

## INTERVENTION

# Adapt, but Otherwise: Repairing Waters in the Venice Architecture Biennale 2025

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A report on the Venice Architecture Biennale 2025, in which I critique the overwhelming offering of technological solutions to Anthropocenic problems in the Biennale, but also focusing on some more healing, repairing aspects of the exhibition, with particular emphasis on an aquatic horizontality as an antidote to techno-saving.

**Keywords:** venice; biennale; architecture; water; repair; reparations

### Technology Saves

The 19th Venice Architecture Biennale 2025 is curated by Carlo Ratti, a global architect and engineer whose trust in technology becomes apparent throughout the curated parts. The Arsenale, the part of the Biennale curated exclusively by the annual curator with personal invitations to the participating projects, promises salvation from the end of the world in the form of mostly technical intelligence that spans from algorithmic capturing to sclerotic robots. Disappointingly, and barring a few exceptions, the other two counterparts of this year's title *Intelligens: Natural, Artificial, Collective* appear as resources to the grand technological resolve.

One thing is resonant: the planet has turned, climate change is galloping, things are no longer predictable. The Arsenale show begins with an installation by Fondazione Pistoletto Cittadellarte of brim-full water tanks and hanging external aircon units that make the vast, dimly lit room asphyxiating with heat and humidity: a representation of Venice in the year 2100 with the rising of waters and global temperatures. The irony is this: the thing that will save us is also the thing that destroys the planet. Especially if you are on the wrong side of the planet or indeed the wrong room in the biennale: the aircon units cool the next room. You have just entered hell.

Anthropocene urges for adaptation. And so we adapt. The question is how to do so without relinquishing on resistance. The curation promises grand technological solutions offered with boy-like enthusiasm and confidence. Charming when young, these boys can be dangerous when they become Trump, Musk, Netanyahu, Putin (the list seems never ending these days), and remain still very much enamoured with their toys.

A few hundred projects by smaller architectural firms appear in identikit wordy poster-form everywhere along the walls of the Arsenale. Should one care to pay attention, they often offer truly beautiful and simple solutions to climate change, overheating, resource poverty and extractivism (see e.g., Jon Goodbun et al.'s ingenious Athens Cooling Project 2025). But isn't this a metaphor for how we deal with the planet? Wonderful science-based ideas that can never muster enough funding to become a technological answer to the various issues, therefore destined to remain forever as posters. A simple solution, exception, is provided by the pavilion of Bahrain, awarded with the Golden Lion, that shows rather than tells the Gulf's continuous architectural thinking against ever-heightened heatwaves. The room is reminiscent of a war bunker yet airy and inviting, with its ambient temperature already markedly lower than its surrounding space on a rather warm inauguration day.

### Repair and Reparation as Resistance

The Architecture Biennale is a demanding beast: is it art? is it architecture? is it meant to be imagination or a project? evocative or educative? utopian or technically feasible? The Biennale buildings are already architecturally vibrant, with the Arsenale claiming the gaze with its massive salt-shedding brick walls, and the various pavilions in the Giardini narcissistically opening their doors year in year out in not so genteel competition with each other. But this year, a large amount of national representations turned to the buildings themselves: Denmark gutted theirs in a material show of stratification; Iceland took very soft care of theirs, a 1956 wooden temporary structure by Alvar Aalto, accompanied by thorough studies that range from the brackish footing of the pavilion in the venetian ecology to the shades of blue that have been tried out over the years on the external walls of the pavilion; the Holy See pavilion took on the restoration of the former Santa

Maria Ausiliatrice Oratory Complex, rendering the works the work itself.



Something, therefore, emerges from these pavilions, a different kind of intelligence, an adaptation to the changing conditions without necessarily entrusting their efforts to Silicon Valley. A resistance within an otherwise perfectly compliant Biennale. The British Pavilion, which received a deserved special mention from the jury, offers a very important bridge between the material (something that one learns to expect in abundance in an architectural fair) and the political, in a highly politicised approach where Kenyan, Palestinian and global perspectives on enduring colonialism offer a series of rooms intent on reparation. The suggested reparation comes in simple materials (e.g., reappropriation of rubble in Gaza, or Kenyan and British bricks inserted in the texture of the pavilion itself) yet with important conceptual weight [i.e., instances of 'insurgent geologies', inspired by co-curator Kathryn Yussof's work (Yussof et al. 2025), namely, earth practices of lived social materiality that have survived in the wake of colonial earth]. These site-specific practices, however, are imbued with a sense of reparation towards the Earth as a whole.



