

# A bridge over the troubled laguna

A proposed new pavilion at the Venice biennale exposes underlying tensions, writes **Ray Edgar**.

**H**AILED as Australia's best Venice architecture biennale, the 3D immersive exhibition *Now + When* captured the public's imagination in 2010. Lord Norman Foster reportedly called the exhibition of panoramic photographs and sci-fi cityscapes created by Australian architects, and viewed in the dark with 3-D glasses, "the best of the biennale".

Since its run in Venice last year, where it attracted record attendances of 93,000, the exhibition has been on the road. Sydney has seen it and so has Seoul, where more than 40,000 have queued to experience the vision of 17 Australian architects curated by John Gollings and Ivan Rijavec. Ballarat will host the exhibition later this year.

The exhibition's success prompts the question: if archi-

ture provides such cultural interest in Australia's creative talent, why is it subordinate to art at Venice?

Perhaps the answer lies in a more fundamental question: should architecture be seen as art or commercial trade export?

It's both, according to architect Philip Cox, who designed the Venice biennale pavilion.

Architecture circles have complained for some years that the Australia Council does not fund Australia's presence at the architecture biennale. Despite its cultural export value, architecture is not seen as part of the Australia Council's charter and, in any case, the council says it lacks the budget.

"We are as a nation spending vast sums on expos which are essentially for Australian trade, but we're not prepared to spend an equivalent or even a partial sum of that on the arts to portray Australia culturally in the best possible light," says Cox. "Of course [architecture] should be sponsored by the Australia Council because Australian architecture is essentially an export industry to the rest of Asia and the world.

"It's in fact a great pity that the Australia Council does not represent architecture as an art," says Cox. "It's a serious defect, I think, in the charter of the council at the moment."

"This has been discussed from time to time," says James Strong, chairman of the Australia Council, who says personally he considers architecture an art.

"The actual role of the Australia Council is pretty much confined by the amount of government funding," Strong says. "What everybody is realising is that there are finite resources for the arts."

The Australian Institute of Architects has to generate sponsorship to fund the Venice Architecture Biennale exhibi-



The Australian pavilion that housed the groundbreaking *Now + Then* exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

tion. Meanwhile, the Australia Council is also looking to alternate sponsorship models. In Venice on Wednesday, Australia Council chief executive officer Kathy Keele announced the sponsorship drive by Sydney businessman Simon Mordant to raise money for a new \$6 million pavilion to replace the temporary building Cox designed 23 years ago. It's hoped the new pavilion will be ready for the 2015 biennale.

Yet here, too, there is an emphasis on displaying the art

inside rather than expressing the best possible architectural form.

"What we're looking for is a space that works for the artists that are exhibiting," Mordant says. "The external design aesthetic, whilst it's interesting, is not what this is all about. This is about delivering world-class exhibition space. It's absolutely about the internals. It's the space for the artist. This is an art space. It's not an architectural competition."

The architects invited to

design the pavilion may be able to sway Mordant and his team. But such comments highlight the subordinate role architecture seems to have.

"It's worse than [subordinate], it's an opportunity missed," says architect and critic Norman Day, who with restaurateur Ronnie di Stasio started an ideas competition in 2008 to draw attention to the need for a new pavilion. "The buildings in the Giardini are in part an architectural expose of the best of architectural thought and to suggest

it's irrelevant for an Australian pavilion is a bit naive. It shows architecture is undervalued," he says.

One of the arguments put forward in defence of the Australia Council's attitude towards funding is that architecture is a commercial enterprise. "So is art, for god sakes," says Philip Cox. "It's very much a part of the art stock exchange with investment. I think it's a strange attitude and architecture has been and always will be an essential component of the visual arts."



Artist Anastasia Klose (with actress Rachel Griffiths) at the opening of the Venice Biennale's industry preview, the Vernissage, on Wednesday. Klose is one of three performance-based artists Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art has taken to the famous art event — cheekily uninvited.