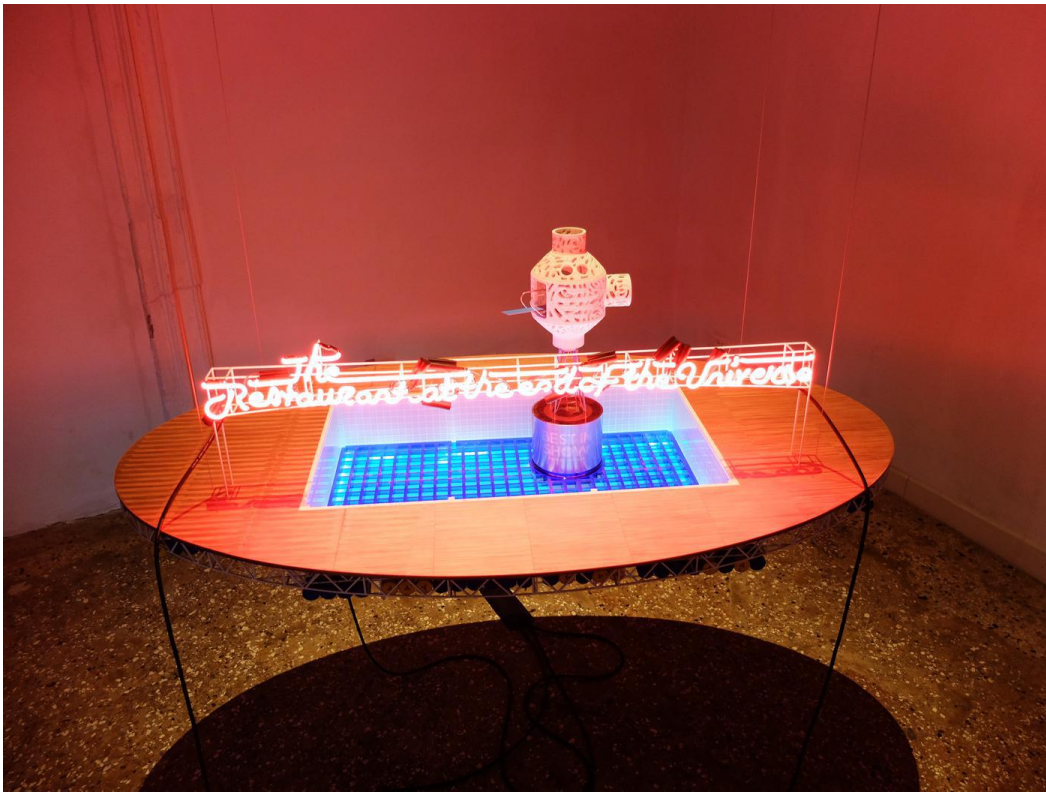




Reporting from the Front Desk
New Zealand at the Venice Architecture
Biennale 2016

by Chris Winwood

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The Venice Architecture Biennale 2016, curated by Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, was a call to arms for the global architecture community to show how they are responding to the global challenges of our time: humanitarian, economic, and environmental, to name a few.

In this piece, Paris-based New Zealand architect Chris Winwood considers Future Islands, New Zealand's second-ever contribution to the Venice Architecture Biennale. Produced by a multidisciplinary team lead by Creative Director Charles Walker, Future Islands sought to present a diverse range of projects and architectural typologies that express the different approaches to, and the changing nature of, architectural practice in Aotearoa.

'Future Islands' is the New Zealand contribution to the Venice Architecture Biennale 2016. It is only the second time New Zealand has entered the world of the Architecture Biennale following on from 'Last, Loneliest, Loveliest' in 2014. The New Zealand exhibition, produced by a multidisciplinary team lead by Creative Director Charles Walker, is located in Palazzo Bollani, one of a number of national pavilions that are located in temporarily-leased spaces outside of the two permanent Biennale venues; The

Giardini and The Arsenale. Exhibition spaces inside these established venues are hard to come by and—not to mention—cost prohibitive. As newcomers to the Architecture Biennale, it seems somewhat appropriate that the New Zealand pavilion is an outlier, free from the density of the Arsenale (a complex of former shipyards and armouries) and the pomp of the Giardini, which hosts the permanent pavilions of primarily European countries or countries with a European colonial history. Notably, this includes Australia, who recently gained permission to replace their ‘temporary’ structure with a heavy granite-clad box which is unlikely to be moved anytime soon.

