



PETER ST JOHN

# Island

## British Pavilion, Venice Biennale

LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY  
THE SCHOOL OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

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## Project details

Output author	<b>Peter St John</b>
Practice	<b>Caruso St John Architects</b>
Collaborators	<b>Caruso St John Architects and Marcus Taylor</b>
Project title	<b><i>Island</i></b>
Output type	<b>M – Exhibition (Curatorial, Design and Content Programming Project)</b>
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Dates	<b>24 May 2018 Exhibition Opening</b>
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Clients	<b>British Council</b>
Partners	<b>16th International Architecture Exhibition, Venice Biennale; British Council; The Store X The Spaces</b>

Supplementary information submitted via URL:

Caruso St John and Taylor, M. (2018). [Island](#). London: The Store X The Spaces





Figure 2. Island, Holy Rosary Church at Shettihalli, Karnataka, India. Image by John Morgan Studio, photo by Bhaskar Dutta.

The neo-Gothic church becomes submerged in water every monsoon season following the construction of the Hemavati Dam in the 1960s. Image: Getty Images.

## Research content and significance

### DESCRIPTION

*Island* captures collaborative practice research through the design and curation of the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2018, responding to the theme “Freespace” – architecture as public realm.

The output was simultaneously an installation, interactive exhibition and built work, that accommodated a programme of events addressing issues of migration and climate change. Referencing Venice - a historic port city, shaped by migration and threatened by flooding – and Brexit in the shadow of colonial history, the themes of migration, climate change and national identity were translated architecturally; the existing pavilion as an empty shell, above which a publicly accessible platform was built at roof level to evoke a floating structure over a flooded building.

### RESEARCH AIMS

Using the context of Venice, the research was designed to test ways architecture can facilitate artistic insight, and ask how such ‘National’ exhibitions – typically outside the thematic control of curators – can be more effective and holistic by extending embodied meanings of architectural settings into artistic and spatial terms over time.

### METHODS

The project examined the Venetian context, as both a historic port city shaped by migration and as a landmass under threat of flooding. Through textual/literary and artistic investigations the themes of migration, climate change and national identity were translated spatially and programmatically.

## DISSEMINATION

The 16th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice saw 71 participants from different countries taking part with approximately 350,000 visitors to the pavilion, engaging in a programme of events. The exhibition culminated in a published monograph, entitled Island, and received far reaching reviews in press articles.

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

This research project is significant and original in demonstrating how architectural and artistic collaboration can effectively communicate relationships between particular histories and geographies and matters of global importance. The pavilion was named runner-up in the Golden Lion award for best national pavilion.

# Introduction

*Island* draws conceptual inspiration from writers, poets, and artists, situated in the present and considering the past and imagined futures, presented ultimately through combined interpretations of architect and artist, where the audience is invited to engage in the theme of “freespace” through introspective contemplation on a path to cultural ritual and contextualising panoramas. The underpinning works that form the conceptual base for *Island* navigate between *The Tempest*, Gericault’s painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, and contemporary British poet, Kate Tempest: *But we see clouds like furious ink, Thick liquid sinks and whips the wind, Pitch shifted rumble screams from a swollen grin, There’s a big storm rolling in.*<sup>1</sup>

These lines could be interpreted as the first scenes of a modern day staging of *The Tempest*. Both literary works navigate the intersection between connection and separation, as the young British rap poet constructs experiences of daily life in Britain, paralleled with Shakespeare’s voyagers washed up onto an unnamed Mediterranean island, representing scenes of contrast between old and new worlds:

*All the blood that was bled for these cities to grow, All the bodies that fell, The roots that were dug from the earth,*

*So these games could be played, I see it tonight in the stains of my hands, The buildings are screaming.*<sup>2</sup>

As images of an island represent scales of refuge and exile, floating and sinking, sanctuary and abandonment, so the interpretation of the exhibition and experience of the visitor differs, facilitated by the structure and void of the re-imagined British Pavilion. An island was formed by the roof of the building rising through the floor of a platform elevated above the drowning world beneath. The simple construction of the platform rests on scaffolding surrounding the neo-classical building, with a clearing at the entrance and stairs. At the peak, the open-air platform situates the visitor between the trees and sky, with views across to Venice beyond, with the lagoon and the Giardini inbetween.

The exhibition, in simplified terms, provides the visitor with an above and below experience that acknowledges the past, while looking forward. Conceptually and literally, the platform provides an opportunity for optimism for new beginnings, and the void of the abandoned pavilion provides a sanctuary from oppressive elements.

