

THE HAPPENSTANCE.11
An External Perspective

Scotland
+ Venice



Making
Image: Albert Lago

VOICE

ESPRIMERE
2015/16



Playing
Image: Brian Hartley

THE HAPPEN STANCE

The Happenstance was Scotland's contribution to the 16th International Architecture Exhibition, Venice, 2018

In this dispatch, critic and curator, Phineas Harper, sets the scene of the Biennale by looking at how it is indeed far from the theme of a Freespace itself. He asks what the role of the Biennale is and how little engagement it has with Venetians. In contrast, he writes, rather than a fixed exhibition to be experienced as a static work, The Happenstance was a multi-faceted armature built to host an ongoing festival of play, performance and making, freely open to all. The usually neglected Venetians took the project to heart - news of it was spread by word of mouth.



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This publication is one in a series of twelve reflections on The Happenstance. Click here or go to ads.org.uk/the-happenstance-archive-dispatches to access the other publications.



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Emily Speed structures to wear workshop
Image: Ashraf Khan

**‘the only truly free space
at Freespace’**

The Happenstance: a lively Scottish-Venetian freespace

Phineas Harper

A standout triumph of Freespace is Scotland’s rebellious contribution which exuberantly challenges the entire edifice of the Biennale with a participatory pavilion-cum-festival as much of Scotland as of Venice. The poet Kate Tempest raises her voice above the hubbub to be heard at the other end of her phone call, ‘I can’t’, she says with perhaps too little discretion, ‘I’m at an architecture trade fair’. The ‘trade fair’ is the 16th International Architecture Exhibition better known as the 2018 Venice Biennale. Curated by Grafton Architects under the title Freespace, it is a sprawling array of installations and giddy prosecco receptions making up the architecture world’s most epic exhibition. Tempest is in

town to open Caruso St John’s British Pavilion with some performance poetry, but her overheard unflattering summation of the Biennale speaks volumes. Access to Freespace costs 30 euros. To get in, I join a long queue snaking towards a security barrier where officials check my papers and identity card, watched over by armed police. Gates open at 10am and close at 6pm. Pets are not permitted. In Venice, Freespace is a controlled space. Calling out the overt absence of freeness surrounding the Biennale, despite its curators’ explicit theme, is a cheap shot, but highlights the tension between lofty curatorial concepts and the reality that plays out here every two years.

2018 is fairly flat with the Biennale punching well below its weight, with precious few moments to set the pulse racing: Peter Salter made a delightfully nutty table gliding around on skateboard trucks, Smiljan Radić cast a chapel using bubble wrap, Assemble squished 8,000 beautiful marbled tiles into existence, the Swiss played games with scale, the V&A clumsily bolted together the decapitated corpse of a decanted working-class council flat, and Lithuania made a swamp. More than previous years I was left wondering what the point of all this was.

Is Tempest right? Is the Biennale a site of great cultural exchange or simply a trade fair for preening hobnobbers cheek-kissing their way down the Via Garibaldi and instagramming spritzes? Is the backdrop of Venice an intrinsic driver of contemporary architectural culture or just a sexier version of the ExCel Centre? In flocking to the city, do we enrich it, or bombard the lagoon with wave after wave of tourism, chipping away local culture, selfishly exploiting Venice and Venetians for our own ends?

Plans for the first architecture Biennale were hatched in the 1970s when the population of the historic city was around 170,000. Today it is just 50,000 and is dropping by 1,000 a year, as local people and businesses are squeezed out by an ever-expanding tourist industry in which architecture is complicit. I am not here to argue for pulling the plug on the Biennale, but it is jarring how little the festival engages with, let

alone complements, local people and traditions.

‘Venetians are super suspicious of the Biennale.’, says Peter McCaughey of artist collective, *WAVEparticle*. ‘We are in the same category as the Grandi Navi. We are the tourists who rock up for a week or six months, make a mess, have a party and then piss off again. Even with those projects that have attempted to engage local people, most don’t.’ *WAVEparticle* are leading The Happenstance, Scotland’s contribution to Freespace which occupies the gardens of Palazzo Zenobia.

Scotland is one of a cabal of underdog nations deemed too minor on the world stage to merit their own pavilion in the groves of the Giardini and instead, along with Estonia and others, must rent pockets of space scattered across the city to deploy pop-up installations. The Happenstance is an hour’s walk from the main show in the less glamorous Dorsoduro district, but, for those who make the trek, offers a radical alternative take on a national pavilion, pricking the staid Biennale formula.

