

Canada's architectural showpiece a giant fleece

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The winning submission to represent Canada at the 2006 Venice Biennale in Architecture will be a sweater that just about everybody wears.

About 350 square metres of orange polar fleece will enfold visitors to the Canadian pavilion, constructed to per-

fect human proportion but on a scale of 20 times larger than that.

Architectural partners Bill Pechet and Stephanie Robb of Pechet and Robb Studio have come up with an idea that is less architectural than it is a witty play on architecture and environment.

SweaterLodge will be suspended from the pavilion and be a warm orange. "Dance the orange," as the poet Rilke

said. The tent-like sweater, still in model form, will be made from recycled plastic beverage containers and inside the sweater, visitors will be invited to ride stationary single-speed bicycles that (pedaled forward or backward) activate digital films reflective of Vancouver and the ways wilderness and modern life intertwine. The packing cases and duffle bags that transport the materials to Italy will become sofas and other furniture that the more sedentary can sit on to rest, should they want to.

And when the sweater returns to Vancouver after the September-November exhibition in Venice ends, it will be turned into toques and scarves. "Not turned back into bottles?" we ask the pair over the phone. "No, but the toques may look a bit bottle-like," Pechet jokes.

Shows of architecture can be a bit grim and "black box-like," Robb says. "We wanted to provide a relief from the usual." This may be partly why the jury that chose this entry over others from across Canada found it so "positive and energizing." It was a refreshing idea, like the soda that the bottles once contained. One judge commented: "This is the message that we want to send to the outside world."

In a Bruce Mau way, the designers have turned a West Coast cliché — the polar fleece sweater — on its head and in an irreverent, renegade coastal way that exudes resourcefulness. They came up with the idea of an oversize sweater to suggest "the vastness of the nation," and however you feel about it, polar fleece has become all but a Canadian icon, implying comfort and warmth. "It's ubiquitous, pervading all

ends of the fashion spectrum," says Robb.

They chose orange because it's a colour very much in vogue and, again, a warm one. "It's a campfire color, the colour you might see in fireside flames," Pechet says. Another thing is that it suggests the maple leaf, and "it's a beautiful complement to the colours of misty Venice. When light shines through the sweater, it creates a glorious, amber-like glow."

About 150,000 people are expected to attend the pavilion in an architectural exhibition considered to be the world's most prestigious. The sweater reflects Vancouver's "cutting edge in the technology of outer wear," according to Pechet. Mountain Co-op is supplying the fabric and the main sewer is Vancouver's Linda Chow, who works in theatre, opera and the music industry, and who had no problem with the construction of a humongous sweater, Robb says.

Robb says, "It's an honour to represent our nation. We're trying to push our limits" in a city that has historically done that, as in postwar housing and the conversion of the False Creek basin from industrial to domestic use. Pechet and Robb, who also work in set design, are uniquely involved with designing cemeteries, a field that doesn't normally tempt the architectural ego.

Asked whether she does so, Robb says, "I do consider Vancouver urbane.



Architects Bill Pechet and Stephanie Robb will represent Canada at the 2006 Venice Biennale of Architecture.

Whenever I travel abroad I really appreciate Vancouver's vitality and optimism. Experimentalism's allowed. It's a laboratory for new ideas."

The exhibition will be co-curated by Chris Macdonald and Greg Bellerby with the support of the School of Architecture, UBC, and the Charles H. Scott Gallery at Emily Carr Institute. Pechet and Robb have been in partnership since 1995 and are both graduates of the UBC architecture school. They won the 2005 Lieutenant-Governor Award for excellence in architecture.

SweaterLodge has a budget of \$400,000, a third of it raised by grants from the Canada Council and the Department of Foreign Affairs. The remainder is left up to corporate funding and private donations.

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