1. Tempest, K. ‘Brews’, *Let Them Eat Chaos*.

2. Tempest, K. ‘Europe is Lost’, *Let Them Eat Chaos*.



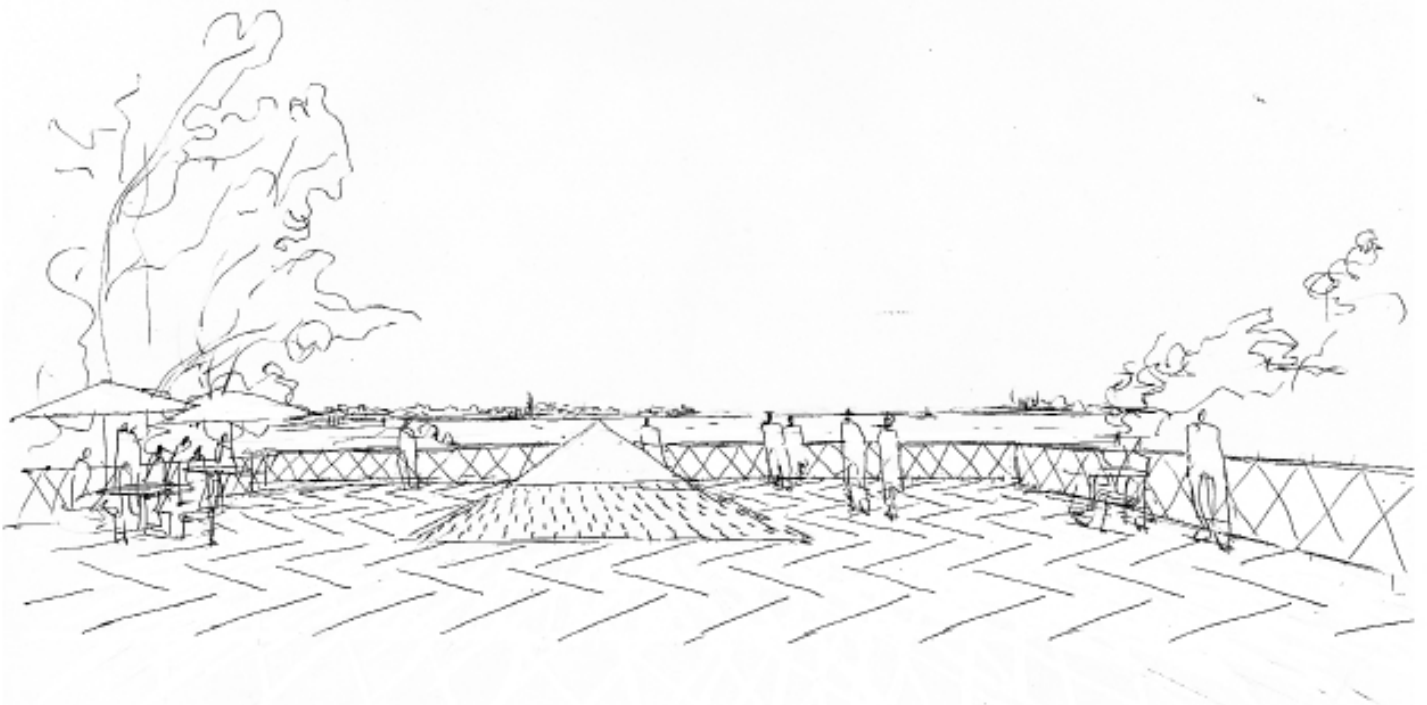
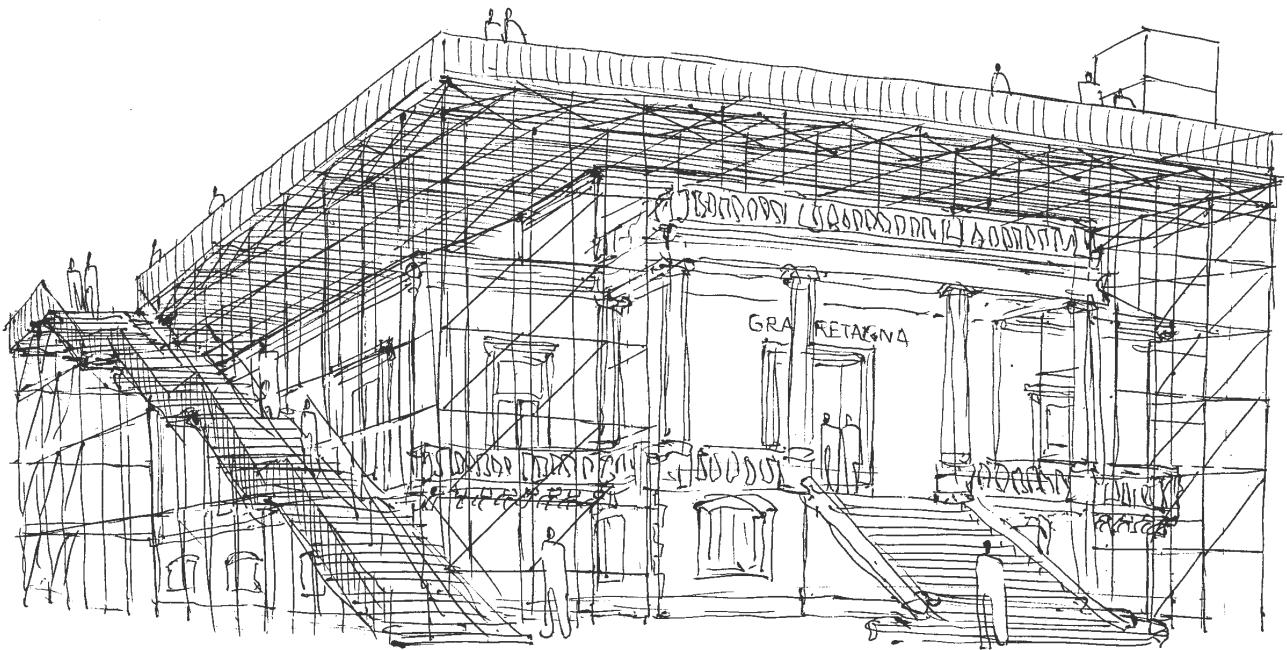


Figure 3. The Abandoned Pavilion. Sketch:  
Peter St John.

