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idea journal

**fiction, fantasies, and fabulations:
imagining other interior worlds**

vol. 19, no. 01

2022

**the journal of IDEA: the interior design +
interior architecture educators association**



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this issue's provocation

While the world reels, reconfigures, and recovers from the drama and trauma of 2020, wishing to thwart the effects of grief and comprehend what was once incomprehensible, there is all good reason to turn our imagination to 'what ifs', dreams, and other speculations as an antidote to hopelessness. This issue, *Fictions, Fantasies, and Fabulations*, calls for contributions that consider the unlikely, improbable, or downright impossible in spatial design. In recent history, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations have offered productive opposition to the rampant instrumentality of pragmatism and functional planning. Their impact has instilled optimism, sparked alternative visions, and been sites of countless critiques of conformity and the status quo. Loosely defined impulses towards the unrealisable and the most illogical of things approached in the most logical of ways have led to unparalleled episodes of creativity in drawings, poems, and material production. From Piranesi, Peter Greenaway, Kurt Schwitters, Dora Maar, Hans Op de Beeck, Ursula Le Guinn, John Hejduk, to Daniel Libeskind, explorations of the impossible have led to new interpretative frontiers that move the limits of interiority and spatial practices. Lest we forget or become complacent with the contributory and often unrecognised impact of contemporary social media, advertisement, and technological surveillance that continues to shape interior worlds, experiences, and values. In many ways, there is as much focus on unpacking, making sense of, and disproving the dangerous impacts of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations as there is on setting the scene for dreams and magical realities.

This issue recognises the complex story of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial design, not as counter-productive forces, but as the necessary counter-balances that offer liberty from convention, propriety, and rational assumptions about behaviour, space, time, and material — the core elements of interior worlds. Far from retreating into solipsistic escapism, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations serve as crucial sites for speculative invention, futuring, and critical reflection. Resistant to the reductive inertia of pragmatism, these generative properties reign in that mercurial shadow world of meaning and value not directly associated with cause and effect.

This call for papers and projects is intended to frame an open examination and exploration of the fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial and interior practices. It prompts us to draw, write, perform, and record the critical edge of the unrealisable in an era that has literally experienced the limits of reason. As described by poet Franny Choi, there is no more time for poetry without stakes because 'people are literally dying'. There is no more time for creative practices that don't ask questions that we 'truly don't know the answer to'.⁰¹ Choi's sentiments air a sense of urgency for relevance as much as they point to the value and agency of poetic meaning and making in artistic, spatial, and interior practices.

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01 https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLYUdgQtOLXlc7HWIc3nBH7VNNvt5hDTA&v=iwoS--CB7k8&ab_channel=PBSNewsHour

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let it unfold — performative exhibitions: the living interior of the austrian pavilion at expo milan 2015

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abstract

This essay explores the relationship between fantasy, fabulation, and the performative through the lens of exhibition design in general and, in particular, expo pavilions. While studying the case of the Austrian pavilion visited by the author during Expo Milan 2015, it further examines the repertoire of the performative as a spatial fabulation indicator. Furthermore, the essay proposes a dramaturgy of analytical tools that interpret the exhibition space as a metaphor of a fantasy-oriented spatial production, and as an illustration of a performative interior architecture opening newer perspectives through which we may study and analyse interiors.

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keywords:

fabulation, exhibitions, performative, unscripted, unfolding, event

introduction

During the last decade, world expos have shifted boldly, in terms of spatial design, from silent monumental pavilions to performative ones. While past expos conceived brutalist monuments and massive concrete forms, recent expos presented ephemeral reversible high-tech structures. In the last two world expos (2015 in Milan and 2020 in Dubai), the architecture and the interior of the pavilions were closer to an event, a show, a stage set, or a fictional spatial performance. In a single pavilion, many performative characteristics could be detected, in which architecture and interior combined a variety of spatial qualities and exhibition types, such as narrative space, experiential interiors, reversible structures, flexible architecture, smart design, interactive interfaces, ephemeral installations, sensorial experiences, scenic and theatrical display of content, and participatory aspects. Thus, world expos have become an architectural wonderland and a festival experimenting with and exhibiting various contemporary trends in spatial design. The design of each pavilion assumes a high complexity level, in which a large amount of data and parameters contribute to shaping the form and the experience. Such shifts towards the performative and the fabulatory require newer scholarship guided by analytical and theoretical lenses.

Exhibitions are a metaphor of a new modernity, as suggested by the Italian architect and thinker Andrea Branzi.⁰¹ In fact, exhibitions in general, and especially expo pavilions, appear to act as illustrations and metaphors of a performative contemporaneity, or of a fluid and constantly changing and event-oriented modernity to which the disciplines of architecture, design, and interior are trying to respond. Exhibitions and pavilions can be predicting and depicting what is happening and what is going to happen in the world of spatial design. Therefore, analysing a pavilion as a 'space in performance' and a fantasy-oriented space gives us an opportunity to rehearse new conceptual and analytical tools for spatial design that can be used in education/theory and in practice. This text-based essay explores the concept(s) of performative fabulatory interiors through the case of the Austrian pavilion at Expo Milan 2015. The essay further dissects and analyses the pavilion's various performative aspects, in which the interior space is conceived as open for transformation and non-static; it acts as a performing theatrical milieu with an emphasis on the aesthetics of experience.