Less successful was the US pavilion's efforts to convert itself and its surroundings to a porch, seemingly the quintessential feature of North American vernacular architecture (not sure that any monopoly can be seriously claimed here), in what felt like a missed opportunity for a political comment on the eminently inhospitable United States right now. But often technosolving goes hand-in-hand with an oddly tasting nostalgia for the 'simple life'.

### A Slow Aquatic Adaptation

The greatest sense of intelligent adaptation comes from the many instances where water features in the Biennale. This being Venice, water is a staple and its appearance carries no surprises. But this year's aquatic emergencies offer some truly tender instances of what I have elsewhere (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2025) called *hydrojustice*, namely a just confluence in space of bodies of water in their difference and continuum. Perhaps the most impressive project is the Peru Pavilion report on the traditional craft of the Uros community on Lake Titicaca in Peru. The community is shown on video to construct floating islands wholly from the single material of totora reeds, anchored in a rhizomatic way to the lakebed, and serving as living areas for anything up to 20 families at a time. This humble archipelago reminds us of a prototypical Venice with one important difference: the Uros islands embrace their perishability and, as opposed to Venice, happily return to the waters at the end of their lifecycle of 25–30 years.

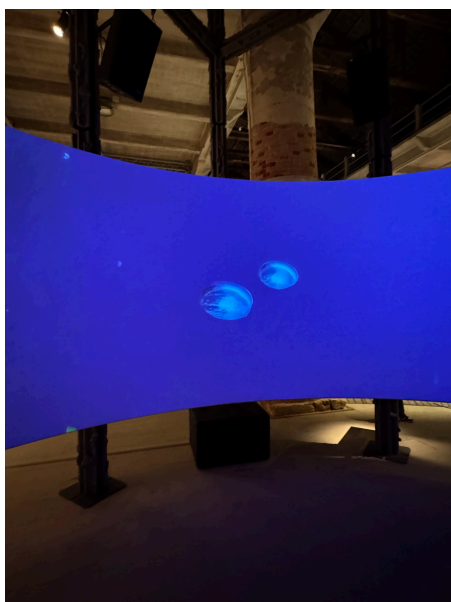
This is a subtle act of construction that shows how building can also be repairing. The same type of circularity is exemplified in the Venetian lagoon, according to Margherita Scapin and Carolyn Smith (2025: 29) writing for the Finnish Pavilion catalogue: 'the interwoven tapestry of the wetland (not quite land, not quite water) is more than human yet less than natural (only partially the result of human choices). It challenges modernist categories and cartographies that seek to define and distinguish where one thing ends and another begins. Venice has always blurred the boundaries between human and non-human agency'. Venice Biennale, on the other hand, does not always aim for that blurring, and its curation certainly favoured clear-cut 'solutions' this year. Luckily, water persists and remains the most appropriate element through which to appreciate such circularities and generative murkiness.

The Ukrainian Pavilion presents the work of repair under war conditions, and part of it focuses on water. As Yevheniia Belorusets quoting the local director of waters in the heavily bombed Mykolaiv area, writes 'at first no one believed the water supply had been destroyed on purpose... but then water became a weapon! Our city was besieged and water was the weapon!' (2025: 55) The process of adaptation began shortly after, from salt water to reverse osmosis water purification, all of which precarious mechanisms that rely on unpredictable factors, such as continuous electricity supply that is all but given in view of the heavy shelling.



