

## Interview: Bill Pechet and Stephanie Robb, by Robin Laurence

I wonder if you would describe the nature of your design practice -- and why it has been characterized as "interdisciplinary"?

BP: We like to work through many different genres that range from art to architecture. Both Stephanie and I come from a fine arts background, before we studied architecture, and we often hold those ideas in our heads when we're working.

SR: Something we've always struggled with is: are we artists, are we architects, are we landscape architects? We get called different things. To us, we're simply designers. We do what we do and sometimes that falls outside of the neater categories that have been staked out by the professions. And we find those boundaries make for artificial constraints that can be detrimental at times. We occasionally run into jurisdictional walls.

By acknowledging the continuity of the disciplines, and the artificiality of the lines drawn between them, are you challenging the idea of specialization?

BP: I think so. At a certain level, our interests are broader than only the sphere of architecture. Because of that and because architecture can't address all of the issues that we're interested in, I guess that's what makes us interdisciplinary.

But the word interdisciplinary already is a label of sorts. It's only because we use language that we have to call ourselves something. I just think our interests are broad. In addition to going through art school, I also studied geography, so I'm interested in urbanism and urban planning, and I've taught workshops in those subjects. Teaching has also informed my practice.

That said, we do specialize in a couple of things. Cemetery design is one of them. There are very few architectural studios in North America that do so. Yet we also have a very wide knowledge of a lot of different materials, because we've had to work in a lot of different ways. But our practice is still evolving. I wouldn't say we've built our best work yet.

The fact that your Biennale project, SweaterLodge, is a mixed-media, interactive installation certainly speaks to your fine-arts sensibilities. You've created an enormous sweater out of orange Polar Fleece and you've hung it inside the Canadian pavilion. You've also set up three stationary bicycles within that environment, so that visitors to the exhibition can drive video projections by pedaling.

SR: We felt right from the beginning that we wanted to do something that would be an experience as opposed to a representation of past work. Didactic displays with models and drawings are pretty typical, but we wanted to go to the other end and do something that was an installation and a primary experience.

BP: While we expect to see star architects exhibiting beautiful and extravagant objects and images, we are also interested in the range of experimentation and creative expression that will take place, especially in the curated exhibition in the

Arsenale. The theme there is MetaCities, where cities and their borders dissolve. It also incorporates ideas around urban growth and sustainability. SweaterLodge coincides with those ideas because of its focus on recycling and its use of social commentary.

Is it surprising that your project aligns with the theme of MetaCities, which was announced long after you'd settled on your form and theme?

SR: It doesn't surprise us that we're all tracking in the same way right now. It's what people are thinking about.

BP: But our take on it is a bit more irreverent -- because ours is as much a critique of the recycling mentality as it is a parlaying into it.

SweaterLodge addresses both site and place -- the site being Canada's pavilion in the *Giardini* in Venice and the place being Vancouver and the West Coast of British Columbia. What are some of the West Coast issues you're taking on?

BP: One of them is excess -- the fact that we've created a culture that produces so much garbage that we need to recycle it. And then how do you recycle it and to what end? For instance, you can do many things with melted-down plastic bottles. One of them is Polar Fleece, which is used to make recreational wear, mostly outerwear. Canada is famous for its outerwear. Has a big installation ever been made from Polar Fleece? No.

SR: Certainly one of the readings of SweaterLodge is the idea of it being super-sized and the obvious reference to the North American standard of living and also to the fact that we recycle. Vancouver is one of the epicenters of recycling. We're very good at it; we take it quite seriously. And I think ultimately it's an act of absolution. You consume something and then of course you recycle it. It would be a sin not to.

But when you drop that water bottle -- the height of conceit -- into the recycling bin, you feel that you've done your part. I think SweaterLodge is a comment on this because Canadians, per capita, have one of the largest environmental footprints in the world. We justify that to a degree because we're a northern culture and you would expect that we'd have greater heating needs. And we live in a more dispersed society so we drive around in cars. But I think Canadians view themselves as morally superior when it comes to the environment. The facts are quite different.

Still, the deification of recycling in Vancouver is starting to have an impact on the way the city is forming itself.

Your project plays with cultural stereotypes and ideas of national identity. Can you talk about those, especially the notion that Canada -- especially Western Canada -- is all about the great outdoors, about a population that is sporty, that goes on camping trips and canoe trips, that is physically active?

