

Catalogue For British Pavilion, 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale.

## HERE, NOWHERE AND EVERYWHERE

*It is 1940. Iron railings, saucepans and bits of domesticity are being melted down as part of the war effort, but the real stuff, the real steel, is still being made in Sheffield. This is the Achilles Heel of Britain and the Axis know it. Nightly bombing raids begin to pick off the steel mills of the Don Valley. Their job is made easy: when the doors of the giant furnaces open to allow the molten metal to cool, a vast glow appears in the sky. And so, with the mixture of guile and Heath Robinson ingenuity that characterised so much of the home effort, a decoy Sheffield is built further up the valley. It is made of light. Lines of bulbs define the streets, sheets of light the buildings, theatre lights the glow of molten metal. During the day it lies blind, but at night it attracts the bombers like moths to the flame.*

*In the wartime School of Architecture on the hill young designers draw up the plans for this phantom Sheffield (the grown ups are away in battle). After a night of bombing ruin, they spend the next day readjusting their plans; dreamers and full of the optimism of youth, they make and remake their version of Sheffield, nudging it towards an ephemeral ideal. It is a city that is here (in the valley), nowhere (it disappears in the day) and everywhere (it represents the future of their country). The designers, builders and engineers create a double of the city. A ghost: a space that is at once Sheffield and not-Sheffield. An echo space, part decoy and part the city's high-voltage, deserted dream of itself.*

## INTRODUCTION

It all started with a story (which we subsequently found to be more than half true) and out of this came a madcap scheme to recreate Sheffield, a city of hard steel, in Venice, a city of soft stone and water. “Sheffield,” we told the British Council’s panel of advisors, “will be made and remade, out of light, out of sound, out of words, out of images, out of stuff. It will be,” we said, with a twinkle in our eye, “a city that is here, nowhere, and everywhere. Like an echo.”

The panel were prepared to believe us and this catalogue documents the results of the venture. It starts with an essay by GO! Sheffield about how a city, maybe Sheffield, can evoke our love (*A Kind of Loving*) which leads to a brief overview of the ideas behind the exhibition (*An Urban Register*). The catalogue then takes you through the rooms presented in the British Pavilion, from the introductory space, through a series of pages/rooms arranged according to scale, and finally the mixed-up scale of the central room. The intent is not to recreate Sheffield, but to give prompts as to how cities should be viewed and understood. Our exhibition has Sheffield at its heart, but is about much more than Sheffield; it is about any city. Sheffield, once famous for its steel and cutlery, is now the archetypal post-industrial city, a ‘glocal’ city, torn between its own identity and those of others. In this it is an echo of many cities, buffeted by the social and technological forces of modernity. We thus use Sheffield as the context to explore the present and future of all our cities.

The exhibition has been a genuine collaboration between the eight of us. I can only begin to thank everyone in the team for their dedication and support. Many thanks also to the featured architects and other contributors, and to our sponsors. The British Council took a leap of faith at the beginning, and have continued to be incredibly supportive - professionally, intellectually and personally.

---

## AN URBAN REGISTER

The theme of the X Biennale is Cities and Social Dynamics. That is a kind of big topic. Too big, I thought, for architecture alone. And so I turned to a team immersed in art, in music, in theatre, and in design. The team all came from the same city; this meant we could start discussions from the same point and work outwards. We had conversations about cities and social dynamics that simply bypassed architecture's normal obsessions with form and technique. Instead these architectural 'outsiders' developed a rich discourse around cities – of stories, of sounds, of stuff, of memories.

The setting for this discourse is our own backyard: Sheffield. In the 1960s this city vaunted its architectural ambition on the international stage, but the buildings then produced have become a classic graveyard of failed modernist dreams. Fingers once burnt, it is now a place of no great architectural distinction but nonetheless it is a place that inspires enormous loyalty and affection. Our exhibition attempts to excavate the city in order to find out what produces an extraordinary urban quality almost *despite* architecture.

Our take on Sheffield is inevitably partial (one of the great architectural fallacies is the notion of complete order and understanding). Any inhabitant, any community, any user of a city generates their own versions – their own doubles of the space which they move through, inhabit; their own imagined versions of the city. We have collected these versions of Sheffield, as well as our own recordings and interpretations, a series of personal snapshots, echoes of a city that few of you know. Architecture is included but mixed in with the other urban hardware and software.

We have organised these echoes as an urban register according to four different scales: 1:1, 1:100, 1:10,000, 1:10,000,000. These ratios refer to the standard architectural and topographical scales, from the full-size detail to the regional map. They are also suggestive of one's relationship with numbers of others, from the intimacy of the one-on-one to the anonymity of being lost in global networks. This register of scales, applied to Sheffield, becomes a means of understanding other cities. Sheffield probably works best at 1:1 (the personal) and 1:10,000 (the topographical and the network of social connections). London, on the other hand, is for me a city of

1:100 (the streets and squares) and 1:10,000,000 (the global). Few cities operate well across all scales (perhaps Venice is one of them?) whilst others fail at several: the typical US city, for example, tends to suppress the smaller scales.

