

AUSTRALIAN PAVILION FORMATIONS // NEW PRACTICES IN AUSTRALIAN ARCHITECTURE

Common Ground - La Biennale di Venezia - 13th International Architecture Exhibition

Cheryl Wing-Zi Wong

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In the spirit of DIY projects, there has been an intensified movement towards overhauling old conceptions of what it means to be an architect, towards redefining *architecture* as more than just building. Along with several other pavilions in this year's Biennale, the Australian pavilion is focusing on exploring local, self-initiated urban interventions. Burke and Reinmuth's curatorial direction places interactivity at the center of the *Formation's* agenda. Rather than being purely didactic and informational, most of the featured projects involve live, active programming. *Formations* is dynamic and engaging; the exhibition truly reaches past the physical walls of the pavilion.

The exhibition consists of six installations by six formations that were selected from an open call. Archival's giant steel structures, housing foosball tables, exploit the courtyard space, converting it into an open-air arcade. Healthabitat's approach utilizes health, environment and design to collect data and understand certain housing conditions in Venice. Maribor 2012 is a project exploring new visions for the Slovenian capital city. Supermanoeuvre's installation is a network of steel rods framing an aperture in the pavilion's roof, a key element in Richard Goodwin's performance. On a zipline, Goodwin painstakingly traversed the canal at the rear of the pavilion, climbed into the pavilion through the roof and then continued on a brief journey. This was a hopeful highlight of the show, but was admittedly an anticlimactic and lackluster performance. Lastly, the Architects's radio show utilizes a microphone/speaker console fashioned from a hodgepodge of parts, to host live sessions throughout the Giardini and the Eternal City itself.



Interview with Anthony Burke + Gerard Reinmuth

CWZW:

Can you talk a bit about the concept behind the title of the show-- "Formations-- new practice in Australian architecture"? What have been the directions/ tendencies in Australian architecture?

AB:

The idea behind the show "Formations" is to take a very different cut through the profession. We're much less interested in a design version of things. Architecture is normally sold through media and all sorts of 'archipress', around a sort of design coefficient. What we're most interested in is how architects are working, what their practices are like, what different practice formations are forming-- as a response to new pressures on architecture, both external and internal to the discipline. So, things like the economy, the environment, those sorts of very obvious ones, but also things like legislation and risk are pushing architects into spheres where they're working very differently and having to imagine their practices very differently, simply in order to have an effect on the world; what we've been talking about as the agency of the architect. And that in a design context is a very bereft kind of conversation; it's style, fashion, which we're not interested in. We're interested in how architects are actually reformulating the way they constitute their practices to have a very tangible effect on the world.

The outcome of that then is that we have six teams, six formations. They're very different to the normative practice model: star architect, board of directors, project architects, and architects, the classic hierarchy of business, which has been around since the mid-century, and comes through the military. That sort of pyramid of hierarchy is the calcification of the hero architect. We think that model has nothing left to offer to either architecture as a discipline or the context of the world in general. We've been searching for people working in different ways. Health Habitat (one of our teams) is a group of three: an architect, a doctor, and a social business manager. They've been working together for 25 years. They work through federally funded programs and they work simply on the issue of the environment and health, and apply this thinking to the indigenous communities or poor communities generally. They started in the Australian indigenous communities, where it's very necessary, very welcome, but has now been picked up as a model by the World Health Organization. It's been awarded grant money by the U.N., and they're applying this model for healthy living to all sorts of different contexts—Brooklyn, public housing in Venice. They actually came to Venice, went to some public housing, did their survey and found the things to fix to improve the health. They've actually been tracking this through a very empirical evidence-based method and have statistics now to show that they've basically saved the lives of 45,000 people and had this measured effect on 7,500 homes... So, there's a really interesting way to envision what an architect does in that context, and it's not about being on the front page of a glamour magazine. It's about a direct implication.

Architecture as we're talking about here is not projective, it's not futuristic or a utopian version of what the world might become; rather, these are people we've uncovered who are already doing this.

CWZW:

It's interesting because you talk about this starchitecture hierarchy, and this can be applied to a greater world context; so how would you root what you found in your selection to local architecture in Australia, more specifically?

