
The Observatory of Scenic Spaces at the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space Festival of the RARE. 8-18 June 2023

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Guillem Aloy Bibiloni is an architect and he completed his PhD at the ETSAB in 2022, where he explored the relationship between theatre, architecture and the city of Palma, Mallorca. In recent years he has been researcher and professor at the ETSAB (2017-2023) and is a member of the Observatory of Scenic Spaces. Moreover, he has spent periods of research and teaching at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Malaquais (2019) and at the Beuth Hochschule für Technik in Berlin (2019); he often contributes to academic discourse as visiting professor in numerous institutions, such as the Universidad Andrés Bello in Santiago (2022), the Aarhus School of Architecture (2022), the Royal Danish Academy (2022), and ENSA Paris-Malaquais (2023).

English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

The Observatory of Scenic Spaces has visited the 15th edition of the Prague Quadrennial, the event that every four years since 1967 has brought together scenographers, artists, architects and students from all over the world concerned with scenography. The article is a critical look at the architecture and scenic space in the festival's 2023 edition.

Keywords: Prague Quadrennial, scenography, theatre architecture, scenic space

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Since 1967, the Prague Quadrennial has been the main meeting point for scenographers, artists and architects to reconsider what is meant by scenography and scenic space, and how it relates to the broader fields of architecture and contemporary art.

With this aim, the Prague Quadrennial (PQ) explores the field of scenography, covering everything from scenic art, costumes, lighting and sound design to site-specific installation. Scenography is defined as an environment that enables the imagination through the five senses. Asking the curators about architecture invariably elicits a long sigh. If, according to Markéta Fantová, artistic director of the festival, there is no consensus on what scenography is, the architecture of the scenic space is even less defined. The word architecture does not appear explicitly anywhere in this edition of the PQ, but the term performance space is used, perhaps more frequently.

The PQ has gradually shifted from exhibiting traditional theatre spaces to new scenic spaces with a wider or expanded approach. Scenography uses any imaginable space, from urban, rural and industrial environments to open air venues for performances. New technologies tend to be increasingly used by theatre creators, and so scenography is expanding to other professions.

This trend, which could give rise to unique and multidisciplinary collaborations to reconstruct the form of creative thinking on and off the stage, is still a promise, or an ideal, in this year's festival, since there is no clear and intelligent proposal in this direction. The lack of ambition of most national and regional delegations is apparent. Taking risk is limited, budgets are tight and professionals seem to be attending an "exhibition from the nineties, with little new on offer," as one visitor commented. It feels like we are witnessing a gigantic student exhibition, made by students and aimed at students and professors, which exploits the experience of being in Prague for two weeks in order to bring it to life.

In the 2023 edition, the fifteenth, the Holešovice Market, a former slaughterhouse built in the late 19th century that has mainly been used as a market since the 1980s, has been the central space of the festival, but not the

only venue, as the programme ranges from performances and theatre shows on the streets of Prague to exhibitions at the Theatre Faculty (DAMU) and scenographic and theatre architecture elements at the Trade Fair Palace of the National Gallery. “Three locations, three immersive experiences,” summarises Markéta Fantová.

The first impression of visitors to the Holešovice Market is that they are in a vibrant and chaotic place, difficult to find their way around and in the process of renovation and construction – some old industrial buildings located in a central position of the festival were being restored at the time of the PQ 2023, and separate the main square that houses the Student Exhibition from the Exhibition of Countries and Regions – in an urban environment in which the main access street is being reformed along with the market and the unfinished pedestrian bridge. When we finally orientate ourselves and find our way around, we realise that the exhibition has been divided into several different buildings that exist along with restaurants, supermarkets and Asian shops. The initial feeling is one of disjointed cacophony. You do not know where to look or where to go. A point of information appears like a beacon.

The main square is an outdoor space that provides the stage to show the proposals of scenography students and emerging artists. Open air and, in most cases, “fragile” installations, built by the students themselves, who have to deal with the usual summer heat and rain in Prague. In contrast, the Exhibition of Countries and Regions extends inside the spacious halls 11, 13 and 17. Based on a formal, constructive point of view, and even the use of materials, this is the most notable difference between the two exhibitions, since the pavilions or installations are formally very similar.