Our intent is not to assess cities with this scalar urban register, but to use it as a reminder that cities work across a range of scales from the intimate to the global. Architects tend to focus on the 1:100 (the composition and making of buildings) and in this eschew the dynamics of the other scales and the rich interplay between them. Their main loss is an understanding of buildings and the places between them as the settings for the social and political life. We have therefore introduced human experience as the common thread of our urban register, taking the role of people in the understanding and making of cities as a central concern, and confronting architecture's tendency to abstract the human, the social and the political. Our urban register does not propose instrumental solutions but points to the extraordinary potential of the multiple forces beyond the built.

---

## SOYO - SCAPE

It was a cold February day when I first saw the British Pavilion in the Venice Giardini. A slightly pompous neo-classical palazzetto sitting at the end of the main axis, asserting a faint memory of Britain's now-faded imperial power. I knew then that I could not face going up those steps. The symmetry, power and order of the entrance sequence symbolised all the authority of architecture that, in Echo City, we were attempting to dissolve. Sheffield is a city of the margins, once designated as the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire in opposition to the rampant conservatism of the Thatcherite centre. It felt wrong for visitors to first encounter the echo of Sheffield in the grand centre of the pavilion.

And so we resolved to bring visitors around to the back of the Pavilion and through a slightly gentler entrance. The first thing you encounter is the SoYo-scape, an image of Sheffield and its South Yorkshire hinterland, a contemporary take on the murals that adorn Italian palazzi and town halls. The image is built up of all the things that are laid over the buildings of a city – signs, lights, advertisements, icons, cash machines. All the things that are beyond the control of the urban designer but nonetheless which have a profound effect on our spatial experience of the city – ‘spatial’ here being used in the sense of Henri Lefebvre’s famous remark that “social space is a social product.” The space of the city far exceeds that of the abstracted sense of space often evoked by architects; as the SoYo-scape suggests, urban space is at the same time social, symbolic *and* physical.

SoYo-scape is washed with the first of three 3D soundscapes developed for the Pavilion: a scanning of the chattering airwaves, the daily soundtrack wrapped around the buildings and urban places, the ‘voice’ of the people that make the city. The first room is thus an introduction to the idea that a city isn’t about designed buildings alone but also about people and the mess they make.

### Credits:

SoYo-scape by The Designers Republic  
Soundscape by The Illustrious Company.

## 1:1 - MORE THAN JUST A DETAIL

1:1 is the scale of the personal, the intimate, the human. We come to the city as individuals and however much the collective life of the city overwhelms us and tends to suppress the identity of its citizens, we remain individuals. We bring to the city our stories, our passions, our characters, our eccentricities, and it is vital that the city allows these to flourish and be shared with others. Zygmunt Bauman argued that the project of modernity is characterised by a relentless war on ambivalence, attempting to rid the world of chaos and contingency and with them the voice of the other. The modernist city, with its will to order and control, smothers the 1:1 under its cloak of uniformity, eliminating the space for individual expression. However, cities like Sheffield, which have grown organically, support the 1:1 and are all the richer for it.

The 1:1 room re-presents a project created over the past three years in Sharrow, a city centre neighbourhood and the most culturally diverse area of Sheffield. Three disused shops were taken over and used as a base for an interactive installation involving visitors and the urban environment. Thousands of people visited the shops, each visit adding to the slowly evolving collection of daily life on display. The process continues in Venice, where the room is presented in a state of incompleteness, encouraging visitors to leave their marks and so contribute to the making of this microcosm.

The 1:1 room registers the attachment that is created when people’s histories and memories lie within a shared set of streets, houses and communal spaces. The Sharrow shops had a forensic character, peeling back the layers of the city, collecting and cataloguing fragments and traces of everyday human experience: anecdotes, snippets of journeys, fingerprints, discarded toys, sounds. These micro fragments, traces unique to Sheffield, are also universal echoes of daily life in any city, reminders of a human scale that is suppressed in the gestural sweep of the urban masterplan.

### Credits:

1:1 exhibit conceived and made by Encounters: Ruth Ben-Tovim, Trish O’Shea, Jim Prevett

---

## 1:100 - ONE ARCHITECT TO ONE HUNDRED CITIZENS

1:100 is the scale of buildings. Of the school, of the housing block, of a bar full of people, of a roundabout, of the tram. 1:100 is also the classic architectural scale. Throughout the world, architectural students are exhorted to draw up their schemes at 1:100. Plans, sections and elevations. It is a scale that is detailed enough to give a semblance of reality, but not so detailed that one has to confront the actuality of spatial occupation in all its mess and uncertainty. In its removal and abstraction, 1:100 is a comfort zone in which architects can twiddle with compositional niceties and play aesthetic tricks.

What if, instead of being a scale of metrics, 1:100 is first considered as a social scale? One architect to one hundred citizens. What does one do when faced with one hundred different characters? The temptation is to retreat back to the comfort zone and wrap them up in neat packages of purified 'communities'. But, as Bauman noted, these postulated communities are bound to fail in the face of contingent reality just *because* they are postulated. Better then to acknowledge the difference of the characters that face one, the very impurity of the community. In this light, 1:100 as a social scale assumes an ethical dimension, facing up to one's responsibility for others.

