotes practices that can be continually looped back into the production cycle, ultimately reducing environmental impact. In recent years, architectural exhibitions and biennales worldwide have showcased displays that embody and promote these principles. These exhibitions serve as platforms for conversations around architecture and global sustainability goals, helping pave the way for a more resource-efficient and environmentally conscious future in the built environment.

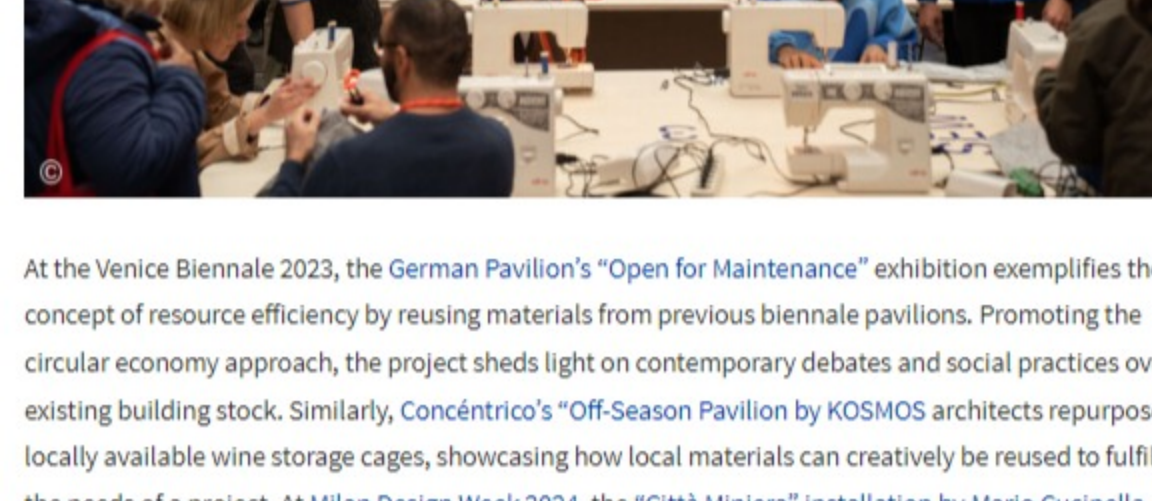


At the Venice Biennale 2023, the German Pavilion's "Open for Maintenance" exhibition exemplifies the concept of resource efficiency by reusing materials from previous biennale pavilions. Promoting the circular economy approach, the project sheds light on contemporary debates and social practices over existing building stock. Similarly, Concéntrico's "Off-Season Pavilion" by KOSMOS architects repurposes locally available wine storage cages, showcasing how local materials can creatively be reused to fulfill the needs of a project. At Milan Design Week 2024, the "Città Miniera" installation by Mario Cucinella Architects reimagines public spaces using repurposed materials found in the city. Another example from Concéntrico is "PackBags" by Alei Verspoor, which transforms textiles from past installations into new bags and accessories. These examples illustrate how architecture exhibitions push the boundaries of resource efficiency and circular economy principles, challenging architects and designers to rethink what they make and presenting a "doing more with less" approach.

Vernacular Intelligence



In the built environment, vernacular intelligence refers to drawing inspiration and knowledge from local traditions, materials and building techniques to create sustainable and contextually relevant structures. This approach reimagines existing landscapes as reference points for "doing more with less" by leveraging existing knowledge and resources instead of producing new materials. Integrating traditional knowledge with modern design principles, architects can potentially create ecologically responsible and contextually relevant buildings. Prominent figures in this movement include architects like Francis Kéré, known for his work with indigenous materials and community-driven projects. Vernacular architecture offers a path toward a resilient and adaptive future that utilizes local resources effectively.

