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Front cover: House in Tacón No. 12, Old Havana, Cuba, inherited by Juana Carvajal in 1698 (photo by Karen Mahé Lugo Romera, 2012) (see p. 284).

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1972, when the group displayed prototypes of the mini-mister as part of the exhibition *L'austerité joyeuse, Doing More with Less*.⁶ The dedication to self-publishing continued through ventures such as the book series *The Problem Is . . .* and audiovisual education materials such as the *Human Settlements Training Packages*. The exhibition's emphasis on distilling lessons for the present day was consistent with the MCHG's decades-long promulgation of hands-on, off-the-shelf, low-cost "solutions"—tools and tactics for those who were unselfconsciously described, in the group's earliest work, as the world's "underprivileged peoples."

Design for the Global Majority Project marked a beginning that the absence of primary archival materials brought into focus. The cost and stringent, museum-standard environmental control requirements for the loan of MCHG objects, now held by the CCA, stymied thoughts of their inclusion. This was a boon for the exhibition experience—it encouraged a more tactile, lively mise-en-scène than might have been required if original sulfur concrete blocks had been displayed. It also signaled a less conscious shift in the historical narratives within which the MCHG may become placed. The absence of the archive in the exhibition pointed to a process of historicization that was already under way. The exhibition and accompanying symposium also marked a point from beyond which the MCHG will no longer actively shape understandings of itself. The group's ongoing historicization will fall increasingly to the scholars who may now scour its organizational records, correspondence, photographs, drawings, and objects, conscientiously preserved in museum and university archives.

Understanding of the MCHG's history and significance has already been enriched by scholarly and curatorial work. The group's ECOL House was included in the CCA's 2007–8 exhibition *1973: Sorry, Out of Gas*, which situated it in the sustainable architecture movement of the early 1970s. More recently, the 2020 Bauhaus Lab program developed the exhibition *A Concrete for the "Other Half"?*, which extensively revisited the group's sulfur concrete experiments. The exhibition and accompanying book thoughtfully framed the MCHG's

materials and systems research as a contribution to the complex field of 1970s development aid.⁷ Hannah le Roux's 2022 book chapter "Circulating Asbestos: The *International AC Review*, 1956–1985" investigates the material flows and corporate geographies of asbestos cement and, in doing so, connects the MCHG to considerations of links between modernity and toxicity. Specifically, le Roux tracks the work of MCHG founding director Álvaro Ortega in promoting asbestos cement components in the global South—a mission he embedded in the MCHG's research agenda.⁸ My own recent article in *ABE: Architecture Beyond Europe* tracks similar material and epistemic circulation, relating the MCHG's early knowledge production to Canada's export industry and the availability of sulfur and asbestos resources, and arguing that the group's expertise was, in its very articulation, highly interconnected with the global management of material flows.⁹ This contemporary work complicates understandings and challenges easy assumptions about the MCHG's history and legacies. It reframes the group's significance and puts its activities into productive interplay with other actors and historical conditions.

The current era of climate catastrophe challenges our approach to writing architectural history and demands profound rethinking of architecture's ambitions.¹⁰ The comfortable story of a plucky, creative activist design group and its hands-on, bottom-up environmentalism and participatory design—the narrative that underpinned *Design for the Global Majority Project*—has become increasingly subject to shifts in perspective and interpretation. As a valuable celebration and letting go, the exhibition laudably and productively fostered new knowledge and networks that can carry forward the most hopeful aspects of the MCHG's work in perhaps less comfortable but necessary ways.

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Notes

1. "Research Overview," Minimum Cost Housing Group, McGill University School of Architecture, <https://mchg.ca/about/index.html> (accessed 30 Apr. 2024).

2. The MCHG does still maintain a legacy website that holds further information about the projects, publications, and figures discussed in this essay. See Minimum Cost Housing Group, McGill University School of Architecture, <https://www.mcgill.ca/mchg> (accessed 30 Apr. 2024).

