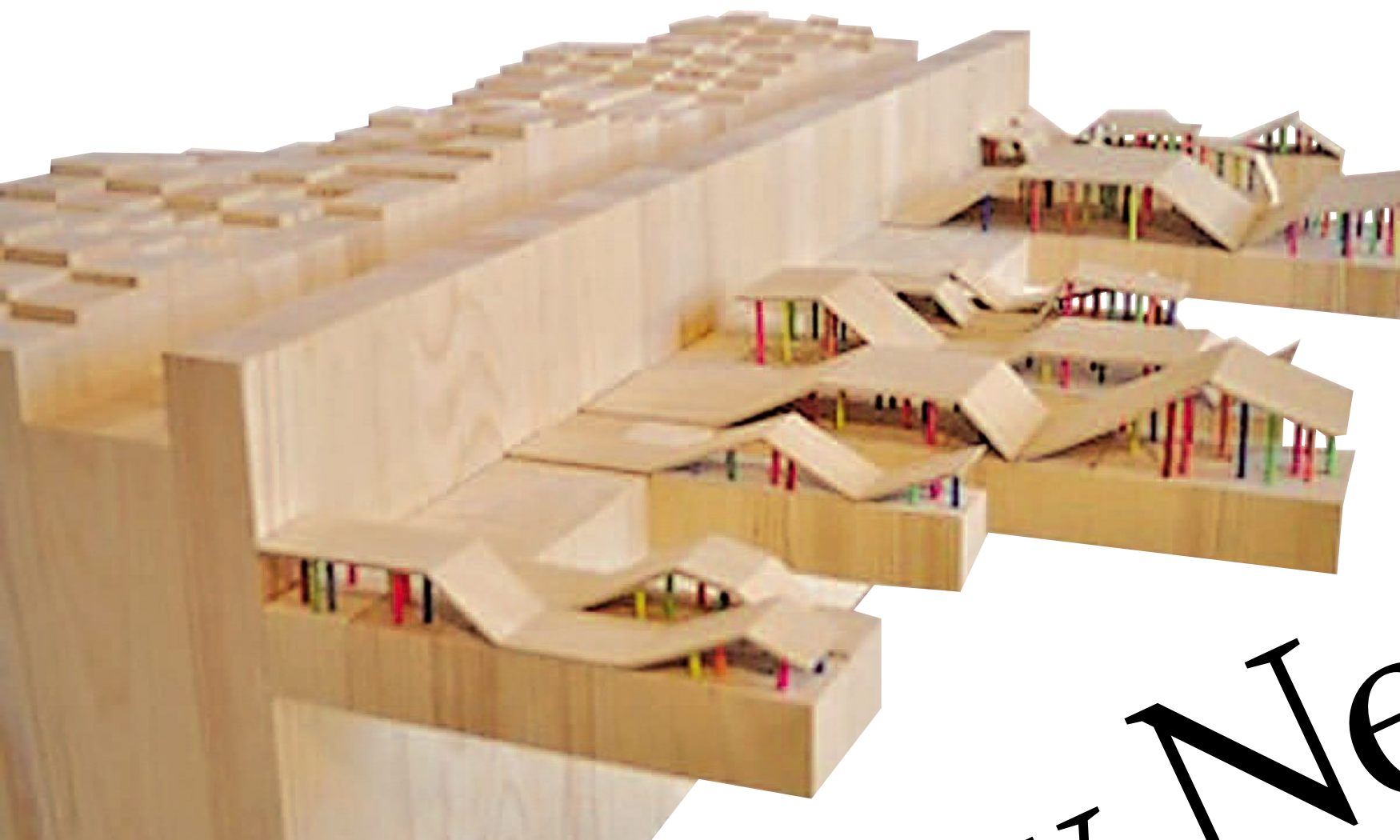


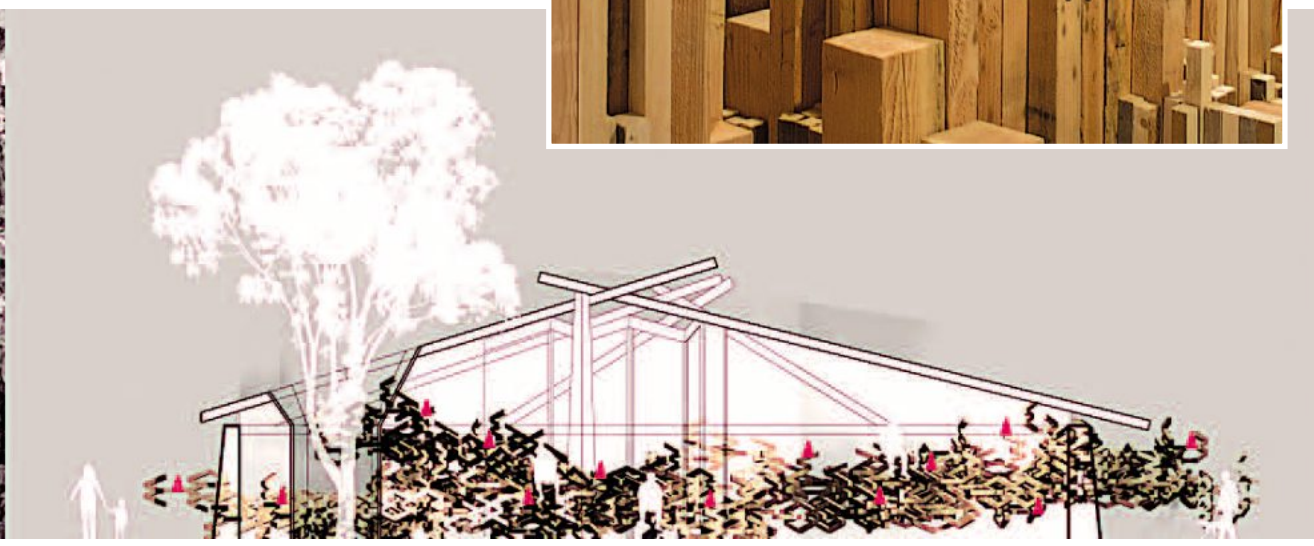
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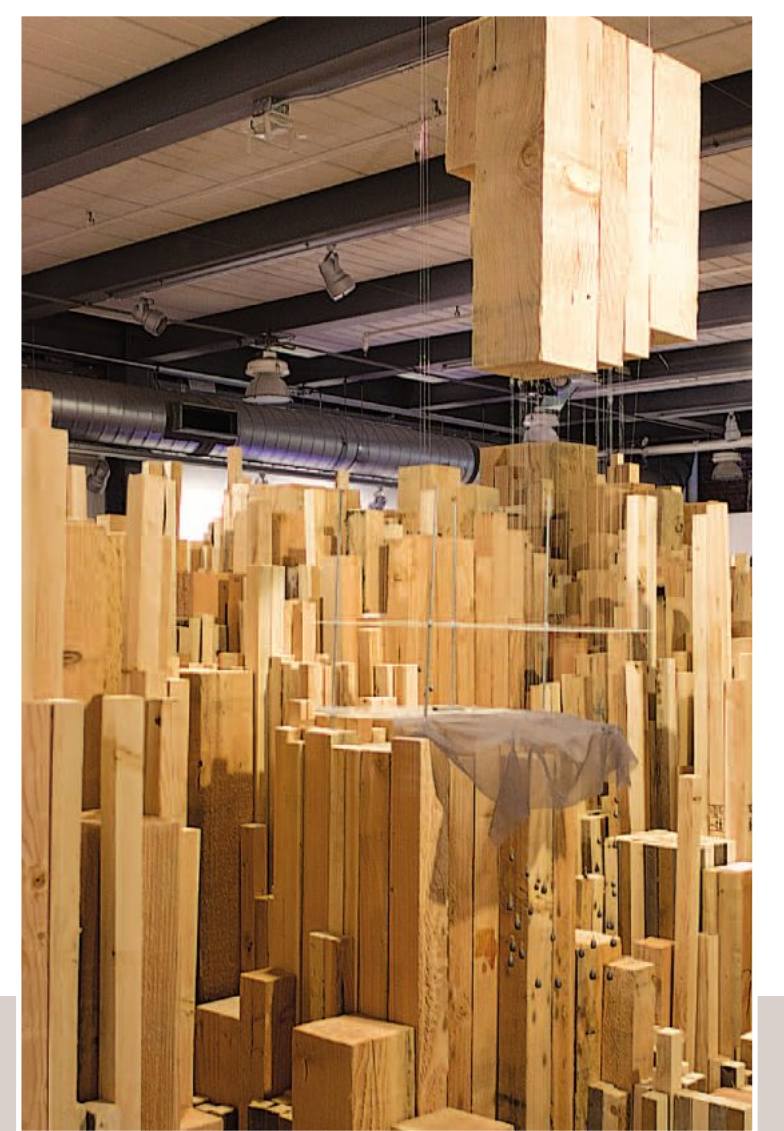
Thanks to the altruistic architecture agenda of two Winnipeg-based curators, New Brunswick's Acre Architects has delved into its cultural memories of the province to find a fount of potential in our migration story and perhaps a blueprint for our future. Story by Mike Landry



