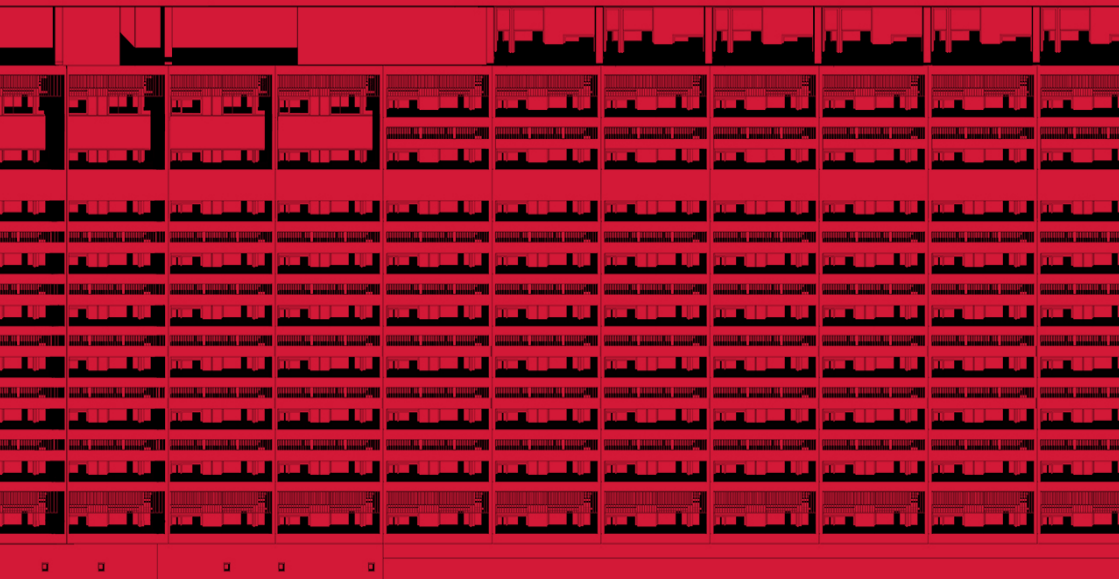# Scotland + Venice

RETHINKING ARCHITECTURE

SCOTLAND'S FIVE DIVERSE PROJECTS SHOWN IN VENICE DURING THE INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE SINCE 2004

2004

LANDFORMS
Drawing inspiration from observations of the Scottish Parliaments architect Enric Miralles, Landforms explored the relationship between Scotland's landscapes and its contemporary architecture through 17 projects completed after the formation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999.

Biennale theme:
Metamorph

Project Curator:
The Lighthouse and NORD

Exhibition Design:
NORD

Graphic Design:
Skratch Design

What:
Exhibition

Where:
Arsenale

2008

A GATHERING SPACE
Scotland's first standalone pavilion that acted as a social platform with two distinct areas - on the outside a set of public stairs encouraged informal gatherings, people-watching and play; on the inside a covered area acted as a public forum for debate and discussion.

Biennale theme:
Out There: Architecture Beyond Building

Project Curator:
The Lighthouse

Pavilion Design:
Gareth Hoskins Architects

Graphic Design:
ISO

What:
Installation and events

Where:
Piazzale della Stazione Santa Maria

2010

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD
A screening of the film Space and Light Revisited and discussion enabled arts organisation NVA to hold a high level of international engagement that helped influence the decision-making process regarding the future St Peter's Seminary in Cardross, designed by Gillespie, Kidd & Coia 1966.

Biennale theme:
People Meet in Architecture

Project Lead:
NVA

Film-maker:
Murray Grigor

What:
Publication, film screening and event

Where:
Ludoteca Santa Maria Ausiliatrice

2012

CRITICAL DIALOGUES
Four Glasgow-based practices – DO Architecture, GRAS, Pidgin Perfect and Stone Opera – created a Scottish 'studio' in Venice to engage with the local communities and explore the social role of the architect and the creative boundaries of architecture.