SR: In part, SweaterLodge is a real celebration of that. Yes, it is a stereotype that West Coast people love the outdoors, but it's also largely true. We have some

unique geography here. We also have a relatively benign climate, compared with that of the rest of the country. It's accepted that people often run or bicycle to work, and that they're likely to go climbing or kayaking on the weekend. That's no longer exceptional. And I think that's fascinating. The stereotype has transcended and become fact.

And is accommodated within the day-to-day city?

SR: Yes -- the assimilation of the outdoors into urban life. There are greenways and bike routes. Because people jog or bike to work or exercise at lunchtime, more and more workplaces are fitted with showers. Companies field teams in fundraising runs and rowing events. And all the outdoor activity trickles down so that you have this high-performance aesthetic in fashion. You can't afford to have two jackets so you use your mountain jacket in the city. Kids are going to school in backpacks that are completely oversized for carrying books -- they've got an entire life-support system built into them! We think that's interesting and we've incorporated some of this into our thinking about SweaterLodge.

BP: Absolutely. I want to pick up on other ways our natural environment plays out in urban life. I think the construction of our city is the result of being pressed up against mountains and ocean, against the wildness of nature -- something that's incredibly beautiful. That produces a city that's not centripetal but centrifugal. Things, people, public space are drawn out to the edges.

On any given day on the Sea Wall [a public pedestrian walkway, encircling parts of the city along its waterfront], you'll have as many people as in the Piazza San Marco in Venice. But on the Sea Wall, they're all in a process of movement around a ribbon. They're all drawn out to the view, to looking at the larger environment. And I think that affects us on a very deep and fundamental level.

And then it gets played out in tourism because that's what brings people here. Let's be honest: they're not traveling to Vancouver to see the art galleries. They're coming here because they can walk on a suspension bridge over a deep ravine or take a cable car up Grouse Mountain or just look at these beautiful landforms.

Much as Vancouverites adore and promote their natural setting, they're also destroying it at a dizzying rate -- clear-cutting the rain forest and building houses up the sides of mountains; covering all the arable land in the Fraser River Delta with more housing and development; draining the wetlands. And then there are the larger and more contentious issues in the province of logging and mining, pollution, clear cuts, declining salmon stocks...

Could you talk about our compulsion to compensate by recreating the natural world within the built environment?

BP: Look at Vancouver International Airport -- its nature artificialized to an embarrassing degree. In the American wing, for example, you walk through a fake rain forest when you come off the plane. The building itself could have been an aperture to look out at the extraordinary view, the natural setting, but instead you're walking through a simulacrum of nature and then you come to a "waterfall"

that smells like chlorine and that spills down into the Immigration Hall. And all of it is copiously complemented by First Nations art. Somehow First Nations art ends up being treated as a bridge between nature and culture. It feeds into a mythology and it's also a kind of repository of guilt.

I feel very passionately about this, and I think SweaterLodge reflects that.

SR: To work as a landscape architect in Vancouver would be the height of frustration, because the only paradigm that seems to be respected is nature itself. You can't comment on nature or abstract nature, you are expected to reproduce it faithfully. A purely decorative practice of land reclamation goes on and absurd situations arise. There are non-viable, salmon enhancement projects in a number of urban settings, in Stanley Park, for instance. In Hastings Park, a faux pond was installed, something that was meant to look like a natural pond where one never existed before and now it's filled with condoms and shopping carts and when the water level goes down, you can see the plastic liner.

Stephanie, you talked about recycling as an act of "absolution". The same could be said of our attempts to reclaim nature and reinstate indigenous culture. We've destroyed and are destroying vast tracts of wilderness and in the 19th and 20th centuries, we all but wiped out Native culture, so now we'll replicate the outdoors indoors and use Native art as a symbol of who we are. Again, doesn't this all tie in with questions of cultural identity, not only as they're played out in Vancouver, but in the Canadian pavilion in Venice?

BP: The building is very much an attempt to portray something about Canadian culture and its love of nature. There's a tree growing up through the middle of it and it's encased in glass, as if to say, "It's protected. We're not taking down that tree." And there are several trees in the entry courtyard in the front of the building. But also, the building itself is a stone, glass, and steel teepee -- it's a set of leaning sticks that create a slanted roof -- as interpreted by an Italian architect in the 1950s. So two major stereotypes of Canadian culture are portrayed there. And the sweater is in a duet with the building, both formally and thematically. There are lovely relationships between our installation and the sloping roof, the glass courtyard, the play of light. The building has a nice shape that's like a big hug as you go around in an arc.

