



The 2026 International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR) explores one of the defining challenges of our time: how can we reorganize the systems that shape our landscapes, cities, and buildings to support both planetary and human wellbeing?

Under the title SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT, the biennale examines how historically rooted economic, ecological, and social structures continue to determine the built environment. Where can we identify the leverage points capable of initiating meaningful transition? How might economic models shift from maximizing return on investment toward generating social, ecological, and cultural value? And what would it take to move beyond technological optimization and quantitative growth toward regenerative practices grounded in care, reciprocity, and shared responsibility?

At a moment when environmental, social, and economic crises reveal the limits of extractive development, SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT positions architecture as a discipline uniquely equipped to connect scales, actors, and forms of knowledge. Rather than asking what architecture can produce, the biennale asks what architecture can sustain.

The Location as Method

The twelfth edition of the IABR takes place in the former Hunter Douglas factory on the banks of the Maas, on the island of Feijenoord in Rotterdam. More than a venue, this site serves as a method: a lens through which broader systemic transformations become visible.

The island began as a marshland in the tidal landscape of the Rhine delta. Over centuries, the combined forces of sedimentation, engineering, trade, and industry transformed it into new land. The river systems of the Maas and Rhine have long functioned as infrastructures of exchange, connecting territories, economies, materials, and cultures between land and sea.

The site itself embodies these layered histories. Its first major building was Rotterdam's Pest House, deliberately located beyond the city's limits. In the eighteenth century, it became a steam engine factory and shipyard. A century later, it was transformed into an industrial complex producing aluminum sunshades and architectural components. Known today as Hunter Douglas, the factory closed in 2021 and was sold to a Brazilian American hedge fund.

The departure of manufacturing from Rotterdam's inner city raises urgent questions about the future of work, production, and urban life. As such, Feijenoord offers a local manifestation of broader global transformations. It reveals how economic systems shape places, communities, and everyday realities.

The former factory and the surrounding district therefore form the starting point for IABR 2026. At the heart of the industrial complex, visitors encounter a place where multiple histories converge. Through these layers, the exhibition invites reflection on the ways global systems materialize in daily life and in the built environment. To understand the present as a point of departure for possible futures, we must first understand the forces that produced it.

The Architecture of Systemic Recalibration

The systems that have delivered unprecedented growth are increasingly undermining the conditions on which that growth depends. Planetary boundaries have been exceeded, social inequalities continue to deepen, and critical infrastructures are becoming more vulnerable. Yet the economic logic driving these developments remains largely unchanged.

A fundamental recalibration is needed.

The tension between finite ecological resources and the seemingly limitless expansion of financial capital is becoming impossible to ignore. Scarcity of land, water, and materials is intensifying. Supply chains and infrastructure corridors reveal their fragility through geopolitical conflict and climate disruption. Access to housing, energy, and clean water is under growing pressure. At the same time, the transitions required to address climate change, decarbonization, and digitization generate new demands on ecosystems already under strain.

Architecture is deeply implicated in these dynamics. Buildings and cities have become embedded in systems of extraction, optimization, and accumulation. While architecture continues to generate prosperity and opportunity, it also contributes significantly to resource depletion, ecological degradation, and social inequality.

This is not a new condition. Rotterdam, like many economic hubs around the world, has benefited for centuries from systems of unequal exchange. Many celebrated buildings, districts, and production landscapes owe their existence to forms of prosperity generated elsewhere. The Hunter Douglas site stands as a material witness to these histories and to the inequalities that continue to shape the present.

SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Around the world, a renewed appreciation for proximity, regional specificity, and cultural diversity is emerging in response to globalization. Global networks and infrastructures will remain indispensable, yet their dominance is increasingly being complemented by a recognition of the value of local capacities and local relationships.

This shift is visible in circular economies, renewable energy systems, regenerative water strategies, and renewed interest in regional building cultures. It is not a nostalgic return to the past. Rather, it represents a forward-looking search for new balances between planetary systems and local communities, informed by historical knowledge and ecosystemic thinking.

Across policy, governance, and design, attention is gradually shifting away from processes that externalize negative environmental and social costs toward practices capable of generating positive ecological and societal impact.

Within this context, IABR 2026 explores the role of the designer as a defender of non-negotiable public values: an actor capable of fostering reciprocal relationships between global systems, local communities, and planetary ecologies. This requires integrated thinking about flows, resources, relations, and interde-

dependencies. It also requires places where alternative ways of thinking and acting can be tested and practiced.

The biennale seeks to reposition architecture not merely as a service profession, but as a steward of social value, connectedness, and justice. A just future demands more than technical innovation. It requires the courage to understand architecture as a common good and as a crucial mediator within larger systems – one capable of advancing equality, agency, resilience, and regenerative futures.

The challenge facing architecture is therefore clear: to move from extractive models in which many bear the costs while few reap the rewards, toward economies grounded in reciprocity and embedded within social and ecological systems.

Design is essential to imagining and realizing these shared values. What is needed are practitioners who do more than solve problems; practitioners who provide direction, learn from meaningful precedents, challenge the limitations of the present, and create space for long-term public imagination. Building social relationships, networks of care, and systems of support is as important as designing buildings themselves.

IABR 2026 as a SYSTEM OF SUPPORT

Feijenoord is the point of departure for this biennale. Until recently, it was a place where strong ties connected industry, labor, and community. Work here was more than a source of income; it provided identity, purpose, and a sense of belonging. Generations of residents were connected to globally operating companies and expanding production networks, making the district both a local community and a node within larger economic systems.

These connections came at a cost. Industrial growth was accompanied by environmental degradation, unequal distributions of wealth and opportunity, and the exploitation of both natural resources and human labor. The closure of the Hunter Douglas factory marks the end of an era, placing new pressures on the social resilience of the surrounding communities. Yet it also creates an opening: a moment to imagine new forms of collective life and new relationships between production, place, and society.

Such a transition cannot occur without recognizing those who are too often excluded from decisions about the distribution of space, resources, and opportunity. Building more resilient futures requires not only new infrastructures, but also broader forms of representation, participation, and agency.

With IABR 2026, we ask whether a biennale can be more than a temporary exhibition in a historically layered part of the city. Can it become an active participant in processes of transformation? Can it create lasting connections between people, knowledge, institutions, and place?

Our ambition is therefore clear: IABR seeks to become a SYSTEM OF SUPPORT itself.

By opening the former factory as a space for encounter, learning, experimentation, and storytelling, the biennale aims to contribute to a broader movement emerging on the island of Feijenoord. The site be-

comes both a platform and a laboratory: a place where new relationships can be forged and where alternative futures can be collectively imagined and tested.

In this sense, the biennale seeks to activate the disciplines of architecture, urbanism, and landscape architecture as agents of public value. It aims to bridge the global and the local, connect education and practice, and develop the tools, methods, and forms of knowledge needed to articulate and advance shared values for people and planet.

The future is here, it just needs to be (re)assembled.

The 12th IABR, SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT, will take place from 18 September through 29 November 2026, at De Piekfabriek on the former Hunter Douglas site in Rotterdam South.