3. Sebastian Loosen, Erik Sigge, and Helena Mattsson, "Introduction," *ABE Journal: Architecture Beyond Europe* 21 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.14412> (accessed 30 Apr. 2024).

4. This was done in keeping with emerging initiatives to radically rethink exhibition design, such as that of London's Design Museum. See "Working to Make Change," Design Museum, <https://designmuseum.org/learning-and-research/design-museum-research/working-to-make-change#> (accessed 30 Apr. 2024).

5. For discussion of the mini-mister assembly, see Alex Morse, Vikram Bhatt, Witold Rybczynski, and McGill University Minimum Cost Housing Group, *Water Conservation and the Mist Experience* (Montreal: Minimum Cost Housing Group, School of Architecture, McGill University, 1978), 37–40. The solar water heater is described in V. S. Nataraj and V. Bhatt, "A Low Cost Solar Garbage Bag Water Heater" (Research Paper No. 5, Minimum Cost Housing Studies, McGill University, Aug. 1980), <https://www.mcgill.ca/mchg/files/mchg/lowcostgarbage-solarwaterheater.pdf> (accessed 30 Apr. 2024).

6. This exhibition was held at Dawson College, Montreal, as part of Buckminster Fuller Week—a weeklong festival cosponsored by McGill University and the École Polytechnique de Montréal.

7. Mya Berger and Leticia M. Brown, eds., *A Concrete for the "Other Half"?* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2021).

8. Hannah le Roux, "Circulating Asbestos: The *International AC Review*, 1956–1985," in *Environmental Histories of Architecture*, ed. Kim Förster (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2022), chap. 6.

9. Lee Stickells, "Ecologically Camping, Eating, Drinking Wine": Material and Knowledge Flows in the Minimum Cost Housing Group's ECOL Operation, 1971–76," *ABE Journal: Architecture Beyond Europe* 21 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.14637> (accessed 30 Apr. 2024).

10. Daniel A. Barber, "Drawing the Line," *Places Journal*, Jan. 2024, <https://placesjournal.org/article/drawing-the-line-architecture-in-the-anthropocene> (accessed 22 Feb. 2024).

The Laboratory of the Future

Eighteenth International Architecture Exhibition, Venice Biennale
Giardini della Biennale, Venice
20 May 2023–26 November 2023

The Giardini is a park where global geopolitics and colonial and imperial histories are enacted in a festive

light. . . . At the core of the Giardini's experience are nationalism and the politics of representation, mediated by resources that each nation can funnel into this exhibition act. Unevenly distributed resources mirror global conditions. The differences, noticeable among those who have access to this national showroom, heighten when considering those unable to take part.

Marina Otero Verzier, 2022¹

On the left-hand wall at the entrance to the Eighteenth International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale, curator Lesley Lokko placed a quotation from Marina Otero Verzier's review of the previous Biennale. After seeing this critical reading of that show and of the institution of the Biennale as a whole, the audience entered the exhibition to find a giant LED screen suspended overhead; *Those with Walls for Windows*, a black-and-white video by British poet Rhael "LionHeart" Cape, played on the screen, presenting a call to arms for those seeking the joyous and redemptive liberation of Carnival (Figure 1). Perhaps this ambivalence between analytical critique of the recent present and celebratory faith in the future was what the Biennale's title, *The Laboratory of the Future*, sought to capture. Laboratories, in addition to being sheltered from the outside world like the fortress of Venice's Arsenale, have often been places where present conditions are clinically dissected to construct possible futures. They are also, to quote Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar in *Laboratory Life*, institutions that are rarely self-aware of the power structures and social rituals that hold them together, a contradiction that this Biennale explicitly acknowledged.²

For example, the Arsenale and the Central Pavilion in the Giardini, the sections of the Biennale under the curator's control, were carefully quantified. More than half of the participants were from Africa or the African diaspora, and a 50/50 gender balance was maintained. Most of the participants were young (age forty-three on average, and some under twenty-five), and nearly half came from small practices of five people or less. This attention to identity, gender, age, and labor practices was not an afterthought. The statistics occupied a prominent space in the curator's statement and



Figure 1 Installation view of the video *Those with Walls for Windows*, by Rhael "LionHeart" Cape, at the entrance to *The Laboratory of the Future*, Eighteenth International Architecture Exhibition, Venice Biennale, 2023 (author's photo).

were evident throughout the exhibition, including on the labels describing the projects, which included portraits of their authors. When it comes to the politics of representation, revealing the faces of those in charge of the laboratory is essential to understanding who has the right to construct the futures of Africa and its diaspora.