AB:

I think these practices have already been practicing. We've elaborated some different versions of being an architect that are possible and happening. And there are other practices that look at themselves and say: What am I achieving in my architecture? Or, as is currently happening in the world, they're saying: I'm the director of this studio-based model, I am the director, I have 3-4 students working for me, I do competitions, I win something and get a big commission. It's so ubiquitous and yet it's so fraught—the winners in that game are so few. There's an incredible amount of talent going to waste there. So we're hoping that this kind of exhibition will allow other people to see that there are different ways of structuring a practice, of being an architect literally, that allow you to actually extend your skills, your spatial thinking, your talent into many different areas. I think from a disciplinary view, it's a very necessary time to be thinking that way.

CWZW:

There are six formations in the pavilion and in your catalogue, you have 33... How did you go through your selection process?

AB:

We were first selected as creative directors of the exhibition through an open expression of interest to the Institute of Australian Architects. We won that out of 27 applications. We've been working together across academic and professional fields for about 3-4 years. Then we put out an expression of interest to the whole Australian fraternity and asked two questions: How do you uniquely form your practice? And what agency does that give you as a practice (that no other practice has)? We got 125 responses, and from that we worked it down eventually to the six we have here and another 27 which are in the catalogue, a book of people working in alternative modes of practice.

We have a group called the Venice Biennale Committee that works as part of the Institute of Australian Architects, Janet Holmes à Court, our commissioner, who's the head of the whole program, Jeffrey London, who's a state-government architect is the chair of the committee. There's eight people on the committee. We met with them about five times at different stages of the process. They were very optimistic about our project and helpful in telling us what would and wouldn't work, how that would rub against certain parts of the industry, and so on.

GR:

They were very useful in terms of giving different points of view of how things might be received, because, of course, we're in our own loop.

CWZW:

You talk about focusing on practice-- there are projects that operate on a more conceptual level and others that operate on a more tangible, "pragmatic" level. How do you gauge the 'efficacy' of projects? (Considering that often times, conceptual architectural projects can easily be critiqued as frivolous.)

GR:

One of the things is, to answer you in a roundabout way, we didn't know how many architects/formations would be in the pavilion. As we went through the process with the committee, somehow it became apparent, for a combination of reasons: 1.) the scale of the pavilion and 2.) staking out a series of domains within practice. We have the humanitarian aspect in Health Habitat, the artist-architect in Richard Goodwin, manufacturing with Supermanoeuvre, urbanism with Maribor, media with The Architects radio show and community participation with Archrival.

What we tried to do is say that there are different forms of agency in different arenas. Our main "test tube" was conventional architectural practice as we understand it, so directly associated with the standard pyramid culture; doing buildings. We said, what about a whole range of other ways of forming in other domains that have greater agency? I supposed you'd say, hopefully, that the pavilion itself gives some evidence to that. The idea of Archrival (with the foosball tables) was to play this game about rivalry between the pavilions. They asked the French [pavilion] to open the back door and allow people through. It's the first time it's ever happened. So, all of a sudden, rather than the pavilion being a funny pocket down the back, it's this crossroads. Richard Goodwin, in the conceptual art sense, has rethought the whole way Venice works with his project, and so the efficacy of that is not direct, it's not physically changing Venice, but he's changing our conception of what Venice could be and those things do have effect. We think that conceptual agency is as important as direct agency. The argument is not one versus the other. All of these sorts of agency, in a complex world, have a role.

AB:

I think that when we asked the question at the beginning of the expressions of interest period, we were really asking people to think a little bit more extensively about how they would measure their effect on a larger concept of architecture in the world. So, [it's] not just the client-architect relationship, but a much more publicly spirited or beneficial and grander version of where architecture sits in a cultural sense. The people who answered that question very cleverly are the ones we have in the pavilion. They were able to articulate how they really had a much bigger impact than just a one-on-one client-architect relationship.

+ EXHIBITION

CWZW:

What physical constraints or challenges did you encounter in the Australian pavilion? How did you navigate them in the exhibition design?

GR:

One of the things is that this pavilion is a funny sort of building for showing art—it's not the white box, it has narrow spaces. So, understandably, the artists have always found it a bit difficult. It was a temporary pavilion that has stayed for 20 years. What the architects have always done is blacked it out, added funny things to it and they couldn't probably help themselves. What we said is: Let's just let this live in its last-ever year; it's badly demolished, a new pavilion will come. Let's actually let it be itself. Two of the things we had to do: The design is highly contextual; this is an exhibition design that probably can't travel. This is very much about this place. Secondly, [in terms of the foosball tables] each of these things weights a ton. There's been about 70 people crawling in and out of this building in the last nine days, in the most extreme install. Every project has never been made before and won't be made again; they're just for here.