Architectural statements aside, the theme set out by this year’s Biennale Director, Chilean Alejandro Aravena, the current wunderkind of the architectural world, is ‘Reporting from the Front’; a kind of call to arms for architects from all corners of the globe to show how they are responding to the global challenges of our time; humanitarian, economic, environmental—the list goes on. It is a broad and weighty theme and inevitably, its underlying agenda leaves little room for overtly conceptual or theoretical practice and certainly no room for iconic ‘Starchitecture’ (though a few old heads get a rather token nod in the Giardini exhibition). Instead, the Aravena curated sections of the Biennale focus on the real and realised works of a wide range of architectural practices, many of whom are relative up-and-comers making small-scale, vital interventions in response to specific issues within their own communities.

It is within this wider thematic context of socially-responsible practice that ‘Future Islands’ is placed. Ironically, a function of our nautical distance from Venice and the time required to ship the installation—from one island to another—means that the conceptual direction and production of content for our representative (art or architecture) pavilions are often well underway before the Biennale theme is announced. For this reason, the installation does not attempt to, nor claim to directly respond to Aravena’s quasi-militaristic theme. Instead, it seeks to present a diverse range of projects and architectural typologies that express the different approaches to, and the changing nature of, architectural practice in Aotearoa, or, as Walker post-rationalises in response to Aravena; ‘a gentle manifesto.’^[01] Whereas ‘Last,

Loneliest, Loveliest’ looked back to the meeting of Pacific and European architectural influences, ‘Future Islands’, in the words of NZ pavilion commissioner Tony van Raat, “speaks of multiple histories and divergent architectural trajectories”^[02] with a focus on looking to the future—imagined or otherwise.

In the grand sala at the upper level of the palazzo, overlooking a courtyard to one side and a canal to the other, some 50-odd architectural models appear loosely sited on and around a collection of floating clouds, or islands, invisibly suspended at various horizons. The ‘islands’ sway gently to an audio of Maori waiata that beckons visitors from the ground floor lobby, while video projections of clouds and water onto the forms suggest a South-Pacific, island provenance and help to draw the eye upwards to the magnificent 5m high ceiling of the palazzo.



Future Islands installation view, 2016. Photo: Chris Winwood.



