

BEAUTY BLOWS ONTO BAY ST.

Philip Beesley's sprawling art installation takes over Toronto's financial district for Luminato

Toronto architect Philip Beesley is one of those particularly Canadian art heroes — celebrated abroad, but rarely exhibiting domestically. That's changing this week as Beesley — the hit of last year's Venice Architecture Biennale — opens *Sargasso*, a sprawling interactive installation, at Toronto's Brookfield Place as part of Luminato. Here, Beesley talks with Leah Sandals about boundaries, Bay Streeters and his favourite building.

Q Your installations have been hailed as a cure for what ails architecture. What's the problem you're fixing here?

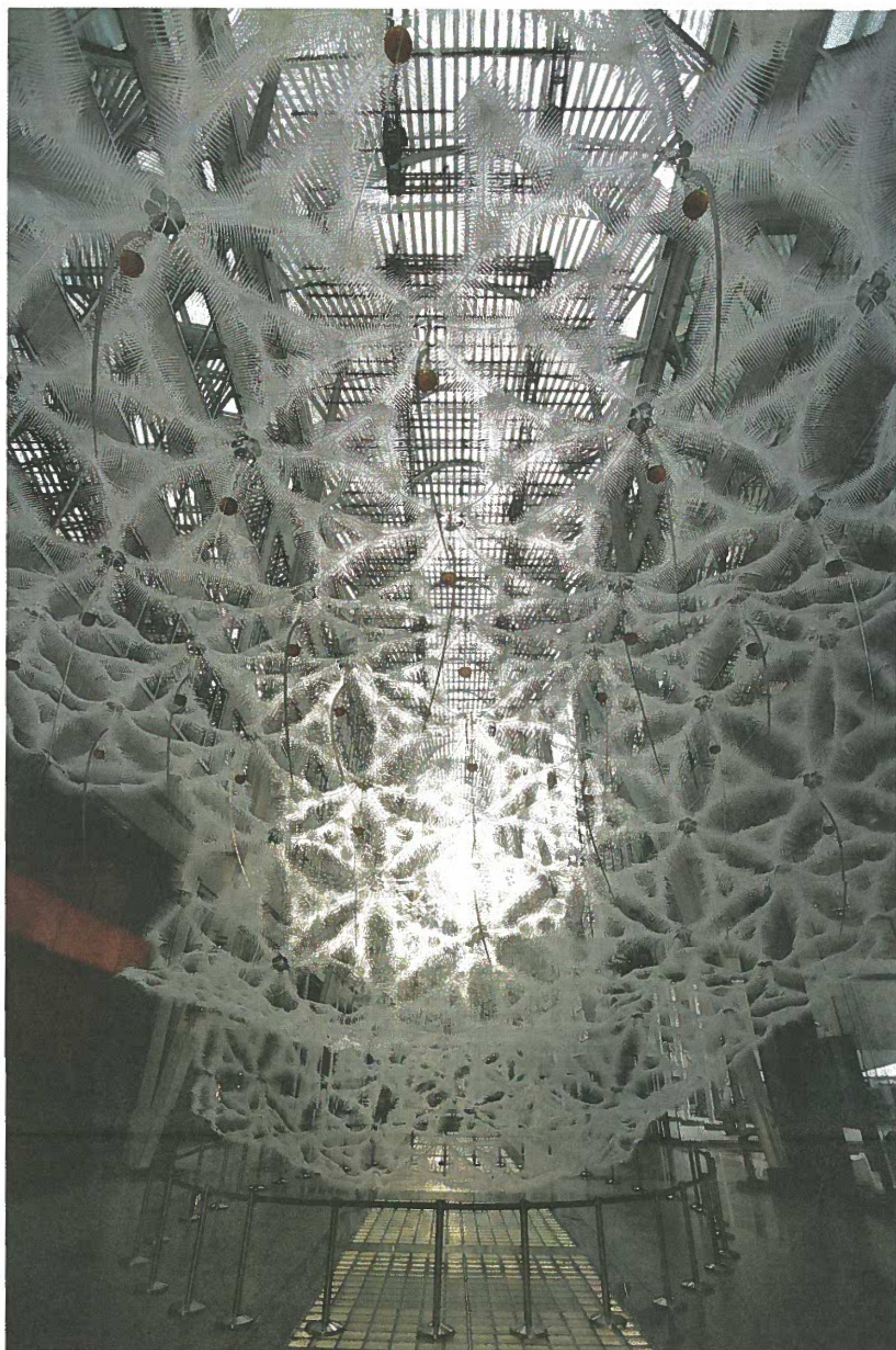
A When I was a student, I was taught the perfect building would be a sphere: minimum possible enclosing envelope — because glass and windows are expensive, right? — and maximum enclosing volume. But that kind of form, where you try to be as enclosed and bounded as possible, is also the kind of form that says, "You have as little to do with your neighbours as possible." Nature might agree some of the time that that's a good form; look at clamshells or armoured animals. On the other hand, though, what about dandelions or sea urchins or snowflakes? That's the opposite kind of form, which has a maximum extension of envelope. It's the opposite idea, and one I'm pursuing. So instead of a world populated by individual, closed forms where "I know who I am, you know who you are, I got my territory, I got a fence between me and you," this is a very optimistic idea which imagines that things are profoundly tangled together — that there are many gentle boundaries between things rather than one absolute fence.