fantasy-oriented space conception

Creating magical realities is a speciality of exhibition design. It is a discipline that translates fantasies, temporary realities, illusions, interior scale wonderlands, phenomenological events, and ephemeral spatial performances. Exhibitions and pavilions are territories for testing the unrealisable and the unusual boundaries of

interior, exterior, installation, scenography, illusion, reality, and art. In such a performative–atmospheric turn, surreal, fantastic, and performative spaces are experimental. Sylvia Lavin, a Professor of History and Theory of Architecture at Princeton University, indicates that the performative liberates spatial practices from the limitations imposed by disciplinarity, and that with the performative, architecture allows itself to explore new methods and tools.⁰²

In fact, these concepts (spatial qualities) drive us to fantasise about spaces designed to be open and flexible, where form, programme, and function are no longer determining factors. The form in this scenario is following a desired fantasy (an experience or a performance), which recalls Bohme Gernot's statement that spaces affect people through the atmospheres; via its atmosphere, a person experiences their space.⁰³ A perceiving subject's body is invaded and penetrated by the atmosphere within which it is immersed. It is the sensation of being transformed or transported into another world.⁰⁴ Hence, form is no longer a priority. The pavilion is a metaphor for a shift from the design of space towards the design of experience.

Exhibition design is usually considered an act of creative contextualisation and re-contextualisation of content, especially in the case of immaterial exhibitions where the emphasis on the spatial performance compensates for the absence of objects. When the exhibition space is no longer dedicated to objects and their aura,

it becomes dedicated for spatial performances, which denotes a shift from philosopher, cultural critic, and essayist Walter Benjamin's aura to pioneer of German ecocriticism Gernot Böhme's atmosphere.⁰⁵ This means that when staging an exhibition, the priority is given to the creation of a spatial experience that communicates a certain content related to the exhibits. In this case, the exhibition becomes an opportunity to stage an atmosphere.⁰⁶ This approach opposes the traditional display approach that glorifies an object and dramatises an aura around it while disregarding the holistic creation of a spatial experience in a museum or an exhibition space. The communication of the immaterial content is then manifested through the spatial experience that results from performative and fabulatory tools reflected in the co-presence of various features and the layering of experiences and encounters with space-content, content-visitors, and space-visitors. The emergence of such characteristics in spatial design discourses underlines the shift from the design of space towards the design of experience where the aesthetic of perceiving becomes the aesthetic of experiencing.⁰⁷ The 'what to experience' is therefore more emphasised than the 'what to see'; the 'what to experience' becomes the driving force of the spatial conception process. A performance-oriented creation of space becomes a tool for fantasy creation and fabulisation of the exhibition spaces that propels towards a semi-dematerialisation of the space.

performative repertoire

In spatial discourse, performative is characterised by a broad range of interpretations and uses. It represents an interest in social and human sciences, and literature in the performance of the inanimate on humans, and an approach that recognises space as having qualities that can be shaped.⁰⁸ While 'performative' has been related to the interest in designing a milieu or a living environment,⁰⁹ more recent contemporary texts have expanded the dimensions of the performative. Portuguese architect, curator, and writer Pedro Gadanho indicates a Performative Turn in architecture as the influence of performance on other disciplines including architecture.¹⁰ The Performative Turn comprises spatial practices being inspired by the world of performance while borrowing new performative dynamics and mechanisms such as the participatory, the ephemeral spatial practices, the flexible structure, the emphasis on the scenic and the spectacular, and the emphasis on the experience.¹¹ For David Leatherbarrow, Professor of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design, the term Performative Architecture describes architectures belonging to dynamic environments, indicating a shift in architectural theory, from what the building is to what it does.¹² Related to scripted and unscripted events, the performative character refers to how architecture is productive beyond the planned programme as a play between intentionality and non-intentionality.¹³

The performative project, as described by Italian architect and scholar Valentina Signore, is able to adjust itself for the unscripted by being open and flexible. It is based on the concept of open form, in which the project is designed to be open for transformations, in contrast to the idea of definitive perfect form where the form and the programme are pre-defined.¹⁴ The performative project 'accepts uncertainty, incompleteness, and openness to events and users, urban and interior improvisations, responding to a contemporary complex and changing context.'¹⁵ With flexible mechanisms instead of linear ones,¹⁶ the performative is transformative; it can restructure spatial and social order by impacting both audience and context.¹⁷ Performative refers to scenic and theatrical potentials in spatial situations;¹⁸ it refers to the ability of the space to communicate and spatial performance acts as a communication medium.¹⁹ This essay used the above attributes of what constitutes performative as a benchmark for challenging interior spatial boundaries and to reflect a fantasy-oriented vision of a mutating living space.

a living interior: a space in performance

The following case study considers a 2015 expo pavilion that was designed to be an autonomous micro-climate, inclusive of scenic and narrative aspects, experiential features, sensorial emphasis, metamorphic evolutionary spatial qualities, and dimensions