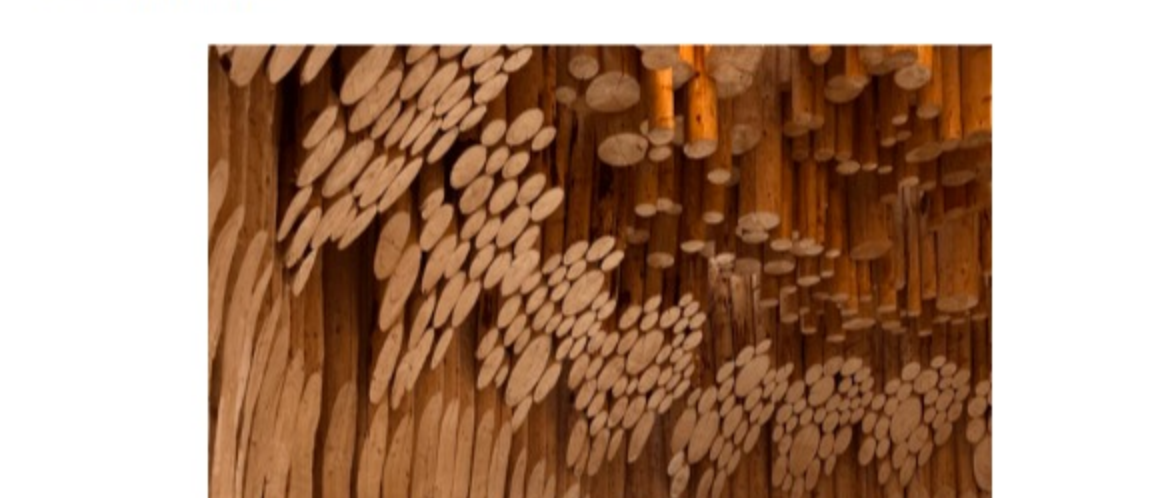
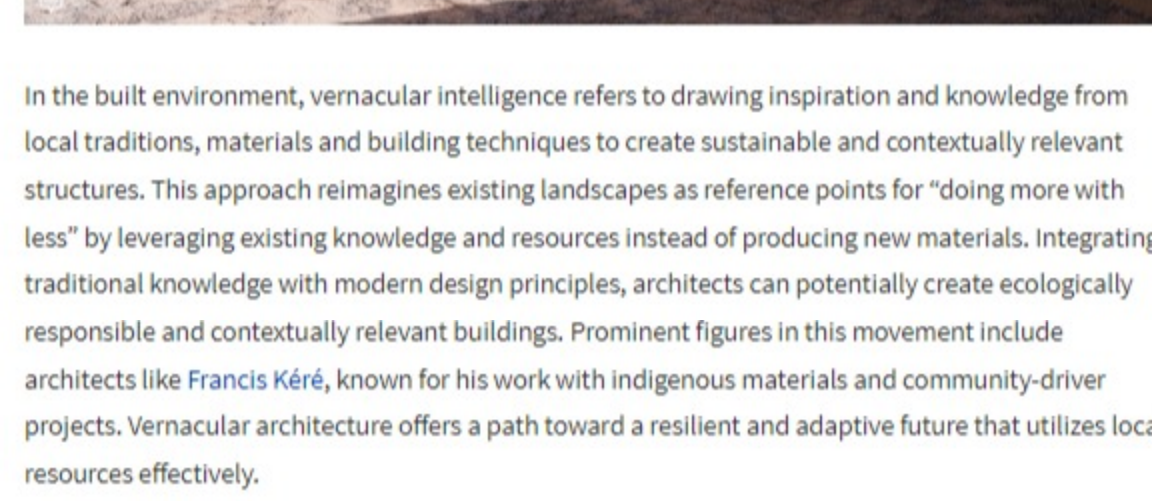


Embracing vernacular intelligence focuses on local traditions, materials, and documented methods to design innovative, sustainable solutions that meet contemporary needs. Highlighting the wisdom embedded in local practices, the methodology explores how these can be harnessed for future architectural advancements. At the Sharjah Triennial, Hive Earth presented a structure constructed using 100% locally sourced rammed earth from the UAE, reimagining traditional, eco-friendly materials that align with the region's heritage. Similarly, the A-Museo Corridor by Walkmakers employs lime masonry and sand to build a dome-like structure, emphasizing how discarded materials can be repurposed using vernacular techniques. At the Venice Biennale, the Egyptian Pavilion explores solutions related to the Nile River, integrating historical knowledge with modern technology to address environmental challenges. Francis Kéré's "The Fireplace" at Milan Design Week uses tree logs to create a communal kitchen space, reflecting both material sustainability and cultural significance. These exhibitions underscore the importance of exploring and leveraging vernacular knowledge to create architectural practices that are innovative, sustainable, and rooted in local contexts.

