



03.08.2011

- > Mr. James STRONG AO
Chairman
Australia Council for the Arts
372 Elizabeth Street (cnr Cooper Street)
Surrey Hills NSW 2012

- : Australian Pavilion_Venice Biennale

Dear Mr James Strong,

It is the widespread and consensual opinion of artists, curators, Commissioners, architects and visitors alike that the current Australia Pavilion at the Giardini in Venice is inadequate and inappropriate, and needs replacement. On this there seems to be universal agreement.

The method and means of replacement of the pavilion is however, a different matter. The recent pronouncements and confirmations by the Australia Council that the decision to develop a replacement pavilion is underway is to be congratulated – even if there is a lingering sense that this decision has taken much longer than it should have. That the Australia Council is leading this project seems logical, given their mandate to promote the cultural excellence of Australia.

Nonetheless, it is not hard to feel that this important cultural destination and facility, as a representation of Australia, has been hijacked by a select group of “arts philanthropists” who are dictating the terms and conditions of the replacement for the Pavilion. Well be it that Simon Mordant has been designated as Australia’s Venice Commissioner for 2013, and as such he has provided energy and even financial support for a new Australia Pavilion. That a \$1 million contribution now confers upon him the authority to dictate how the commission for the new Pavilion will be structured, converts Mr Mordant’s philanthropy from being a “gift” to something very much with strings attached.

Recent statements by Mr Mordant over the issue of the commissioning for the new Pavilion reveal a serious lack of knowledge regarding the practice of architecture and the operation of design competitions. In his own words, Mr Mordant has stated:

"This is an art space. "It's not an architectural competition ... We need a functional exhibition space that works for the artist and complies with the Venetian authorities' requirements. And that's going to be something that's far more modest."

"We're not looking to build something architecturally outstanding but something that works for the artists."

This old dialectic that there is “a functional exhibition space” versus “architecture” is an anachronistic and totally discredited cliché about architecture and art exhibition spaces. The very idea that the authorities in Venice and the Biennale would accept such a

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mundane aspiration or initiative is hard to take serious. No one has yet proposed a grandiose, anti-art edifice – what has been advocated is treating this commission with the seriousness and professionalism it requires to achieve a work of architecture that is worthy of the site and the future exhibition of the art and architecture of Australia.

I can think of no other national arts authority that would advocate, on behalf of its national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, for “*not looking to build something architecturally outstanding*”. If Mr Mordant doesn't have faith that Australian architects can achieve a pavilion that “works for the artists (and architects)” and yet also attain the status of an outstanding work of architecture, then really what is the point of the exercise? That is the whole point of a truly OPEN competition – to canvas a broad spectrum of architectural speculations and with the help of a respected and professional jury to determine the scheme that best fits the curatorial and exhibition criteria of the pavilion.

The numerous petitions and letters supporting an OPEN competition have been recently answered with an amended competition structure, proposing a two-stage “open competition”. This competition is “open”, as long as one has “previous experience designing public buildings in an international context”. I can think of no other word than “cynical” in describing this proviso, and the continued use of the word “open”. This is clearly a return to all that Mr Mordant has advocated since the beginning – the selection of a small number of appropriately qualified Australian architects. Such a process is deeply compromised. It lacks transparency and it can only perpetuate the sense that the shortlist has already been drawn up. Given that applicants will be first and foremost selected on the basis of a portfolio of existing works, allows for prejudices and pre-conceived styles, networks and “the usual suspects” to be self-validating.

Mr Mordant says:

“The noise around ‘start with design and then deal with credentials’ doesn't actually cut the mustard at all with me. The government who own the site and the private-sector donors who are putting up the money for the redevelopment will only want to work with someone who can deliver the project. This has to start with the credentials and then go on to the design, not the other way around.”

Again, Mr Mordant seems confused about the procurement and delivery of architectural projects. This mythology of certitude based on “credentials” is without support for a project: 1) of the scale and programmatic complexity of the Venice pavilion; 2) based on the fact that no one in Australia has delivered a similar project in the Giardini in Venice in recent years - which would be the only comparable experience if one wants to set real credential criteria; 3) it is the role of the Australia Council to manage the delivery of the project with its specific demands related to Venice, not based on an assumption that any one architect in Australia can know how that is to be handled.

The point raised by Mr Mordant regarding “the private-sector donors who are putting up the money...” being in need of “credentialed delivery” raises a more fundamental concern with the entire procurement of the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It has been stated that a budget of at least \$6 million will be needed for the design and construction of the pavilion. The lack of debate as to why the Commonwealth has so readily acquiesced to relying on a set ‘private-sector donors’ to fund this prestigious project is puzzling. Clearly not having to find the sum of \$6 million makes life easy for Canberra, but surely this is one of those unique and glorious opportunities for Australia, as a nation, to invest in the cultural infrastructure that broadcasts the nation and its artists and architecture on the world stage. Australia has invested 10s, if not 100s, of millions of dollars in trade and cultural expos in Shanghai (which cost \$83m), Japan, Germany and elsewhere in the last decade – events which typically last no more than 4 to 6 months. The Australia Pavilion in Venice should be a continuing reflection on the nation for at least 40 to 50 years from now. The paltry sum of \$6 million would accrue a huge return on investment for the Commonwealth. Such short-sightedness is blinding.



And should the Commonwealth still go down a road where the Australian Pavilion is funded by private-sector donors, (who will surely receive lasting credit and acknowledgement at the pavilion) then it should be treated as just that – a donation. If it comes with the strings of overview, setting criteria and procedures for selection, and interference in the process of design development, well then that is not a donation – it is something else.

The recent perfunctory changes announced in the selection process for an architect for the pavilion have the smell of a decision made and unalterable. This is more than a disappointment for innumerable architects – young and old, known and unknown, small or large. It is the lost opportunity for a unique and a once-in-a-generation moment to conceive a pavilion in Venice that is produced by a genuinely open, inclusive and transparent process, aspiring to architectural excellence in all its varied criteria.

I have written this impassioned letter not because I am concerned that my practice, Lab Architecture Studio, is not eligible to make a submission. Rather, I have written it exactly because we are one of the Australian practices most qualified to participate, having designed and built galleries and museums, cultural centres, public buildings and commercial projects in Australia, China, the Middle East and Europe (including Italy).

More importantly, I have written this letter to advocate for a genuinely open, inclusive and transparent process, as we are the architects of Melbourne's Federation Square, itself the outcome of a process that did not deny a new, untested architectural practice the opportunity to succeed in creating an award-winning, internationally recognized work of architectural excellence. Federation Square was a design competition, profoundly more complex and involved than what is proposed for Venice. If we as architects, without a built project to our name before Federation Square, can achieve what was achieved there, then perhaps you can understand my total rejection of the specious provisos that Mr Mordant keeps injecting into the procurement of this project.

The time span for the completion of the pavilion (2015) is more than adequate to hold a two-stage competition, open to all registered architects (although I would advocate that it also be open to artists and designers as well) in Australia. There are many methods to oversee the execution and delivery of the project. The complexities that might arise will arise due to the nature of Venice, the Biennale committee, etc – this is the same problematic for a "credentialed, well-established" architect as for a novice. The project is not so complex that it can't be handled by any intelligent architect. And finally, irrespective of the chosen process, it will be the responsibility of well-curated jury to provide the guidance and selection nous necessary to achieving a project of excellence. And if this is the defining condition, then the exclusion – at the beginning – of an untapped segment of the architectural and design community is out of step with the best traditions of the Commonwealth. Anything less than a fully open design competition for the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale is nothing less than a betrayal of the design community.

Respectfully



Donald L. Bates
Director

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