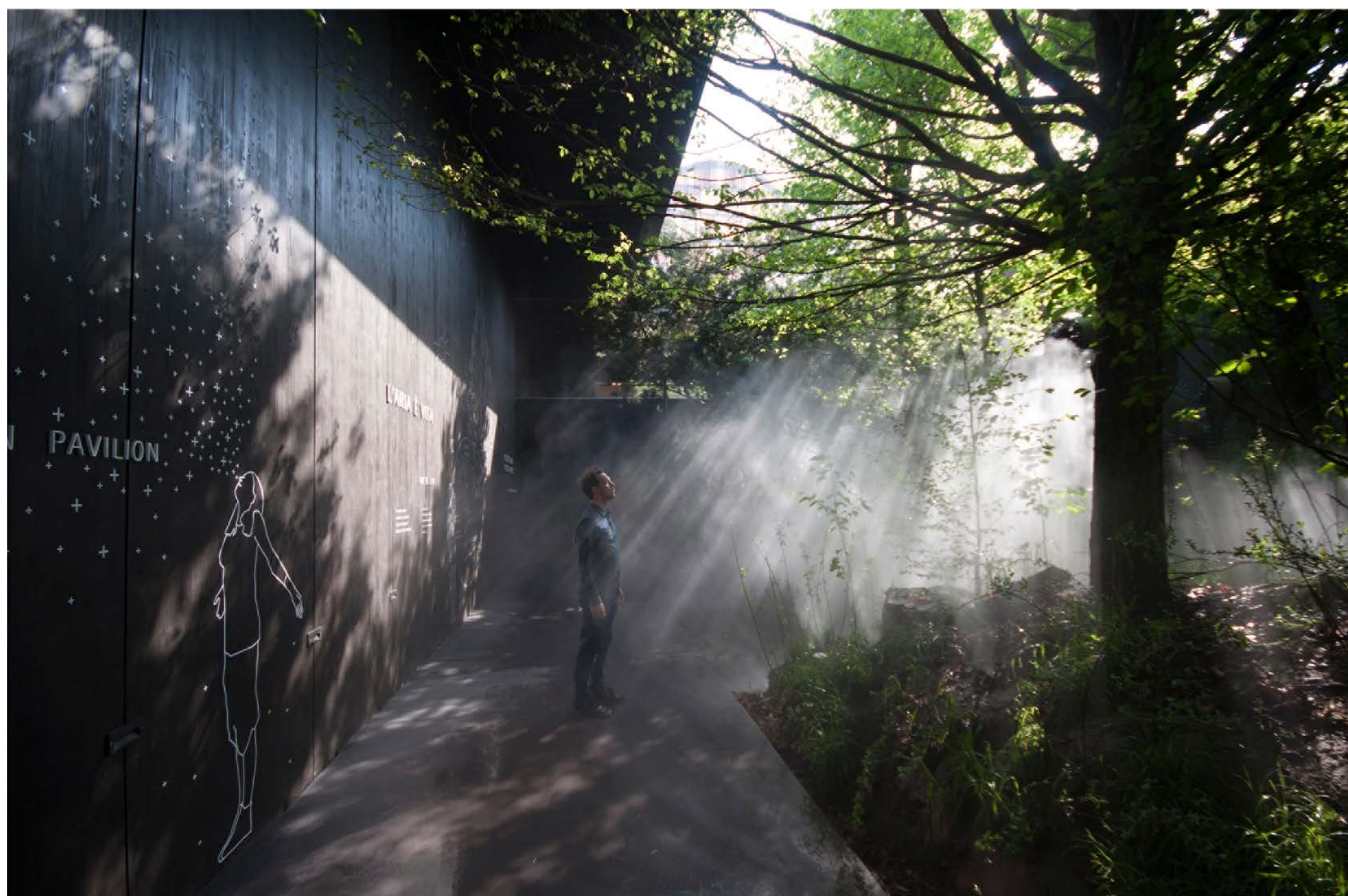
of a simulated reality. This pavilion was a representation of what a performance-oriented space could be. The project was a mini-Austrian forest implemented inside a magical wooden curiosity box. It was designed by team.breathe.austria led by Professor Klaus K. Loenhardt and his studio terrain: integral designs BDA. Their study looked for evidence of fabulation within the living interior, how it challenged the definitions and boundaries of what interior space is, and how the conception of interior atmosphere was indebted to temporal conditions. The pavilion design was guided by an imagined and fantasised experience, and the form it takes is conceived to follow and fulfil that performance. The fabulousness of a desired spatial experience,

with all its material and immaterial qualities such as atmosphere, emotions, time-based experience, and sensoriality grounds the design process even in its early stages.

*The pavilion was developed by the interdisciplinary project group team.breathe.austria of the Institute for Architecture and Landscape at TU Graz, under the direction of architect, landscape architect, and university professor Klaus K. Loenhardt. It involved: Terrain: Integral Designs BDA — Prof. Klaus K Loenhardt With Agency in Biosphere — Markus Jeschaunig Hohensinn Architektur ZT GmbH — Karlheinz Boiger LANDLAB, i_a&l, TU-Graz — Andreas Goritschnig und Bernhard König Lendlabor Graz — Anna Resch und Lisa Enzenhofer See breatheaustria.at

Figures 01 & 02.

The Austrian Pavilion from the interior and the exterior. A pavilion conceived as a forest in a wooden box. 2015 © team.breathe.austria/terrain: integral designs.

