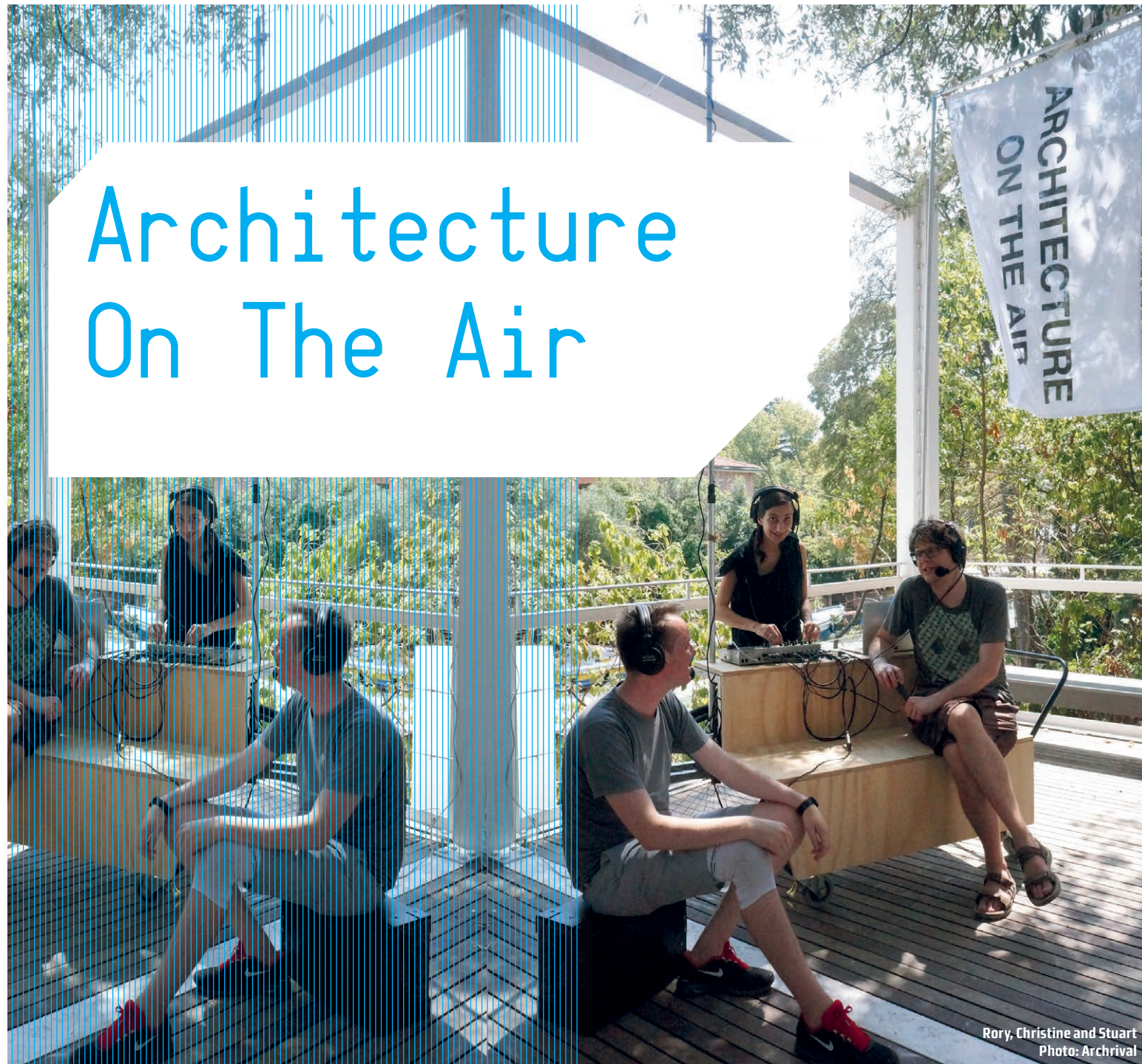


# Architecture On The Air



Rory, Christine and Stuart  
Photo: Archival



BY STUART HARRISON

In late August, we took the *The Architects* radio show to the 2012 Venice Biennale of Architecture, the biggest architectural exhibition in the world. This was the end of nine months of planning and design after we, the hosts of *The Architects*, were invited by the Australian Institute of Architects to be one of six teams to represent Australia at this year's Biennale. What was significant here was that the four of us who form the radio show team – myself, Simon Knott, Christine Phillips and Rory Hyde – were invited not as individual architects but as the thing that brings us together, a radio show on RRR.

