

Day 9, Australia and Canada pavilions – Bradley Kerr & Ellen Buttrose

This year's Venice Architecture Biennale is titled 'The Laboratory of the Future' and as set out by Biennale curator Lesley Lokko 'Architects have a unique opportunity to put forward ambitious and creative ideas that help us imagine a more equitable and optimistic future in common'. Overwhelmingly central to many exhibitions we saw was the intent to elevate First Nations and marginalised peoples voices. It was refreshing, it was affirming and strong.

On the tour we visited the Australia, Canada and Sámi (Finland, Norway and Sweden) pavilions, each directly addressing in different ways architecture and its relationship with colonial histories and First Nations People.

Bradley Kerr (Quandamooka) and Ellen Buttrose sat down to discuss what was seen and the responses shared. We encourage you to read this conversation in full, as these conversations are always nuanced, delicate and explore themes in depths that cannot be covered in sound bites. Indeed this is at the heart of the criticism of the Australia Pavilion.

We've included four themes below we that have unintentionally framed and are central to our yarn:

1. Knowledge systems and extraction
2. context and grounding
3. object and objectification
4. voice.

31 May 2023 – Tiny Bar in Venice, sunny, blue skies, cool breeze and four spritz.

B: What do you think you were expecting to see when you went to the (Australia) Pavilion?

E: I don't know I didn't really have any background of what it was, or what the exhibition was about, I think initially I thought it was about New Zealand, I thought Australia and New Zealand had combined and were doing something about Queenstown in New Zealand, I hadn't realised it was about Australia and First Nations and histories and extractive resources.

B: I didn't know what I was expecting, I think when I first saw it, and first saw a colonial building float above eucalypt leaves, ~~at first~~ it felt a little bit confronting, this big solid dominant thing that feels familiar, elevated above something that is inherently associated with Australia. It is uniquely rich the way, the smell and the feel of a gum - the way that it feels under your feet. With that whole experience, I think I was a little bit apprehensive at first.

B: After reading (the description) it didn't help with the understanding, I think, I was still really confused. I don't think it was until we heard an explanation what it all was doing that it helped.

E: Yes the explanation was helpful in piecing it together; I agree it wasn't immediately obvious. When I read the first blurb as you walk in the door. I was like oh, this is going to be interesting. Cool themes to explore and talk about.

E: I enjoyed the photography and the background.

E: The copper structure is pretty dominant

B: And it's quite reflective and I know they've been playing with the lighting. The day we were there at least, both lights were focused on the arches. If the themes are about extraction, why are we not highlighting the material on the ground and not the object floating above it? I thought it felt a bit confused.

E: In what it was trying to message

B: I thought the smells just weren't there.

E: If you walked into that space and it was filled with the smell of eucalypt. The smell of the bush it would have been completely different.

B: The smell hit you immediately, it would be completely different, the smell of home. If you contrast that with the Sámi Pavilion, as soon as you walk into that you are hit with a very distinct smell in a very positive way.

E: The Sámi Pavilion was so friendly and tactile you could really get in and around it, whereas the Australia Pavilion is very much an object where you stand and it's very static.

B: It almost would have been cool if you could walk on them and feel them, I don't understand why we couldn't walk on them? They have such a distinct crunch, and I think that would contribute to the experience.

E: Or If the whole floor was filled with them.

B: The invitation to share knowledge maybe because it was the first pavilion (we saw), I was really intrigued and excited to pull sheets off the wall, look at it all them, it was a bit of an exercise to put books together.

B: But then when we visited the Canada Pavilion and the Sámi Pavilion, these places are just inviting you to sit and stay and be there and be present, here are hundreds of books. Here is as much context as we can give you. Here are as many reference projects as we can give you. It is very clear and direct, and at the same time freeform in the way that you want to experience and read it all.

B: I think you were talking about the invitation to stay and be present..

E: Yes I thought that was super strong in the Canadian and Sámi Pavilions. The dialogue and the invitation to sit and engage with it in a completely different way. From sitting at the front in the little courtyard where you can just sit and be before you move in it was like an acknowledgment (of Country),

E: And the fact the information was layered on and that there were people actively researching (in the space). That the information that was there was gathered by the people it was wanting to serve, it felt very collaborative.