Figure 4. The Platform. Sketch: Peter St John.

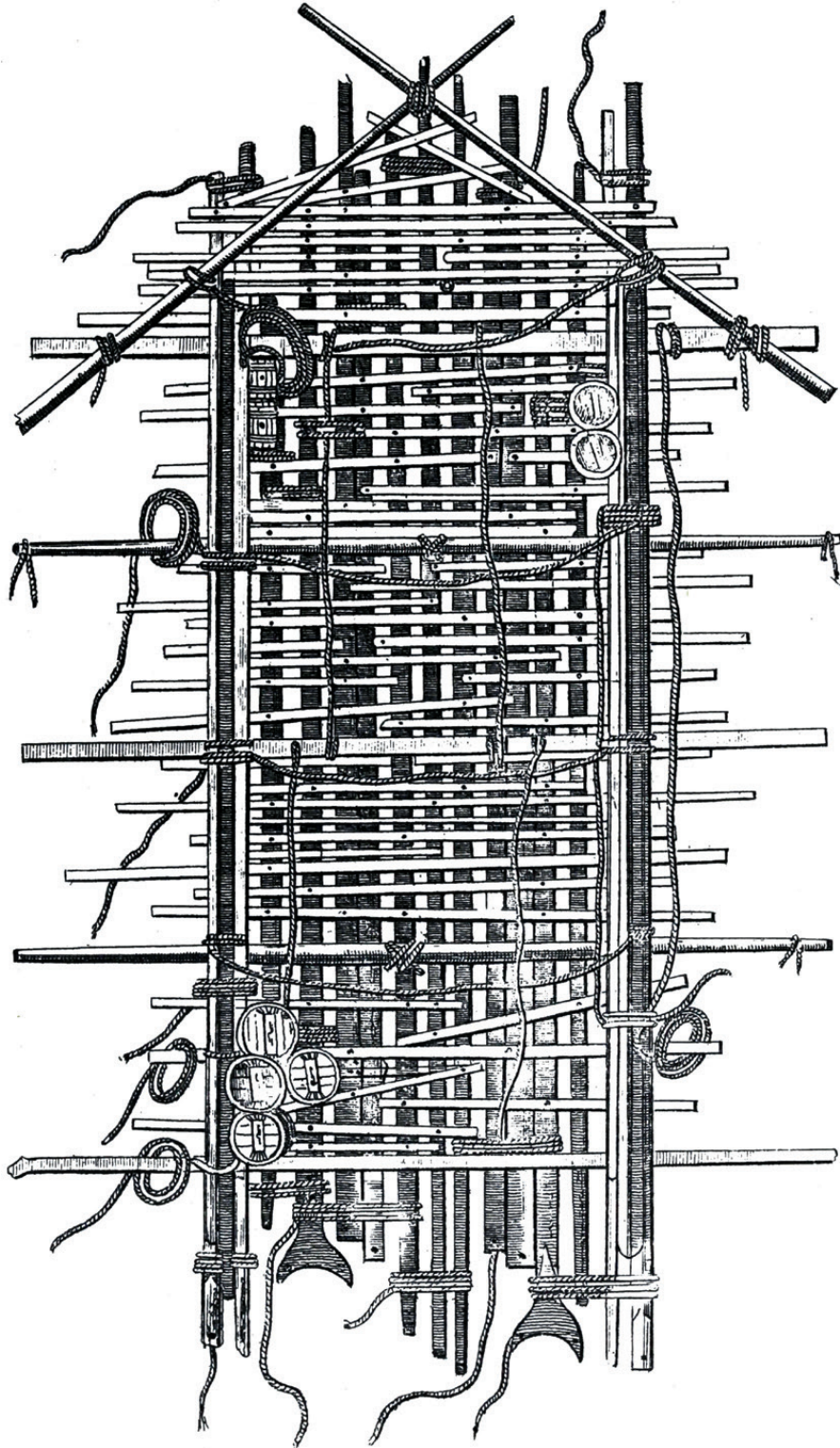


Figure 5. Henri Savigny and Alexandre Correard, plan of the construction of the raft. Wikipedia Commons.



Figure 6. Theodore Géricault, The Raft of the Medusa. 1818 - 1819. Wikipedia Commons.