The overall theme of the Australian Pavilion was *Formations: New Practices In Australian Architecture*, and our project, one communicating architecture, was seen as sitting well within this expanded definition of what architects do today. To background, *The Architects* radio show is one of a handful of shows in the world that discusses architecture and design – notably the most recent one is *The Plan* on Radio Adelaide, which started a couple of years ago.

The Venice project for us was an opportunity to expand on the series of Outside Broadcasts (OBs) we have done since starting the show in late-2004, in the dying days of the Fitzroy premises. These OBs started with one at the new observation deck at Eureka Tower,

for which we won a CBA Award. This became the model, and we have since had OBs at Federation Square (two of them), one at the Melbourne Recital Centre, and last year one at ACCA on Nathan Coley's *Platforms*. RRR Program Manager Mick James has through this time encouraged us to undertake these OBs and look for interesting places to do them. Venice was going to be a big step up! Mick suggested straight away getting Rob Wanless, who had been our tech on most of those OBs, involved. Rob knows all things and we cannot thank him enough. And after a first meeting early this year we had the outline of a strategy for how we could do the two things we wanted to: a live show from Venice in our normal Tuesday 7pm time slot; and to broadcast locally while there.

What became clear was that we needed the Tieline (the i-Mix G3 Mixer/Codec) to be exact. This is a fine piece of Australian-made radio equipment that is both the mixing desk and a codec up-linker that could make the live connection happen. The Tieline is often used by RRR for OBs to transfer the signal back to the station. Normally, however, we'd use an ISDN line and getting those in to your OB location is the key constraint as to where they can happen. We were set to broadcast from the Giardini in Venice, a garden setting with national pavilions, a kind of exhibition parkland. ISDN was not going to happen, but the Tieline can also connect using IP (internet) or even a phone line. To get a decent connection we needed to use IP on good broadband. We did tests here in Melbourne back to a sister Tieline in master control at RRR that all worked, but that was not from Venice. The quality of the connection at the Australian Pavilion was going to be essential. We did speed tests and the connection was okay but not great. A lot of bureaucracy (so much) got us a new dedicated broadband connection into the pavilion just before we got there.

On the day myself and Rory Hyde arrived, the first thing we did was go down to the pavilion with the Tieline and conduct a test back to RRR. The Tieline is two-way, so what we were looking for was being able to hear RRR. We could, clear as a bell. We knew it should work. We spent the next few days setting up our project – a fully mobile self-powered radio station, in the form of a trolley.

The idea of a trolley evolved over the months and was conceptually and literally the armature of the project – it would house the gear and us, and be able to be moved around. It was an exercise in minimalism. What is the least you need for a radio studio? Headsets, the panel (Tieline), an FM transmitter, an aerial, a logger (one of the harder bits), a dedicated cheap laptop with USB sound card that could capture everything going through the panel, and inputs (a jack that we could plug into an iPad, another laptop, smart phone, whatever, to play music and carts). In the past when we did an OB we had a table, until the ACCA broadcast where we just sat around on a platform with headsets and Rob behind us. The trolley was the next step – part seating, part table, part

platform, but on wheels. We wanted to move around the Giardini and make radio visible. We designed the trolley together and then got local outfit Aussie Trolleys to make the frame and wheels (two bike wheels, two castors) and then good friend Paul Coffey clad it for us in plywood – more thanks there.

We bought a PA so, like at a regular OB, when we were on this could be heard by the crowd. But what about people a bit further away? Many smart phones don't have FM radios (although many phones, like Nokia ones, used to), so how could people tune in? We decided to give away some radios, a thousand of them. We found one we liked (old-school, with a dial) and good enough that people could keep it, take it home and listen to their own community radio stations. With some little stickers and a lot of time we had *The Architects* radio and handed them out during the three months of the Biennale.