Biennale theme:
Common Ground

Project Director:
Jonathan Charley

Graphic Design:
Graphical House

What:
Publication, workshops, tours, banquet and exhibition

Where:
Ludoteca Santa Maria Ausiliatrice and Venice wide

2014

PAST + FUTURE
Four groups, each comprising a practicing architect, an academic and two students, researched modernity in Scotland within the post-war period of 1950 – 1970, opening up discussion on what a modern architecture in Scotland was and what it might be.

Biennale theme:
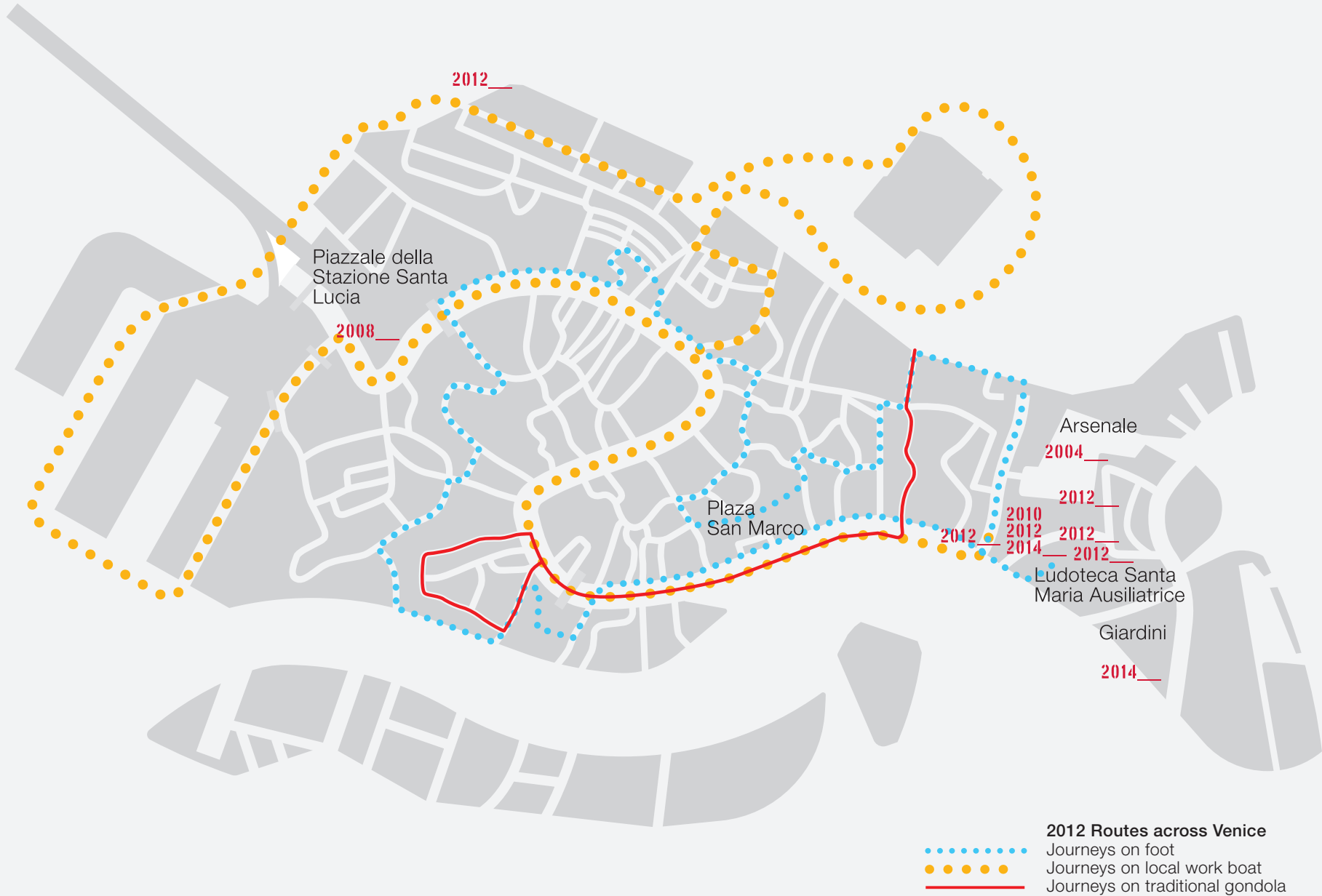Absorbing Modernity 1914 – 2014

