

Venice | Biennale of Architecture 2025

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Elephant Chapel by influential Thai architect Boonserm Premthada, who makes bricks from elephant dung. “Architecture is not about theory, nor philosophy, but about attitude, empathy, and human dignity.” The 19th Biennale of Architecture in Venice runs 10 May-23 November 2025. (Boonserm Premthada/Image courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia)

Architecture

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Venice has boggled minds with its ancient cityscape and tracery of canals for more than 1,500 years. From its earliest days, the city has specialized in political power struggles and scandal – with an outpouring of artistic creativity alongside.



The whole world seems to pass through the Central Pavilion of the Giardini during the six months of the Biennale. In all, 66 countries will be represented in 2025, four for the first time: Azerbaijan, Oman, Qatar and Togo. (Francesco Galli/Image courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia)

Over 200,00 art lovers attended the first Venice Biennale in 1895 to view sculpture and painting in the grand classical national pavilions in the leafy Giardini enclave. In 2024, the international draw to the 60th edition of the art exhibition was 700,000.

Its slightly lesser known cousin, the Biennale of Architecture, has only been around since 1980. But it is a worthy companion, setting modern visions of the built environment into the fabric of the world's most distinctive historic city. This year's 19th edition runs 10 May–23 November, with exhibitions clustering the atmospheric buildings of the 14th-century military shipyard, the Arsenale.

It is an inspirational event that bridges past, present and future in unforgettable surrounds. Where else can you stroll in minutes from an exhibit revealing how ancient Romans created remarkable self-healing concrete two millennia ago to one exploring astronaut space suits as a springboard to transform building and insulation techniques on Earth?



Curator Carlo Ratti's welcoming approach for the 2025 Venice Biennale of Architecture sees more than 750 participants united across disciplines, from architects and engineers to artists, philosophers, writers, coders, farmers and climate scientists. "Adaptation demands inclusivity and collaboration," says Ratti. (Andrea Avezzù/Image courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia)

New words for new times

While early Architecture Biennales lasered in on *-isms* like Postmodernism and Mid-Century Radicalism, more recently the focus has shifted to how architecture needs to respond in the face of climate change – a shift particularly resonant in a watery host city imperilled by environmental impacts.

This year's event brings architects together with climate scientists, philosophers and artists, urban farmers and fashion designers to spark novel thinking and collaboration. Curator Carlo Ratti has coined a novel word for his guiding theme: *Intelligens*. A fusion of *intelligence* with *gens* (Latin: people), the 2025 event promotes visions of the built environment that are "inclusive, multiple, and imaginative." Contributors will arrive from 66 nations, with four (Azerbaijan, Oman, Qatar and Togo) making their debut.

Ratti's direction takes a broad social and ecological view of cities as the frontiers of new architectural inquiry rather than a showcase of individual buildings. It's an approach kickstarted at a previous Biennale when flowing digital video representations – memorably described as "global magma" – illustrated the breathless evolution of diverse megacities such as Sao Paulo, Mexico City and Cairo.



The founders of Rotterdam-based practice MVRDV (Nathalie de Vries, Jacob van Rijs, Winy Maas) made a splash at the 2012 Biennale with their ambitious plans for the Dutch city of Almere. This year, their exhibit *Biotopia* explores ways of integrating nature into cities. (Erik Smits)

Power to the people

Citizen input on urban evolution is another strand this year. Call it Collective Intelligence. Rio's favelas and the bustling markets of Lagos will exemplify functioning urban environments and social networks created without self-congratulating architects or doctrinaire urban planners.

“Successful cities always arise from the input of multiple people over years, decades, sometimes millennia,” says Winy Maas of MVRDV, who started the 2012 Biennale with their approach to the fast-growing new Dutch city of Almere. Rising out of land reclaimed from the sea, Almere is evolving as a fluid open-source collection of different neighborhoods designed by residents themselves. Maas wryly recalls some colleagues back then declaring the idea as bordering on insanity.

Maas returns with an exhibit entitled *Biotopia*, one of several looking at how to make 21st-century cities more sustainable through close integration with nature. Natura Futura's *Floating Ecosystems*, *Building Biospheres* (Belgium), Peru's *Living Scaffolding* and the

UAE Pavilion's *Pressure Cooker* on architecture for arid environments are inspiring examples.