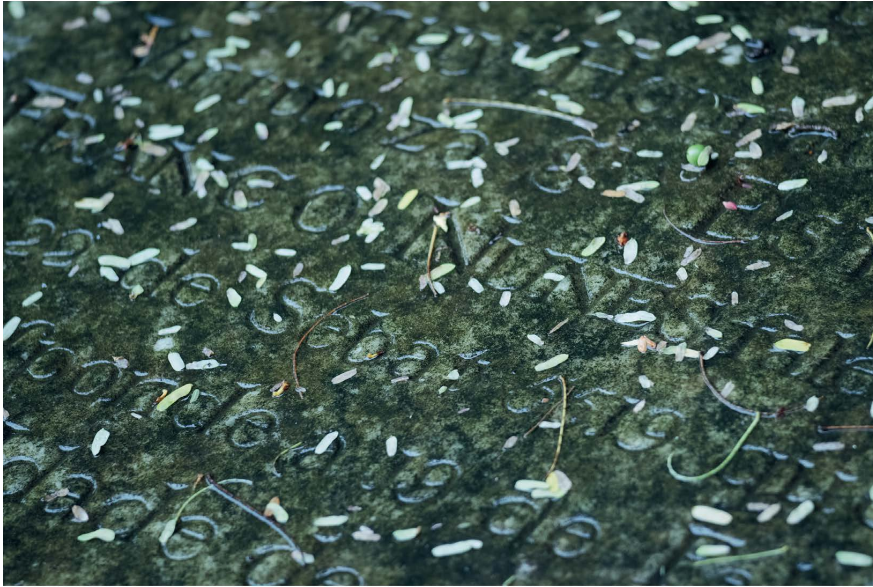


Figure 7. The Utopian Palimpsest. John Akomfrah. Island. p177.



## Research context

This practice research output entailed curating and designing the exhibition of the British Pavilion for the 16th International Architecture Exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia in 2018. The proposal, made in collaboration with the artist Marcus Taylor, was a response to the Biennale theme of Freespace. The Biennale curators referred to *Freespace* in a seven point manifesto, published in June 2017, setting out what is, and can be, achieved between architecture and people. *“Freespace can be a space for opportunity, a democratic space, un-programmed and free for uses not yet conceived. There is an exchange between people and buildings that happens, even if not intended or designed, so buildings themselves find ways of sharing and engaging with people over time, long after the architect has left the scene. Architecture has an active as well as a passive life.”*<sup>3</sup>

The output takes the form of an architectural artefact, with the original building having opened in 1897 as a tea house, and later having undergone adaptation for the British Pavilion at the Biennale in 1909 - a time when colonialism divided the world. While this installation, addressed the present day challenges faced due to climate change and rising sea levels - a poignant topic in the precariously positioned city of Venice

- it has stood through the global volatility of two world wars, and contentious political rise and fall of fascism and communism. This building again became the stage for representation during a time of political schism, in the year leading up to the departure of the UK from the EU.

In responding to this brief, by Biennale curators Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara of Grafton Architects, the structure served as a framework for an interactive exhibition that addressed issues of migration and climate change, appropriate to the theme of the Biennale. The name of the project, *Island*, reflected these activities and also the imminent implementation of Brexit. The design provided a new public space within the Giardini, on the roof of the original building, and primarily formed the stage for a programme of events, that took place during the opening and closing weeks, when the Biennale records its highest number of visitors. The two spaces: the abandoned pavilion and the platform, hosted a range of events including talks, architectural debates, readings, poetry, performance and film, around the theme of *Island*.

3. Farrell, Y., & McNamara, S. (2017) Freespace. Venice Biennale Manifesto. Available at: <https://www.readingdesign.org/freespacemanifesto> (Accessed: 18 December 2020).



Figure 8. Photograph by Helene Binet (2018)  
from the platform of the pavilion, looking  
across the lagoon.

### THE ABANDONED PAVILION

A scaffold structure was built around the British Pavilion. The scaffolding formed a two metre wide zone wrapped around the building, leaving the entrance portico and steps uncovered. The pavilion was left empty, with open doors. The empty building houses the history of the place with galleries carrying the marks of previous exhibitions, by artists and architects, on its walls.

*Picture a vacuum*

*An endless and unmoving blackness*

*Peace, or the absence at least, of terror*

*I see, and amongst all this space*

*That speck of light in the furthest corner*

*Gold as a pharaoh's coffin*

*Now follow that light with your tired eyes*

*It's been a long day, I know, but look*

*Watch as it flickers and it roars into*

*fullness and fills the whole*

*fram blazing a fire and you can't bear the  
majesty of*

*Here is our Sun*

*And look*

*See how the planets are dangled around*

*it*

*And held in that intricate dance*

*There is our Earth*

*Our Earth*<sup>4</sup>

A network of metal scaffolding trusses supported the wooden platform at 11.5m above the ground, which was visible from

below. These trusses spanned from the perimeter scaffolding, beyond the sides of the roof, and were braced and self supporting, at no point keying back into the building for stability.

A staircase and a lift provided access to the platform. The three metre wide staircase formed a long structural feature up the eastern side of the pavilion, adjacent to the French pavilion, as it rose in a straight line of four flights. The first tread of the stairs was positioned far forward of the front of the pavilion, offering an equal hierarchy of entrance to that of the existing stairs. The prefabricated lift was positioned on the western side of the pavilion, fixed to the outside of the scaffolding.

4. Tempest, K. 'Picture a Vacuum'. Let Them Eat Chaos.





Figure 9. Photograph by Helene Binet (2018).