Q So how will Bay Streeters experience those ideas in *Sargasso*?

A When you walk into the Brookfield gallery, you'll see a large, hovering veil rising far above your head. That acts a little bit like cumulus clouds and cirrus clouds — layers of material hovering and gently floating in the breeze. That will come down and nearly touch the floor and arc around you and then rise up again and stretch far away. It makes a kind of primordial room for gathering, a social space. Other layers of the work are shot through with microprocessors and sensors and lights. They harvest all the eddies of crowds moving through the gallery, and create very fine motions through the veils, as if the entire thing is shifting and flexing and breathing with you. So you will also have the slight sensation of being right inside a living organism. And at night, it'll become more surreal, perhaps more like an undersea experience.

Q You have a background in housing activism. How does that affect your structures?

A The work comes out of several parallel involvements. Some of it is surreal, dealing with the edges of consciousness. Some of it is scientific — we're in interesting dialogues with synthetic biologists. And a large part is social, thinking of the spaces that might generate the beginnings of cities, where people start to make something that's public. I think the public has a peculiar tradition in Canada, because the colonial side comes from a place of being injected into the wilderness. Small clusters of people gathered together to make garrisons and then grew out and populated. Also, "What is the public?" and "What are the spaces of the public?" are potent architectural



TOP AND MIDDLE: BRETT GUNDLOCK / NATIONAL POST; ABOVE: AARON LYNETT / NATIONAL POST
Artist Philip Beesley and a volunteer, above, work on his new installation, *Sargasso*, in his Toronto studio last week. The finished work, top, is on view at Toronto's Brookfield Place until June 18.

questions today. I like to think this is a contribution. Granted, it's a deliberately disorienting public space. It doesn't look like Tiananmen Square or the Washington Monument in having a ready unity or some homogenous nationhood. Instead, it's a public space for clustering together in small conversations building toward something in common. I would say the past activism work — which mainly was in creating co-op housing — is pretty consistent with that sensibility.

Q Some might say *Sargasso* is a frilly, impractical project, whether socially or physically. What do you say about that?

A Isn't it funny that certain kinds of form languages, like the Rococo or the late Gothic, are thought of as excessive, or even grotesque, where other kinds of art that is strongly bounded, perhaps like Mies van der Rohe's TD Centre, is seen as clear and clean? Well, this work is unapologetically excessive in the way that it oozes and trembles and resonates. It's trying to achieve a radical fragility, to open itself into a state of sensitivity. I think that's something the human spirit might be hungry for: a sense of belonging and being able to be in a place which exchanges with us.

Q Final question: What's your favourite building?

A I'd have to admit an incredible soft spot for the United Nations Headquarters in New York, because of the way it hovers and reaches out over the East River. There's some common utopian ground there, a hopeful sense of expanding out with multiple systems and networks.

■ Philip Beesley's *Sargasso* is on view at Brookfield Place in Toronto until June 18. For more information on the Luminato festival, visit luminato.com.

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Questions & Artists