Project Curator:
Reiach and Hall Architects

Publication Design:
Reiach and Hall Architects

What:
Publications and events

Where:
Ludoteca Santa Maria Ausiliatrice and Giardini

Location map of Scotland + Venice projects since 2004

2012___

Piazzale della Stazione Santa Lucia

2008___

Arsenale

2004___

2012___

2010
2012
2014___ 2012___

2012___

2012___

2012___

Plaza San Marco

Ludoteca Santa Maria Ausiliatrice

Giardini

2014___

2012 Routes across Venice
Journeys on foot
Journeys on local work boat
Journeys on traditional gondola

Scotland + Venice:
Rethinking Architecture
Professor Gordon Murray

In the City in History, Lewis Mumford credits the Venetians with the invention of 'a new type of city based on the zoning of urban functions, separated by traffic ways and urban spaces', citing both the Arsenale and Murano as Europe's first examples of industrial planning. Defying rational explanation by the simple mathematics of the grid or the diagonal of the European city, Venice does indeed require more complex analysis. Its plan form works almost as a flattened DNA spiral centred on the helix of the Grand Canal. What better laboratory to explore Scotland's modernity – the theme of its presence at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2014. In Past + Future four groups researched and documented a critical appraisal of modern architecture in Scotland and continue the events-based approached that has established itself as a hallmark of a distinctive Scottish presence. The contrast of this approach with the exhibition environment underlies Venice's complex relationship with its hinterland.

This complexity has provoked a shift in critical thought throughout history that is at the heart of the Biennale. Italo Calvino, in his 1972 novel Invisible Cities, also captured the multiplicities and contradictions of the city as a series of cities overlaid as layers. Each layer described is reinvented anew, and echoes the labyrinthine nature of Venice: "Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else."

Venice as a laboratory for discourse and provocative debate is epitomised by the Biennale: always at its best when it focuses on more than just an exhibition of the global condition of architecture. In her unsurpassed Architectural History of Venice, Deborah Howard quotes Goethe on his visit to Venice in 1797, only a decade before the fall of the Republic of Venice, indicating a kindred spirit with those living in a more northerly archipelago:

> This race did not seek refuge in these islands for fun, nor were those who joined later moved by chance: necessity taught them to find safety in the most unfavourable location. Later, however, this turned out to be their greatest advantage and made them wise at a time when the whole northern world still lay in darkness . . . the place of street and square and promenade was taken by water. In consequence the Venetian was bound to develop into a new kind of creature.

In attempting to suggest a sympathy between Venice and Scotland it is important to understand that the essential engagement of an old and outwardly conservative or conservationist society which embraces radicalism is embedded in the inhabitants themselves.

All major modern architects have beaten a path to Venice, more significantly in the days before the Architecture Biennale, with many working on projects there. With the exception of Scarpa, most were thankfully unrealised; including Le Corbusier's new hospital in Cannaregio (1966) and Kahn's massively oversized Convention Centre behind the Arsenale (1974). Aalto's existing small insertion at the Giardini, the Finnish Hut, was more of the scale required. Even in the seemingly even-tempered Giardini, modest modernism – Rietveld and Scarpa most notably – has made a stand against the bombast of a few, maybe by simply continuing the provocation.

In 1968 the Biennale was struck by the protests also breaking out across Europe. Carabinieri (armed police) were everywhere, from St Mark's Square to the Giardini. The central pavilion hosted a very ambitious exhibition entitled Lines of Research, with works by Malevich, Duchamp, Calder and Rauschenberg, but demonstrations and disorder characterised that year's events. Artists from many different countries took part, and as a sign of solidarity covered up their work. Some historical exhibitions were not even opened. This effectively closed the Biennale, and on restarting in 1976 similar controversy arose when Josef Beuys was selected to represent Germany. The German Pavilion had been built during the Nazi era, and Beuys would have been very conscious of its associations when he chose to make a monument to peace out of the discarded weapons of war.