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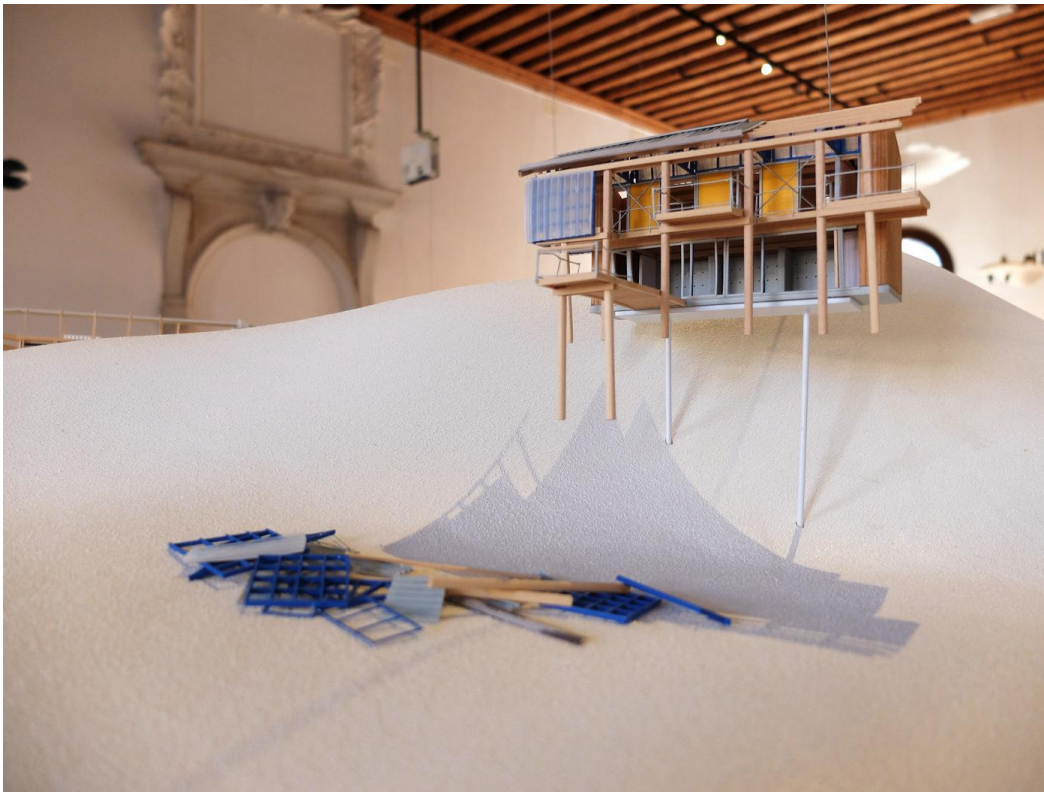
These imagined forms, some full and sumptuous, others veneered fragments that suggest a topography that extends beyond the room, evoke the familiar flowing hills and volcanic landscapes of Aotearoa. An asymmetric mirroring about the islands’ horizons serves as a more literal reference to an inverted antipodean perspective (apparent in the exhibition logo) while also lending the forms an extra-terrestrial dimension as they float through the space like Avatar-esque fragments of an aerial archipelago. It is within this familiar, yet foreign ‘world’, displaced from their real-life contexts, that the ‘architectures’ exist; floating, some even inverted, above and below the horizon lines like satellites, or recently landed space-craft, belying their terrestrial origins.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of the projects represented are in fact buildings realised in the past 5 years, serving to highlight the breadth of contemporary architectural practice in New Zealand; from recent architectural graduates who have eschewed a traditional path and taken the role of construction into their own hands, right through to established practices and household names of New Zealand architecture like Athfield and Warren & Mahoney. Interspersed throughout, are a handful of unbuilt and speculative propositions, including recent student work and elements commissioned for the exhibition. Their inclusion attempts to disrupt the conventional pragmatic concerns of architectural practice, and promote the forward-looking speculative nature of architectural practice.

The numerous conceptual threads that inform the exhibition centre around the notion of the island as a ‘site of possibility.’^[03] This is taken both in a literal sense; a reflection of Aotearoa as a place somehow less constrained by history and thereby more free to experiment and innovate, and in a metaphorical sense; playing on romantic notions of the island as a utopian paradise. In doing so, Walker draws in references from beyond our shores in order to enrich what could otherwise be considered an insular theme.

Closer reading of the accompanying catalogue reveals a reference to Italo Calvino’s famous work *Invisible Cities*, a key inspiration for ‘Future Islands’. The book describes 54 imagined cities, all of which are based in some part on Venice. This lends the exhibition a romantic, poetic narrative frame of reference, one that is inextricably linked to Venice; the floating island-city that’s very existence seems to defy logic. This serves to ground—or more accurately float—the architecture in its Venetian context.

While the exhibition’s conceptual framework serves to set it apart from other national pavilions at the Biennale for whom the context of exhibiting in Venice is of little or no importance, the reference is buried in the density of the show and is only revealed to visitors who take the time to read the catalogue. This can be problematic in the fatiguing, over-saturated experience of visiting the Biennale, and it suggests a misunderstanding of the exhibition context.



As well as a convenient, if trivial, numerical connection—54 cities, 54 projects^[04]—the exhibition also borrows from *Invisible Cities* a form of categorisation (Making Islands, Trading Islands, Islands of (Im)possibility etc) in an attempt to order what is a very diverse range of projects. It is a clever way to avoid typological categorisation and instead suggest less obvious connections between projects. But again, this is only evidenced in the catalogue; the arrangement of models in the space does not strictly follow the same categories, presumably, for aesthetic and spatial reasons. To add to this confusion, the exhibition guide handed out to visitors did not fully correspond with the installation. This meant that it was difficult to identify certain projects, while other projects were located so high or low, so as to be out of sight. This ‘unreliable’^[05] curation, was admittedly secondary to the overall, immersive experience but made evident the challenges of curating what was arguably too many projects for one exhibition, without a clear underlying motive or hierarchy.