Figure 10. Photograph by Helene Binet (2018).

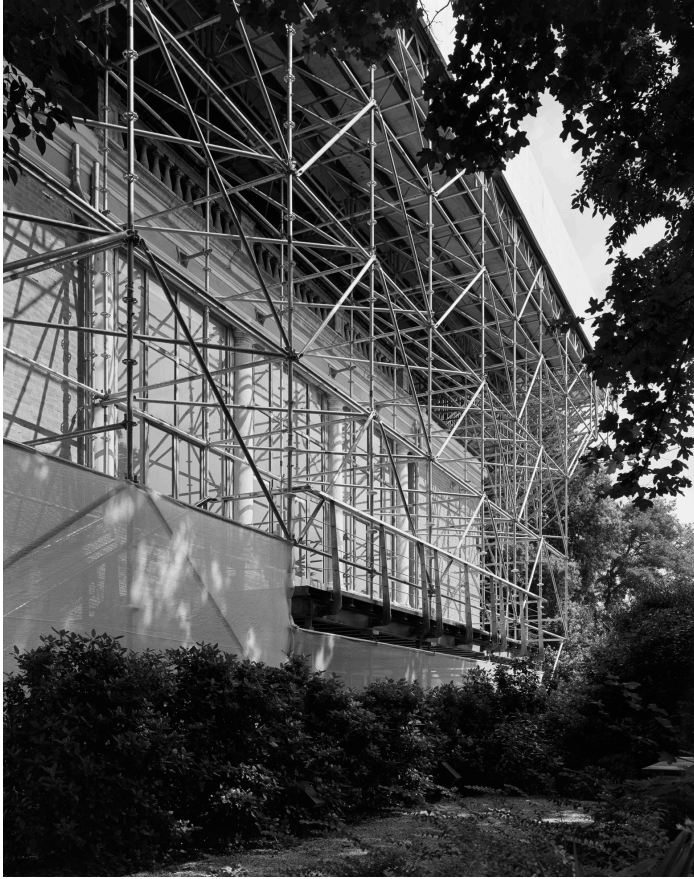


Figure 11 and 12. Photographs by Helene Binet (2018).





Figure 13. Photograph by Helene Binet (2018).

## THE PLATFORM

The tip of the roof projects through the platform that stands over the building, rising to the level of the canopies of the surrounding trees. The platform is open to the sky, and from the 25m square plaza, with its maximum occupancy of 200 people, there is a view south over the lagoon towards the Lido. The lifting of the platform above the building, taking the visitor to a place of openness all around, embraces the distant views, while offering a reminder of the past through the 'relic' inertly positioned in the middle of the plaza. Views into the gallery below can be glimpsed through the skylights. The walkway is made of wooden planks, while the platform is finished with a finer grain board, stained in shades to resemble the paving of a public space.

A cafe at one end of the platform sold tea and cake. The flexible space of the platform hosted visitors, parties, talks, and other events, offering loose seating for those wanting to read or chat. The shaded areas offered by the trees, were places for people to linger on sunny days.

*O, wonder!*

*How many goodly creatures are there here!*

*How beauteous mankind is!*

*O brave new world,*

*That has such people in't.*<sup>5</sup>

5. Shakespeare, W. (1958).



Figure 14. Photograph by Helene Binet (2018).



Figure 15. Photograph by Helene Binet (2018).





Figure 16. Photograph by Helene Binet (2018).

## Research process

The Freespace Manifesto formed the brief for the project. *“We are interested in going beyond the visual, emphasising the role of architecture in the choreography of daily life.”*<sup>6</sup>

Freespace<sup>7</sup>:

- Describes a generosity of spirit and sense of humanity at the core of architecture’s agenda, focusing on the quality of space itself.
- Focuses on architecture’s ability to provide free and additional spatial gifts to those who use it and on its ability to address the unspoken wishes of strangers.
- Celebrates architecture’s capacity to find additional and unexpected generosity in each project - even within the most private, defensive, exclusive or commercially restricted conditions.
- Provides the opportunity to emphasise nature’s free gifts of light - sunlight and moonlight, air gravity, materials - natural and man-made resources.
- Encourages reviewing ways of thinking, new ways of seeing the world, of intervening solutions where architecture provides for the well being and dignity of each citizen of this fragile planet.

- Encompasses freedom to imagine, the free space of time and memory, binding past, present and future together, building on inherited cultural layers, weaving the archaic with the contemporary.

The cost of the pavillion was £215,000, with the majority of the funds allocated to construction of the scaffold structure and deck. This exceeded the £100,000 budget, with the shortfall funded by Trusts, Foundations, private individuals and corporations within the construction industry. With the project intent of being a generous public gesture of a public meeting space within the Biennale, the draw was the effects that the prominent project would have for a sponsor. The design and construction spanned the eight months starting from October 2017 with development of structural design, to construction and opening events in May 2018, with time taken in between to obtain permissions, draft the programme of events, initiate funding and secure scaffolding and events contracts.

6. <https://static.labiennale.org/files/architettura/Documenti/brochure-freespace-910.pdf> (Accessed: 18 December 2020).

