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# Lisbon Architecture Triennale – review

A series of sceptical exhibitions in Lisbon questions the purpose of architecture



**Rowan Moore**

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Redefining space: The Nation Room – Embassy of No Land by Paulo Moreira and Kiluanji Kia Henda, part of The Real and Other Fictions exhibition.

I'm standing in the shadow of an equestrian statue in a Lisbon square, as part of a small crowd, listening to eager young architects explain their projects through megaphones. We're not meant to be here, as a special stage has been constructed nearby for this and other events. But the sun is hot, the stage has no shade and the pompous statue casts a big shadow.

It is a perfect demonstration of architects' tendency to insert construction in the wrong places. The square makes a good enough stage unassisted, but a structure to keep off the sun would have made a real difference. Which is ironic, as a major theme of the Lisbon Architecture Triennale, entitled *Close, Closer*, is that architecture is not just

about designing buildings.

Under its British chief curator, Beatrice Galilee, *Close, Closer* is a series of events and exhibitions dedicated to the ideas and proposals of young, mostly European architects. They share a powerful scepticism about the creation of large structures and monuments, as tending to be associated with the more or less corrupt concentrations of power and wealth that have done so much damage over the past decade. Which scepticism coincides with the fact that there are now precious few large structures for young architects to design.

Rather than designing buildings, the theory goes, architects can be strategic and tactical. They can map and observe and form networks that might eventually enhance people's enjoyment of their cities. So the triennale includes a programme called Crisis Busters, where architects were invited to spend very small grants on clever ways to address the economic crisis, which in Portugal is acute. Thousands of traditional family restaurants, for example, are threatened with closure by a drastic hike in taxes. So one Crisis Buster grant is being spent on a guide to some of the more endangered ones, such that increased business might help keep them going.

If it works, this is indeed a smart way of supporting city life without building anything. It is justified to mistrust the urge to bring in diggers and cranes whenever possible and the idea of thinking more widely about the usefulness of architecture is attractive. But it requires a seriousness of intent, a realism as to how such thinking might take effect, without which strategising becomes ornamental, and the architects in question might as well be designing replicas of Louis Quinze chaise longues.

In the triennale, there is a proposal that architects should work with lawyers to redesign legal systems. Well no, they shouldn't and they shouldn't help brain surgeons, either. There is also a display announcing the great importance of the various agencies that now ferment architectural ideas, something that needs to be demonstrated rather than stated, and news of which doesn't seem to have reached the passers-by in the street outside.

Much of the triennale is a valiant attempt to realise good intentions within budget limitations made tougher by the crisis, without really succeeding. It is also hampered by the fact that the aversion to building things means that it is hard to know what to look at. An exhibition called Future Perfect, a series of science-fiction clichés about cities of tomorrow, doesn't improve matters. The Real and Other Fictions, by the London-based Portuguese architect Mariana Pestana, however, does. Here a decayed 18th-century palace has been populated by installations inspired by the building's varied history – as an embassy, an institute of landscape architecture, a Madeiran cultural centre.

They include a machine whereby you lie on a sofa and find yourself put in intimate proximity with a stranger on another sofa, a sinister quasi-embassy, and a mind-torturing card game by the artist Carsten Höller. The intention is not only to create a series of engaging and provocative rooms, which they are, but also to create an unofficial temporary town hall, where debates and dinners can be held.

The point that Pestana gets is that, in the end, architects' main skill is in designing things, in ordering materials and spaces to given purposes and ideas. A wider awareness is highly desirable, but in the end what matters is the way these two things – designing things and social intelligence – come together.



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