Technically and visually speaking, the installation is executed to a very high standard. Unlike many other pavilions, it is an accessible, engaging experience that generates intrigue with visitors of all ages, interests and stature, and successfully broadens the appeal of the pavilion beyond an architectural

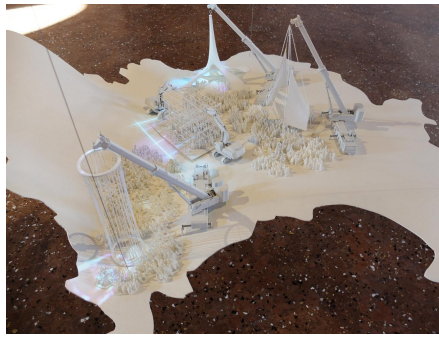
audience. It is also proof that even in the age of virtual reality, physical models remain an engaging and accessible way to communicate an architectural idea. This is evidence of a talented and savvy creative team and is something to be commended. The models themselves are exquisitely hand-crafted with many made specifically for the installation and others loaned from the practices. The range of modelling techniques and materials suggests a rich, albeit somewhat fabricated, diversity of architectural thought, appropriately celebrating difference rather than homogeneity.

Some models convey a 'realistic' representation of materiality; Jasmax's *Te Uru Taumatua*, Patterson Associates' *Len Lye Centre* or *Dogbox* by Patch Work Architecture, which is left partially assembled to suggest the projects design/build process. Others are reduced down to key elements or abstracted through the use of 3D printing, resulting in homogenous plastic forms that emphasise solid and void. Most impressive in this mould is the Athfield House at Amritsar St, Wellington, which captures the full extent of the 50-year development in all of its 'Organic Heritage' glory and deservedly forms its own island fragment.

While the majority of the projects translate naturally into the model format, it is the more abstract, elemental representations—in particular for the speculative works *Awaroa Lighthouse* by Henry Stevens, Nick Roberts and Jansen Aui and *Vanishing Acts* by Holly Xie or the organic roof elements of the *Ahuriri River Lodge* by Architecture Workshop and *Otuatua Stonefields Heritage Centre* by Charissa Snijders Architect and Crosson Architects—which feel more 'at home' in this other-worldly environment, inviting interpretation. By contrast, the more literal representations either sit awkwardly on their foreign, undulating sites or float above with foundations exposed, highlighting the challenge of conveying more conventional architectural representation in an unconventional exhibition format.



Future Islands installation view, 2016. Photo: Chris Winwood.



LuxCity & CityUps (Model), FESTA, Future Islands, 2016. Photo: Chris Winwood.



Amritsar House (model), Athfield Architects, Future Islands, 2016. Photo: Chris Winwood.



Future Islands installation view, 2016. Photo: Chris Winwood.

The limitations of an exhibition strategy based on physical 3D replicas are further tested with the representation of the ground-breaking FESTA event series (*LuxCity* in 2012 and *CityUps* in 2014)—the student-led temporary ‘city’ built within the vacant Christchurch CBD as a response to the top-down blueprint-led rebuild. While light projections and crowds of miniature people attempt to recreate a sense of a temporal and overtly ‘social’ architecture, the combination of miniature demolition nibblers and fantasy landscape results in a scene resembling something from *Fraggles Rock* which, at least, meant it was a hit with the younger visitors. Although it is important to represent the transitional in

the spectrums of architectural possibility, it makes evident how these alternative situations are not always easily represented in traditional formats and would have benefited from alternative display formats, like video, in order to better convey the project and its reason for being there.

This reflects a wider critique of the pavilion; an ambivalent treatment of the architectural content. Though the exhibition succeeds in creating an engaging visitor experience (one visitor commented that it was their highlight of the Biennale), for those who were interested to dig deeper into the New Zealand architectural psyche—arguably the target audience—there were too many questions left, well, hanging.