Visualizing who the presenters were—and whom they represented—was at the heart of an exhibition that made decided claims about decolonizing and decarbonizing, but that may not be enough. Institutions like the Biennale and the events it has hosted for nearly a century are essential to perpetuating the social organizations and technologies of governance and representation that began in Europe in the sixteenth century and took over the globe with the expansion of colonial capitalism and racializing epistemologies. For centuries, the Arsenale produced the galleons that sustained Venetian control overseas. More recently, with some notable exceptions, its shift to the creative arts has helped maintain Western hegemony over discourses and practices of art and architecture. This set of technologies and techniques cannot be separated from the burning of fossil fuels that lies at the heart of global warming. In fact, these technologies are the source of energy that has made both the historical maritime empire and the contemporary art-based tourism economy possible. Therefore, naming is

of paramount importance as a strategy for resignifying these spaces and cultural practices. The exhibition's title indicated the role that participants were expected to fulfill—how they were to actively contribute to the Biennale's ambitious project—and Lokko, whose successful career as a writer has brought her a much wider audience than her architectural endeavors, did not shy away from ambitious names.

The exhibition was divided into six parts, further unpacking Lokko's curatorial approach. The first, "Force Majeure," took its name from the French legal term for the exceptional circumstances that release both parties to a contract from liability and obligation. This part of the exhibition was located in the Central Pavilion in the Giardini and included an idiosyncratic selection of sixteen established art and architecture practices of African and African diasporic origin. Rooms filled with large-scale models by Adjaye Associates and videos describing the work of other firms, such as MASS Design Group and Koffi & Diabaté Architects, coexisted with practices based in academic environments, such as Urban AC and Softlab@PSU, and installations by smaller practices, such as Sumayya Vally's imagined Pan-African post office, Thandi Loewenson's graphite panels that bring together African struggle and the politics of extraction, and Sean Canty's take on South Carolina vernacular sheds filtered through the recognizable formal

tropes of Harvard’s Graduate School of Design—a reminder of how these diasporic practices have infiltrated Ivy League institutions in recent years. On the artistic side, a video piece by Theaster Gates summarizing his Black Artists Retreat project, Ibrahim Mahama’s Parliament of Ghosts, and an Afro-futurist waiting room by Olalekan Jeyifous added to a collection that, in its traditional combination of large-scale models, spatial installations, plans and sections, documentaries, construction details, video projections, and architecture-related art, seemed to imagine what a normative yet Black Venice Architecture Biennale—an exhibition of architecture centered on what Paul Gilroy has called the Black Atlantic—might look like.³ It was an optimistic sign that the disruption of architecture’s racial bias is not only urgent but already happening.

The “Dangerous Liaisons” section provided a counterpoint to the confidence of “Force Majeure” and helped viewers understand how much still needs to happen. Located in the Arsenale complex, this part of the exhibition hosted thirty-seven practices that, to paraphrase Lokko, enjoy the company of “others” outside the field of architecture. Its name is also a French idiom, but instead of signaling a break with the existing status quo, it harked back to the prerevolutionary novellas of decadent eighteenth-century France and the conspicuous Hollywood films of the 1980s that warned us about nefarious acquaintances. Lokko’s Francophilia was strategic. Reflecting Lokko’s Ghanaian origins, the section unearthed France’s colonial history and the European nation’s strategic refusal to establish architecture schools in its colonies—only one architecture school existed in a territory of 167 million people. Revealing colonial histories was a trend shared by most of the participants, but the name of the section also referred to the format chosen by most of the exhibitors—audiovisual storytelling through films—perhaps fueled by Lokko’s interest in narration. Exceptions such as the exquisite collections of models by Flores y Prats, BDR Bureau, Neri&Hu, and ZAO/Standardarchitecture, seemed to confirm, in their inability to discuss the interlocking of colonial and carbon logics, the adequacy of visual narratives to critically address them. Explicit documentaries like Killing Architects’ *Investigating Xinjiang’s Network of Detention Camps*, DAAR’s acts of