E: I think both the Sámi and the Canada Pavilion's authorship felt a bit different, it felt very dispersed in that there were lots of authors and lots of contributors and that no one really was the sole holder of knowledge. And I guess you probably would get that from the Australia Pavilion too but I think in a different way, it (Canada and Sámi Pavilions) almost felt more open source and that you were invited to engage in a conversation a bit more. And maybe that's what the Australian pavilion was intending to do with the pamphlets.

B: I was pretty excited to go and see it, I have never been to the Biennale, never been to the Giardini, and never seen the DCM building. And then we get there and there is this huge wall of projects that is work with indigenous peoples and knowledge. The interaction was quite fun, I think that was a good idea. I think making your own book is pretty fun, it might have been because we were comparing it with spaces that were really warm.

B: The difference between walking through a walking through a gallery and walking through a lounge room, or your friends lounge room vs walking through an architectural project that has just been finished. It like still perfect, you don't want to touch anything its still really clean.

B: I guess it's hard because I didn't know what the rest of the Biennale was going to be like; it had this really strong theme of giving a platform to indigenous voices and marginalised voices globally. And every space we went to there was a really strong generosity, and there was also a really strong sense of material identity. It was not as manicured as the Australian pavilion.

B: Maybe that's the right word for it, manicured, I think the Australia pavilion was so manicured and so precise. It felt like it was on display rather than interactive. So many things we saw were interactive, you could sit on it, you could move it around, you could put your feet in the ground and tickle your feet.

B: The stories on the headphones were really great. I think that's one of the most successful things, because it gave distinct space and voice to the Indigenous people (Confirm the Elders speaking were Palawa?).

E: Going in the Sámi Pavilion, it felt like an invitation into someone's room.

B: And the generosity and the knowledge sharing, and also in the identification that Australia has an Indigenous history. In both the Sámi Pavilion and Canada Pavilion there were Indigenous Australian books and Indigenous Australian voices, were on show as well. And there was a collective understanding and appreciation. Where as, Australia was hyper focused on Australia.

B: I don't know if that was, well that was obviously intentional.

E: it was pretty hyper specific, in referencing one building and one particular place, even though it was intended to be anywhere. I don't know if that bit was clear.

B: It is still quite difficult to understand

E: Yer, and then how the research relates on the wall relates to that. Maybe it didn't need to, I'm not sure.

E: I think in the other pavilions and in the Australia Pavilion, that show case of what is happening and what has been happening, like the library in the Sami pavilion, and in the Canada Pavilion there was a lot of texts and books and a lot of information. And in the Australia pavilion there was too, but in the Australia Pavilion it only seemed to be referencing what was happening now and not necessarily the stuff that has gone before and I think that, in the space that we work in there is often a lot of reinventing that happens in that that space. And not necessarily building on what has happened before, I don't think that building that has occurred was communicated that there is a lineage of this type of dialogue, I think that was missing. I just noticed that difference (between the pavilions).

E: It was very curated.

B: It was extremely curated. And I know we have spoken about this before, but it just feels like there is a lot of context missing.

B: Like how the Brazilian pavilion was focused on de-colonisation, as did so many other pavilions, they introduced the context at the very start. In a non abstract way, in a very easy to understand way, they were quite clear on who the audience is, and I don't know if you agree, but I feel there is three audiences, First Nations Peoples, architects and tourists.

E: And who do you think the audiences were for?

B: I can't tell for the Australia Pavilion....

E: I would say its architects, I wouldn't say its First Nations Peoples and maybe does include everyone else. Whereas the Sámi and Canadian Pavilion's ticked all three, in my opinion. What do you think?

B: Yer, yer I would agree. The Australian pavilion, now I think about it more, if the whole idea is of extraction and harmful extractive processes then then notion of a wall and taking things off of the wall, feels like it is in contrast with the point of the exhibition, like one single paragraph worth with one little theme. It's not a whole collection of knowledge, it's an abstract.

And did they have QR codes on them?

E: I think they did. Maybe it's a link and go and find out more.