7. Farrell, Y., & McNamara, S. (2018)

8. <https://static.labiennale.org/files/architettura/Documenti/brochure-freespace-910.pdf> (Accessed: 18 December 2020).



Figure 17. Photography by Helene Binet (2018).

The project thus involved research into multiple realms of influence including context, history, ethics and art and exhibitons.

It involved finding ways that spatial experiences, made with architectural tools, can make an artistic experience, and the capacity of architecturally constituted places to embody meaning and function in artistic terms, and in spatial form, encountered over time.

It was important to utilise the setting and historic context, of Venice, to communicate the inter-related themes of migration, climate change and national identity. There is something about the pathos of the empty building and the exhilaration (and perhaps relief) of getting up above it – especially by comparison with navigating the labyrinth of the Giardino – which speaks to a sense of the weight, drag, and loss associated with our history (e.g. what we have made of the world we now have to live in). There is an aspect to the approach in Island of being a ‘public architect’ in that the tone, both in aesthetic as well as ethical terms, of the project capture something of this sense of obligation to public and national culture and its aspirations, while at the same time remaining anchored in history and to what has been lost.

Finally, investigation into how exhibitions in the National Pavilions at the Biennale could be more effective, when they are outside the thematic control of the curators. It’s a truism that pavilions are typically either very fragmented and diffuse, or somehow gimmicky. The pavilions that say something clearly and ‘holistically’ all too often feel like one-liners. Even the prize-winning Swiss Pavilion trod the line between one-liner and being an exhibit that was at the same time ‘for architects only’ and also designed for visitors to take selfies. There is certainly a long history of debate about this (and the Serpentine Pavilion series offers an easy, contemporary comparison, though of course the challenge of the ‘exposition’ or the national culture imperative sets a more complex agenda).

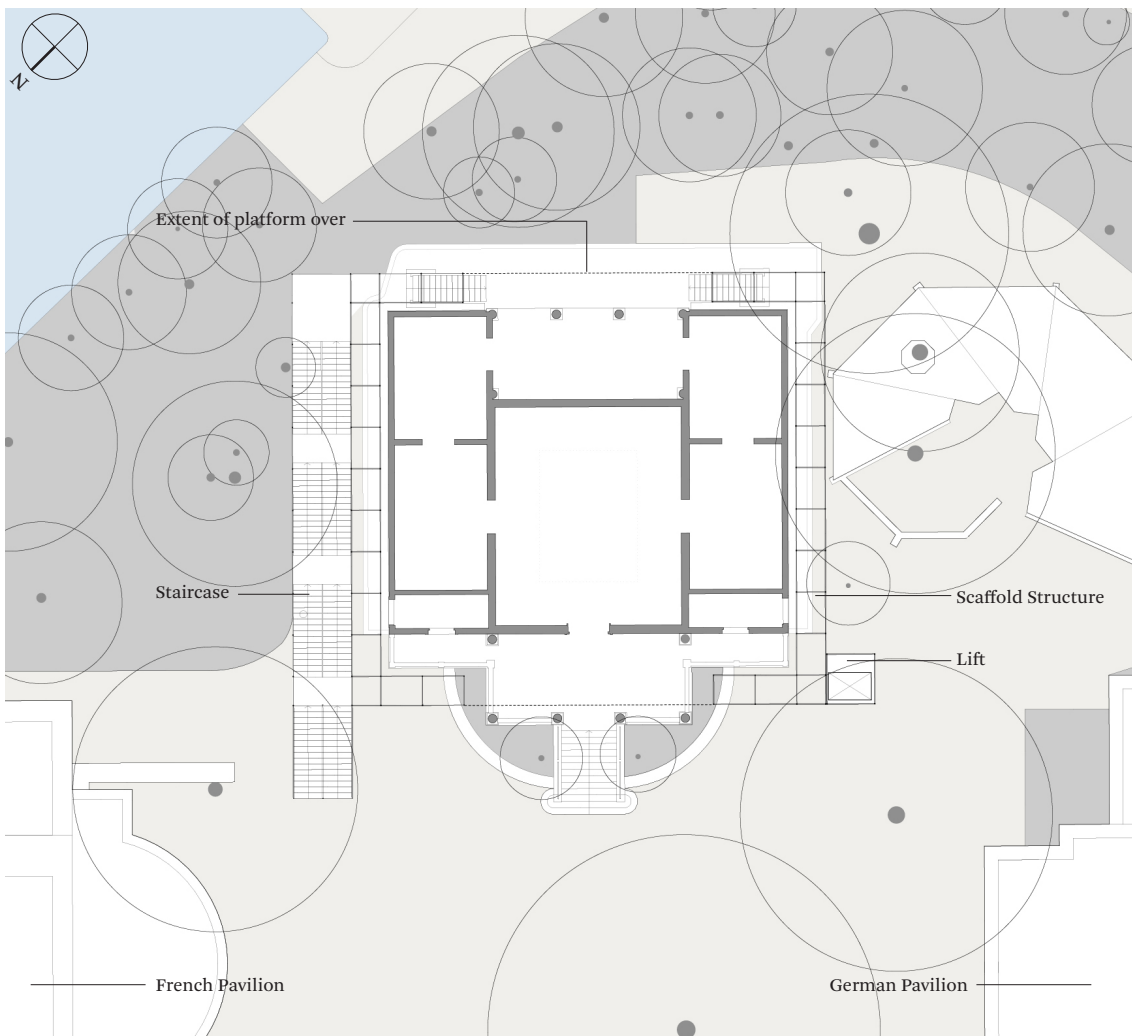
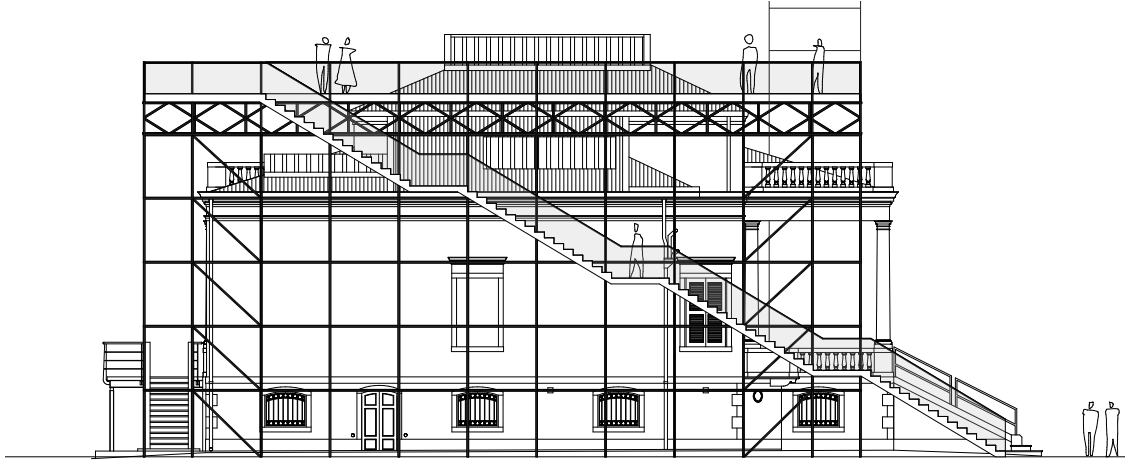


