

# Arts & Entertainment

## A yellow beacon set to light up Venice

Australian architects aim to lure the Biennale crowds, writes **Louise Schwartzkoff**.

**A** cubby house of basswood and gold leaf, an apartment block resembling a snowflake, and an Olympic tennis stadium will be among the Australian models on display at the Venice Architecture Biennale in September.

In the past, Australia's contribution to the festival, which takes place in alternate years to the better-known Art Biennale, has been a showcase of a few big names. This year, there will be more than 300 models from architecture practices around Australia.

The curators behind the entry hope that its sheer abundance will capture the attention of the Biennale's 130,000 international visitors.

The architects Neil Durbach and Wendy Lewin are members of Australia's creative team. They say the scope of the exhibition reflects the energy and diversity of local designs.

"There's a kind of renaissance happening in Australian architecture," says Durbach. "There's more money going in and more confidence, so the work is becoming much more inventive and experimental."

Says Lewin: "There's been a growth in young architects who are practising in their own right, and who have found positions in larger firms, so the quality and agility of the thinking has increased."

Australian artists have impressed the critics at the Art Biennale, but our architects have

traditionally had a lower profile. To draw the crowds to their outlying exhibition, squeezed between the French and Czech displays, the Australian committee has painted its pavilion bright yellow.

"It's incredibly exhausting schlepping from one site to another," says Durbach. "But the Australian pavilion will be this big, bright, optimistic beacon that you'll be able to spot from the main drag. Our hope is that people will go there to talk and to hang out."

Once inside, visitors will see a waist-high garden of models, perched on slim metal stands. The designs range from abstract experiments - the architect's version of a conceptual squiggle - to scale models of real buildings.

Chris Bosse's entry is a commission for the formula one champion, Michael Schumacher. It is a mixed luxury-residential, hotel and commercial building

to be built in Abu Dhabi. Laser-cut from sheer perspex, the model looks like a delicate ice sculpture.

"We've based buildings on efficiencies in nature," says Bosse. "A tree, or a snowflake, or a coral reef in nature is a model of efficiency for what it does. There are no straight lines in nature, because straight lines just don't make sense."

A design from Richard Johnson, Graeme Dix and Matthew Morel for the Australian Museum Collections and Research Building takes its inspiration from the filigree pattern of a moth's wing. The Sydney building's facade features a mosaic of glass panels that reflect light in shimmering colours.

While the models represent the avant-garde, a display on the pavilion's second floor will explore our architectural history. A digital slide show over the ceiling will display

innovative work from the past 200 years.

"There have been some amazing things made, but they have remained in many ways somewhat submerged," says Durbach. "Australia is seen as a little kid on the block in terms of cultural history, but we are trying to redress that. We want people to see these amazing, eccentric and sophisticated structures we are building."

To architects, Australia's relatively short history of building offers a creative opportunity.

"It can be liberating to work in a place without this overwhelming weight of tradition. We're not constrained in any cultural way," says Durbach.

Lewin believes the dominant style is a hybrid of Eastern and Western traditions, distorted by Australia's unusual geography.

She compares the development of Australian architecture to a plant growing in hostile

terrain. "Say you have a huge tree, which in its natural environment is tall and beautiful and symmetrical. But if you plant it on the coast, if it can stand the salt air, it will tilt to one side in the wind and develop a robust, tortured quality."

"We take the existing forms from Europe and Asia, and put them in a place with all this harsh sunlight, and slowly the old ideas become something completely different."

In the real world, an architect's ideas are often muted by council regulations and client demands, but in their biennale models of coloured resin, wood, cardboard, perspex and gold, the architects have found freedom to explore.

"That's what these models are about," says Durbach. "Our hopes and desires for each building."

Details: [www.labiennale.org/en/architecture](http://www.labiennale.org/en/architecture).



Confidence ... Wendy Lewin and Neil Durbach. Photo: Lisa Wiltse