Once inside the venue, the space is distantly reminiscent of the Cartoucherie in Paris. The PQ Talks hall, home to official presentations and lectures, is a found scenic space, with a practically flat stage that occupies the entire width. There is no stage house, and both lecturers and audience share the same space, equipped with a tier of “Rosco” platforms, folding chairs, a large black curtain that acts as a screen and longitudinally limits the venue, and with minimal stage equipment and blocked windows

With a total of one hundred installations by creative teams representing 59 countries and regions, the main exhibitions are constructed as “diverse portraits of talent,” as the PQ states, which certainly create a noisy and confusing coexistence. The space, the number of pavilions, the density of some of them and also the “activation of the installation in time” throughout the eleven days of the festival leave you with the feeling that there is always something to see. In fact, it gives the impression of not getting to see the relevant and meaningful content, which one assumes is hidden somewhere and at some time. Figures are important to the PQ: between June 8 and 18 it will feature more than three hundred works of art by artists from over one hundred countries.

The figures, the number of spaces and sections, important for a festival of these characteristics, draw attention to the less daring proposals, the performances made to meet the demands for being represented in the Prague

Quadrennial. Depending on where you read, the numbers vary, but not the scope; more than 250 events in the programme: performances, exhibitions, architectural concepts, workshops or lecture blocks in ten sections by artists from more than a hundred countries, from New Zealand to Colombia. The historically more important programme sections of the PQ — Exhibition of Countries and Regions (ECR) and Student Exhibition (SE) — show around one hundred installations by creative teams from sixty-five countries/regions around the world.

For this year Markéta Fantová proposes the theme and title Festival of the RARE, understood as unique, special. In response to the artistic concept of the festival and the complexity of the different sections, the participating countries and regions construct a complex mosaic of socially critical views on the diversity of cultures through a variety of modes of artistic expression, but above all through site-specific installations, video, VR or the classic exhibition of scenography drawings and models.

The PQ continuously jumps from virtual spaces to specific closed, indoor installations that offer an individual experience or for a very small group, in which the physicality (albeit virtual) and the materiality of the installation become central, while attempts are made to isolate them from outside noise. The experience of the pavilions presented is only completed by active participation and interaction with the visitors.

Four thematic lines resonate in the Prague Quadrennial. The first revolves around reflection on the fragility and impermanence of human existence in a post-pandemic context. Sean Coyle (New Zealand. *Cruising Wonderland* Fragments II) presents some meticulously made models of empty scenographies of anonymous and generic places in the contemporary city, but highly ominous and suggestive of denunciation of places of homophobic violence. The Slovak pavilion, curated by the DOXA architecture studio, is a large black cube that starts out intact, but that several performers gradually destroy: “The cube was discovered by a nearby life.” It seems that physical spaces would be a limitation for existence: “The cube disappeared and life



DOXA, Slovak pavilion,
Prague Quadrennial 2023.



Tartu New Theatre, *Serafirma+Bodgan*,
Prague Quadrennial 2023.



Cyprus, *Spectators in a Ghost City*,
Prague Quadrennial 2023.

grew. And once the emptiness will have become too much, the cube will disappear and her beloved life will faithfully follow her.”

Karla Rodríguez and Héctor Bourges, curators and designers of the Mexican pavilion, take us on a reverse journey. In the *Journey for Life* the Zapatistas cross the Atlantic from the Mexican coast to Galicia with the single motto of “Wake up” and spread other forms of unsubmissive existence against the project of homogenisation, commodification, dispossession and death imposed by the hard core of capital.

Those looking for scenographies at the PQ will be pleased when they arrive at the Moroccan stand, with a display of models, or the Chinese, with a selection of monographic publications by scenographers and the exhibition on large productions in conventional and technically well-equipped theatres. The Israeli pavilion, with *WondeRare Women*, shines a spotlight on women scenographers.

