
Søren Pihlmann (pihlmann architects), *Build of Site*

Ingeborg Hau

REFERENCES

Søren Pihlmann (pihlmann architects), *Build of Site*, in the Danish Pavilion, Official Danish contribution to the 19th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, La Biennale di Venezia 2025. Location: Giardini, Venice.

Contributors to exhibitions:

Royal Danish Academy - Institute of Architecture and Culture; University of Copenhagen, Technical University of Denmark, yasuhirokaneda STRUC-TURE, Gjerulff & Lassen A/S, M+B Studio, Spazio Legno Venezia, Oxara AG, Studio Gisto.

Cover credits:

Hampus Berndtson *Build of Site*.

- 1 The Danish Pavilion is located right by the entrance of the biennale in the *Giardini Pubblici*, a green garden once open to the public, now an entry-by-ticket area, home to the majority of the national pavilions participating in the Art and Architecture Biennales. As an architecture fan, the pavilions in the garden are in themselves worth a visit, even without exhibitions. They tell stories of national identities, style and geopolitical (in)balance expressed through architecture – and together they make up a colorful and slightly strange cacophony of architectural languages.
- 2 For this year's biennale, Danish architect Søren Pihlmann has been appointed as curator of the Danish Pavilion. The starting point of his project is the building itself. The hybrid pavilion consists of a classicistic hall designed by architect Carl Brummer in 1932, and a smaller, modernist hall added by architect Peter Koch in 1960. The two main spaces are linked together by a central hallway and a series of secondary spaces, often used for dissemination and information activities. It's not an easy life for a building, being an exhibition pavilion in Venice. Shifting exhibitions every year, wear

and tear by more than 100.000 visitors passing through each Biennale, seasonal floodings and general climate change called for a general renovation of the pavilion. That is the starting point of Pihlmann's project.

- 3 Pihlman's architectural approach is to transform existing buildings without adding anything to site and without removing anything from site – and he is using the biennale and the needed renovation of the Danish Pavilion to demonstrate this approach; to *Build of Site*. The concept is a strong strategy for sustainable construction in Denmark, where excess resource use, production and consumption has led to an annual Earth Overshoot Day in March meaning that Denmark spends four times the resources allocated in the planet's annual biocapacity budget. In Denmark, the construction industry is responsible for the generation of 12 million tons of waste, corresponding to 58% of total waste generation and for 30% of all carbon emissions, as a recent publication has discussed¹.
- 4 Pihlmann has led an extensive transformation process to adapt the pavilion to meet future needs, by reusing what is already there. Huge chunks of cut up concrete floor is transformed into typical exhibition elements such as tables and podiums, while other elements like the original limestone tiles and wooden window frames have been carefully dismantled, studied and assessed to determine their future use. Some will be reinstalled, others will be crushed and casted into the new flooring. In portfolios, the visitors can study drawings of the original pavilion, the renovation process and details of what it will look like, when the renovation is completed in 2026.
- 5 In that sense *Build of Site* tackles the eternal dilemma of architecture exhibitions head on. How can one exhibit architecture – an artform that is at its core to be experienced, in full scale, on site, in context, in use? The pavilion is a paused process, put on hold for the six months duration of the biennale, meaning that the pavilion has a *real* purpose, it is not merely a representation of architecture, it *is* architecture.
- 6 Stepping into the Koch Hall of the pavilion has a dramatic, almost aggressive feel – its floors are gone and bares open a crater, in which the visitors can find footing while watching a short film about the approach narrated by Pihlmann himself. The spatial experience is strong, physical, but slightly compromised by the narrative film, complete with the logo of the producer in its corner. It breaks the barrier between experience and representation, and reminds the visitor that it *is* in fact an exhibition. The Brummer Hall is calmer, more classic, it showcases the materials, experiments and drawings on tables made of the broken-up flooring from the pavilion – neatly organized in piles, stacks and containers in such an aesthetically effortless way as only an architect could do it.
- 7 The pavilion's aestheticization of the process, the broken up, the worn, the unfinished, the rough without a doubt makes a healthy addition to the aesthetics palette that clients and users in Denmark (and in similar contexts) normally chose from when constructing. Talking to peers from other, less economically privileged, parts of the world, the pavilion also has connotations of an aesthetic that they've had to live with without a choice. In communities that haven't had the extremely high standards of comfort and security that Denmark has, a more polished finish is understandable and sought after. Just like it's cool to wear ripped jeans – if it's on purpose.
- 8 When reading the sympathetic texts and credits it's evident that Pihlmann's way of working is extremely collaborative. It celebrates and relies on the skills of architecture

and art historians, students, craftsmen, researchers, engineers, artists and technicians, it is through this interdisciplinary work that innovation emerges. It might be through interdisciplinary collaboration that all good architecture emerges, one could argue. As such, it seems a little old school that Søren Pihlmann himself is being portrayed in the exhibition film and media as a sole protagonist - a starchitect. It risks building on the notion of the architect as an artist, an auteur, with a vision coming from within himself. That type of architecture seems to have played out its part - at least for now.

- 9 The radical approach of Pihlmann could mark a shift in Danish architecture. It challenges conventional notions of beauty, value, and quality, as well as what is considered permanent or temporary, strong or fragile. This perspective paves the way for truly sustainable construction. By focusing on locally abundant resources, existing building stock, and regenerative materials, this approach could significantly reduce the negative impacts of the Danish building industry while reshaping perceptions of attractive architecture. If architects can find creative, innovative ways of reusing what is already built and generate beautiful, people-nature friendly, dynamic environments from it - as Pihlmann demonstrates - it might point to a great sustainable future for the profession ahead.

AUTHORS

INGEBORG HAU

Royal Danish Academy - Institute of Architecture and Technology