



## Russian Pavilion at 2018 Venice Biennale. Next stop Station Russia



*At the next Architecture Biennale, the Russian pavilion will present “Station Russia”, a particular interpretation of the “Freespace” theme proposed by the general curators, Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara, a theme that in this case will become an “empty and huge space”. In the vision of **Semyon Mikhailovsky** (on the left), the exhibit’s curator, the protagonist is in fact the immense territory of Russia,*

*criss-crossed as it is by the railway lines allowing people to move but, above all, to see and appreciate it. Trains and stations, lines and landscapes are therefore the core elements of the narrative framework, which obviously does not detract from the architectural aspect of such infrastructure. Semyon Mikhailovsky is the Rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, a member of the Russian President’s Council for Art and Culture, a curator and commissioner of*

*three previous pavilions in Venice for both Art (2017) and Architecture (2014, 2016) and a great friend of Italian culture and our country.*

**The Russian pavilion was one of the first national pavilions to be inaugurated in the Biennale Gardens at the beginning of last century. This bears witness to the profound relationship between Italy and Russia in history, but above all a special relationship with Venice. How would you describe this long history and what is your relationship with Venice?**

There has always been a relationship between Russia and Italy, including between our Fine Arts Academies. Russians love Italians and Italians love Russians. I have never found an Italian who spoke ill of Russia and its culture and it would be surprised if there was one.

Regarding our Fine Arts Academies, Russian students were sent to study in Italy from the mid 18th century to become painters. Italian nature and culture have influenced Russian art. The Russian pavilion was built before the outbreak of the First World War (1913): with a very good, accessible location and a terrace overlooking the lagoon, the whole pavilion works perfectly, with its overhead light like in a museum. Although there are now many architecture exhibitions around the world, the one in Venice is still the best, attracting the best artists and the most interesting architects who come here to exhibit their work and themselves. This is why the Biennale is important for us: first because Venice is in Italy and then because of the important relationship between Italy and Russia. Italy has nurtured Russia by training its students in the past and, even today, our students come to Italy: this is why the Biennale has a historical significance.

Ours is a national pavilion and our mission is to present our achievements to the world in a context in which Russia is close to Japan, Germany, France, Great Britain, the United States. This is why we have a great responsibility to our country and our achievements. The first time I arrived in Venice I looked out into Piazza San Marco and I could not believe this was happening to me: I knew the square only from photographs and paintings. That day a gigantic cruise ship passed while I was near Palazzo Ducale and the festively illuminated ship left a considerable impression. Born and bred in St. Petersburg, I draw my strongest impressions from the presence of water and its smell. Arriving at Venice airport, the smell of the lagoon never fails to make its mark on me. St. Petersburg and Venice have nothing in common except water. From an architectural point of view it is not true that St. Petersburg is the Venice of the North: they are

two different cities. For me all cities on the water or by the sea are interesting. I like the smell of Venice: it's fantastic. I don't understand why people ask how can anyone live here.

**How does Russia view this year's "Freespace" theme?**

For us Freespace is the gigantic physical space of Russia: it is one of the characteristics of our country, we have a vast territory. This is our problem, but also our resource. The whole country is crossed by arteries represented by the railway lines allowing people to move, which they do in continuation. People live near the railway lines, which therefore become life lines. Our problem is to cover the distances. This is how we're interpreting the theme, even if it doesn't match 100% with what the curators mean. For us, open space is a constant, if not difficult, presence. For us, space is our country.

**We know that the Russian pavilion will focus on the type of station as a place of departure and arrival for covering long distances. Can you give us a preview of "Station Russia"?**

The pavilion has been built on the design of the engineer Alexei Shchusev who also designed Kazan station in Moscow: there is a certain similarity between the two architectures. Shchusev uses traditional Russian decorative motifs and there is a formal connection with the pavilion. The main themes will be railways that connect people and the problem of great distances. The first room will be dedicated to geography: we will recount the scale of the country, the time zones that cross it and the vastness of the territory through infographics with maps.

The second room will be inspired by a railway depot in which architectural designs of stations from the 19th century to present will be shown.

Another room will display a model of Pavlosvsk station in St. Petersburg, the first station with a music room where Strauss also played. The theme is memory. There will be photos and videos of the people you meet and greet at stations, to examine such locations in terms of emotional response.

There will be three other exhibits. In the first, Studio 44 will present Sochi station, inspired by the shape of a bird; the second is dedicated to Nicolaj Shumakov who has designed a high-speed line linking Moscow to Kazan (part of the new Silk Road), along which the stations of Chelyabinsk, Petuski, Kazan and Nizhny Novgorod will be built. Then there is the waiting room. An artist will create graffiti, like that seen on railroad fencing in every city: all the walls will

therefore be very colourful. This space will exhibit an artist's proposal for Moscow's Komsomol'skaya square surrounding three stations (Leningradsky, Yaroslavsky, Kazansky). Lastly, on the ground floor there will be a luggage room where even railway-related artefacts will be displayed. In the final room there will be a large screen showing a video of someone who travels from Moscow to Vladivostok to visit his relatives: from the window he sees the infinite landscape of our great country. Opposite the screen will be displayed the design of the Moscow-Vladivostok line. From the window you will see the ice crystals and the winter whiteness of the infinite space. From here we will go out into the summer of the Biennale Gardens. The whole pavilion will be full of awareness of the great scale of the country: this theme is of great importance for us, for whom it has always been important to communicate not only in terms of the technical and architectural aspects, but also in terms of sensations. What differentiates the Russian pavilion from others is the fact that we always try to instil great energy in the public. Having grown up "in the volcano of our history", we register changes in the earth and we are used to discussing very serious issues, which we are delighted to do in an international context.

**Finally, can you give us an idea of the expectations and objectives that you intend to pursue with this participation in the next Architecture Biennale and, if so, what will be your relationships and synergies with other participating countries?**

We make friends with all the pavilion curators at the Biennale. Even if there are problems in politics, we all have a friendly and collaborative relationship at the Biennale. We exchange visits with the nearby Japanese pavilion for example. Thanks to these friendships, the atmosphere of the Biennale helps countries to collaborate with one other and create a positive atmosphere. Even if some win prizes and others do not - we received a special mention once (in 2012) - this is not the most important problem. The most important prize for us is to receive the public's attention and to get positive feedback.

*(Russian translation Dariia Maksimova)*

**About Author**



### [Alessandro Colombo](#)

Nato a Milano (1963), dove si laurea in architettura al Politecnico nel 1987. Nel 1989 inizia il sodalizio con Pierluigi Cerri presso la Gregotti Associati International. Nel 1991 vince il Major of Osaka City Prize con il progetto: "Terra: istruzioni per l'uso". Con Bruno Morassutti partecipa a concorsi internazionali di architettura ove ottiene riconoscimenti. Nel 1998 è socio fondatore dello Studio Cerri & Associati, di Terra e di Studio Cerri Associati Engineering. Nel 2004 vince il concorso internazionale per il restauro e la trasformazione della Villa Reale di Monza e il Compasso d'oro per il sistema di tavoli da ufficio Naòs System, Unifor. È docente a contratto presso il Politecnico di Milano e presso il Master in Exhibition Design IDEA, di cui è membro del board. Su incarico del Politecnico di Milano cura il progetto per il Coffee Cluster presso l'Expo 2015

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