Social and Environmental Advocacy



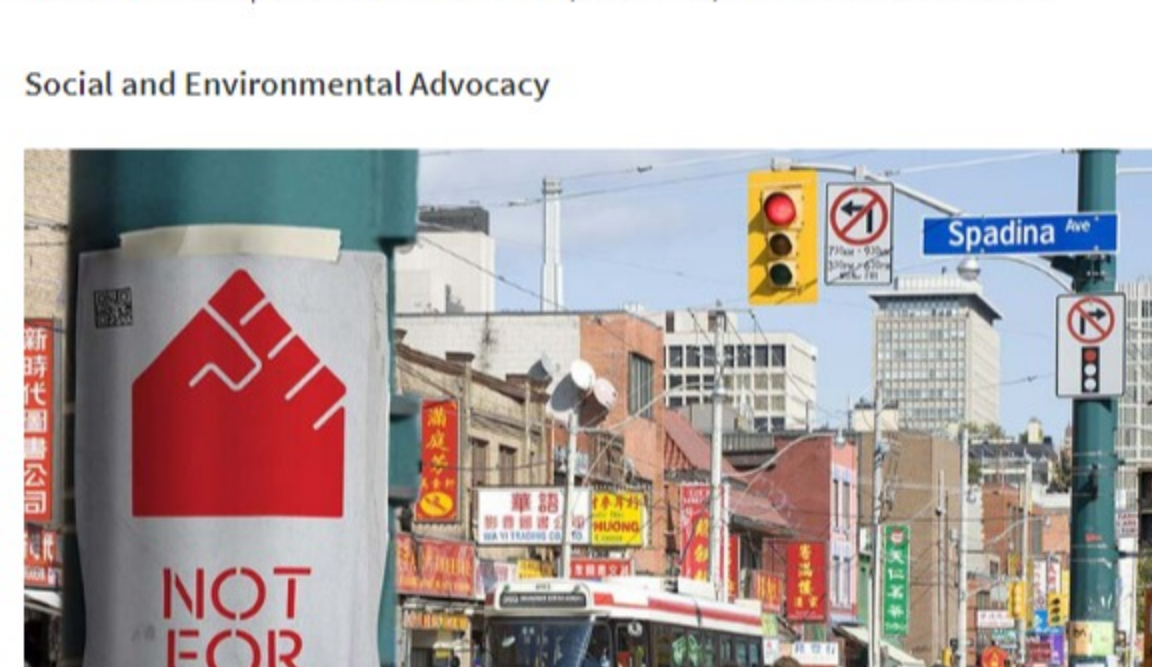
Architecture exhibitions are powerful social and environmental advocacy platforms, highlighting designs that challenge existing norms and ignite meaningful conversations. These pavilions act as critical learning points for architects, highlighting the importance of addressing contemporary issues such as housing affordability, labor market conditions, environmental degradation, and social justice. From the perspective of "doing more with less," these displays encourage architects to leverage existing resources and work on bettering them by questioning the status quo. In fact, these exhibitions provide a platform for architects to draw inspiration to innovate within the constraints of current resources, thereby advancing towards a more socially conscious built environment. By urging architects to think deeply about their role in the greater society, this reflective process promotes more responsible and sustainable architectural practices.



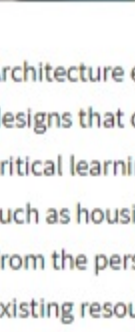
Addressing pressing social and environmental issues, architectural activism in contemporary exhibitions pushes the boundaries of "doing more with less" by advocating for communities and ecological sustainability. The Canada Pavilion at the previous edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale tackled the critical issue of housing affordability, highlighting the importance of housing as a fundamental human right and exploring innovative solutions to address this global challenge. Similarly, the Czech Republic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale focuses on labor conditions and social justice, encouraging viewers to reflect on architecture, labor, and societal equity. In the Sharjah Triennial, Formafantasma's "Cambio" project examines the wood sourcing supply chain, spotlighting the environmental and social impacts of wood sourcing. Also a part of the Sharjah Triennial, "Super Limbo" by Limbo Accra uses an installation to depict the incomplete state of various sites in the global south, showcasing the potential for unfinished spaces to be imagined creatively and non-traditionally. Lastly, the "Make it Rain" installation in Concéntrico reinterprets traditional cooling systems using water-soaked bricks to create a cool and interactive space. These projects demonstrate how architecture activism can shed light on current practices and propose more equitable and sustainable alternatives.

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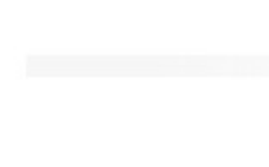


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