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The Lisbon Architecture Triennale headquarters

OPINION

Close, Closer

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Coming back from Lisbon and writing about Close, Closer, the third edition of the Lisbon Architecture Triennale, is no easy task. Conflicting opinions have already been written, with debate raging about what an architecture triennale should actually be, represent and do.

The issue is that Close, Closer does not feature straightforward architecture projects. Instead, it examines issues surrounding architecture. Set in Portugal – a country that is home to a school of excellent architectural masters – a triennale such as this is particularly delicate: how do you accept that in such a location, this year's triennale does not feature any actual architectural projects? How do you explain that although no architecture is on display, it is indeed architecture that is being discussed?

Close, Closer has been curated by the London-based writer and curator Beatrice Galilee. Working with a team of young architects, critics and curators, Galilee has laid out her interest as being in the exchange between design, architecture and cultural production. Which is what sets the stage for the dispute. While some will challenge and criticise the lack of physical projects, context and detail; others will argue that such an absence, at this moment in time, is necessary.

We live in an era in which the failures of economic, financial, religious and political systems have sullied the image of a future built on “happy endings”. Yet this crash of positivism perhaps signals the birth of a new form of freedom – one without obligations, traditional morality, dualisms, anxiety, and perfect systems. The failure of the previously dominant model evidences the feasibility of an anti-model; an anti-design where everything is possible.

The approach that emerges from Close, Closer concerns itself with the shifting position of architecture today, which Galilee believes has transitioned from an answering to a questioning role. If you look for information about the Triennale on its website, you are catapulted into a clamor of questions, which users are invited to answer in sentences of under 100 characters – 40 fewer than a tweet. It means that the Close, Closer website looks like a think tank of elementary and global statements, trivial and brilliant at the same time – what is architecture in a time of crisis; why is architecture different from building; what is the function of an architectural exhibition; what questions should architecture be asking today?

“We don't have a conclusive answer,” explained Galilee following the triennale's inauguration and this is perhaps the point of the event. This triennale is courageous enough not only to eschew cliché views and positions, but also to suggest that asking questions is the way to

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Aava
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generate a participatory and responsive community. You could say that Close, Closer has a placebo effect: it works not because it delivers solutions, but because the shared and latent questions that emerge from it trigger improvement. This is a triennale that demands active participation.

Uniting the various exhibitions and activities that make up Close, Closer is a desire to make our experience of space dialectical. The Real and Other Fictions is an exhibition within the triennale curated by the architectural writer and scholar Mariana Pestana. Set within the Palácio Pombal, a building that has previously served as a residence and embassy, the exhibition embodies the poetic elements of the space's history through a series of spatial installations. Featuring work from the likes of Onkar Kular, The Center for Genomic Gastronomy and Friendly Fire, the exhibition treats the space's past as a paradigm through which reflection on current political and social issues is made possible.

Yet if the Real and Other Fictions looks to the past, Future Perfect – an exhibition curated by Liam Young from the architectural think tank Tomorrow's Thoughts Today – looks to the future. Housed in the cyclopean Museu da Electricidade, the exhibition presents a speculative future city in India where, Young argues, the future is treated as "a verb and not a noun."

Although it has roots in science fiction, Young's city is a concrete creation that is played out in design scenarios created by the likes of Cohen and Van Balen, Mediated Matter Group and MIT Media Lab, Marshmallow Laser Feast, Bart Hess and Factory Fifteen. These installations ask what happens when technology, which we are used to perceiving on a screen, enters the physical space. By entering into this dialogue through an exhibition, such a future seems to become more attainable.

A third major exhibition is The Institute Effect, curated by the writer Dani Admiss, which occupies the MUDE spaces. The Institute Effect is hosting a residency program for 12 institutions (such as Urban-Think Tank, Strelka, Z33 and Fabrica) over a 13 week period, throughout which they will be invited to host debates, exhibitions, performances and workshops. It is an exhibition that is not an exhibition – not a curation of documents and objects, but rather an exploration of the manner in which institutions organise activities, researches and curation itself.

Outside of the museums, Close, Closer is similarly democratic. The Civic Stage, designed by Frida Escobedo, is a tilted wooden stage that lands like a UFO in the Praça da Figueira square. The stage is enlivened by New Publics, a public programme curated by José Esparza Chong Cuy that range from speeches, self-taught golf lessons and the theatre of the absurd of Andres Jaque and the Office for Political Innovation to the ping pong of debate between two mayoral candidates for the city of Lisbon. All these activities insist upon



INTERVIEW

Forgotten Spaces 2013



LONDON DESIGN FESTIVAL

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questioning and exploring the format of public expression in a time when narratives are changing dramatically. How could architecture support a new public?

Galilee's triennale is about everything that revolves around architecture and one of the reasons why her project was chosen over others is the fact that it ignores the old architectural masters and establishment. What instead emerges from the triennale is a countercultural interest, and one that seems to be rapidly gaining ground within the architectural debate.

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WORDS Angela Rui

Close, Closer is on in Lisbon until 15 December

				
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