B: So maybe its more, well maybe I need to go and do my research more before I get to critical

I think maybe because it was designed as a space to move through quite quickly rather than a space to spend time in. Which is in itself a contrast to the ideas of deep listening cited in the articles on the wall.

E: Yer and to occupy

B: It felt much more like art in a museum.

E: Which I think, I don't know how you feel about this, but I think, that's a dangerous space for those conversations to sit in, because it turns it into an object and an objectification rather than something that is engaged with and discussed and active and ongoing.

E: Were as I think you got that more from the Canada and Sámi Pavilion, it exists within a in a whole context.

E: One thing I also was missing from the Australian pavilion, which you spoke beautifully about before, is the idea of Terra Nullius, and what you were speaking about with Linda this morning.

E: The representation of Country in the Queenstown pavilion was very one dimensional perhaps, and I think there is a disservice in not representing Country in a more multidimensional way.

B: It was hyper specific, I found it very hard to relate to it, apart from than wanting to walk across those leaves and wanting to be smacked in the face with the smell as you walked in. Like wanting to be reminded of Australia, I didn't feel reminded of Australia when I walked in.

E: It was a bit of a cop out with the leaves. I mean they moved the entire sculpture across from Australia, but didn't move the gum leaves? I think it was a missed opportunity.

B: They said something about customs issues..

E: I could understand the other way, but hmm okay,

B: It was also underwhelming, those gum leaves.

E: Totally

B: I mean if you're going to do it, fucking do it.

E: Yer, a massive pile.

B: Why wasn't it piled? Fill one of the arches.

E: Imagine that, buried in it.

B: The floating above thing, the hierarchy and approach to country, really clashed with how I would have viewed it

E: That was the dominant thing in the room and the leaves and photography stay behind it.

B: Yer, you wanted to just look at this copper thing they welded.

E: The object.

B: We've looked at so much architecture and so much of it has been objects in landscapes, not of landscapes.

So to contrast that, have you seen Gathering Space between Sarah-Lynn Rees (Trawlwoolway) and N'Arweet DR Carolyn Briggs (Boon Wurrung)?

So this exhibition is extremely contextual, so that map is of Victoria and maps different geological regions, and through that they identified different types of sand, stones, timbers that are endemic to all these places. So all of these stacks and piles that can be rearranged to be used as furniture are all materials of Country and are of materials endemic to these regions.

And this plus a map of Australia would tell a really really incredible story of something tangible and practical.

E: Its adding, I look at that and I'm learning something, its progressing a conversation, how can we look at things in ways we haven't looked at them before? It is a more complex portrayal of landscape and material and Country, rather than just... It's different to what we saw in the exhibition.

E: It's also about authorship, I keep getting a bit irked about. I don't enough about it, the authorship..

I don't know how you feel about this, but in in the way we practice, we would never involve an artists from other places to talk about other people's Country.

(the exhibition was) Talking about Palawa, there didn't appear to be a Palawa person involved in the project.

A Palawa voice was missing from the team, why was it not focused in South Australia?

B: Yer that's a good point

B: I feel like the strongest idea was that there was, that colonised countries have a Queenstown, super obvious at first, but it's not just Queenstown, its actually everywhere you go.

E: They do identify a particular place, the whole thing was titled under the banner of Queenstown and they refer to a specific place.

B: I think that's a really good observation.

E: The Gathering Space exhibition is very beautiful..

E: The Canada Pavilion was a big call to action, how can everyone become involved and how can we consider things differently, what is the jump forward, how can we all come together and what are the next steps.

B: I linked how it was- this is where we are at in the conversation, this is everything we have done, this is where we want to go, and this is how we are trying to do it. And we are still researching, but we need more voices and we need more involvement which was really nice.

B: It really reminded me of the Occupy Wall Street, which was what 2009?

E: Oh year it did (in how the timber structure was built within the Pavilion)! It was like the Occupy the Canada Pavilion. Quite literally.

E: You can't put something like that on a wall in a space and not have it talked about. That's what it's there for.

B: I just feel so strongly it was missing a lot of context.

E: In specific ways?