One of the winning schemes from the Maritime regional exhibit heading to the Winnipeg Art Gallery in March for the national competition. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



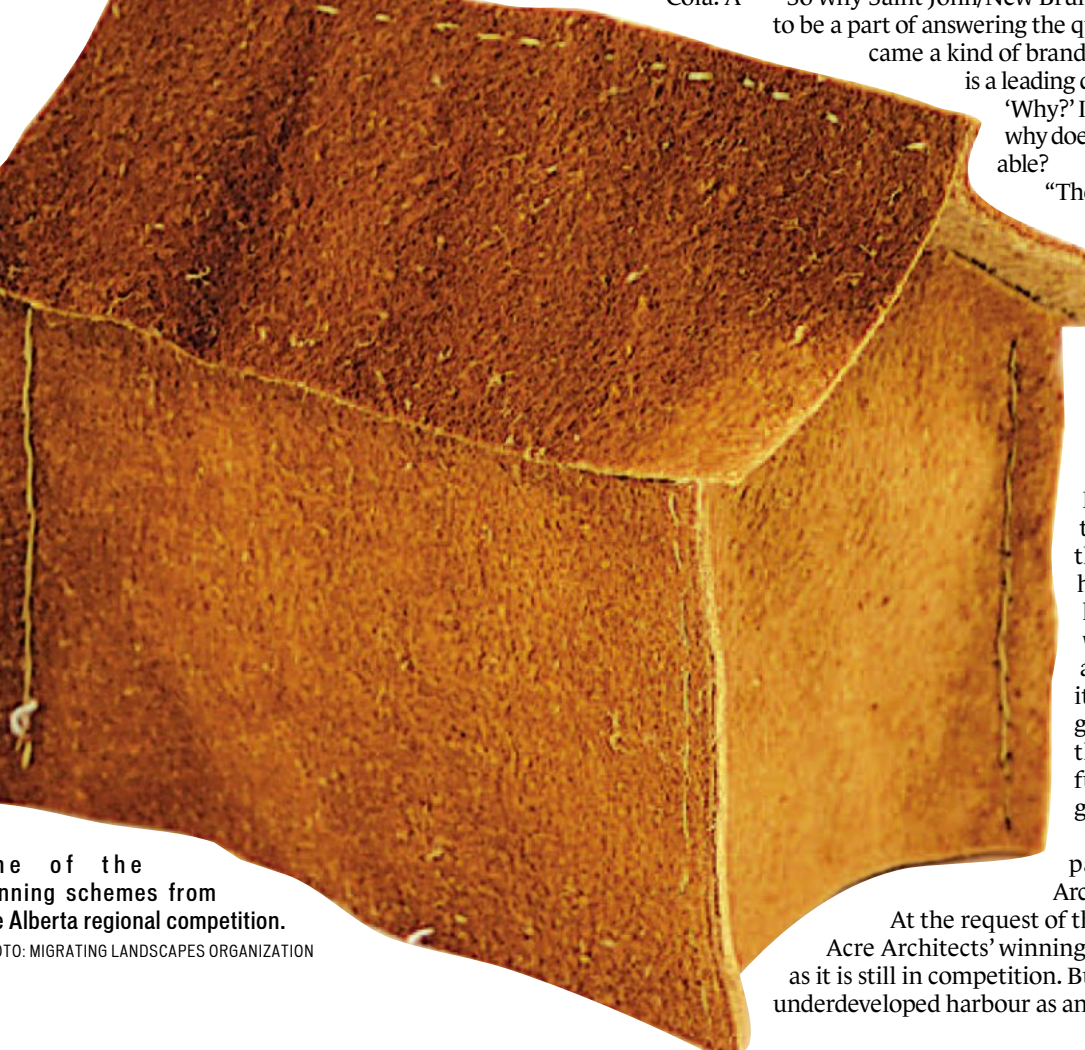
Another of the winning schemes, top right, installed at the Maritimes regional exhibit earlier this month, which is vying for a ticket to the Canadian pavilion, pictured above, at the 2012 Venice Biennale in Architecture from August to November. PHOTOS: SUBMITTED