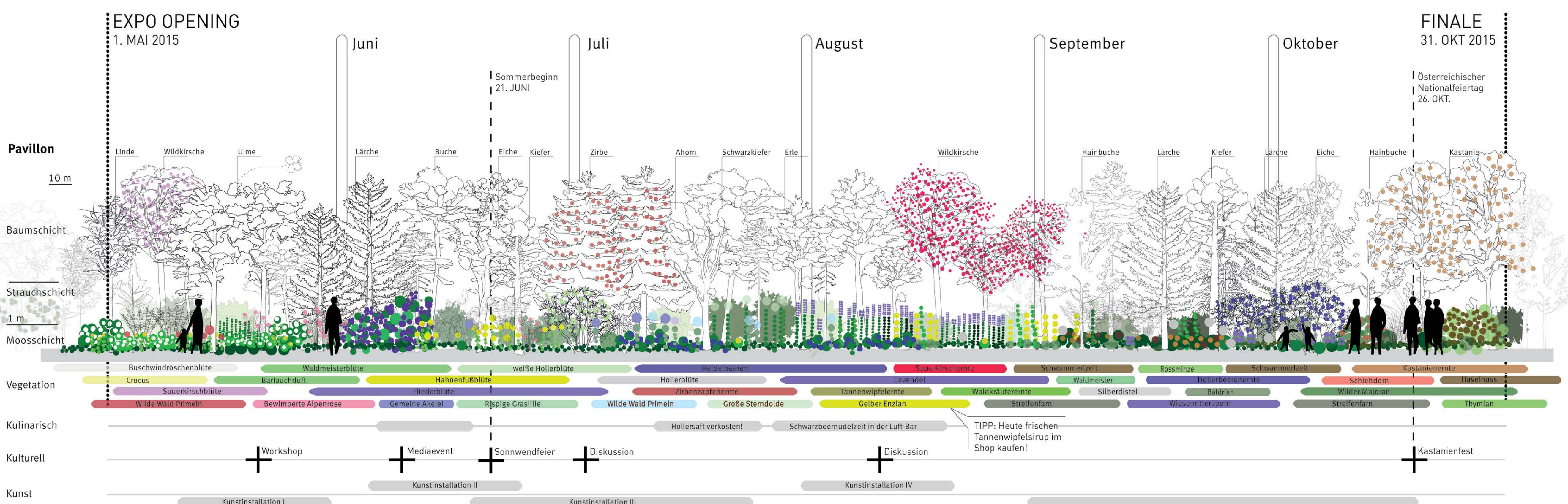


The pavilion Breathe.Austria was constructed by architectural and vegetal elements. It relied on bio-geo-natural processes as hybrid tools. The pavilion was an attempt to recreate the interior of an Austrian forest with its decreasing temperatures and increasing humidity. It created an experience one had when moving towards its centre that included Austrian bio-diverse vegetation and unique Austrian scents for which the design team used devices and mechanisms to optimise the desired performance of a forest including modifying temperature and humidity levels, and air flow.²⁰ The interior architecture of the pavilion was constructed mostly from living elements (trees and plants) that grow and change over time. These design elements

made time a significant factor within the design and construction process. The mini forest was conceived to be ready with a sufficient level of growth immediately before the opening of the expo. However, the fact that the mini-forest kept growing and evolving during the entire expo period of six months had a dramatic impact on visitor experience. As the space evolved, the boundaries between a stable form/space and a fluid/living space were challenged. We also noted an illusionary fictive factor: the simulated mini forest performed an illusion of being transported to a fictive forest in a parallel world/reality to the crowded expo.

Figure 03.

A planting timeline that demonstrates the evolution of the vegetation through the months of the expo and the transformation of the pavilion. 2015 © team.breathe.austria/terrain: integral designs.



This project also embedded an event-characterisation of the space, which is manifested in its lifetime as an ephemeral spatial event, a living architecture performing for the visitors: the Before, the During, the Unfolding, and the After.²¹ The changes in the growth and the density of the vegetation; the unexpected gradual attraction of birds, insects, and lizards; the dismantling of the pavilion; the distribution of the trees to the municipality of Milan were all parts of this spatial event's timeline, with scripted and unscripted happenings. With no pre-testing of the pavilion, it was an experiment waiting to unfold. This case study allowed us to examine the concept of spatial fabulation of a living and performative interior through the following key concepts aligned with repertoire of the performative: left to unfold, the event-character, fluid interior, open-form, anticipatory and improvisatory design, scripted and unscripted performances, and form follows performance.

pavilions as performative architectures

One of the uses of the term 'performance' in architecture goes back to the impact of the scientific developments on architecture, in particular biology, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards and the rise of the notions of environment and milieu. It also goes back to 'systems theory' in the twentieth century, the complex systems-engineering of the 1960s, and the design of contained life or eco-systems, where these theories required a more complex approach to design and engineering.²² The Austrian pavilion relates to those aspects of 'complex systems'



Figure 04.

The interior of the pavilion as a simulation of an Austrian forest. 2015 © terrain: integral designs/ Simon Oberhofer.

and to the interest to design a 'performing milieu,' a 'space in performance.'²³ The pavilion translates the philosophy of 'form follows content' elaborated by the German exhibition designer Uwe Brueckner.²⁴ We re-interpret that philosophy as 'form follows performance' in keeping with Brueckner's own elaboration on the shift in exhibitions design from an aesthetic of perceiving towards the aesthetic of experiencing.²⁵ Memory design and experience design are also manifested within the aim to create a fabulated spatial experience engraved in visitors' memory. These dimensions of the performative character are detected in the openness of the interior, where the interior is a metamorphic evolutionary space open for the unscripted improvisation of the natural elements that constitute it. This pavilion is a significant representation of what a fantasy-oriented spatial design may be, or what a performance-oriented space may mean. The form of the pavilion follows its performativity as an Austrian forest.