Figure 18. East elevation showing the stair to the platform. Image: Caruso St John Architects.

Figure 19. Site plan showing the position of the surrounding trees. Image: Caruso St John Architects.

## Research insights

### ARTIST AND ARCHITECTURE

What appears, at first, to be an oversimplified response to the theme of Freespace, is revealed, through the experience of the pavilion, to be anchored in much deeper levels of understanding human experience in space and how structures and voids can take their visitors along a subconscious passage of time and reflection.

*Island* responds to the research aims that set out to respond to multi-faceted flows of inquiry. As Caruso St John explained in their press release: “An island can be a place of both refuge and exile. The state of the building, which will be completely covered with scaffolding to support the new platform above, suggests many themes; including abandonment, reconstruction, sanctuary, Brexit, isolation, colonialism and climate change.”<sup>9</sup>

The installation, following the concept of *Island*, afforded artistic insights, within an historic spatial setting, that allowed the visitors to experience the exhibition according to their own interpretation, allowing the structure to facilitate artistic insight. The concept and architectural structure, was specific in response to the context of Venice, with a strong reference of water as global resource, communicating current issues of

migration, climate change and national identity.

### BRITAIN IN VENICE

Drawing parallels between places, using time and architecture, offers relevant insight into global zeitgeist and the effect of social and political events on structural interpretation. The Tate Gallery, designed by architect Sidney Smith, first opened in London in 1897. Within a decade, the cafe-restaurant designed by Enrico Trevisanato, opened in the Giardini in Venice. The symmetry between the two buildings is reflected both in style and the positioning along the Thames and a tidal lagoon respectively. Caruso St John Architects would later have a hand in both buildings, by refurbishing the Tate Britain back to its former glory of the 1800’s, and by adapting the cafe in Venice, for the second time after 1909, to bring to consideration the challenges of the present day. In the book *Island*, an in-depth discussion presents the realities of the world and daily life as seen by artists in the architectural masterpiece that is Tate Britain - much as it does at the British Pavilion.

9. Venice Biennale Press Release. (2018). Available at: [https://www.dropbox.com/s/1inc8r8jere1gq9/PRESS%20RELEASE\\_Pavilion%20of%20Great%20Britain%20at%2016th%20International%20Architecture%20Exhibition\\_06%20March%202018.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/1inc8r8jere1gq9/PRESS%20RELEASE_Pavilion%20of%20Great%20Britain%20at%2016th%20International%20Architecture%20Exhibition_06%20March%202018.pdf?dl=0) (Accessed: 18 December 2020).



Figure 20. Tate Britain Millbank Facade. From *Island*, p41. Photograph: Caruso St John Architects.

Figure 21. British Pavilion. From *Island*, p41. Photograph: John Riddy.

## Dissemination

The 16th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, that ran from 26 May to 25 November 2018, and saw 71 participants from different countries taking part. The six-month public exhibition saw approximately 350,000 visitors engaging in an extensive programme of events, as well as British Council events and lectures. The exhibition culminated in a published monograph titled *Island*, and received far reaching reviews in press articles. The pavilion was named runner-up in the Golden Lion award for best national pavilion. A selection of publications are listed below.