We broadcast for four days and generated 12 hours of radio. The endpoint recorder captured this and when we left we kept the transmission going on loop. Like Voyager into space or a rescue signal, it broadcasts locally in and around the Giardini.



Stuart and Simon  
Photo: Rory Hyde

On the trolley itself we placed the radio 'station' stuff on the lower shelf - the transmitter, the end point recorder, power supplies, both mains and a car battery for when we were on the move (don't ever try to buy a car battery in Venice). The top shelf was more temporary. The Tieline sat here, as did whatever input device, headsets and a roving mic. Two poles came out of the trolley. The all-important aerial was one of these (a tuneable four-rod Centrefire Antenna from the US, which we attached to two telescope tent poles for extra height); the other was a flag pole. We had a flag made up that read 'ARCHITECTURE ON THE AIR', to make our project visible and to add to the ephemeral nature of radio itself, floating in the air.

It all worked. The transmission pumped out and we generated more content in a few days than we normally do in a few months. It was exhausting, we had new appreciation for *Breakfasters* and others who do radio a lot, every day. The live show was strangely seamless (our regular listeners in Melbourne were taken by how normal it sounded); the quality was great, the structure of

the show maintained - familiar territory in an extraordinary context. We tried to set the scene around the edge of the Australian Pavilion: trees, a canal, talking and thinking; what was the state of architecture in these difficult times?

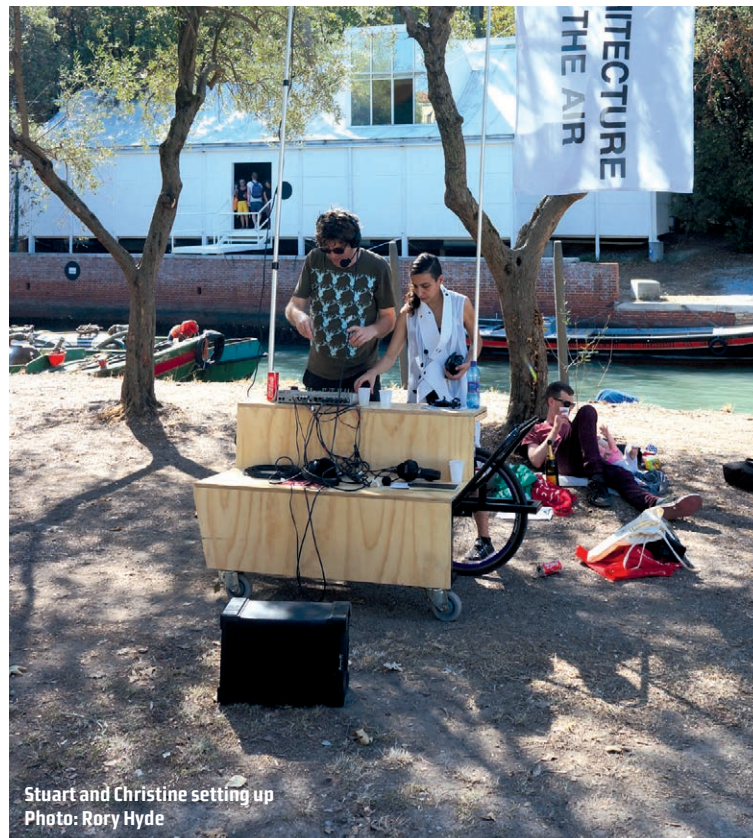
We spent a lot of time on the deck of the Australian Pavilion, and we did the live broadcast from there. It's a quintessentially Australian space - shaded, outside, informal. It became our base during set up and when performing. It was here, during the lead-up days, where we first hooked up our PA into the Tieline whilst connected back to RRR and experienced an unexpected highlight - we had RRR pumping out from the Australian Pavilion as we worked.

**Funding for this project was brought together from Australian Institute of Architects, RMIT Architecture, a CBF grant and The Architects. Technical support was courtesy Rob Wanless of Valley Sound.**

**Stuart Harrison, Simon Knott, Christine Phillips and Rory Hyde present The Architects, Tuesdays 7-8pm.**



The Trolley  
Photo: Stuart Harrison



Stuart and Christine setting up  
Photo: Rory Hyde



Opening day at the Australian Pavilion  
Photo: Stuart Harrison

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