The architect Klaus K. Loenhardt expresses that:

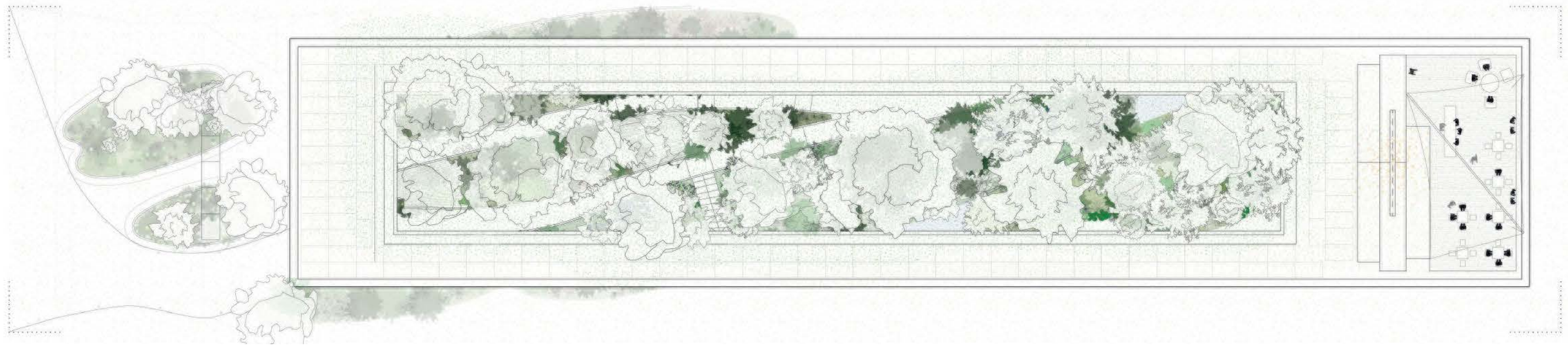
The pavilion forms a frame around a generous vegetation body and acts as a vessel for the performance of the internal landscape [...] The central element is a dense Austrian forest brought together with technical elements in order to create a breathing microclimate. With this oxygen and carbon-producing core, the pavilion becomes an air generating station [...] without conventional air conditioning.²⁶

The designers of the exhibition asked: How does the Austrian forest perform? As explained by the Austrian architect, when people visit an Austrian forest, the more they move toward its centre, the lower the temperature, the greater the humidity, and, simultaneously, the more intense the smells, and the types of vegetation change.²⁷



Figure 05.

Floor plan of the pavilion demonstrating the pavilion conceived as a mini forest inside a box. 2015 © team.breathe.austria/terrain: integral designs.

**Figure 06:**

Top view of the pavilion demonstrating the pavilion conceived as a mini forest inside a box. 2015 © team.breathe.austria/terrain: integral designs.

Moreover, this project expresses the concept of performative within the design and the construction process. The architecture of the pavilion is constructed from living elements (trees and plants). These elements grow and change, which is an important factor considered earlier in the process. The mini-forest was conceived to be ready, and with a sufficient level of growth, immediately before the expo opening. However, it would keep growing and evolving during the six-month expo period. Strategising the time factor was crucial in the design process in order to emphasise its performative qualities. It is a living architecture that is performing. The pavilion was named Breathe.Austria, a title emphasising the experiential factor, the 'experiencing' and the 'sensorial' aspects of the pavilion and its architecture. The space was hybrid as it was constructed using architectural and vegetal elements; however, it relied on bio/geo-natural processes along

with technical devices and mechanisms to achieve and optimise the atmospherically desired performance of a forest: the desired temperatures, the different humidity levels, and the air flows. Adequate trees were planted to provide oxygen for up to 1800 people. The main message of the Austrian pavilion, in relation to the theme of the expo, was to highlight the importance of oxygen and cooling air to the environment. The design team team.breathe.austria designed the space as a mini-forest that combines natural cooling systems instead of artificial air conditioning, to create its own microclimate.

**Above, Figure 07:**

Section of the pavilion.

2015 © team.breathe.austria/
terrain: integral designs.**Below, Figure 08:**

Elevation of the pavilion.

2015 © team.breathe.austria/
terrain: integral designs.

During a presentation at the Politecnico di Milano prior to the inauguration of the Expo and before the pavilion construction, we asked the architect if the design had been tested and experimented on a smaller scale in a laboratory, in a way to guarantee the results and the desired performance of the pavilion. The architect confirmed there was no pre-testing or experimentation of the pavilion.²⁸ Thus, the making of the pavilion was an experiment that unfolded along with all the scripted and unscripted happenings, which makes the design and the making process a testing and a learning process. Another aspect of a fantasy-oriented conception of space and of a performative architecture can

be found in the 'narrative' and the 'interactive' aspects inside the pavilion. Visitors walking through the different sensorial experiences were influenced by its changing topography. London-based writer, editor, and speaker Amy Fearson described the pavilion:

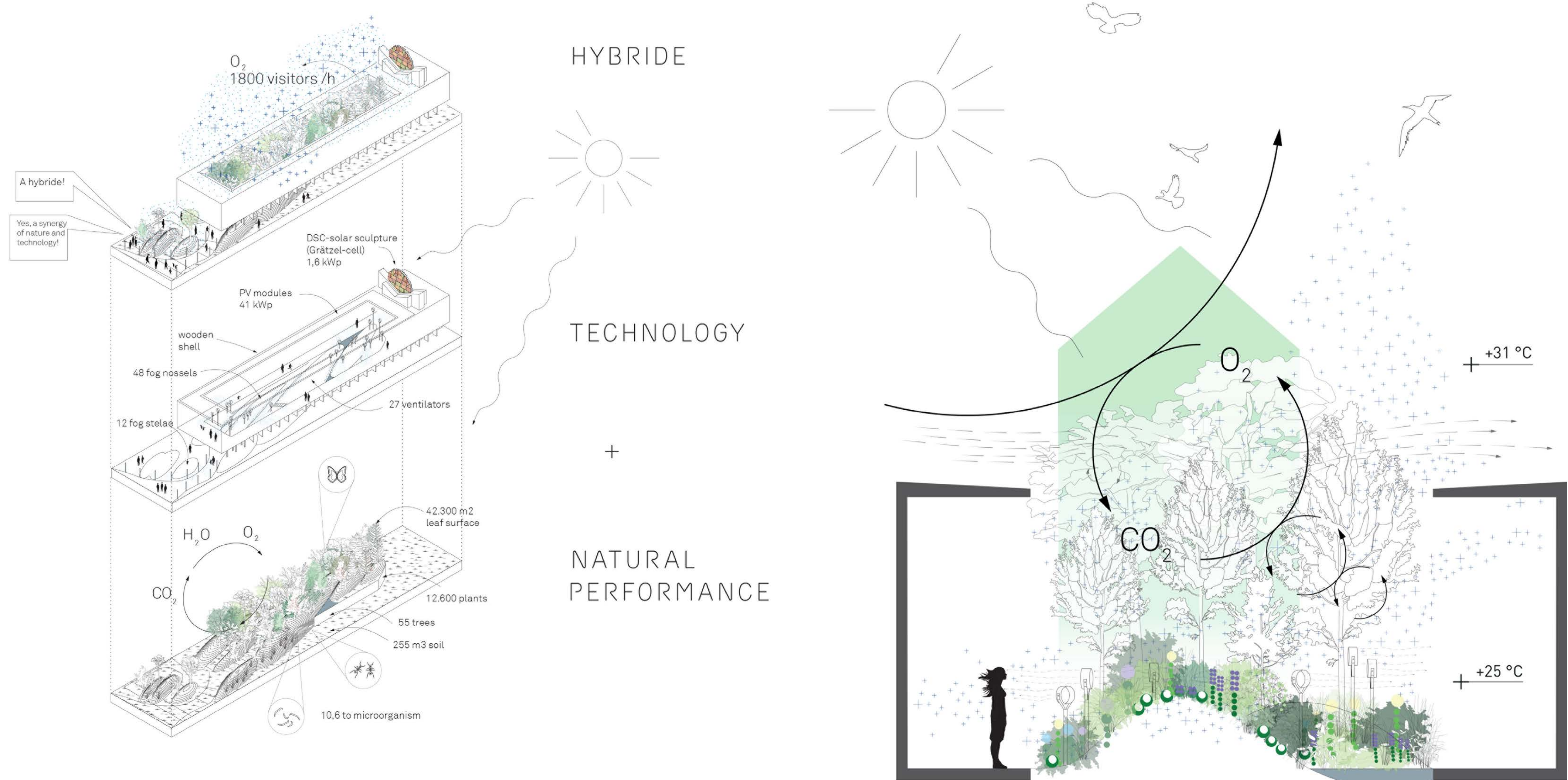
A snaking pathway leads into the base of the timber structure, which is raised off the ground on concrete feet. Inside, trees and bushy plants cover the majority of the exhibition space and are engulfed by clouds of mist [...] Illuminated letters spell out the word BREATHE across the path. As visitors get further inside, some of the letters

disappear from sight, and those left over spell out the word EAT. This was intended to suggest a link between the content of the pavilion and the theme of the expo, which is Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life [...] The pathway climbs gently up to meet the floor level of the pavilion [...] Digital microscopes dotted around the perimeter allow visitors to closely inspect and identify the different plants and flowers featured. There are also a series of transparent cylinders containing items including

feathers and fabrics. As visitors press down on handles, air is pushed into the containers, causing the contents to float upward.²⁹

An *ArchDaily* article detailed the following:

The pavilion's entire floor area is densely planted with 12 Austrian forest ecotypes, ranging from mosses and shrubs to towering, 12-metre trees. In a natural, water-rich forest, cooling occurs through evapotranspiration, meaning



Figures 09 & 10. Schematics and conceptual sheets demonstrating the combination of natural and artificial solutions to replicate the atmosphere of an Austrian forest. 2015 © team.breathe.austria/terrain: integral designs.

the evaporation of water from flora and fauna as well as from the soil and water surface [...] the evaporative cooling process is technically augmented. While the pavilion surface area is only 560 m², thermodynamic high-pressure misting nozzles are used to activate the total evaporation surface of the pavilion vegetation, amounting to around 43,000 m² [...] Breathe.Austria succeeds in creating a unique climate zone within the pavilion [...] The effective interplay between nature and technology cools the interior space by 5 to 7° C and