I love the tree hugger idea at play there: your installation itself encircles or embraces the tree at the centre of the building. It adds another dimension to ideas of place, since the West Coast of Canada is also known for its "tree huggers" -- environmentalists who are opposed to logging.

BP: It is a tree hugger. And scale is very important. SweaterLodge is based on a real, person-sized sweater, only it is eighteen times bigger. It's almost 40 feet high and 87 feet wide. People will be able to circulate within it. The body is both the beginning point and the end point.

SR: We like the idea of taking as banal an item as a Polar Fleece sweater and enlarging it until it becomes inhabitable. That transforms it in a funny and surprising way.

The title of your installation, SweaterLodge, is humorous, too. It's a pun that is probably not translatable in most languages. In Canadian English, a sweater is an upper body garment, worn for warmth -- thus your giant Polar Fleece garment with its recreational and outdoor connotations. And a sweat lodge is a traditional structure among some North American aboriginal cultures in which a steamy environment is created with fire, rocks, water, and herbs. It's a place of spiritual cleansing or healing, often in preparation for some sacred ceremony or rite of passage. So, isn't it a bit flippant to make this play on words?

BP: We've talked about this a lot. We see SweaterLodge as a place where people come together. The experience should be contemplative, perhaps transformative, certainly very beautiful. In that way, it is not flippant.

SR: We like the pun and we think it's appropriate. As we've discussed, we're looking at non-Native society's use of a sanitized version of Native culture as a default.

BP: Sweat lodge references go back to many Native communities across North America. But there's also the adoption of it, during the past couple of decades, by many other traditions. Google the term and you'll find sites that say, "Build your own sweat lodge." It's definitely been released into other communities, beyond the original. There's now this sense that a sweat lodge is a place for an encounter group. You sit in a circle and talk about why you're at the sweat lodge. Although the sweat lodge is certainly an ongoing and serious cultural practice, the idea has been absorbed by New Age philosophy.

Still, we can only go so far that way. We're also thinking that it's a beautiful place to be inside of and hoping that experience takes over from the first reading. Stephanie and I often meet on the middle ground of humour and the title is a portrayal of that. But the references become serious after the initial pun.

You've created a five-minute video, which is projected on the white mesh lining of the jacket and operated, at different speeds and in different directions, by visitors sitting on stationary bicycles. Originally, you were thinking about creating three different videotapes, but now you've settled on one. What are you intending to say with it?

BP: We realized how hard it would be to distill three themes where there might be twenty, and we thought that one video could probably accomplish what we intended and also create interesting situations in which you would end up with incidental abutments of imagery between all three projections.

SR: The content coincides with the ideas built into the sweater, with aspects of West Coast culture that include recreation, tourism, transportation, the dislocation of Native art and culture, winter sports, aerial and rotating-restaurant views of the landscape, bottle collectors. We like the connection between the images of the bottle collectors or "binners" with their plastic bags full of pop bottles -- that's such a common sight in Vancouver right now -- and the recycled plastic that is the source of Polar Fleece.

We've used footage from a variety of sources, but have edited it together to read like a five-minute commercial for living in Vancouver. A wonky, things-gone-

slightly-awry kind of commercial. Our film editors, Global Mechanic, produce art films but they also do a lot of commercials and they're incredibly savvy with all of the tropes that are used in advertising and popular culture. They understand the conscious use of genre.

BP: The content is really broad: Stephanie's been shooting, I've been shooting, we had an open call to young filmmakers and architects. The style and quality of the footage are all over the map, the implication being that many voices have put this together, through many layers of experience and perception. It's like a collective anthem. There's also a kind of hallucinogenic quality built into it, not only because it has to be visually astounding but also because going through the SweaterLodge should be, as I mentioned, a transformative experience. We've taken some of the stereotypes of place and revved them up to an incredibly beautiful and funkified level. I think this says, "Yes, we know what we are but we can move a little bit beyond it and produce the hybrid."

It's interesting to see a correspondence between SweaterLodge and elements of Vancouver visual art culture, especially with video and film work by internationally known artists such as Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, and Tim Lee. Were you considering their practices when you brought video into your installation? Or is that incidental?