B: They had a full spare white wall. Like a big map of First Nations Australia would have made a big difference. And then this (work) is from this space (or Country). They talked a lot about extraction, and where was the history of that extraction? What species of eucalypt of was used and why? If Queenstown is representative of colonisation then where is a world map of the queens towns, and all of the First Nations Peoples that were affected - where is the context to this thing.

E: It's like their introduction and that acknowledgement (was missing), whenever we start a project and whenever we are talking with TO's and First Nations Peoples, and the conversations will often start with where are you from, and its all of that (that's missing).

B: Yer, absolutely.

E: And none of that was in it.

B: Yer, always starts like that, whose your mob how you going, Who do you know?

E: Yer, where do you fit in the web.

B: In Melbourne the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung word is Wominjeka, which is welcome, it means like come with purpose. But the way I've heard people say it is as, welcome, what are your intentions for being here, what are you doing here? Why are you being here?

And it's such an appropriate way of thinking about moving onto someone else's country, what are we doing and why? What are our intentions? And having that context at the start would have made a world of difference. Or even on the giant concrete block that's out there.

E: Yes, the only space that is connected to the outside. It's a very introspective building that one.

B: But If you positioned something in that space that was the welcome or the why you are here. These are the contextual issues in Australia and this is what we are going though and this is what we are facing at the moment and this is how it relates to architecture. We are about to go through a tumultuous time for First Nations Peoples given the referendum - I don't know how this or the Uluru Statement wasn't included. Again just so much context missing.

E: I think that would have really changed it, and grounded the project.

I think you can tell, to me it felt academic.

The Canadian pavilion there was no set type face and it felt like a work in progress, and that was okay.

This Mob Collective, are a collective of First Nations artists and they had a project where they wanted to reconnect with their material and their material understanding of the material of where there Mob's from and create a culturally safe space that uses materials from Country in that were all harvested in specific ways that was designed as a space.

The roof is stringy bark tree bark, sand is from a specific space, and stones were from a specific space. 1 person was focused on undertaking each material and where the materials were from and why they were important culturally and how they were used culturally. And then the rest were forming the space and detail and then building it. It was such a cool exhibition

E: It's awesome.

B: The thing that strikes me most about this, is that how when we went to the Arsenal, the introduction was all about giving voice to emerging and marginalised indigenous and first Nations practices and communities, and we have those groups and communities in Australia, we have First Nations practitioners and First Nations artists, that do specific place based work and from what I understand of the Australia there is only one Indigenous contributor (on the curatorial team).

B: When the whole theme and everything we have been thinking and learning, is a of perspective and voice of First Nations people, whereas ours wasn't, and it felt like that.

E: Absolutely I think you've hit the nail on the head.

E: It would be interesting to know more about the team and their roles, who was leading the process and how the team was made up. Was Ali involved in more than just the photography?

E + B look at team on phone.

B: I just think it would have been great to see something that was just a full team of Indigenous artists and architects. Feels like a missed opportunity almost. Which I'm not sure if you can say that but..

E: Absolutely, I think we could ask the question, why wasn't the team a full team First Nations.

B: Which is a very valid question. And a question that is coming up a lot in Australia. On projects that are for First Nations people. And you could even tie that into the Voice and Uluru Statement of the Heart.

There is a very obvious parallel between what is happening in society and architecture in Australia.

E: Completely, trust me this is one that I think about a lot. You know I even think about should I even be in this space at all..

B: No, I think you need to be in this space, I mean what do you feel?

E: I would never ever do a project like that, in the sense that I feel primarily First Nations architecture (and the conversations around it) should be by First Nations architects and that is the absolute goal. I have done some work talking to schools in Cairns talking with schools with diverse populations, including First Nations kids about architecture and what it means.

B: That's cool how long have you been doing that?

E: I haven't done any this year, but did a whole bunch last year.

E: I can talk about Cairns and the context of the Cape, there is so much work in that space alone, for community, and so much work happening in community, and the proportion of Indigenous architects we have in Australia, and I think until that time we have a critical mass of Indigenous Architects, it's the unfortunate reality.

The cultural lens, the research, and cultural awareness, is something I'm always learning.

B: I think that's just a critical way of being and a good way of being.

