



Lisbon Triennale
Various locations around Lisbon
 Until 15 December 2013

EVENT

Lisbon Triennale

A series of events aimed at reevaluating the architect's role, asks vital questions, but presents few answers, says Owen Pritchard

This September the Lisbon Architecture Triennale opened in the recession-hit Portuguese capital. On the charming, crumbling streets filled with tourists and hawkers, slogan-bearing posters and banners hang where advertisements might usually be found. **BUT IS IT ARCHITECTURE?** asks one. **HOW CAN ARCHITECTURE CREATE A CITY?** asks another; there's **TACTICS NOT SYSTEMS** and also **ASK CEDRIC PRICE ...** This triennale, it seems, is not going to pass by quietly.

Curated by Beatrice Galilee, the third incarnation of the triennale asks what architecture could be, or mean, or do. It was conceived as a conscious rejection of the architecture exhibition that celebrates the built and familiar. The curators emphasise that the discipline of architecture extends far beyond what the public can actually see. In a city that is being battered by the economic crisis, it seems timely to present the alternatives to building, reassert the architect as an agent of change; to engage the public in a debate about what they need, and for architects to find solutions in increasingly bleak circumstances.

On the waterfront, at a converted electricity factory a short walk from

the Padrão dos Descobrimentos – a monument that celebrates Portugal's age of discovery – is Future Perfect. Curated by Liam Young of Tomorrow's Thoughts Today, the installation presents a speculative future city developed through dialogue with dozens of writers, designers, architects and creative practitioners. Here is a vision of a city that can be programmed and hacked, a sci-fi landscape explored through film, light and sound; "an exaggerated near future," in Young's words.

At the gorgeous 17th-century Pombal Palace, Maria Pestana has curated seven installations for *The Real and Other Fictions*. Each seeks to evoke the past uses of the palace (it has served as an embassy and residency) through performative works that encourage debate and exchange with other visitors – be it a game designed by Carsten Höller or a stadium designed for a discussion of the Declaration of Human Rights. If Young's speculations are deliberately removed from the realities that Portugal and Lisbon face, Pestana highlights the opportunity to pause and reassess what possibilities exist; it's – a nuanced and sober call for reflection.

In contrast to this calm is *The Institute Effect*, curated by Dani Admiss. A 12-week laboratory that investigates the role of the institution as a conduit between practice and discourse, it is the most exciting and provocative of the main events – although the definition of "institution"



is hazy. Outfits such as Strelka and Urban Think Tank will each introduce a public programme to encourage interaction with the city, and all this will be documented.

New Publics, curated by José Esparza, has provided a physical platform for debate – although the public seemed to be eyeing enormous plywood disc with suspicion rather than clamouring to engage with it.

Across the city there are successful projects, simple ideas executed well. These include EXYZT's *Casa do Vapor*, a cultural centre for fishermen, and projects that relate more directly to local problems – such as a directory of family-run restaurants facing closure, so visitors to the triennale can visit them.

Galilee and the other curators have succeeded in putting together

a programme that presents the complex questions of architectural practice. The curated events are, at once, insightful, vain, nostalgic, optimistic, naive and pertinent. Its legacy will be determined by how many of the ideas posited will have an afterlife in Lisbon.

From a visit on the opening weekend, it is impossible to tell whether this is a discussion for the profession, or for the public. And do architects really have the answers? The triennale's approach is a fair reflection of the image architects have of themselves and of their role outside of making buildings, at a time when the profession is in a precarious state. Can such an event begin to shift perceptions? Is this the way to sort out the mess of the profession? What would Cedric Price say?



Above
 Outdoor poster campaign designed by Zak Group

Left
 The Schematics by Delfino Legnani, at Future Perfect