Figure 2 Installation view of the film *Ente di Decolonizzazione—Borgo Rizza*, by DAAR (Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hila), in *The Laboratory of the Future*, Eighteenth International Architecture Exhibition, Venice Biennale, 2023 (author’s photo).

decolonization using fragments of fascist architecture painted in red, as portrayed in their film *Ente di Decolonizzazione—Borgo Rizza* (awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival), and Gbolade Design Studio’s report on the fate of the West Indian community in Brixton known as the “Windrush Generation” demonstrated the power of journalistic reporting to expose how colonial structures are far from gone (Figure 2). At the same time, viewers were reminded of fiction’s capacity to foster political imagination by films such as Liam Young’s *The Great Endeavor*, an atmospheric depiction of extractivism; MMA Design Studio’s *Origins*, with its dance performance over the layered historical landscape of the Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve; and Sammy Balojii’s visual essay on the Yangambi Agricultural Center, a remnant of Belgian colonial agricultural experimentation. Fourteen other films completed a sea of moving images that appropriated Audre Lorde’s thesis and explicitly refused to undo the house of architecture with traditional architectural tools.⁴ Only 1:1 scale mock-ups survive the disciplinary drowning. Works that retain certain normative architectural qualities despite their challenging scale or material strangeness—such as Serge Attukey Clotey’s yellow plastic “Afrogallonist,” an endless fabric-like skin; Estudio A0’s embroidered constellations of agro-ecological urbanisms in the Amazon basin; and Studio Barnes’s ambiguous

archaeological and anthropological fragments of an imminent future—can evoke totemic powers, enable symbolic readings, and at the same time seriously present the thing itself. A glimmer of hope: perhaps architects do not need to learn filmmaking to deal with the colonial and carbonizing present of the field.

The title of the section “Guests from the Future” also carries literary baggage, but of a different kind. It is the name of György Dalos’s account of the dazzling impression that a young Isaiah Berlin made on the fifty-six-year-old poet Anna Akhmatova when they met in 1945. A literal reference, as Lokko embodied Akhmatova here and gathered twenty-two startling young African and African diasporic practices, most born in the 1990s, introducing them as a destabilizing thread in the fabric of the previous two sections of the exhibition. Mixed between the established offices of “Force Majeure” and the critical readings of “Dangerous Liaisons,” they reclaimed the possibility of a future, not always because of what they are, but rather because of what they might become. And what they might become is quite diverse, ranging from Arinjoy Sen’s embroideries depicting the domestic architecture of Bangladesh’s vulnerable coastal floodplains to Ibiye Camp’s attempts to decolonize data extractive technologies in South Africa; from Black Females in Architecture, a UK-based group that promotes diversity and racial

and gender equity in all sectors of the built environment, to the Afro-Brazilian collective Cartografia Negra, which recovers the histories of Black Brazilians that have disappeared from national records; from New South's clothed domestic interiors that link Algiers to the Parisian suburbs to Dzidula Kpodo and Postbox Ghana's archival research into Ghana's midcentury anonymous photographs. Geographically expansive and conceptually convoluted, this section took a risk that only the bold fool or the brazen soothsayer would dare to take: drawing images of the future.

