

# The big orange lodge

Giant fleece sweater is Canada's Biennale entry.

MONIKA ULLMANN

**B**ill Pechet and Stephanie Robb, a Vancouver interdisciplinary design team with a sense of humor, knew that they were taking a chance when they turned an orange fleece into a "Sweaterlodge" – their entry into the architecture section of the Venice Biennale, an international art exhibition.

"We knew they were either going to love it or hate it, and we weren't going in quietly," said Robb. Though the pair got the nod

from the Canada Council (the third time that a Vancouver team has been selected to represent Canada at the Biennale during the last decade), they have a challenging year ahead of them. Not only do they have to get their giant fleece sweater stitched together and shipped to Venice for the opening of the

Canadian Pavilion in September 2006, they also have to find sponsors to join those they already have in place – Canada Council, the Department of Foreign Affairs, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and the University of British Columbia School of Architecture. The cost of the project is \$400,000, and Sweaterlodge spokesperson Miriam Blume hopes the prestige and global media exposure of this event will draw some major sponsors. "The Jewish community is known for its generosity and commitment to the arts, so we're hopeful," she said.

Pechet, who is Jewish, was born in Edmonton and attended a Talmud Torah school there in his youth. He went to high school in Victoria and is a graduate of UBC's School of Architecture. Robb, whose credentials include degrees in architecture and theatre design, jokes that she's "the shiksa," but it's clear that she and Pechet are equal collaborators in a wide-ranging portfolio of projects that include public spaces (one of their best-known is the giant picnic table in the park on Beach Avenue at Howe Street), private residences, schools, memorials and set design.

They enjoy bridging the worlds of art and everyday life, and part of their witty design aesthetic is playing with scale. As Robb points out, when you expand something ordinary like a sweater, it becomes a sculpture, while retaining some of its functionality. This is what they've done with the Sweaterlodge ([www.sweaterlodge.ca](http://www.sweaterlodge.ca)) – an idea that grew directly out of Vancouver's unique urban environment.

"Vancouver has a really long tradition of producing innovative and exploratory architecture and de-

sign," said Pechet. "People come here from all over the world to study how we build density and sustainability into our city. The Sweaterlodge is in that tradition, because it cuts across disciplines, resonating with a large audience, not just architects and designers."

The project is already getting rave reviews. The Italian ambassador to Canada, who came to visit Pechet and Robb's studio recently, was quite smitten with it and even remembered an Italian pop song that

refers to "my little Canadian lodge in the woods." Canadian officials are also praising the team. Foreign Affairs minister Pierre Pettigrew called the project "original and innovative," while Canada Council director John Hobday said the Sweaterlodge "offers a sharp and witty slice of Canadian life to the world."

Okay, but how do you actually make something like this?

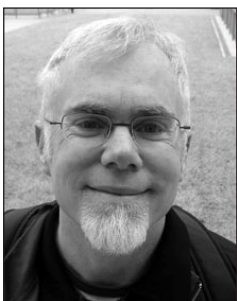
"Well, Vancouver is probably the only city in the world where you can pick up the phone and call someone in the movie business to make you a sweater out of 350 square metres of fleece without any problem," laughed Robb. The Sweaterlodge will be stitched together in Vancouver by Linda Chow, who has a background in costume design. The fabric is Polartec fleece, made of 100 per cent recycled bottles.

The recycling theme carries through the entire project. Part of the exhibition involves three stationary bicycles that project movies about Vancouver's urban yet green lifestyle as soon as someone starts pedalling.

Aside from the international prestige of this project, Vancouverites who might not make it to the Biennale also get something out of it. Once the exhibit closes, the Sweaterlodge is coming back for further recycling into our urban landscape. The designers are planning a big thank you party for all their sponsors and friends, during which the Sweaterlodge will be disassembled.

"We're going to have a big sew-in," said Robb. If she and Pechet have anything to do with it, the citizens of Vancouver will be cozying up in orange toques and matching scarves – thus recycling the Sweaterlodge architecture into everyday life. ■

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Bill Pechet

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