



It's alive!

The latest work by Toronto architect Philip Beesley – a magical installation with a mind of its own – electrifies the Venice Biennale.

— By Helena Grdadolnik



The ancient belief that all matter has life gave rise to Toronto architect Philip Beesley's vision of buildings that can respond to light, heat and even a person's mood. Working with a host of collaborators – including engineer Rob Gorbet and chemist Rachel Armstrong – Beesley filled the Canada Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale in Architecture with his latest work, Hylozoic Ground, a petrified forest made from thousands of digitally fabricated acrylic components.

The international exhibition in Venice is the closest contemporary architecture comes to having an Olympics, with more than 50 countries participating. Hylozoic Ground didn't win the coveted Golden Lion for Canada, but it was definitely a contender and the talk of the town. At other countries' exhibit openings, in line for the washroom, and at dinner, I overheard countless discussions on Canada's contribution – there were a lot of superlatives and rapturous praise.

The Hylozoic Ground project has evolved over the last five years, growing

larger and more complex with each iteration from Copenhagen to Mexico City. The installation in Venice is the most ambitious to date. The intricate web of fronds, filters and whiskers was painstakingly assembled by hand and fitted with microprocessors and touch sensors so that the piece interacts with visitors. Beesley's studio has created a delicate architectural Frankenstein with a mind of its own. The installation doesn't always respond to direct requests, even from its master. Parts wake up and nervously twitch or tentatively reach out when someone approaches, while others lie dormant even if prompted by waving hands, only to spring to life a few minutes later. The beast is temperamental, but that is part of its charm and the reason it feels alive, rather than programmed.

Even when the installation was crowded, the experience was somewhat solitary, as individuals were swallowed into the web. People were so enthralled that all that could be heard was the sound of the mechanical crickets and the odd exclama-

tion of surprise. This year's overall theme for the biennale was "People meet in architecture" – in Canada's exhibit, people got lost in the woods. The visceral experience made a virtue of the interior of the pavilion: the floor-to-ceiling angled glass facing the courtyard was covered with a translucent black film that reflected the installation against the faint backdrop of the surrounding tree canopy.

Hylozoic Ground is a beautiful and engaging sculptural piece, but Philip Beesley also sees it as a prototype for the future of architecture, where building systems react and modify themselves according to environmental factors. It would be great to see this project's technology applied and tested with inhabited spaces outside of a museum setting. We aren't too far away from a building that could breathe in carbon to clean the air. With this installation, it is easy to imagine a building that could also give you a hug when you feel lonely. ◀



Hylozoic Ground comprises an intricate lattice of small, transparent acrylic meshwork links, covered with interactive mechanical fronds, filters and whiskers. These digitally fabricated components are fitted with microprocessors and sensors that respond to the human presence.