



The loincloth and the Lido



MAGAN'S
WORLD

From Tamil Nadu to Venice, Manchán

Magan gets an architect's eye view

AN ARCHITECTURAL folly of pleated linen and lavendered softwood is luring me to Venice next week, although I had made a solemn promise not to visit the city until I was too fat and dodderly to go anywhere more adventurous.

An Irish architectural *amuse-bouche* of linen and softwood, combined with Kilkenny limestone, Murano glass and furry-slipper carpet, tickles my fancy, especially considering it will be housed beneath the great dome of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in the Giardini di Venice.

It's the work of spatial contortionist Tom de Paor, who won the international Young Architect of the Year Award in 2003. The last opening of his I attended was the unveiling of a mud well-keeper's hut he helped build in Tamil Nadu, Southern India. On that occasion, I had spent a week with him learning from loincloth-clad locals how to mix earth and water to the right consistency to make walls, and how to create a floor from cow dung.

On the few occasions I've travelled with architects, they've clued me into a whole different way of seeing the world, through examining people's homes and the spaces they live in. De Paor is the first Irish architect to be invited to create an installation for the main exhibition of the Venice Biennale.

It's far removed from our days in Tamil Nadu when our low-caste hosts, Joseph and Mary, would lead us through the low door into their hut and wash our hands with a copper jug and bowl of water each lunchtime, before serving us a meal on banana leaves laid on the mud floor. Every day Mary would ladle out the tamarind-flavoured vegetables and coconut-oil dhal, showing

us how to mash it into little balls before popping it into our mouths. Afterwards, she would hand each of us a pillow and send us off to sleep on the floor in front of her, insisting that it was the only way to cope with the scorching heat.

I'm hoping the sensory juxtaposition between the Venice and Indian openings will be a thrill, but is it enough to warrant the expense of the trip? I've always regretted that I never got to see de Paor's debut Venice installation for the first Irish pavilion in 2000, a corbelled array of 1,741 bales of Bord na Móna briquettes, slotted into a tiny, sky-roofed chamber. The sheen, shape and smell of the compressed turf was revelatory, a sensory overload, according to anyone I asked. There's never been a chance to see it again, as de Paor had the briquettes broken up and returned to the Venetian earth to help the drowning city.

This year's Irish Pavilion is being held in an 18th-century oratory of the Irish monk St Gall, near Piazza San Marco. It will honour de Blacam and Meagher Architects, one of the few prestige building firms to have survived the downturn intact.

Go readers should be most familiar with their work on the Aer Lingus executive lounges, the Inis Meáin Restaurant (built for Shane de Blacam's nephew Ruairí), and of course the notorious pit-stop of Munster-bound travellers, Matt the Thrashers, on the N7 at Birdhill – now bypassed by the motorway (probably to the delight of the irate *Liveline* callers who would frequently traduce the Basil Fawley-like manager for his putches against nursing mothers, unruly children, inebriated sports fans, etc).

All in all, Venice should be a thrill, but I wonder if the likes of de Paor and de Blacam &

Meagher get collywobbles about showing their work there. It must take chutzpah to present one's buildings while surrounded by the pinnacle of 11 centuries of architectural splendour.

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The Irish Pavilion of this year's Venice Biennale is in an oratory near Piazza San Marco, Venice, above. Photograph: Getty