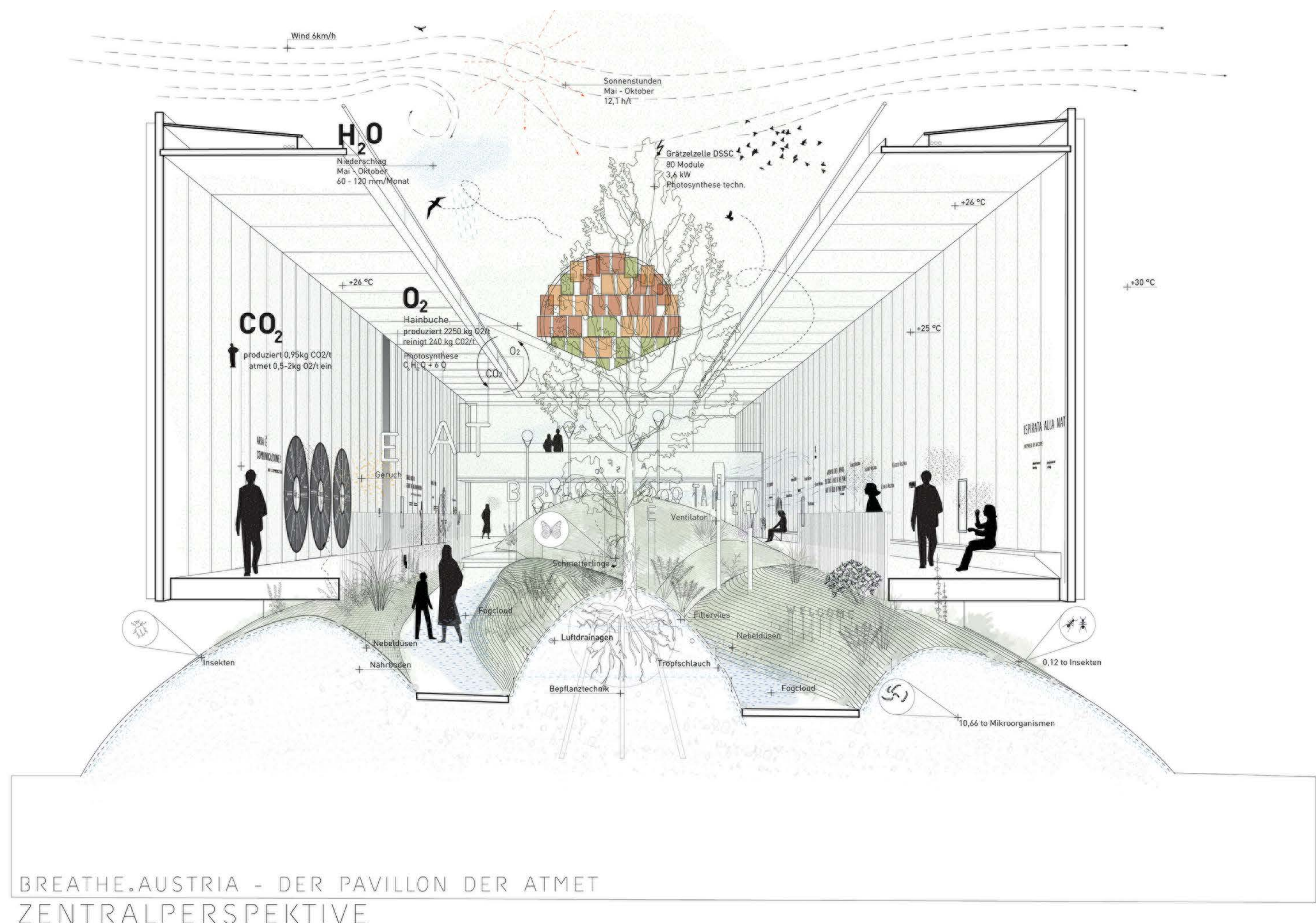
supplants conventional air conditioning. The pavilion produces 62.5 kg/h of oxygen – enough for 1,800 visitors. On its surface area of 560 m², Breathe. Austria achieves the equivalent of a much larger, 3-hectare natural forest. The pavilion serves as a breathing “photosynthesis collector” [...].³⁰

The Austrian pavilion is described as an experiential space technology, where natural diversity and climatic activations collaborate and intersect.³¹

Figure 11.

Interior performance and conceptual schematics.

2015 © team.breathe.austria/
terrain: integral designs.



‘fabulatory’-oriented design: implications

Contemporary exhibitions spaces are tending to be more fantasy- and fabulation-oriented and increasingly performative driven. For the Italian architect and exhibition designer Italo Rota, the ‘pedagogical role of exhibitions is finished. Now it is about a simple evocative and emotional role.’³² The performative qualities of the exhibition space dominate all other characters, as they keep experimenting with fantasy-evocative, event-oriented, and performative-spectacular spatial qualities that are usually the result of hybrid spatial features and an imagination for a fantasy space. Director of Theatre for Social Change Pam Locker highlights that ‘the theatrical opportunities borrowed from multimedia, sound, lighting design and a range of other exhibition technologies, create interesting opportunities for storytelling through performance.’³³ The abundance of new types of museums and exhibitions is leading to constant innovations in exhibition methods, especially with the use of new types of materials and the emergence of immateriality in exhibition design.³⁴ Performance, hybrid, flexible, narrative, and interactive are spatial concepts that emerged with the rise of exhibitions that have unusual and challenging content that require creative hybrid spatial strategies in the exhibition spaces. Exhibitions are becoming highly hybrid, performative, and multitasking, where a large variety of tools are employed to make a space perform and communicate/exhibit content in a fantasy

