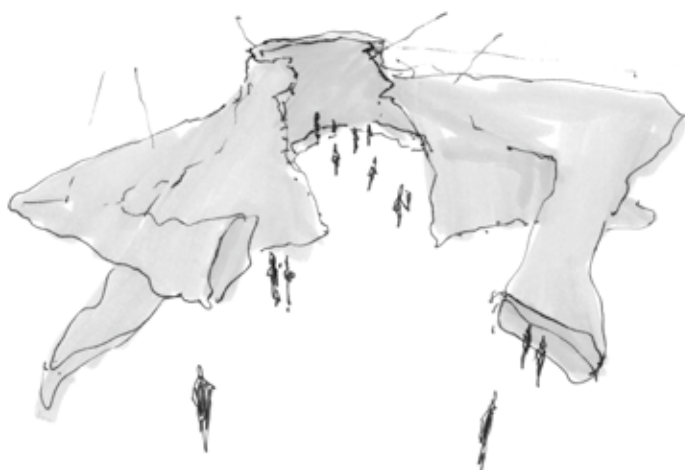


JIM NICHOLLS

IN THE BEST POSSIBLE LIGHT

During a popular morning talk show on Canadian public radio, a contest was held to complete the phrase "As Canadian as" Every listener knew the phrase "As American as apple pie," but there was no familiar Canadian equivalent. After weeks of write-in and phone-in entries, there was no clear winner or even a popular favorite. As Canadian as Mounties? As Canadian as beavers? As Canadian as hockey sticks? Finally, just as the country was giving up, the judges announced a unanimous winning entry: "As Canadian as possible under the circumstances."



Sweaterlodge is Canada's entry in the 2006 Biennale in Architecture, which will take place in Venice, Italy from September to November 2006. In a national juried competition, Bill Pechet and Stephanie Robb of Vancouver, BC proposed the fabrication of a fleece sweater big enough to have a party in and won. It will be draped inside the steel, glass and brick Canadian pavilion in Venice. Within the glowing orange enclosure, interactive digital projectors will show films that contextualize the sweater by portraying Vancouver and Canadian scenes. The jurors found the proposal to be positive, energizing and a refreshing approach... "this is the message we want to send to the outside world."

The orange fleece Sweaterlodge evokes the comfortable familiarity of Mr. Rogers, the intimate space of a child's blanket tent, the log cabin resourcefulness of Canada, the Northwest cult of the outdoors, the purification ritual of the sweat lodge, the erotic light of the boudoir and the warm embers of a welcoming fireplace.

The sense of humor that pervades the work of Pechet and Robb is not only about making people laugh, it is also employed as an intellectual strategy. The pun is engaged not as a lowly form of humor but as a way to bring in multiple meanings, ambiguity and contradiction. It can be seen as a powerful tool to increase expressive potentials and to add depth and complexity to the work. The technique allows populist accessibility but also, upon reflection, or a second reading, a sophisticated rigor.

In addition to humor, an attitude of sustainability pervades the project. The fleece is made from recycled plastic bottles, and the shipping containers will be reused as reception desks and pavilion furniture. The sweater itself will be, like Christo's curtains, cut up and recycled back into the community as scarves and toques.

Three men have been stranded on a deserted island for many months. One morning an ornate bottle washes up on the

beach. All three men dive on it at once. Suddenly the bottle fills with light, the cork pops off and a genie appears.

"Well what do we have here...three wishes is the rule, so I will grant you each one wish."

Larry jumped at the chance. "I wish I was back home sitting down to dinner with my family." Poof, he was gone.

Harry went next. "I want to be opening a bottle of Champagne in a penthouse suite in Las Vegas. Poof, he was gone.

Joe was last. He looked around the empty beach. "Gee I miss those guys. I wish they were here to help me decide." Poof they were back.

Much more than collaborative or cross-disciplinary, Pechet and Robb simply do not recognize boundaries. The question of is it art or design does not occur. Their portfolio includes dance sets, public art, houses, cemeteries and columbaria. Landscape always looms large in the work. Houses are organized around gardens and courtyards, public art focuses larger urban settings, and the cemeteries are grounded in the Northwest vegetation. The work is always personally invested and is an autobiography of human values.

During a recent war being fought in the cobblestone streets of Eastern European villages, an old man, sitting erect in formal clothes, played the violin in the town square. When asked, "Why are you playing the violin when bombs are going off around you?" He replied, "Why are they exploding bombs around me while I am playing the violin?"

Sweaterlodge is also a response to a world in crisis, like Dada was a response to the loss of humanity and meaning between the World Wars. It is an offering to the global community of warmth and welcome, of comfort and humor, of necessary human compassion. Sweaterlodge is an antidote to the News. It is not cynical, it is hopeful. ■

Jim Nicholls teaches architecture, paints pictures, loves his daughter and occasionally writes. For more information about Sweaterlodge, visit www.sweaterlodge.ca.