Rather than a fixed exhibition to be experienced as a static work, Scotland have created a multi-faceted armature to host an on-going festival of play, performance and making, freely open to all. A vivacious timber structure with ingenious water-filled foundations, part boardwalk part playground, designed by Glasgow-based architects Baxendale, gently transforms the garden into an interactive landscape

inviting inventive contributions. A cast of artists-in-residence lead a programme of workshops and events in and beyond the garden, with toys, tools, technology and raw materials on hand for anyone to use. Permission to add to the festival is implicit and the answer is always yes.

During the Biennale’s opening week, the garden heaved with local children and their families. One man made boat-shaped ‘Jesus shoes’ allowing him to walk (precariously) on water. A super-size basketball was rolling through a nearby campo. Huge inflatable teeth materialised above the garden entrance. ‘My job is to always say “yes”’ explains McCaughey, who describes himself as an anti-curator. “It’s about not knowing, but trusting.” For him, The Happenstance is an experiment in harnessing the rich tradition of participative dialogic practice flourishing in Scotland’s contemporary culture and using it to engage an audience that the Venice Biennale usually neglects – Venetians.

Scottish *recce* teams established connections early in 2018. Local designers, schools, campaigners and artists became collaborators. Suspicion and Biennale antipathy ebbed as *WAVEparticle* and their team slowly earned the trust of sceptics. News about the project spread not through e-flux press releases and PR budgets, but by word-of-mouth.

Serendipitously, a community fête of folk dancing, food and local political discussion took place in a campo across the canal from

Zenobio on the weekend of the Biennale opening. Free cocktails and starchitects were on offer across town at numerous more extravagant parties, but the opportunity to further enmesh The Happenstance into its neighbourhood is too good to miss. So, to mark the official opening of the Scottish Pavilion, a psychedelic parade led by a 14-year-old kilt-clad bagpiper promenaded out from Zenobio and back, pausing to ceremonially dance a *ceilidh* amid the Dorsoduro fête. It was a surreal moment and unlike anything I’ve seen at a Biennale before.

Each year, the creep of tourism gradually takes more of Venice away from local access. Publicly-accessible spaces are sold, homes becomes airbnbs. The entire island of Poveglia, which used to be a popular picnic spot for Venetians in search of rare green space, is to be auctioned. Yet in Dorsoduro, Scotland have managed to reverse the flow. Not only are Zenobio’s normally locked gates now open to all, but nearby church forecourts and largely unused, have also opened their doors to host games and events led by The Happenstance artists. McCaughey explained, “It isn’t just playfulness, it is a serious political question – a suggestion of how to occupy space – a hijacker’s tactic”.

Some snobs would barely recognise the Scottish Pavilion as contemporary architecture. There’s no reinvention of architectural form, no innovative new construction technology – but who cares? The cutting edge of architecture as a

joyful inclusive process is what's on show here, not just a product. The tasteful mannered preciousness of Caruso St John's British Pavilion, a beautiful but banal object, is rejected for a far more ambitious adventure, diving deep into a site, its traditions and people, and emerging with something truly of a place. Nothing about The Happenstance could be confused with a trade fair.

It is a pavilion both entirely of Scotland and entirely of Venice – and the only truly free space at Freespace.

'The Happenstance: a lively Scottish-Venetian freespace' text was originally published on 1 June 2018 by *The Architectural Review*.



Image: Basharat Khan

RESOURCES

- [WAVEparticle Website](#)
- [Jake Keith, The Courier, 19 April 2018](#)
- [Susan Mansfield, The Scotsman, 24 May 2018](#)
- [Susan Mansfield, The Scotsman, 24 May 2018](#)
- [George Kafka, Metropolis Magazine, 26 May 2018](#)
- [Oliver Wainwright, The Guardian, 28 May 2018](#)
- [Alice Bucknell, Elephant Magazine, 29 May 2018.](#)
- [George Kafka, Disegno, 31, May 2018](#)
- [Sam Holleran, garage, 31 May 2018](#)
- [Editors Choice, Architecture Review, 1 June 2018](#)
- [Graham Ross, Austin-Smith: Lord Architects, June 2018](#)
- [Peter McCaughey, Shorthand Social, 1 June 2018](#)
- [India Block, Dezeen 6 July 2018](#)
- [Susan Mansfield, Architecture & Design Scotland, July 2018](#)
- [Phineas Harper, Dezeen, 28 December 2018](#)
- [Related Films](#)

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'permission to add to the festival is implicit and the answer is always yes'



Fellows at the Calle de Vecchi entrance to The Happenstance
Image: Brian Hartley

'it isn't just playfulness, it is a serious political question'



Image: Basharat Khan

'it was a surreal moment and unlike anything I've seen at a Biennale before'



Exhibition of artists and architects work
Image: Basharat Khan



Watching
Image: Alberto Lago

The role of the Biennale and its lack of engagement with Venetians, in contrast to the freely 'open to all' ethos of The Happenstance.



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Dancing
Image: Sean Campbell