AB:

We talk about the pavilion as an infrastructure. So, rather than thinking of it as a container for the works, it's just a platform for things to have in front. Almost all of the groups, with the exception of Supermanoeuvre (which is the sculpture inside), explode outward in some way. The radio show is going around Venice and being mobile, the Archival team is outside, have exploded outside to capture this arena foosball culture.

CWZW:

It's all highly interactive.

AB:

Yes and very performative, actually.

The pavilion is only just holding everything together as it vibrates around Venice. From a curatorial point of view, it's very fascinating. It was a very nice experiment.

GR:

We actually started with the idea that [the pavilion] should be a one-liner, because Venice is exhausting, hot, you go from one thing to another. We thought we were very clever with what we were going to do, but as we followed our own concept very rigorously, we found that what we had to do was make a new formation.

AB:

I think we've always felt that we're just on the edge of controlling the chaos. That was our job: to just hold it together in just enough shape so that it's identifiable, and then everyone can just be themselves.

CWZW:

About the performance: What did it mean to engage a dialogue with the Australian pavilion and the territory beyond (on the other side of the canal) with this new passageway?

AB:

The first idea is that we use the pavilion as a launch pad. We've always had an events program that's been tied to the physical side of this. We have Flash Formations coming together, a performance of sorts. We were very conscious that we weren't just going to be here [in the pavilion itself]. We were in Venice; the city has to be involved, the conversations that start here don't stop here. So, how do you promote/continue these conversations and make spaces for them to happen? This is what the schedule for the Flash Formations is about.

Richard ziplined across the canal, came into the building, came down the stairs and jumped into his water taxi, which went on a particular route around Venice and then came back again. And so Richard's performance on the boat and on the zipline is really about re-scripting the role of the city and understanding Venice in this particular case. He's done the same thing in Sydney with public and private interfaces, in Melbourne as part of his Ph.D.

GR:

The multi-level is important in that context. Richard is a good example. On one hand, it physically connects. For the Greeks and Serbians over there [on the other side of the canal], they think: What is this thing?

CWZW:

Was it a crazy procedure to obtain the permits for the performance?

AB, GR:
Yes!

+ ARCHITECTURE CULTURE

CWZW:

David Chipperfield says the "ambition of Common Ground is to reassert the existence of an architectural culture..."

What does this "culture of architecture" mean to you?

How do you place architecture as its own (exclusive) discipline?

How has architecture evolved to be more multidisciplinary?

How has it moved past just building?

GR:

I think that in this pavilion, we've been interested in is *genuinely in the culture*, if you take that at its full breadth. Not just even the culture of certain parts of the discipline, but the full culture. The Herzog & De Meuron piece in the Arsénale is fairly on the money in terms of this. There's this whole contested, political environment that the project has been procured in. That brings us into the full difficulty and opportunity of practicing architecture. I think we're more in that territory than the sense of the homage to others. Having the radio show, we've invented a whole culture. Carpenters and electricians in Melbourne on Tuesday nights will turn on the radio to listen to architecture.

AB:

We did a TedX talk in Sydney about 6 months ago, and what we really tried to get across is the idea that architecture is not a thoroughbred, but a mongrel. If you approach it from the idea of purity and some kind of Corbusien ideal purity, you're doomed to failure. We're much more interested in the complexity of contested ideas wrestling in an imperfect way with each other to create a space for things to happen. In that sense, this is one of those wrestling matches. We think we've got everyone talking to each other, but the ideas sit alongside each other and they don't try to be each other. Architecture can't be a pure discipline anymore. It has to understand itself complexly. There's many ways in which you can see the discipline moving forward. One thing we'd argue for is that architects need to be trained to speak to different audiences, and we don't get that training at our usual Ivy League or master's programs. We get taught how to speak to other architects, to impress ourselves with our own virtuosity. The best skill one could have is to learn to speak to politicians. It's a whole different conversation that has to happen, a whole set of other metaphors, and a whole sort of media training even.

GR:

What we're trying to do is ask questions to get people to converse about these potentials.