By removing the architecture from its intended context, scale, function, even orientation^[06] in order to invite alternative—rather than actual—readings, the critique of the architecture becomes limited to one of formalism; a collection of curious objects from some far-off place. This in itself is not necessarily a negative, however, one could argue the strategy trivialises the role of the architect rather than celebrating it; a curious strategy, particularly in light of Aravena's underlying agenda which seeks to recalibrate the global currency of architectural practice.

Another curious strategy is the addition of herds of miniature cattle that feature throughout 'Future Islands.' What appears to be a light-hearted agricultural reference to our colonial beginnings, is really a commentary on our economy's vulnerability (and thereby also the building industry's) to the global dairy market^[07]. The bovine inhabitants inadvertently create a common reference in scale across each of the islands and have the effect of turning the architecture into works of folly rather than considered responses to real contexts; physical, environmental, political etc. An aversion to a didactic approach means the door is left wide open to interpretation—some of which could be considered unintended; are visitors to speculate, as one particular visitor did, that Jasmax's *T e Uru Taumatua*, the Ngai Tuhoe headquarters, could in fact be an elegant (and very eco) cow shed?



In the context of this Biennale, a sense of playfulness and dare I say it, humour, is certainly not unwelcome and could be considered a fair reflection of our renowned ‘relaxed’ and ‘open’ nature. However, in this case, obscure references, inside jokes and the reinforcing of cultural stereotypes comes at the expense of focusing on the architecture, begging the questions;

What are we trying to say about New Zealand architecture? Are the projects not interesting enough on their own? Or are we just too coy to talk about them?

These observations could reflect the general expectations for an exhibition of architecture, rather than a critique of what is an intentionally loose and ambiguous spatial experience. One that strives to invite multiple associations and readings, where the architecture itself is secondary, or, a demonstration of the whole being worth more than the sum of its parts.

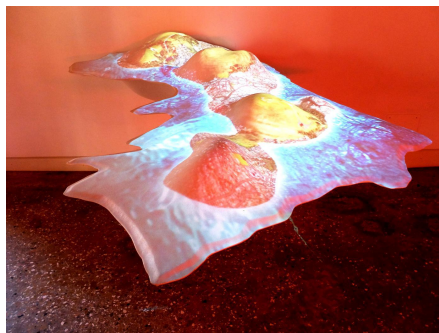
If this is so, then the accompanying catalogue works against this notion. Along with an insightful interview with Walker which reveals the multiple layers of influence behind the exhibition, it provides a brief summary of each of the works and as such, effectively lifts the lid on the projects’ real-life existences that the

exhibition tries hard to avoid talking about. As such, it feels like an attempt to salvage something more tangible, in order to promote the projects and their architects, many of whom helped sponsor the exhibition along with the New Zealand Institute of Architects and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. But with 54 projects to cover, a significant tome would have been required to do it justice. Money would have been better spent on an exhibition text describing the intentions for the exhibition that visitors could take-away to later reflect on—a necessary evil for the time-poor Biennale goer.

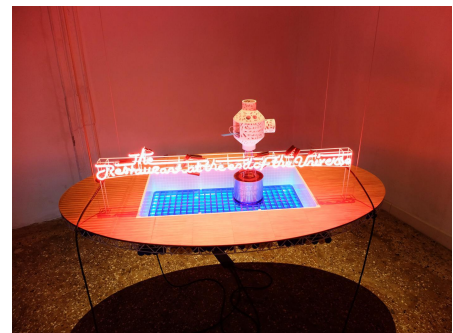
If the atmosphere of the main space is somewhat aloof, the second sala is where things start to take a more direct position. Within the smaller, darkened room, a ring of 9 private homes, all 3D-printed to the same scale in yellow plastic, congregate around a large model of Stevens Lawsons rather gothic proposal, *A Mission in the City*. This overtly optimistic proposition for welfare housing in the centre of Auckland, is the only model in the exhibition (excluding the Amritsar village) that demonstrates medium-density housing as an alternative to our ever-increasing suburban condition, perhaps signifying a need to rethink our architectural ‘bread and butter’. This is contrasted by the gloomiest contribution; an animated time lapse projection of a pastoral peninsula (bearing a striking resemblance to Auckland) which is rapidly urbanised before being eventually inundated by rising sea waters. Finally, after being fully submerged, a barren, frozen landscape is revealed and the loop starts again.