Other exhibitions capture the essence of urban planning, such as *City as Stage*, where you can consider the relationship between time and space and look at meeting places and the use of the public space, both physical and digital. The foundation of the Estonian exhibition is Tartu New Theatre’s open-air performance of *Serafirma+Bodgan*, which is experienced from different perspectives, where the protagonist of this staged world is the garden of a house in a village, with stands on both sides, freely recreating its legends. Cyprus, in *Spectators in a Ghost City*, questions how we can understand places of conflict and trauma through their materiality as bearers of memories that we connect through scenography. The ghost town of Famagusta, located on

the east coast of the island, inspires the curatorial concept: “Turning our attention to the space of the ghost city itself, we engage with it through notions of memory, belonging and displacement, trying to grasp how the scarred and derelict urban landscape becomes both ‘author’ and ‘dramaturgy’.”

Latvia, in *On Our Way. A Road Manifesto*, takes us through the artistic journey of the curators and artists who leave home on the same day as the opening of the PQ to arrive there on the last day: “A search for performative space manifesting scenography as a living and elusive practice.” Ireland offers a large table always full of people to talk about the next four years. There is also no lack of whiskey to find answers to: “If performance designers could offer new possibilities for Irish theatre after the pandemic, what shapes and sounds, spaces and acoustics, materials and formats, structures and hierarchies might they propose? What new creative and collaborative practices might emerge? What new social and artistic functions for theatre might present themselves?”



Irish pavilion, Prague Quadrennial 2023.

The most colourful exhibitions are inspired by traditional folklore, legends and cultural heritage. The traditional nomadic Mongolian open air theatre is brought to the festival with a fantastic 360° video curated by Ariunbold Sundui where, with the effect of being in the middle of the Mongolian desert and through different scenes, we experience the atmosphere of this nomadic theatre.

¡Viva la montaña! is the performative installation of the Spanish delegation that rises again every day of the festival, is built, and creates a narrative. In the PQ there are pavilions where you enter or pavilions you walk around.

The Spanish pavilion is a mountain, made of fabric, with an interior. The curator is Maral Kekejian and the conceptualisation, research and design of the pavilion is by the architect María Buey González. Architects abound in the Spanish delegation: Raquel Buj in the design and creation of costumes for the Spanish pavilion, and Felisa de Blas, the curator of the Spanish schools pavilion in the Student Exhibition, where you can “swing, dance, wander, distort your image, make an ex-voto, or just rest.” The group of architects Zuloark appears as the ideation and exhibition design of *La verbena de la paloma: culto, fiesta y zarzuela* – which, by the way, is one of the most meticulous exhibitions of the PQ, in a completely peripheral area of the festival, at the Instituto Cervantes, where the curator and researcher Fernando Carmena retraces the Madrid summer carnival with a detailed narrative.

Finally, the PQ focuses on sustainability, with pieces that criticise consumerism and the ecological footprint. *Assemble*, by Suzon Fuks and Bob Vanderbob, is an installation about electronic waste, a meditation on obsolescence and the impact of technology that is part of the section of the Performance Space Exhibition. The curators of the Catalan pavilion, Marta Rafa and Pau Masaló, set about visualising a future where the excess costumes accumulated in the basement of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya are invaded by moss, fungi and insects. An installation that shows how theatre, due to its

¡Viva la montaña!,
Spanish pavilion at
the Prague Quadrennial
2023.





Terra, Spanish scenography schools pavilion at the Prague Quadrennial 2023.

ephemeral nature, also leaves a footprint in the form of dung: “We live in a world that tends towards virtuality, but the reality is that our waste devours us. The vast amount of waste we produce leaves a confusing trail of us and our stories. If we could observe this debris from the near future, would we be able to imagine other futures?” The installation is formalised with a pile of clothes on the floor, where with a magnifying glass and headphones you can listen to this near future and “life” after theatre performances.

France brings to Prague a site-specific installation made with sand, which deals with mass urbanisation and the bowels of our soils. In the framework of PQ23, “in the tension between maximalist visual impact and minimalist ecological impact,” in the words of curators Théo Mercier and Céline Peychet, you do not know if it is the destruction of a city or the construction of a new one. Although the resource of using sand as a reused, recyclable and low ecological footprint material is also employed in at least two student pavilions,

Crop, Catalan pavilion at the Prague Quadrennial 2023.