The Venice Art Biennale since its inception has included representation from across the British Isles. In 1897 (the Biennale's second year) thirty-three artists were classified as Scottish (alongside nineteen of their English contemporaries), and a pattern of large group exhibitions was established which continued until the Second World War. Among the Scots who participated in 1897 were James Guthrie, followed notably by Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1899), in a section devoted to Scottish decorative art, E.A. Walton (1903), S.J. Peploe (1909), F.C.B. Cadell (1924), J.D. Fergusson (1928), and, in the post-war period, William Turnbull and Eduardo Paolozzi (both in 1952, and the latter also in 1960). Since 2003, constituent parts of the UK – Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland – have developed separate exhibitions outwith the British Pavilion, broadening the range of the country's representation.

In 1975 the first steps towards an architecture exhibition were taken by Vittorio Gregotti within the Visual Arts exhibition. In 1980, Architecture finally became independent, with Paolo Portoghesi as director. After the dramatic arrival of the Teatro del Mondo on a barge, as realised by Aldo Rossi (1979 – 80), heralded a landmark in postmodernism, the new director organised the 1st International Architecture Exhibition. The provocation continues.

With the encouragement of the plaudits surrounding Glasgow 1999 as City of Architecture and Design, the possibility of a Scottish presence in architecture was first mapped after the Architecture Biennale 2000. With a focus that year on research, entitled Less Aesthetics, More Ethics, Massimiliano Fuksas abandoned the usual set-up of the previous Biennali. Echoing the radical approach of Beuys, Fuksas had to find a new way to relate to architecture, favouring the research of new ethical responses, rather than simply aesthetics when developing a project - 'to use the Biennale as a lab to analyse the new planetary dimension of urban behaviour and transformations'. He highlighted three main themes: the Environment, both as an object and a subject for thinking; Society, representing attention to urban changes; and Technology, as information, communication, virtual dimensions. This suggested that the ideas of art and architecture stimulating wider debate might be embedded and be more useful in understanding the built environment.

More contingent but nevertheless reinforcing the Scottish zeitgeist, in 2002, when the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement was presented to the Japanese architect Toyo Ito, the Scottish film-maker Peter Mullan, was taking home the Film Festival's top prize, the Golden Lion, for his film The Magdalene Sisters. This demonstrated that there was an ideal terrain where the country's artists could provoke similar debate. Indeed, Scotland's case was further underpinned by the curator of that year, Deyan Sudjic, himself fresh from the role as Director of Glasgow 1999, City of Architecture and Design. When he presented Ito with the Golden Lion award, the number of Japanese TV crews almost outnumbered the number of Italian journalists. This confirmed, if it ever was in doubt, that Venice was home to the premier arts exhibition in the world. Any country wishing to be taken seriously in its cultural development needed to engage on that platform.

It was in 2004, with the Scottish Landforms exhibition, premiered in Barcelona the previous year, with appropriate themes of changing landscapes and sitting in the grand company of Ireland and Portugal at the end of the Arsenale, that Scotland first showcased its emerging architectural talent. The low-level topography of this exhibition might have been overwhelmed by the scale of this medieval shipyard or by the vast sums of money expended by some individuals, as well as countries, but instead set out a strong manifesto for the future of Scottish architecture. In the seven years since devolution it demonstrated the beginnings of an infrastructure of relevant projects were well under way.

The notion that a reflective appraisal of the architecture of Scotland might have a regular presence at the Biennale was consolidated in 2008 with A Gathering Space, where a large-scale insertion (La Scala Scozzese) into the Piazzale della Stazione Santa Lucia – Venice's busiest public space – provided a temporary public forum for debate and discourse.

On many occasions the city of Venice has proven the Biennale to be more than a national PR exercise. Controversy has engendered critical debate. Architectural discourse has been encouraged across a spectrum of connected disciplines – economics, politics and global science. This is where Scotland has, since 2008, created a distinctive presence in architecture and an unique voice which, in focusing on a research and event-based approach, follows Fuksas's 2000 model and even Beuys's assault on the complacency of the art market, and thus avoids cliché as a 'talent contest'. This was perhaps best demonstrated in 2010 when the event-based approach created To Have and To Hold. The discussions held in the church of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice and organised by arts organisation NVA through the invitation of the Scottish Government, British Council and Creative Scotland sought to navigate a path towards a new radical view of 'conservation', a timely opportunity to look for new methods and approaches. To Have and to Hold enabled a high level of international engagement and influenced the decision-making process regarding the future of St Peter's Seminary in Cardross. Yet again, in 2012, with Critical Dialogues, a discursive approach that devolved to the local neighbourhoods of Cannaregio and Castello, gave four young practices an opportunity to explore the social role of the architect and the potential for extending the creative boundaries of architecture.