Grafton Architects' vertical university campus in Lima was designed to draw in ocean breezes for free cooling. A similar approach informs the layout of Hulhumalé, taking shape on an artificial island in The Maldives as a city-sized 'lifeboat' for an Indian Ocean nation whose scattered dots of land are otherwise slowly being engulfed by rising seas. Visitors are invited to explore myriad real-world examples of communities living in climate-resilient harmony with their environment.



Emirati architect Azza Aboualam is curator of the Pavilion of the United Arab Emirates at the 19th edition of the Venice Biennale of Architecture. Titled *Pressure Cooker*, the exhibition explores self-sufficiency and food production through architectural solutions like net greenhouses, pictured in the background here, designed specifically for arid environments. (Nino Consorte/Seeing Things/Image courtesy of National Pavilion UAE)

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What role will humanoid robots play in the houses of the future? *Construction Futures: Co-Poiesis*, an installation by architect Philip Yuan, principal at Shanghai practice Archi-Union, poses the question from the Biennale's Corderie venue. (©Philip Yuan)

From nature, with love

Architecture loves playing with new materials – where new sometimes means centuries-old. How about banana fibre, fungi and hemp? Nobel laureate Konstantin Novosëlov and Japanese starchitect Kengo Kuma lend insight to the *Matter Makes Sense* and *Living Nature* strands of the 2025 Biennale where natural materials are re-invented. Likewise, Buenos Aires-based Angie Dub and Heidi Jalkh present CONQ – innovative building tiles made from discarded seashells.





Each year, around 10 million tonnes of oyster, mussel, clam and scallop shells are discarded. Buenos Aires-based environmental architect Angie Dub and experimental designer Heidi Jalkh developed CONQ – a way to make the bivalves into building materials. The shells are washed, crushed and mixed with algae-based polymers to form innovative heat-free bio-ceramic tiles. (Camila Piazza | Heidi Jalkh/Images courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia)

Ecosystems as templates for sustainable global communities is the fascinating underpinning for a host of exhibitions under the banner *The Other Side of the Hill* this year in Venice. When biologists and designers work with architectural theorists, how do microbial communities balance resource consumption? Exhibits such as Italy's *The Intelligence of the Sea*, Canada's *Picoplanktonics*, or Finland's sci-fi sounding *Alusta Pavilion for Multispecies Encounters* may provide some answers.



The Other Side of the Hill is a collaborative work that “digs deeper into our global population future.” (© Beatriz Colomina, architectural theorist | Roberto Kolter, biologist | Patricia Urquiola, designer | Geoffrey West, physicist | Mark Wigley, architectural theorist/Image courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia)

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The other side of *The Other Side of the Hill*. “What happens when population growth peaks and collapses?” (© Beatriz Colomina | Roberto Kolter | Patricia Urquiola | Geoffrey West | Mark Wigley/Image courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia)

Digital discourse

Of course, AI musings are part of the Biennale as everywhere else – though Carlo Ratti’s curatorial gaze goes beyond what he calls “today’s limiting focus on AI”. *In-Between* at the Japan Pavilion, for example, pushes back against too much leeway for generative AI in future construction. They question the value of AI seeking ‘least error’ answers from synthesized existing data. Doesn’t that produce nothing but a flawed chewing-up of old ideas? Originality requires human mediation.

Elsewhere, exhibits will examine next-gen humanoid robots as players in future construction, while a team from Ukraine understandably wants to know how digital tech might help to map and rebuild cities destroyed by war.

We mustn’t forget 3D printing. Various exhibits see 3D concrete printing as a game-changer for 21st-century architecture. People are already living in eye-popping printed homes from Texas to the Netherlands, their seductive curved structures printed in just days at minimal cost. Next step is giant printers churning out concretes that will move us ever closer to carbon neutrality.

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- **Reporter: Norman Miller**

- **Norman Miller** is an award-winning UK-based journalist covering topics ranging from architecture and design to travel and food/drink for outlets including BBC.com, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and *World of Interiors*.