French pavilion
at the Prague
Quadrennial 2023.

the French achieve a more powerful effect through scale and ambiguity that makes the pavilion one of the most important of the PQ. You do not know if this is a place of construction or destruction, but it resonates deeply with the construction-filled environment all around Holešovice Market.

The PQ programme includes eight other sections, curated by its international team: Fragments II (where the diversity of scenographic approaches is celebrated with an exhibition of models and installations); Performance Space Exhibition (the exhibition of spaces dedicated to cultural meeting, from the physical space to the ephemeral and virtual); an exhibition of books submitted to the Best Publication Award; PQ Talks (with 150 lectures), 360Q (a Virtual Reality workshop), [UN]Common Design Project, PQ Studio Stage (the emerging and young stage with a selection of performances, concerts, parties and even a football tournament), as well as PQ Performance and PQ Kids. The unmanageable volume of content, the density of text, the length of videos, the opacity of curatorial approaches, the repetition of concepts and ideas, the overwhelming amount of work can be read as both an ambitious choice and a misstep of the festival's artistic direction.

The Performance Space Exhibition offers a limited vision of how architecture and architects can be relevant agents in the conception of performance spaces; in fact, very few of the projects in this PQ only document a

building project or a scenography. As the found spaces have almost disappeared from the festival, the transformable spaces inside a black box, very common typologies in previous editions, have vanished completely. Instead, the Performance Space Exhibition is a collection of multimedia installations, narratives that present a total of 35 spaces (a large number of them shown through video documentaries) – again numbers are more important than quality – dedicated to performance and cultural meeting spaces.

Acts of Assembly is the specific title of this section and has been curated by Andrew Filmer, Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at Aberystwyth University, UK, for whom “performance spaces are dynamic; they are places of gathering, event and appearance. Performance spaces are sites of encounter; where bodies, objects, materials and technologies meet. Performance spaces are sites of possibility; places for imagination, storytelling and world building. Performance spaces are resistant; stages for protest, for redress, for repair. Performance spaces are shared; they are places of communal attachment, memory and ownership.”

Despite the initial intentions, there is no clear approach on how to deal with the architectural space, its relationship with theatre and which spaces to select. Doubts in the approach that the artistic director and the curators of the PQ have been reflecting upon at least since the last few editions to find a place for architecture in the festival.

The exhibition features a sample of some theatres in Chile in the form of testimonies and memories. The reconstruction in virtual reality of the exhibition space of the National Gallery to see its “layers of history” by the Canadian delegation only partially achieves its goal. The story of the Mama Theatre with a happy ending: a theatre gutted by fire and rebuilt, with a stage so small that the performance space is literally the living room of a house and its immediate exterior spaces. The section continues to show the complexity of the renovations of historic theatres, which after twenty years have not yet reopened due to economic and political problems, but are presented at the festival emphasising “the importance of making models.”

In the same line of struggle with regulations, the Greeks present a video on how to “solve” the strict Greek rules, and propose a building without a roof in order to consider it an outdoor space and relax the rules enough to technically, legally and normatively achieve an open theatre space in an old factory. Also accompanying this section is a collection of photographs of *Ramlila* productions in New Delhi, India. The stages for these performances vary in size and complexity, but are temporary outdoor structures erected and dismantled after the performances.

If the feeling of the exhibition is a lack of ideas and risk in the proposals, and even a lack of fun, the Spanish delegation takes an intelligent and different approach in representing a large rock in Galicia as a meeting space of nature and tradition on the coast of Muxía, following the general leitmotif of the Spanish folklore delegation: *A pedra de abalar*; and the installation of a large yellow belly with a gigantic vagina, *Matria*, by the artist Marta Pazos, the womb as a mystical and ecclesiastical space entirely in yellow, which should be noted as relevant and that despite belonging to the Fragments II



Marta Pazos, *Matria*,
Trade Fair Palace
National Gallery, Prague
Quadrennial 2023.

section is perhaps the most interesting architectural space of the PQ. Nevertheless, as this could apply to the future of theatre space, it is left as an open question.

On leaving PQ2023 we would agree with Andrew Filmer's cautions and doubts when he says that "the question of what contemporary theatres or performance spaces might be like seems to be more complicated than ever, but also more open, and certainly more urgent."