By focusing on an approach rooted in research, experiment and discourse, Scotland is following in the footsteps of the more radical curators and artists, and in doing so is perhaps significant in the Architecture Biennale's history in providing opportunities for younger practices and researchers to be given a voice on a world stage. This in turn can underpin a more critical debate on the built environment within Scotland that is informed by that wider vision. As Fuksas said in 2000: 'to use the Biennale as a lab' is a unique opportunity. Such debates need to be part of a continuum and must happen in some international context. History has illustrated there is no better place than the Venice Architecture Biennale.

Professor Gordon Murray PPRIAS
Gordon Murray is a partner in Ryder Architecture. He has practised as an architect in Glasgow for thirty-five years. His work has been exhibited at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London, at the Royal Scottish Academy and RIAS in Edinburgh, at Rotterdam, Marseilles and the Bauhaus Dessau, as well as at the 2004 Venice Biennale. He was moderator for the Scottish 2010 Biennale in To Have and To Hold. He is currently Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at the University of Strathclyde, a post he has held since 2007.
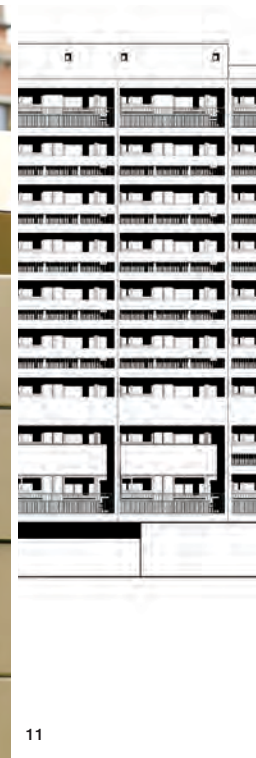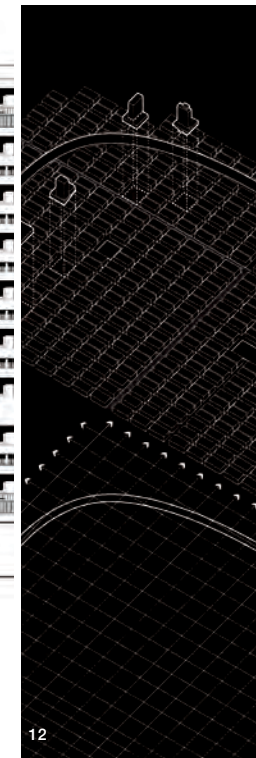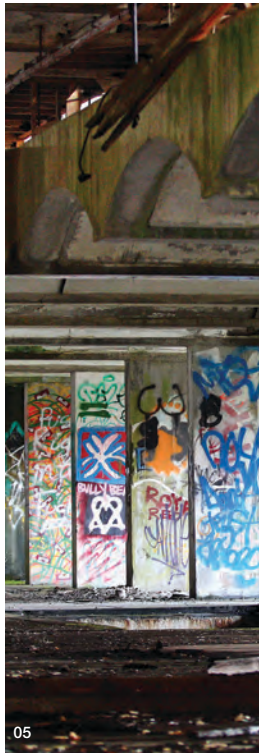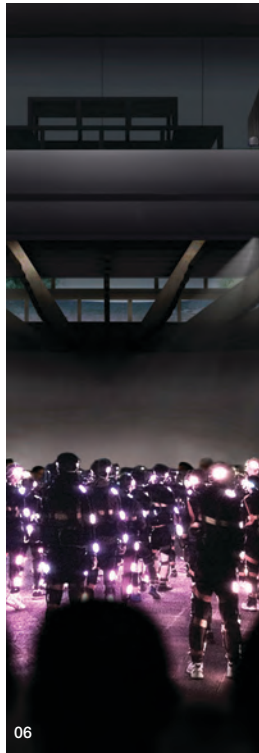
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Credits

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●● COUNCIL

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