

>>EXHIBITION

**TALKING CITIES**  
**The Micropolitics of Urban Space**

Entry 2006, Zeche Zollverein, Essen, Germany  
Until 3 December

*Reviewed by Vicky Richardson*

*Below: Taiwan National University of Art's stunning Interbreeding Field*

*Right: A pod by Danish artist NISS outside the old pit head machinery*

This exhibition makes a tremendous impact. But whether I was blown away by the location – the newly converted Coalwasher building at the remarkable Zollverein mine in Essen – or the show itself, I'm not sure.

Essen, which as a former industrial powerhouse is roughly the

equivalent of Wolverhampton, is being heavily promoted by regional politicians as Germany's design hub, with Zollverein at its heart.

Consisting of several exhibitions arranged on different floors of the Coalwasher, Entry 2006 is intended to kick start a new phase of investment and attract creatives to investigate all that the area has to offer. The building has been restored by OMA which created usable space, while leaving in place the vast rusted plant that last washed coal in the 1980s. A bright orange stairway links the four floors of exhibitions.

Talking Cities, at the top, is the

only show that was specifically created for the site, and aims to respond to the 'edge condition' or marginal nature of Zeche Zollverein and Essen.

Curated by up-and-coming architectural operator Francesca Ferguson – who recently became a director of the Basel Architecture Museum – the show is ambitious in its scope and global reach. It includes work by 35 practitioners from a range of disciplines, each putting forward not a building as such, but an approach to shaping the environment. The best installations respond directly to this strange location.

Woven around the dark, fossilised remains of the coal washing machinery, the show is a giant adventure playground. Several exhibitors actually invite the visitor to climb in and around their displays: students from Taiwan National University of Arts have created the Interbreeding Field, a magical construction of sawn timber that sprawls around the space as if were a self-replicating alien. I'd seen this before at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2004, but in the course of two years it seems to have bred a far greater complexity.

British architects Simon Conder and Toh Shimazaki are both there – Conder with a scale model of his Black rubber house in Dungeness and Toh Shimazaki with an elegant slatted structure made from chipboard.



The Berlin contributors at Talking Cities particularly caught my eye: artist Kartsten Konrad builds large model cities from discarded 20th century materials such as kitchen cupboards, and pulpboard panels. Another group, baukasten.berlin, created a set of trump cards featuring details of GDR prefab blocks.

What all the protagonists have in common is an acute sensitivity to the environment in which they operate, observing, recording and communicating their ideas by any means necessary. I'd disagree with Ferguson that the work offers ready-made strategies for contemporary urban design. But in a way, the show does something more important than that – it fuels one's curiosity to find out more about the strange and unexpected nature of our surroundings.