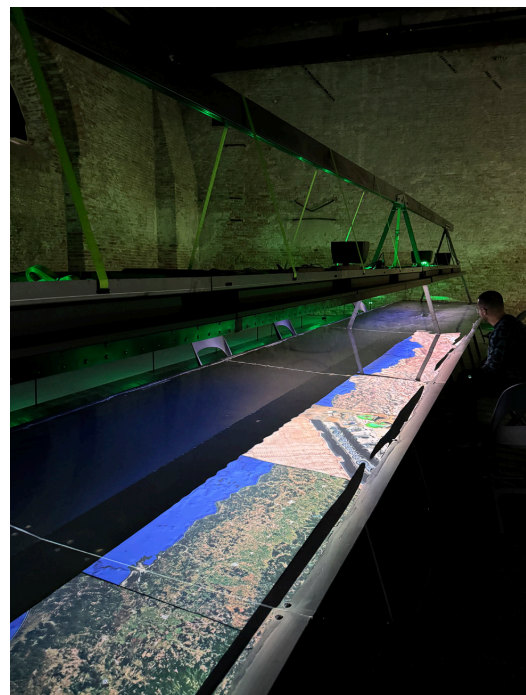


Sometimes, to believe is to repair. In a carefully selected gallery of objects, the Polish Pavilion brings to life scientific and unscientific tools of everyday existence, from blessed candles and bowls for household spirits to fire sensors and security cameras, all dealt on the same horizontal plane of efficiency. What drew my attention was the careful description and presentation of a Radiesthetic Rod, namely, the forked branch of wood or metal used to find underground veins of water. A murkiness emerges from the depths of rituals and techniques that have proven their value over the years, whether scientifically provable or not. Belief in salvation can come from everywhere when planetary stakes are as high as they are now. In the magnificent video installation by Oceanic Fractions, indigenous citizens of the Fiji Islands explore rituals as ways of listening to the ocean in the face of global ecocide. The video was complemented by a deeply significant indigenous Kava ceremony, where for a moment the public was transferred to a space of hope for the Earth.

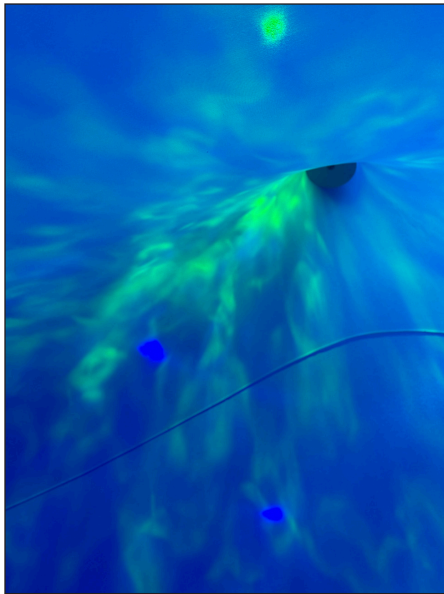


Small acts of adaptation are an important way to resist the Anthropocene wave of extreme extractivism we are riding right now, whether we like it or not. Our lives in the West and increasingly globally are woven into a mesh of complicity with global destruction, and hopes for maintaining things as they used to be, are becoming a dead nostalgia of the US pavilion porch type. The Kosovo Pavilion offers such a small adaptation of agricultural crop timings in view of climate change. The artist Erze Dinamara single-handedly designed an olfactory installation that follows the new crop calendar, reproducing the scents of the earth at various times, emitted through long clear tubes that occasionally spurted out steam: water in that nebulous form to guide our noses and eyes to the next stage of the altered cycle.

One of the most visually arresting installations was that of the Chile Pavilion, where intelligence becomes reflective in the metaphorical and material sense of the word. Giving voice to excluded actants, from wetlands to local residents whose lives have been turned because of large infrastructure projects that exclude them, a video is projected upside down on a stream of water that runs along the length of the pavilion, significantly rendered wavy by the cooling mechanism of the projector. Water appears here both as a depleted resource and a material claim of the tribes involved in the project.



Brackishness meets crystal-clear concepts in the most aquatic of pavilions, that of Catalonia. In a rich installation that includes even a sediment saloon, water is seen in its many dimensions as the main intelligence of our planet. In the accompanying catalogue-archive *100 Words for Water*, Timothy Morton (2025: 104) writes: 'Water comes from the future...Every single artwork, human or not, is how water gets to remind you who you are. Who you aren't. Who you are'.



The invitation of the water, therefore, is to inhabit the future in ways that both confirm and recalibrate our identity. The earth is ready to accommodate a new hydrohuman dwelling on floating islands that dwell on a soft horizontality, the murky waters of wetlands that keep on questioning categories, and the reflective waters of blessed bowls that welcome guest spirits. Technosolutions are just one way of dealing with the future. Luckily, there are other ways too.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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