E: I see what I do as being a role as a facilitator, and I think that's the biggest thing. So for example there was this project I was working on for the client X located Community X and they had really strict tight process and guidelines. And I see my role as being an advocate and my role in those projects is to push as hard as possible to have the right conversations with the right people, because they won't do it otherwise. And it's trying to push projects to have the right people at the table and design process, that allows projects to be (more) reflective of where they are from and who they are for.

B: Do you do a lot of research with your practice?

E: Yer, if we are doing a new project, so for a project say the Community X one, I read a lot, we will talk a lot in our office about the histories of that place, we will talk to TO's who are close to our practice about who the right people are to talk to. Then we will go and talk to them to check if they are the right people to talk to, and then talk to the local community council. Yes, we try and do as much as we can.

B: And why don't you think you have anxieties about being in that space?

E: Because I'm not First Nations, and I don't know, like I don't have the same connection to Country, and history and lineage, I don't ever want to claim to, it's trying to know what you don't know and not ever try to speak for that.

And I think what is interesting about this project is that this is a very big platform that is a massive platform for what they are doing right now.

And they are claiming to say things or occupying a space, if you are even remotely going into this space it has to be done right.

B: I think that's a really good observation and I think that's probably why it feels the way it does and why it feels very rigid. There isn't a lot of fluidity in that space.

E: What do you think about it?

B: I feel like, one of the Wurundjeri Elders says at the start of a project, that for us to go anywhere we need to do it together and that in working on any project, or getting through society. He says, they are here now, white fellas are here now, and they aren't going anywhere, and the only way to get through it is to work together.

I've had a lot of talks with Sarah and other people where people have asked these types of questions and really it's just we need as many people on our side in advocating. And there are right ways and there are wrong ways. And it sounds like you're doing it the right way.

E: Yer.. I try to, and that's how I feel, there are spaces that are not my space, and its being an ally rather than occupying a space, I'm not trying to occupy that space. But in practice, trying to bring the people who do need to be in that space, so clients and elders to the table.

B: It's making space for Blak voices within your projects.

E: And that's at all phases of the projects. I mean at the moment I'm only working with Indigenous builders, and that's partly because of how we write in training and employment outcomes into our contracts about upskilling and percentages of training outcomes. Queensland is good; in any state government project over a certain size they allocate a particular percentage target of Indigenous employment for the construction. But we write that into almost all of our contracts, and then also make it quite specific for the project type, and place. For example we are having conversations with a client in community about how write the contract and training and employment outcomes so that they are specific to that community.

And literally writing in all the local suppliers, and working the local employment agency to identify specific areas of employment right for the community.

B: That's amazing, that's a lot of work, a lot of research, you aren't copy and pasting your schedules there, that's a lot of work.

E: Yer, but it has to be, it has to be holistic, if it's just one avenue it doesn't hold water. And look there are things I wish we could do more of, we (like everyone) still have the time and money factor as well.

B: Yer, its hard, you do the best with what you've got, and it sounds like you are.

B: I don't think you should feel guilt over wanting to help like that, listen to the Uncles, it's not going to get us further.

E: I think it would be awesome if every practice practiced more like that, and I feel like that's what this conversation is, how can be we all be aware of the histories we all have, and can we all priorities having the right people at the table, how can we be aware that the pendulum has been swung in one particular direction highlighting one particular set of voice for a very fucking long time, how can we swing it back so that we can include everyone, and it is acknowledge where we come from.

B: Yer and we are about to go through that.

There is this really great quote, about people who aren't marginalised and when things start to move close to that line,

Quote – When you're accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.

B: Danièle Hromek, have you talked to or read her stuff?

E: No I've heard her speak on Deadly Djurumin Yarns, and read a little of her stuff, and wow she is so incredibly articulate, holey shit.

B: Yer she's amazing, and I've read everything she has published, and she publishes all of it for free on her website. Because she's tired of everyone asking about what can we do, how can we help, when it's all freely available. And so she's like have you looked at my website, it's all on there, everything I've ever done and you can download all of it, her thesis, short stuff, terminologies, understanding, examples. I direct everyone there.

E: how generous of her, so so generous.

B: I can't remember where I was going with that now...

E: It's been a long week

B: A long 10 days

E: So much has been covered, so much still to cover.