The 1:100 room presents three schemes by internationally significant architects and is the most obviously architectural. Yet these projects express a conversation with the city that goes far beyond form and aesthetics. The interlocutors are a wide group: clients, Sheffields, politicians, procurers and, most of all, future users. The schemes are all designed by people from outside Sheffield, but all three have captured the essence of the city and shown how identity can survive the homogenising forces of global capital.

## 1:10,000 - THESE ARE STORIES NOT STREETS

1:10,000 is the scale of the urban quarter, of parks, of networks (social and physical), of rivers, of urban infrastructure, of the topography. 1:10,000 is the most difficult of all these scales to deal with. One can see it from the top of a hill or office block, but never grasp its entirety in all its complexity. The temptation is to stay high up, squint at the city through fingers of abstract patterns and dream of ordering that complexity with the sweep of a mouse or the streak of a pencil. But, as Michel de Certeau put it, to be "lifted to the summit is... to be lifted out of the city's grasp." 1:10,000 is a large scale, but is maybe best understood as an accumulation of the smaller scales, "one's body grasped by the streets...by the rumble of so many differences." And so to see better, it is necessary to surrender the view and claim the experience, to come down from on high, both literally and metaphorically.

The exhibition presents the experience of 1:10,000 from within, not from without or from the summit. A phrase, a manifesto even, - THE TRUE MEANING OF THINGS LIES IN THEIR USE - is written on to the map of the streets of Sheffield, generating an alien typography that lies somewhere between a childish scrawl and a psychopathic threat. The walking of these letters into the city, a journey spelling out the title phrase in the streets, provides the occasion for both documentation and speculation. What is this city? What can it tell us? What stories ripple if we walk it with eyes open? A kind of slamming together of writing and urban space, of words and lived life.

The facts of the exhibit are simple. On a certain day in a certain month in a certain year between certain times in the day, a certain route was walked in a city in the North of England. The evidence of this - mapped, indexed, organised by some system - is already doomed to fail; it cannot be the thing it echoes, cannot make it present. On the other hand something of ambiguous substance remains and can be glimpsed.

Credits:

1:10,000 exhibit conceived and made by Tim Etchells and Hugo Glendinning

---

1:10,000,000 - HERE, THERE AND NORTH OF NOWHERE

1:10,000,000 is the scale of the globe, of nations, of invisible flows, of brands, of chat-rooms, of overwhelming statistics, of celebrities. Even twenty years ago one might have been able to shun this scale behind the last vestiges of historic walls. Now, however, it is a pervasive force – for some *the* pervasive force – and not all for the good. Depending on which side of the free market fence you sit on, globalisation is either an opportunity to distribute the benefits of capital across the globe or else a hammer that flattens our both local markets and regional identity. Architects cannot sit on the fence and ignore these conditions by climbing on their pedestal of false neutrality. Manfredo Tafuri's 1960s prophecy of the impotence of architecture in the face of global capital has come to pass with a crashing inevitability, but he never argued for total capitulation.

It is the second tier cities, such as Sheffield, that have the greatest potential to retain a sense of themselves. GO! Sheffield describe how the city's stubborn character has grown out of its relative isolation from the 1:10,000,000 scale in the past. Now it and other second tier cities have to look out to the world in order to survive, but without giving themselves up to the world.

In the 1:10,000,000 room a combined soundscape and animation presents the city as both magnet and diaspora of people, stuff, sounds and virtual connections. Thirty years ago this display would have been rather repetitive (lots of steel-industry statistics) but the post-industrial reach of this city is now vast. Someone in the Vatican (a slightly deranged cardinal maybe) loyally visits the Sheffield Wednesday FC website 77 times a year. Yorkshire riflemen, pining for the taste of home, make Basra in Iraq one of the major export markets for Hendersons Relish, a Sheffield delicacy. The exhaustion of the tracks made by the Arctic Monkeys as they criss-cross the world.

Credits:

Soundscape: Martyn Ware and Vince Clarke of the Illustrious Company  
Sound Research and Engineering: Asa Bennett. Diaspora Research: Melanie Goode.  
Informatics and display: Malcolm Garrett RDI of AIG (Applied Information Group)

NO SCALE / ALL SCALES: PLEASE ~~DO NOT~~ TOUCH

Typically the central room of an architectural exhibition would give pride of place to a sumptuous model, basking under the spotlight. PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH. An instruction that asserts the authority of architecture, reducing the visitor/user to a passive observer of a model/building which in all its beauty shrugs off the stains of future occupation, of time, of mess.

We, too, have a model in the central room, but it mixes spatial realities through the confusion of scales and the doubling of virtual with real space. PLEASE TOUCH. An instruction that invites the visitor/user to actively engage in the reinvention of the model/city, asserting the right of all to share in the making of our future cities.

Credits:

Installation by Prevett and McArthur  
Model assistance: Matthew Harrison  
Support: Jeremy Till and Paul Bower

First published as: Catalogue For British Pavilion, 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale, texts by Jeremy Till.

Published here under a [Creative Commons, non-commercial, no derivatives license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).