

The Canadian Pavilion is asking for it

Maybe the razing of Canada's unwieldy art space in Venice can be an installation piece on its own

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

VENICE—"Making Worlds," the 53rd Biennale opened yesterday. But Barbara Fischer, this year's Canadian commissioner, thinks Canadians should start now looking to the future.

"That would solve many logistical challenges and would allow a more normal pace for exhibition production," she suggested a few days ago, looking exhausted yet quietly triumphant as we sat undisturbed in an alcove in Venice's Giardini, the venerable city park to the east.

Fischer, director of University of Toronto's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, is absolutely right. So we respectfully submit our proposal for an art event at the next Biennale based entirely on the Canadian experience coming after a few rocky days at this Biennale.

Proposed: The controlled destruction of the current Canadian Pavilion in Venice as a filmed public event.

Timing: By making our plans known now, Canada can carry on current Biennale director Daniel Birnbaum's vision to emphasize art's "process of creation" and "exploring new spaces for art."

Rationale: The Canadian Pavilion is asking for it.



ALBERTO PELLASCHIAR/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mark Lewis poses in front of the "inhospitable" Canadian Pavilion in Venice, Italy. Lewis is exhibiting his four-film installation, *Cold Morning*. (June 5, 2009)

NOT SO GOOD VIBRATIONS

You know things aren't going exactly to plan when:

Bad Vibe One:

Luggage from an entire Canadian contingent went missing Wednesday following a brief Lufthansa flight from Frankfurt. Matthew Teitelbaum, director of the Art Gallery of Ontario, with bags

Support: Everyone. Even the notoriously diplomatic Canada Council admitted in a press release this past week that the unwelcoming, squat structure – designed in 1958 by Enrico Peressutti, a Milan-based architect – "is notoriously inhospitable to contemporary artwork and in particular to new media."

"The pavilion demands a certain kind of installation," said the frazzled London-based artist Mark Lewis, now being sponsored in the pavilion. "Many of the artists who've had the Canadian Pavilion in recent years have fought the space and they often ended up making something that was like an installation. I tried to resist that as much as I could."

The council's admission comes a tad late for past new-media artists chosen as Canada's representatives in Venice. The prestigious past lineup included Rebecca Belmore in 2005, Jana Sterbak in 2003 and Michael Awad, David Rokeby and Eve Egoyan in 2002 Architectural Biennale. Belmore felt she had to "survive" the pavilion.

Lewis believes he solved some inherent problems though by having his four-film installation, *Cold Morning*, set up in the site's largest space carved out of the pavilion's former entrance.

"Mark and I actually like the pavilion," Fischer added. "We think it's a beautiful building with certain romantic elements: But it's a challenging building for art."

Indeed, *Cold Morning's* architectural and spatial explorations – cold concrete modernist Toronto architecture juxtaposed with a staged fight scene against a back projection of a torpid Vienna street – were themselves challenged by the building's curiously curved articulation.

Relevance: Better vibes from a new space. Because the vibes sure haven't been good this time around for many Canadian officials (see sidebar, above).

Budget for Pavilion bust up: Next to nothing. With the razing of the Berlin Wall as a prototype, Biennale visitors will be encouraged to chip away their own bits of the old Canadian pavilion by themselves. Cleared for free, the empty space would be ready for a new Canadian Pavilion that might challenge the antiquated Imperial pretensions of the nearby German, British and French pavilions.

Marketing: Canadian history is spread worldwide since the current pavilion suggests nothing more or less than "a Canada Parks Visitor's Office building," as Fischer says.

missing, suggested to jet-lagged Canucks lounging unhappily around Venice's sleekly modern airport that they might better pass their time in a colloquium discussion of the AGO's future. He was met with resounding silence.

Bad Vibe Two:

Canadian Art Magazine staffers were forced to wait for boxes filled with their summer issue launch due to given out during the magazine's Friday's cocktail party in the Giardini. The cover story? "Film as Art: Mark Lewis." The magazines arrived eventually – as did all the bags – but not before Canadian Art anxieties levels had gone through the roof.

Bad Vibe Three:

Italian officials blew off Thursday's Canadian party scheduled at the famous Rialto Fish Market, just off Venice's Grand Canal with the claim that a cocktail party was inappropriate for such a historical site. Like what site in Venice isn't historical?

In less than a day Canadian officials relocated the party to

Historical recording: Mark Lewis. Being the last artist forced to wrestle with the Canadian pavilion difficulties – "It's been intense," he said a few days ago. "I am exhausted. It's consumed our lives for the past six months" – no one could be imagined to watching these difficulties being removed bit by bit.

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a nook in the Giardini near where curious Venetians strolled while taking in the evening air.

Bad Vibe Four:

Despite an increasingly long line of visitors mulling around at the party, drinks could not be poured for a good hour after the party began. Drink tickets had failed to show up leaving thirsty Canucks to drink in only the luxurious jasmine scent from the surrounding hedge.