The exhibition continued with a section whose generic name, "Curator's Special Projects," avoided the programmatic tone of its predecessors. The works presented in its three didactic subtopics, "Food, Agriculture & Climate Change," "Gender & Geography," and "Mnemonic," were developed in collaboration with the curator. Lokko's intervention seemed to be the only thing they had in common and the reason they had been separated from the rest. The stream of events, talks, screenings, and performances that completes every Biennale has been given the distinct name "Carnival," a reference to one of Venice's local celebrations par excellence, but perhaps also a warning to participants, reminding them that every now and then the "fools" get to run the show for a limited time. The final section was called "The Biennale College Architettura," and it replicated the educational programs that the Biennale's art, music, dance, theater, and cinema sections have been running for several cycles. It held its inaugural season last June, focusing on the future of architectural education.⁵

Lokko's determination to operate within the logic of the Biennale while simultaneously subverting its histories and institutional structure suggests parallels to ruangrupa's experience curating Documenta 15 the previous year. Even if the invitation to occupy the center went to different geographical peripheries—the

global South in the case of the Indonesian art collective and the Black Atlantic in the case of Lokko—they had in common the discomfort they encountered. Beyond the accusations of anti-Semitism against Taring Padi's large mural *People's Justice*, which was immediately removed from the Documenta exhibition, the overall visceral reaction to ruangrupa's collection of works from non-Western art collectives in Kassel signaled the difficulty of fitting decentered proposals into the centers of power. Curatorial frameworks and established trajectories in the former colonies did not translate well back into Europe, culturally or politically. In Venice, the controversies were less public but no less structural. By comparison, the few negative reviews complaining about the "lack of architecture" at the 2023 Biennale seem anecdotal. Imagine organizing temporary visas for participants arriving in Italy from different regions of Africa under the notorious migration policy of Fratelli d'Italia, the neofascist party of Giorgia Meloni, Italy's prime minister since October 2022. Picture working for an institution under the jurisdiction of the current Italian minister of culture, Gennaro Sangiuliano, who was a local representative of the far-right party MSI-DN (a direct descendant of Mussolini's Partito Fascista Repubblicano) in the 1980s and a candidate for the House of Representatives with Silvio Berlusconi's Casa delle Libertà in the 2000s. If these conditions constrained the Biennale's horizon of possibility, they also rendered it even more necessary when it opened in May 2023. By the time it closed in late November of that year, the return of war to the Middle East had provoked renewed debates about colonialism's contemporary manifestations.⁶ The breadth of works in *The Laboratory of the Future* left us with a single certainty: the colonial project is not a set of long-ago historical events and experiences that affected Africans and those in the African diaspora. Rather, it is an ecology of epistemologies, cognitive

structures, and regimes of representation that continues to hold strong resonance for active participants of architecture in sites all across the planet.

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Notes

1. Marina Otero Verzier, "How Will We Live Together? La Biennale di Venezia 17th International Architecture Exhibition," *JAE Online*, 11 Mar. 2022, <https://www.jaeonline.org/issue-article/how-will-we-live-together> (accessed 10 Nov. 2023)
2. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).
3. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).
4. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing Press, 2007), 110–14.
5. This is a fascinating project that I will refrain from discussing further because of my personal involvement with it.
6. Forensic Architecture and DAAR have consistently used the concept of colonialism to analyze Israel's relationship with Palestine, and in November 2023 a number of other participants at the Biennale signed the "Call for Immediate Action to Architecture and Planning Programs, Organizations, and Individuals to Stand against the Destruction of Lives and Built Environments in Palestine, and to Protect Academic Freedom" (<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/19bohoR6auH1LjJR7f3nyDrn-WjRsZgIbjscxdEzDRXE/edit>), which characterizes Israel's actions as colonial. Other voices, however, have warned that the term is rather ill fitting for describing the Israel–Palestine conflict. See Jonathan Freedland, "The Tragedy of the Israel–Palestine Conflict Is This: Underneath All the Horror Is a Clash of Two Just Causes," *Guardian*, 28 Oct. 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/27/tragedy-israel-palestine-conflict-horror> (accessed 17 Feb. 2024); Simon Sebag Montefiore, "The Decolonization Narrative Is Dangerous and False," *The Atlantic*, 27 Oct. 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/10/decolonization-narrative-dangerous-and-false/675799> (accessed 17 Feb. 2024).