

Getting Weak

by Aaron Seward

“V enice Architecture Biennale! What does that have to do with Texas?” Believe it or not, I’ve heard that more than once regarding my recent trip to Italy for the preview of the International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. While a bit startling, it’s not an entirely surprising response. Most architects understand that theirs is an international profession, that architecture itself is a universal language with many dialects, and that an opportunity to be a part of the world’s most significant forum for architectural exchange is not something to be missed. On the other hand, ours is a country of increasing isolationism, which extends extraterritorial love to but a few draconian dictators, and that wants to build a wall against our southern neighbor. (Which reminds me of one of Gary Shandling’s last jokes: “They had a wall at the Alamo. And the Mexicans, they had, uh, what do you call them? Ladders!”)

But what *does* this year’s Biennale have to say to Texas? Hopefully, readers will find something of relevance in my initial roundup of national pavilions on *txmagazine.org* and in my review of the main exhibition on p. 9 of this issue. Here, I’d like to examine one exhibit in particular that speaks directly to issues we’re grappling with in our state — Estonia’s entry to the Biennale: “Weak Monument.”

The news cycle, quicksilver beast that it is, has moved on to other controversies, but we are still in a national kerfuffle over Confederate monuments. On June 4, the Dallas Morning News reported that in the last three years Texas has removed or changed 31 Confederate monuments — including flags; school, park, building, and street names; and statues — which is more than any other state. (Virginia was next on the list, with only 14.)

With that in mind, consider the following story from Weak Monument’s curatorial statement:

In 1923, in the Estonian village of Torma, a statue of a kneeling warrior was put up to confront the East. When the East came a few years later, the statue was turned to face the West, who then came and turned him around, followed by the East, once more, who made him face the West, before blowing him to pieces. In Estonia, monuments dance.



“Weak Monument,”
Estonian Pavilion at
the 16th International
Architectural Exhibition of
the Venice Biennale.

Gliding past the debate over the appropriateness of monument removal, the question becomes, what is left when monuments are gone? For curators Laura Linsi, Roland Reemaa, and Tadeas Riha, the answer is found in the everyday features of the Estonian built environment: the ubiquitous pavers found in public plazas, the hardened vertical circulation core of the typical Tallinn apartment building, a staircase in Hirvepark. Their alteration of the former baroque church Santa Maria Ausiliatrice transforms a strong monument into a weak one. It breaks down the interior’s hierarchy by raising the floor to the level of the altar and concealing the altar’s carved figures behind a skim-coated wall fronted by a park bench. The altar can still be viewed and appreciated by passing through a threshold in the wall, if that’s what you wish. It’s your choice. After all, this is a weak monument.

As it turns out, weak monuments are weirdly stronger than strong monuments. Strong monuments express one meaning by literally writing it in stone. In the case of Confederate monuments, that meaning invites a particular group into a

privileged position, while telling another one they’ll never get the upper hand. The inflexibility of this posture means that, when society changes, strong monuments are liable to be blown to smithereens, as in the case of the Torma soldier above. Weak monuments, meanwhile, are open. They can be fit to many different purposes and lend themselves to many different political interpretations, thus they are capable of weathering any number of changes in the social sphere. In the words of the curators, their meaning is implicit, and “what is only implicit cannot be openly questioned.”

Texas still has 68 Confederate monuments. Who’s to say how much longer they’ll last? In the meantime, we might as well start thinking about which weak monuments we value. I’ll offer up one from my little city: the Barton Springs Pool. How about you?