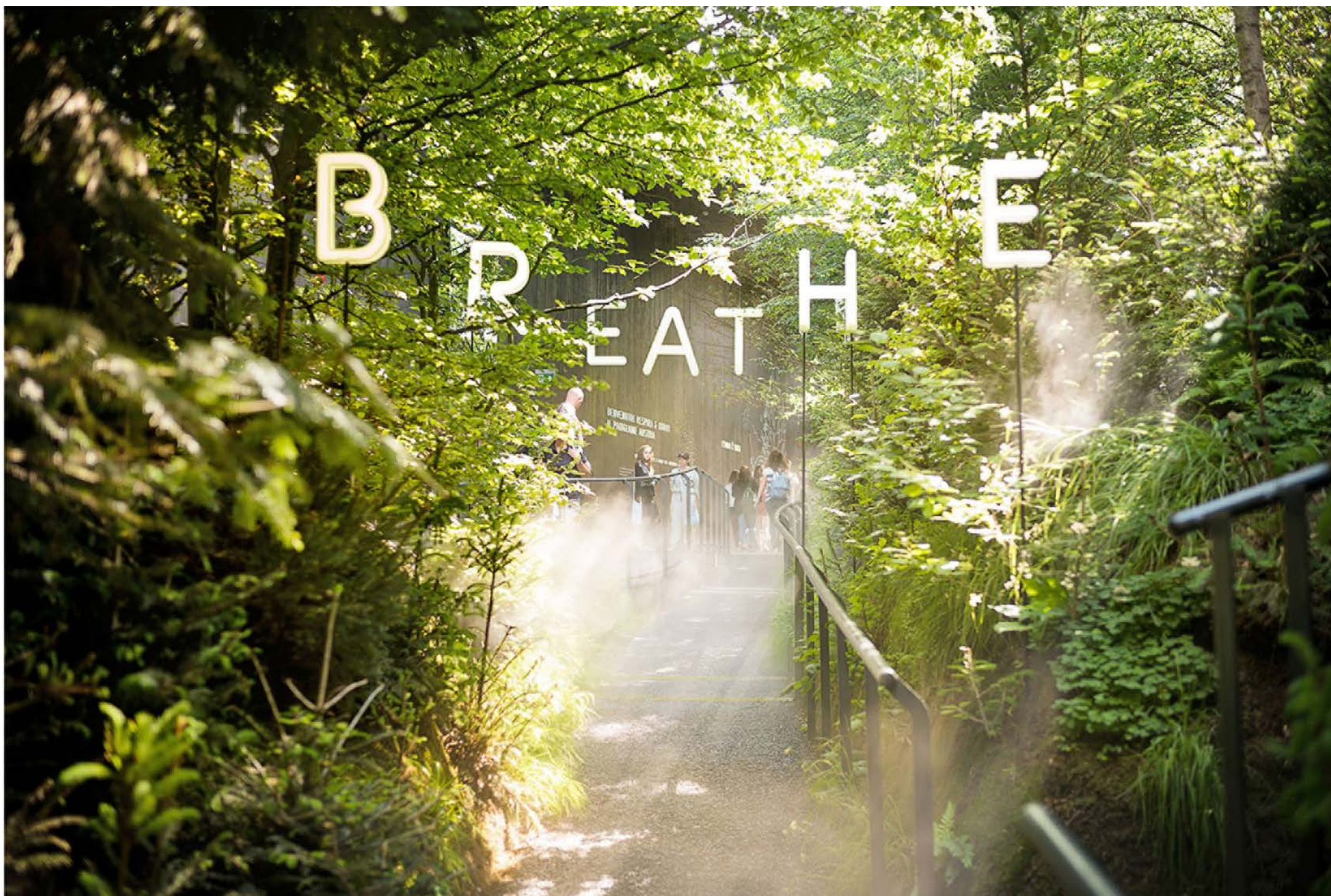
space where a fusion is conceived between the interior and the exterior, the static and the metamorphic, the virtual and the physical.

The implication of those tendencies in exhibition design and, in particular, expos, is, as described by Lavin, that spaces come to life only when the lights are on.³⁵ The pavilions are becoming black boxes that only come to life when the show is on. They are appearing as black boxes waiting to be filled with screenings and projections and scheduled shows. Consequently, the performative fabulation becomes better exercised on us only when visiting the pavilions at night, or when the events and the shining lights are on, while visiting the expo during the day, and, outside the scheduled events, enable us to experience the dry side of the spatial realities including the raw structural skeletons of the pavilions.

Despite its inevitable temporariness and its quasi-event conception, the Austrian Pavilion represented the opposite to those trends; it exercised a unique immersive spatial performance and spatial fabulation through minimum use of technology, screens, smart devices, and lights.

the pavilion as a metaphor

In his famous essay ‘Exhibition Design as Metaphor of a New Modernity’, Founder of Archizoom Associati and Professor at the Polytechnic University of Milan, Andrea Branzi stated:



Figures 12 & 13.
Interior of the pavilion.
2015 © terrain: integral designs/
Marc Lin.

In the category of the design of displays [...] there are in fact all the genetic elements typical of a new modernity, which we shall call "light" and "diffuse" [...] A modernity characterized by the design of flexible or temporary environmental micro-systems, architectural subsystems.³⁶

In fact, the practice of exhibition design has always been a field where designers have tested and forecasted newer trends of spatial qualities. In this regard, Branzi's predictions are literally happening. The spatial design practices are increasingly allowing unusual spatial systems that are metamorphic and open for the continual changes in how we inhabit and use our spaces. Unplanned functions and uses may emerge and take place in our spaces, which challenge their original spatial qualities

and programme. A pavilion can be used as an illustration of a performative/fantasy-oriented interior architecture. It is a rehearsal of a performative dramaturgy, or an analysis based on performative criteria. Moreover, it is an opportunity to reflect on the concepts of performative and fabulation within the design process that shall be instrumentalised as tools that can be used in education and practice. Such analytical tools must be experiential and based on the concepts of openness, performative, flexibility, and temporality. Elaborating such analytical dramaturgical tools is necessary to study interiors as a living malleable spatial creature capable of unfolding and evolving through its lifetime, and capable of fulfilling and performing various scenographic, theatrical, metaphorical, and communicative missions, while examining a fabulatory spatial conception and a performance-driven design process.

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