The 14th Architecture Biennale in Venice is best tackled in bite-sized chunks. It’s vast and expansive – both in theme and scale. And it’s really two discrete exhibitions. In the overarching theme, Fundamentals: elements of architecture curator Rem Koolhaas brings us back to basics with a focus on ‘fundamentals’ – doors, ceilings, stairs, windows and so on; an eclectic array that in the main, looks back at what was, to what is. From a Roman chariot latrine to a wi-fi enabled toilet some displays have elements of surprise while others have the feel of a trade show.

Retrospection is also explored in Absorbing Modernity 1914 – 2014, inviting 65 countries to respond to the question of whether modernity has produced a universal architectural language – the international style – resulting in the erasure of national characteristics. What was once local and specific is now global. At least these are the assumptions put into question.

A summary of world architecture of the last 100 years is a big endeavour and it’s produced a range of national responses, varying from the playful, the intellectual to the mundane. Many countries critique modernity’s utopian project, with France and Britain expressing this through popular culture. This made for an engaging experience. At the centre of France’s pavilion is a 1:10 model of Villa Arpel the high-tech modernist house in Jacques Tati’s 1958 film Mon Oncle, which ridicules the advent of timesaving electronic gadgetry. Our attention is directed to the question looming behind the model, ‘Object of Desire or Machine of Ridicule?’ The growth of the French banlieue is critiqued in a visually arresting manner that invites contemplation.

A Clockwork Jerusalem, referencing Kubrick’s film Clockwork Orange, exhibits a grand sweep of British architectural and visual culture from William Morris to David Hockey. The pavilion, with a 60s psychedelic look features a striking pink and earth mound sitting in the
middle of a panorama of British architectural styles. But what stands out is Britain’s utopian efforts at public housing which resulted in those grim council estates, spawning a magnitude of social problems, while also solving many of them. We are reminded of this with reference Clockwork Orange, and its droogs (thugs).

The German pavilion, somewhat playfully, features a full-scale reconstruction of part of the Chancellor’s bungalow built in Bonn in 1964. Its sleek, low modernist lines sit in contrast with the pavilion itself, a grand third Reich statement remodeled in 1938. This exhibition is refreshingly spare of textual references, the house speaks for itself.

Appearing to lack a coherent Japanese aesthetic, the Japan pavilion includes a mishmash of wooden pallets and crates, construction bunting, handwritten notes and models. The aim is to show how architects challenged modernism during the 1970s recession, a significant period in redefining Japanese architecture. Copious amounts of real drawings, models and notes require time and dedication to absorb but are gems for architectural enthusiasts.

Israel’s Urb Urb critiques suburban housing sprawl in a striking way. Four enormous ‘print machines’ are programmed to trace a series of plans in the sand spread across the pavilion’s floor, beginning with Israel’s master plan in 1949. Intended as an ‘abstraction of reality’ we can interpret what it might mean for Israel’s expanding settlements.

The Australian contribution resides in a temporary tent structure while the existing pavilion undergoes a major renovation. Its displays are fittingly digital, downloadable as a series of apps. The exhibition looks at buildings that didn’t make it to construction and although there’s been some criticism of this, it brings an interesting and appropriate twist to the theme.

With its broad focus and exploration of what architecture has lost and retained through globalization, the
exhibition elides a compelling concern of contemporary architecture: what lessons have we learnt from the past? And how might an architecture of the future promote the health of the planet? Perhaps Koolhaas wanted to avoid this question explicitly. He’s spoken about the empty rhetoric of sustainability and its politicization, a view hard to ignore in a world driven by rapacious growth and consumption. And while implicitly, retrospection might afford contemplation of the future, only a few countries articulated this link explicitly.

One such country was Malaysia, with Sufficiency; standing out as a clarion call for ‘material adequacy’. In recognition of needs rather than wants, a series of cages suspended from the ceiling suggest the idea of minimum building footprint and asks us to tread on the earth lightly.

Other exhibitions are scattered throughout Venice itself, some will invariably be serendipitous finds, hidden in alluring Venetian laneways. You really need a month in Venice to enjoy the fruits of this exhibition.