### SELECTED PRESS

Architecture Today. (2018). The British Pavilion at the 16th Venice Biennale, curated by Caruso St John and artist Marcus Taylor. 24 May. Available at: <https://architecturetoday.co.uk/island/> (18 December 2020).

Farrell, Y., & McNamara, S. (2018) Freespace Brochure. *16th Venice Biennale*. Available at: <https://static.labiennale.org/files/architettura/Documenti/brochure-freespace-910.pdf> (Accessed: 18 December 2020).

Heathcote, E. (2018). Caruso St John's British pavilion: island nations. *Financial Times*. 11 May. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/bceb8390-4d48-11e8-8a8e-22951a2d8493> (Accessed 18 December 2020).

Hopkirst, E. (2018). Caruso St John to build roof terrace on British Pavilion. *Building Design*. 6 March. Available at: [https://www.bdonline.co.uk/caruso-st-john-to-build-roof-terrace-on-british-pavilion/5092428.article?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=twitter](https://www.bdonline.co.uk/caruso-st-john-to-build-roof-terrace-on-british-pavilion/5092428.article?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter) Accessed: 18 December 2020).

Pitcher, G. (2018). Venice Biennale: Caruso St John to open British pavilion roof to public. *Architects' Journal*. 6 March. Available at: <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/venice-biennale-caruso-st-john-to-open-british-pavilion-roof-to-public> (Accessed 18 December 2020).

Stathaki, E. (2018). Caruso St John and Marcus Taylor discuss the British Pavilion at 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale. *Wallpaper*. 8 May. Available at: <https://www.wallpaper.com/architecture/british-pavilion-venice-architecture-biennale-caruso-stjohn-marcus-taylor> (Accessed 18 December 2020).



Venice Biennale Press Release (2018). Available at: [https://www.dropbox.com/s/1inc8r8jere1gq9/PRESS%20RELEASE\\_Pavilion%20of%20Great%20Britain%20at%2016th%20International%20Architecture%20Exhibition\\_06%20March%202018.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/1inc8r8jere1gq9/PRESS%20RELEASE_Pavilion%20of%20Great%20Britain%20at%2016th%20International%20Architecture%20Exhibition_06%20March%202018.pdf?dl=0) (Accessed: 18 December 2020).

Wilson, R. (2018). Venice Biennale's magnificent seven: what to see. *Architects' Journal*. 18 May. Available at: <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/venice-biennales-magnificent-seven-what-to-see> (Accessed: 18 December 2020).

#### FILMS

Five minute overview film featuring the *Island* curators. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqpMzVva6SI&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed: 18 December 2020).

Drone Footage of *Island* at the British Pavilion. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJlkr3Gxe4Y&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed 18 December 2020).



Figure 22. Island cover. Designed by John Morgan studio.

## Impact

Receiving honourable mention in the Biennale Awards, the pavilion could be seen as politically charged, inciting discussions ranging politics and climate change, to art and the effects of architecture on the human interaction with space, as far reach that is demonstrated in the 29 articles, ranging in response by economists and artists alike.

Sarah Mann, Director of architecture, design, and fashion at The British Council, explains the context of the structure: *“In contrast to the isolationist sentiment of Brexit, neighbouring national pavilions will also be able to hold events at the British Pavilion. ... Rather than presenting an exhibition, we want to offer an unmediated experience through a new piece of architecture, which offers a generous space to reflect and to come together”*<sup>10</sup>, and explains the specific representation of the British pavilion: *“I believe that our current social and political situation gives the British Pavilion a new imperative: how to approach national representation when a nation is in transition. ...*

*During the selection, jury members were struck by the boldness and simplicity of Island, the proposal by Caruso St John Architects and Marcus Taylor. It offered an unmediated experience of architecture rather than an exhibition.”*<sup>11</sup>

The response of the British Council to the design of *Island* gives an indication of the significant impact of Caruso St John’s design on the wider public, and serves as a measure of how architecture, art curation and installation can provide a positive counterforce to prevailing political, social and environmental developments. At the same time as provoking, through its unorthodox ‘colonising’ and emptying of a familiar classical building, critical reaction to growing nationalist/separatist sentiments and the threat of deluge, the scaffolded structure of *Island* also serves as a powerful gesture of openness, reconciliation and repair to civic, social and climatic conditions.

10. Venice Biennale Press Release. (2018). Available at: [https://www.dropbox.com/s/1inc8r8jere1gq9/PRESS%20RELEASE\\_Pavilion%20of%20Great%20Britain%20at%2016th%20International%20Architecture%20Exhibition\\_06%20March%202018.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/1inc8r8jere1gq9/PRESS%20RELEASE_Pavilion%20of%20Great%20Britain%20at%2016th%20International%20Architecture%20Exhibition_06%20March%202018.pdf?dl=0) (Accessed: 18 December 2020).

11. Ibid.



Figure 23. Photograph by Helene Binet (2018).

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Figure 24. Redshank beach house, Essex, United Kingdom, by Lisa Shell Architects and Marcus Taylor (2016). *Island*, p193.

Photograph: Helene Binet (2018).