BP: I think its incidental. Video is such a common device now. Even when you go to architectural presentations, there's often an animated video that flies you through the building. Projection is being used as a tool of design and movement -- it's just a part of what everybody is working with now.

Recycling is not just a point of satire in your work, it is also a serious consideration. How have you integrated its ideas into the construction and transportation of the work?

BP: We've been very concerned about the multi-functioning capability of our shipping materials, so we planned that everything we sent to Venice would be reused in another way. The bicycle crates, for instance, are being re-purposed as exhibition furniture and didactic panels. Certainly on the West Coast, but in any urbanizing area, spaces are becoming smaller and smaller. We're using SweaterLodge as a way for our studio to think about how an object can have more than one use, be more than one thing at a time. we've tried this before, in some of our houses and set designs.

The original press material for the installation spoke about the sweater becoming "a community legacy", but in other forms and incarnations, such as fully wearable, person-size toques and scarves. Could you talk about that?

SR: We don't want to pack the sweater away and have it sit in a box or, worse, go into a landfill. So it would seem a fine conclusion of the project that it would be split up into usable items. We love the image of it starting to deconstruct into smaller pieces and going off into the community.

BP: Those ideas are still percolating. We need to have sponsorship for it to happen. But maybe, thirty years from now, someone will be wearing a little memory of

SweaterLodge in the form of a hat. We like the idea of it disintegrating back into the street like that.

Do you very often encounter humour at the Venice Biennale of Architecture?

SR: Of architecture, I can't say. But certainly in the last art biennale, there were some very humorous pieces that were very successful.

BP: Art is much broader. Architecture is not really what you would call a funny profession. It's pretty earnest.

I think architects themselves as a group have a great sense of humour and they're educated and most of them have had training outside their own field and they come in with interests in art and other things, but architecture itself isn't particularly a venue for satire. The occasional Frank Gehry piece, perhaps. And in Postmodernism, there was a flurry of quotational architecture that flattened classicism -- but that stuff isn't really very appealing to us.

I'd like to return to your earlier questions, about interdisciplines and our use of a fine art installation at an international architecture fair. Conventional architecture would not provide a mechanism for cultural commentary. Architecture is too inside of and part of the major systems of the world to allow for something like this to happen.

It gets back to the question of why we work outside the architectural mainstream. I guess we need larger venues or different venues sometimes because we have these ideas about how things are out there and conventional architecture is too embedded in the system to be a mechanism for cultural commentary.

However, when we do design buildings -- either residential or retail -- we always try to invest something in it, something that speaks back to the culture in which it is located, so that the building works as a commentary on its time and place. Conventional architecture tends to be based more on issues of style and the look of the moment. Certainly, it is a mirror of society but it isn't consciously trying to bring forward other content.

When you talk about architecture being inside culture, inside society, and therefore not critically aware, I see another creative inversion here. That's because so many artists in Vancouver -- and Vancouver on the international stage is known for its visual arts more than any other discipline -- take architecture as their subject. Both sculptural and photo-based work in this city has focused on architecture as an embodiment, often, of failed ideologies. So it's interesting that your installation is coming from a city where that critical mechanism exists in the visual arts.

SR: Yes. When I studied fine arts, I was taught by Jeff Wall. I went through that particular system of critical analysis and interpretation, and in some ways, carried it with me. After graduating from that program, I went on to architecture school, and during first-year there, I kept using that earlier system of critical practice. When I tried to make architecture, there was often a criticism embedded in it --

and I had some difficulty because of that. I was told a number of times to straighten up and fly right, and I guess I did for a few years.

BP: I also encountered similar experiences in architecture school, where the mechanisms of critique, learnt in art school, were no longer considered appropriate. At that time it was the height of post modernism. Architecture was being taught in a highly vitriolic manner, as a rebuttal to the social and spatial trainwrecks of modernism. Any use of the medium of architecture-as-critique was discouraged, in lieu of earnest engagement with the romance of historicism. Fortunately, twenty years later we are past this in our schools. However, the planning ideologies which govern much of the new growth in Vancouver, has a lineage back to that period. This is producing a cancerous explosion of building typologies which are a curious blend of modernism's take on giant social engineering, fused with post modernism's saccharine take on history. We love complaining about this in our studio and often take on these issues, even as subtexts to our work. The projects may seem benign enough, and on some levels they are but if you dig a bit deeper they can be a conduit to a larger and more serious set of issues. Is SweaterLodge a critique? Partially yes.