## The new

It's Saturday morning and all is calm in the Port City. A fresh snowfall adds a soft touch to Canada's gritty first-incorporated city. Smoke from the Irving Tissue mill drifts across the snow-sullen west side. The container cranes are looming sleeping giants. An oil tanker floats on the horizon between Red Head and Partridge Island. In the South end, the only sounds are the hum of light traffic, proceeding like Dinky cars along the Saint John Harbour Bridge and Chesley Drive, and the scraping of someone shovelling snow in front of The Salvation Army Saint John Centre of Hope on Saint James Street. Against the -20 C cold, Stephen Kopp wears a grey toque emblazoned 'acre' in hunter orange, advertising the local firm, Acre Architects, he founded with his wife Monica Adair. Standing under the "Three Sisters" lamp in St. Patrick's Square at the foot of Prince William Street, he surveys the west side. "Imagine how amazing it would be to wake up to that view every morning or being able to look out to it while you skated on an outdoor rink," Kopp says. Looking around the harbour, Adair and Kopp see the future and potential. But they also can't help seeing the reality - an obstructing chain-link fence protecting expanses of pavement, parked cranes and diggers and Kent mobile homes. "It's 11:30 on a Saturday morning and look around - there's no one here," Adair says. For them, if it New Brunswick has a future, it begins here. It begins in the past.

"Saint John eagerly opened its doors, setting the stage to be one of Canada's most promising cities for business and new ideas - and it once was," Kopp says in a video he made along with Adair, John Leroux, Alicia Halas and Jessie Croll as part of a submission for *Migrating Landscapes*, a national competition to participate in Canada's pavilion at the 2012 Venice Biennale in Architecture this August. "(T)oday, Saint John is a dwindling city within a province that struggles to communicate and prioritize its value." Acre Architects' submission was one of two winning schemes, selected from a regional Maritimes exhibition earlier this week to be part of the national competition at the Winnipeg Art Gallery from March 15 to April 29. The other regional finalist was Marianna de Cola. A



One of the winning schemes from the Alberta regional competition. PHOTO: MIGRATING LANDSCAPES ORGANIZATION

jury of Canada's architecture elite will decide from the national exhibition who will be included in Canadian pavilion this August. Conceived by Winnipeg's 5468796 Architecture and Jae-Sung Chon, *Migrating Landscapes* will offer Venice the new landscape of Canada, with designs constructed from the cultural memories of young Canadian architects from across the country. Selected participants had to incorporate their model as an intervention upon an abstract, wooden landscape outlined by the *Migrating Landscapes* organization. The organizers describe the biennale as the Olympics of architecture, and they're looking for its Team Canada. Name a name in Canadian architecture, and they're likely involved in project, between participating architects, firms, school and regional organizers, and their partnerships. Acre Architects were the only New Brunswick-based group in the eight-finalist Maritimes exhibition at the Dalhousie University School of Architecture in Halifax this past month. It's ironic that Acre Architects' submission would be selected for the national show. The heart of its submission is the flabbergasted question, "Why Saint John/New Brunswick?"

