

## Model Venice

From little things, big things grow: Australian architecture's innovative international showcase.

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**CRICKET BAT WITH** sculpted images of buildings, a “snowflake” high-rise in Abu Dhabi, 10 models representing the evolution of one building, a cubby house and a “thought tower” encapsulating a firm’s way of working – these are among the 300 models by Australian architects on show at the Venice Biennale’s 11th International Architecture Exhibition opening this month.

The “sea” of models comes from architecture practices of every size and type – from emerging one-person practices to those of established international firms such as Denton Corker Marshall and Hassell Architects.

At the historic Giardini di Castello, reached by *vaporetto* (water bus), 39 countries will exhibit in their national pavilions. They are in many ways competing for attention, says Australian co-curator, Neil Durbach. Another, Wendy Lewin, says the Biennale is, in the first instance, a kind of trade fair, which opens to the public for two months.

The Australian pavilion, which is being painted acid yellow – “the colour of optimism and curiosity”, say the curators – with a fuchsia slot running through it, has been reinvented with a new entry and outdoor space that organisers hope will be a hub for both discussion and socialising.

**Architects’ models (left) for the Australian pavilion were specified to be no bigger than the organisers’ invitation, a yellow circle (top right)**

Invited architects were asked to provide models that would represent the spirit of a building they’re working on, one already built, or one evocative of the essence of their practice – most have been purpose-built. The overall theme is Architecture Beyond Building. Lewin says the models represent the impulses that go into the making of architecture.

Says Durbach: “It’s the exploration that takes place by good architects in any project. These are architects who think quite hard about architecture, about what it means and the impact it’s going to have. It’s how you strip that back and represent, in a haiku form, the idea of the building.”

While the brief is broad, the specifications are very precise – the offerings were to be no bigger than the invitation – which, unfolded, is a yellow circle – the same dimensions as the yellow metal base, or disc, on which each work will be displayed.

The discs will perch on slim stands of different heights, creating a topographic quality, a miniature, self-contained landscape that the curators hope will capture all the beauty and aspirations of Australian architects.

Models – rather than drawings or photos – were used because architecture is three-dimensional. The images, plans or photos usually used to present architecture in the media is like wallpaper, giving little sense of the “making of things”.

“We’re interested in materials, the tactility, the shadow play – it’s something that architects do, make things – it’s an essential part of our life,” Lewin says. They had, she said, been deliberately inclusive, digging deeper than the few star

## ARCHITECTURE

Curators Neil Durbach and Wendy Lewin



architects who usually represent Australia. All the invitees either teach or have won awards for their work in the past three years.

What emerged was a collection of “weird and wonderful” architectural dreams, Durbach says. In many cases, they were dreams that would be realised because, despite the constraints architects bemoan (on one recent house, 16 consultants were involved in development approval), they continue to explore, and Australia is still a freer and more experimental environment than most.

“Despite appearing very conventional and tightly controlled, there’s this amazingly free declaration of thoughts and opportunities that probably doesn’t exist elsewhere,” says Durbach. “In Italy, and even in America with its so-called freedoms, there is so much control.” Australia, he maintains, has bold patrons who are giving architects a chance.

Upstairs in the pavilion is a collection of “truffles” – images of largely unsung but extraordinary Australian buildings. These, Durbach says, are “eccentric and startling projects, a history of amazing built work that we didn’t think existed in Australia – unknown gems.” Just as Australia had become known for its iconoclasm in movies, art and literature, so too were architects ready and able to take risks.

“Where else,” asks Durbach, “do these things exist in the world? Nowhere. As Rick [Richard Lepplastrier, Sydney architect] said, it’s this weird ‘coral reef of experimentation’. Where else in the world could the Opera House have happened at that point in time? Australian architects are not trying to be cautious and conservative any more. They are confident and skilful at producing these off-the-wall things, at having a go.”

At the 2006 Biennale, Australian curators tried to find the everyday beauty in harsh urban environments, presenting a parking lot and street signage, among other things. This exhibition aims to be “overwhelmingly” beautiful.

“Beauty does matter,” says Durbach. “There’s beauty in the idea, in the truth, in the origins of any project. Very few architects start off saying, ‘We want to make something ugly and make a lot of money.’ They struggle to make beautiful things, in circumstances where there’s often very little support from the authorities.”

 Venice Biennale of Architecture, September 14-November 23. For more details visit [www.labiennale.org/en](http://www.labiennale.org/en)

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