Future Islands installation view, 2016. Photo: Chris Winwood.



Dynamic video projection, *Future Islands*, 2016. Photo: Chris Winwood.



The Restaurant at the End of the Universe World (model), *IMPORT_EXPORT*, *Future Islands*, 2016. Photo: Chris Winwood.

Both elements reveal an awareness of the global issues that Aravena has challenged architects to report on. But without any elaboration, it feels like a token gesture, leaving the visitor to ponder our position on issues of housing and climate change; two challenges that are going to have a huge impact in the future, not only for architectural practice, but the wider fabric of our Pacific nation.

The final work, and perhaps the most conceptually revealing, is entitled *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe World*. This speculative work commissioned for the exhibition, is in fact the miniature materialisation of another proposal for the New Zealand pavilion at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale. Intended to be sited in the Arsenale lagoon, the design is for a man-made floating ‘island’, featuring a replica Athfield turret enveloped with whakairo motifs, which serves as a diving board for a swimming pool below. Above, blazing red neon lettering spells out the project’s title and gives the room an apocalyptic red glow. A collaboration between artists and architects calling themselves `IMPORT_EXPORT`, the work deftly critiques the role of the Biennale as a platform for nationalistic promotion while reflecting on how architecture might be used to this end. It is the antithesis of a broad-brush, all-inclusive showcase, and presents a critical, if somewhat pessimistic, position (you’ll need a magnifying glass to decipher the brilliant ‘For Construction’ documentation in the catalogue). The inclusion of this project is in stark contrast to the non-committal nature of the remainder of the exhibition but does, at least, reveal a willingness to self-reflect.

It is important to keep in mind that to have the opportunity to present at the Venice Architecture Biennale is no mean feat—bureaucratically, financially and logistically—particularly for a nation so geographically distant, without a history of supporting participation in such events on a regular basis. As a practicing Architect and New Zealander, I was proud to play a small part in the ‘on the ground’ Venice campaign. Having the opportunity to talk with visitors about our architectural culture and values encouraged me to reflect on how we see ourselves and how we are seen by an international audience.

‘Future Islands’ is a thoughtful, poetic contribution that stands out—for better or worse—in a Biennale characterised by a focus on more pragmatic concerns. By ambitiously challenging the paradigm of an architectural exhibition, the pavilion has made our presence felt on the Biennale scene. To then respond critically to a theme, whilst carrying the expectations of sponsors and a close-knit architectural community—one that dedicated a significant amount of time and resources to enable it to happen—is admittedly, a lot to ask of one exhibition. Perhaps, as this report suggests, the shortcoming of the pavilion is that it tries to respond on too many fronts and in doing so foregoes an opportunity to provide a clear statement of intent. It is important that we build on the presence of 2014 and 2016 pavilions in order to shift the focus beyond national representation and to contribute strong, provocative ideas that will stake our architectural claim on a global stage.

Footnotes

01. Charles Walker, *Future Islands* ex.cat. (Auckland: New Zealand Institute of Architects, 2016), 24.

02. Tony van Raat, 'Foreword' in *Future Islands*, 8.

03. Walker, *Future Islands*, 12.

04. The more astute visitors will notice that 6 of the 54 projects presented in the catalogue have not been modelled, for reasons unknown.

05. Walker, *Future Islands*, 18.

06. Athfield Architects *House of Tahu* hangs awkwardly inverted over the entry like a disembodied pare.

07. The total number of cows is a reference to the average size of a dairy herd in New Zealand.

Biographies



Chris Winwood is a registered New Zealand architect currently based in Paris. Since his architecture studies at Victoria University in Wellington, Winwood has worked for Renzo Piano Building Workshop in Italy, Chris Moller at S333 Architecture and Urbanism in the Netherlands and as an Associate at Athfield Architects in Wellington where he was responsible for Massey University College of Creative Arts building, Te Ara Hihiko.