It's the first question Kopp, who is originally from Southern Manitoba, almost always gets asked since he moved with Adair from New York City to her hometown. "It's the way they ask 'Why,'" Adair says. "It's not like, 'Why New York?' It's amazing the power of intonation." When they had announced their decision to leave New York, a partner with their firm told them to stay and presented a counter-offer. He had been to Saint John. He assured them there was nothing there. So why Saint John/New Brunswick? Acre Architects wants its work to be a part of answering the question for themselves. This project became a kind of branding exercise for the team. "This project is a leading question," Adair says. "But not just saying 'Why?' It's good enough to have an identity, but why does that identity matter what makes it valuable?"

"The city is where an intervention is needed to address this migration, or this idea of identity. It's all about going back to who we are. Be in this place? But what is this place?" So, the team met over waffles in the too-hot-for-October basement of Fredericton's Charlotte Street Arts Centre last fall to brainstorm. They thought of all their friends who have left Saint John and New Brunswick for other places. They thought of everyone who only knows the province as far as the width of its highways and what can be seen travelling at 110 km/h. They thought about what people talk about when they talk about cities. They thought about what it would take to not only bring immigrants to New Brunswick, but to keep them here. They thought about the future Johnner - full of energy ready to give to the city. Working within the abstract and rigid parameters of the competition, Acre Architects constructed its intervention. At the request of the organizers of *Migrating Landscapes*, Acre Architects' winning scheme cannot be described in detail as it is still in competition. But it was inspired by Saint John and its underdeveloped harbour as an exploration into what New Brunswick



architecture could be. Not referencing the historic port or dreaming up nostalgic reincarnations, the intervention sought to tap into the current "voice of the site." "Often times, the powers that be don't encourage a vision, they don't understand the abilities we have within the infrastructure we currently have right now," John Leroux says. "The urban potential of Saint John is probably where New Brunswick's greatest economic potential lies. Who am I to predict the future? But the salvation of New Brunswick lies within engaging with our cities properly." Adair herself is guilty of once overlooking the potential Saint John's port. She grew up on Queen Street with a view of the water, but never considered walking to the shore. "It was not a port city and I lived right there," Adair says. "Now I look down Germain Street and see the water view and go 'Wow, this is our city.' It's a coastal city and it's never been emphasized that way." Looking at the cultural memories of the province in *Migrating Landscapes*, the team wanted to revisit why it was people came here in the first place and see what the province still has that was a part of that. But Leroux says development has been negating its connection to the waterfront for more than 50 years. "We seem to have lost our way in safeguarding (our architectural infrastructure) and using it to our advantage," Leroux says. "Our future may not lie in the new asphalt highways, but in the cities and communities we often shun for outdated reasons. Far from being a pessimistic outlook, we've tried to articulate, in a sculptural and metaphorical way, that we have powerful and meaningful tools right at our fingertips. The rest of the world has realized this over the past few decades, and so should we." "We're standing on the shoulders of giants here, and the sooner we realize that we're bound to achieve more and try much harder." In this way, Acre Architects' project embodies the spirit of *Migrating Landscapes*. The organizing body has been humbled by the generosity of the countless people wanting to be involved with the project from across the country. "It's been actually really amazing to see that we have this passion of design as a country, and don't think been fully tapped into as we think it can," Johanna Hurme, co-creator of 5468796 Architecture, says. The day submissions closed for *Migrating Landscapes*, there was a lot of cheering going on at project headquarters in Winnipeg, the organizers were so excited about the breadth of submissions they had received. "The production was really sort of quite exciting and not fashionable. It seemed to be really coming from people's guts, they were not trying to follow trends of architecture, made with big flare. It's really

