

Venetian Mind

Venetian Mind By Ed Dorrell

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Jeremy Till has been around the architecture scene for a pretty long time now and he knows just about all there is to know about it. But even he must have been surprised that when the British Council launched the search for someone to curate its 2006 Venice Biennale pavilion with a specific focus on the regions so many Londoners still applied. In winning the project, Till, a well-known professor at the Sheffield School of Architecture, had to see off opponents from throughout the capital, all of whom seemed to believe that they were qualified to assess the architecture of the regions. An attitude that seems a little weird, to be frank. And while Till is understandably diplomatic about this, he does look surprised that architects with very little experience of life in the regional fringe thought they were qualified to take on the job.

Till is talking to me in an independent Clerkenwell coffee shop, having refused point blank to visit the Starbucks next door, and is still clearly basking in the joy of his win, which was announced last Tuesday (6 December). It becomes apparent very quickly that he considers the Venice gig to be one of the biggest things that has ever happened to him professionally.

Being politic, Till would disagree. He would say that it is not about him. He would say that this is one of the biggest things that has happened to his 'team'. And what an eccentric but interesting unit he has gathered around him. It takes in Designers Republic, the international graphics firm, a Sheffield experimental theatre company called Forced Entertainment and Till's long-term partner Sarah Wigglesworth. Perhaps the most remarkable component is the Illustrious Company, a new firm set up by Martyn Ware, formerly of the Human League and Heaven 17, and Vince Clarke, of Erasure, Yazoo and Depeche Mode fame. The '80s electro-pop heroes have fast developed an international reputation for weird and wonderful music soundscapes.

What can be certain is that this eclectic crowd will certainly produce something a little different to that which was brought together by Peter Cook 18 months ago. While the 2004 pavilion was admired by some, Cook's cross-section of the British scene had a mostly mixed reception. It seems fair to say that the Till team will not expect to have to repel any accusations of blandness. While the focus of the 'installation' - probably the best word for what is planned - will be the city of Sheffield, it will also be a general critique of the way that architecture is normally displayed in shows.

It will, of course, also relate to the work being carried out by the all too London-focused Ricky Burdett, who is curating the Biennale as a whole. The London mayor's architecture advisor is determined that the 2006 event will look at the development of all cities.

The space allocated to Till for his Venice ideas is made up of one large central room, which will feature several unusual exhibits - constantly evolving sound, light and even models - with smaller rooms opening off it. These will probably be a little more mainstream but will still have an interesting innovation. They will look at Sheffield on a variety of scales, from 1:1 to 1:10,000,000. Thus, according to Till, the exhibition will make the observation that cities exist - and develop - on a 'micro and personal scale' for people who live there, as well as the grander size that 'architects and planners work on'.

Till, it seems, is increasingly determined to trigger a revolution in the way that architects look at themselves and their role in society. 'In architectural shows there is far too much enthusiasm for models and for the traditional. We need to explore the other ways of looking at architecture,' he says. 'For example, everything will be moving and changing in the main room. It will not be static. It will never be exactly the same at any particular time. This will reflect the way that cities constantly change. 'Cities are moulded by all of us, by all the people who live there, not just architects and planners. This is not explored in traditional architecture shows.'

'Architecture is just a contingent discipline to the other forces at work, ' he says, with the sudden look of a zealot. 'The trouble is that architects do everything that

they can to resist it.' And this desire for change seems to be the general theme of almost all that Till has recently undertaken. For example, he is convinced his work at the Sheffield School of Architecture is at the vanguard of a revolution in architectural teaching. By way of illustration, he has done away with crits. 'Many schools mistake adventurous form for adventurous thought. They think they are being radical when in fact they are deeply, deeply reactionary, ' he says, obviously nodding to the Architectural Association, where he failed to become chairman earlier this year.

This self-styled radical has, it seems, a lot to prove in 2006 and it will be fascinating to see how this manifests itself in Venice. Don't be surprised if it's ever so slightly wacky.