personal and that's what we were hoping for - that those submitting would respond by looking within selves." For Vancouver architect D'Arcy Jones, one of the five B.C. finalists heading to the national *Migrating Landscapes* competition, he tapped into his memories of moving into new, still-being-built suburb as a child. His migration story was one into the "no man's land" of customized landscapes. His model simplified this idea of the suburban plot by carving into the landscape rather than sitting on top. If it all sounds a little abstract, that's because it is. There are rarely ideas competitions like this in Canadian architecture, and the participants saw this as not only a chance to be part of "Team Canada" in Venice, but also an opportunity to exercise their conceptual muscles. Even one of the three Maritimes judges, Barbara Louder, a professor at NSCAD University in Halifax, was one of the, admits it was hard for her to envision *Migrating Landscapes* from the drawings and descriptions. "Once I saw the work with all the wood, I thought it really is beautiful. It really works as another way of looking at landscape, but it's also so based in materials and reflects the history of Canada," Louder says. "I've seen the pavilion in Venice... it's a very difficult and strange space, and I think this work will look fantastic in it too. I think it will be striking." Stephen Kopp imagines it would be mind blowing to be asking "Why Saint John?" in Venice. This project was "a wild card" Acre Architects, but Kopp says it was their duty to enter. Like their peers across Canada, Acre Architects did this project for themselves. Cradling her newborn son, Adair asks him, "Hugo, why Saint John?" "You know what I funny? I didn't realize the impact of being born somewhere until I saw Hugo's passport and he is from Saint John. He could have been born anywhere. You open your eyes, and in that moment you become part of the Earth, and he was in Saint John. He's a Saint Johnner now. I find that just fascinating." Whether poised to earn a return ticket to Venice this summer, Acre Architects and projects like *Migrating Landscapes* are keeping the province in dialogue with the rest of Canada and a place to be. "It talks about the spirit of our practice and what we're inherently doing here," Adair says. "We have a chance to say why are we in New Brunswick. If we can't answer that in this project, then we have a problem with our whole practice and life mission." "We're trying to figure out what the new New Brunswick is." ☺

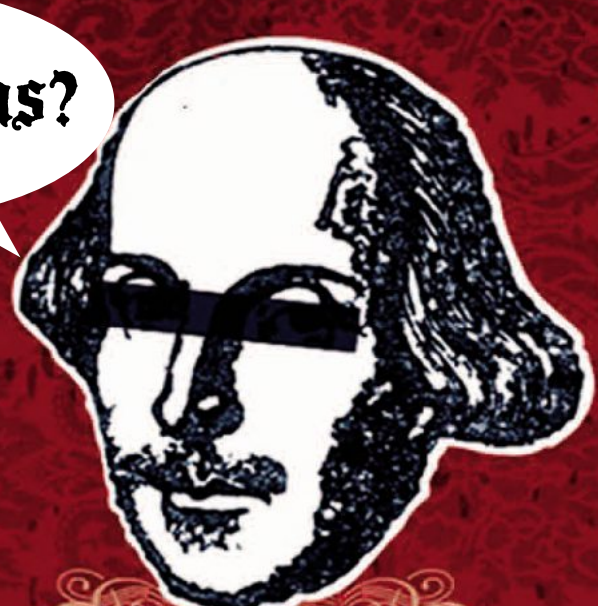
Mike Landry is the Telegraph-Journal's arts and culture editor. He can be reached at landrymichael@telegraphjournal.com.



One of the winning schemes from the BC regional competition gunning for Venice. PHOTO: MIGRATING LANDSCAPES ORGANIZATION

An overview of the Alberta regional exhibition. Each regional exhibit had an architectural timeline of the city it was in, as can be seen on the wall behind the work. PHOTO: RYAN ARCHER

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