

Echoes**The British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale: Navigating Frames and Reimagining Cultural Relations****Stuart MacDonald****Abstract**

This article examines the British Council's management of the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, exploring the complex interplay between different operational frames: showcasing British creativity, supporting creative sectors, conducting cultural diplomacy and advancing cultural relations. Drawing on recent research commissioned by the British Council, the analysis reveals tensions between national promotion and genuine cultural exchange. While the pavilion successfully fulfils its traditional role in cultural diplomacy and sector support, the article argues for a more intentional application of cultural relations principles in its management. It suggests that reimagining the pavilion as a platform for cross-cultural engagement and co-creation could pioneer a new model of pavilion diplomacy better suited to addressing contemporary global challenges. The article proposes practical steps towards embedding cultural relations priorities throughout the pavilion's curatorial processes and engagement strategies, while maintaining its other vital functions. In doing so, it presents a vision for evolving the British Pavilion's role within the Venice Biennale, potentially influencing how national pavilions contribute to international cultural engagement in an interconnected world.

Keywords

Cultural relations, Cultural diplomacy, Venice Biennale, British Council, National Pavilions, Cultural exchange

The British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale: Navigating Frames and Reimagining Cultural Relations

Stuart MacDonald

The British Pavilion, 2023. Entrance to the exhibition *Dancing Before the Moon*, featuring a commissioned work: *Thunder and Şimşek* by Jayden Ali which uses overhead steel vessels to represent Trinidadian steel-pan playing and Cypriot cooking, two ritualistic acts that evolved from colonial occupation of the Caribbean and Cyprus. Photos: Taran Wilkhu © British Council.



Introduction

This article, written from a non-academic perspective, discusses the British National Pavilion, at the 2023 Venice Architecture Biennale. It is based on a recent research consultancy report by an ICR Research team which included experts from the University of Bologna.¹ The research was commissioned by the British Council and drew, at their suggestion, on an innovative methodological approach which included ethnographic observation in order to provide insight into the extent to which the British Pavilion delivered cultural relations outcomes.

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Understanding the Cultural Relations Approach and Impacts through the UK Venice Pavilion, ICR Research for the British Council, (2024) (unpublished).

The Venice Biennale, with its historic system of national pavilions, has long been a stage for cultural diplomacy and national representation. For the British Council, which has managed the British Pavilion since 1937, the Biennale presents a unique opportunity to showcase British art and architecture, support the UK's creative sectors, and engage in cultural relations. However, as revealed in our report on the British Council's management of the pavilion, these various aims and frames can sometimes be in tension, particularly when it comes to balancing national promotion with fostering genuine cultural exchange and dialogue.

This paper explores the complex interplay of these frames and aims, and argues for a more intentional application of a cultural relations lens to the British Council's management of the pavilion. By reimagining the pavilion as a dynamic platform for cross-cultural engagement, collaboration, and co-creation, the British Council could not only advance its own organisational mission but also pioneer a new model of pavilion diplomacy that is more responsive to the needs of an interconnected world facing shared challenges.

Frames and Aims

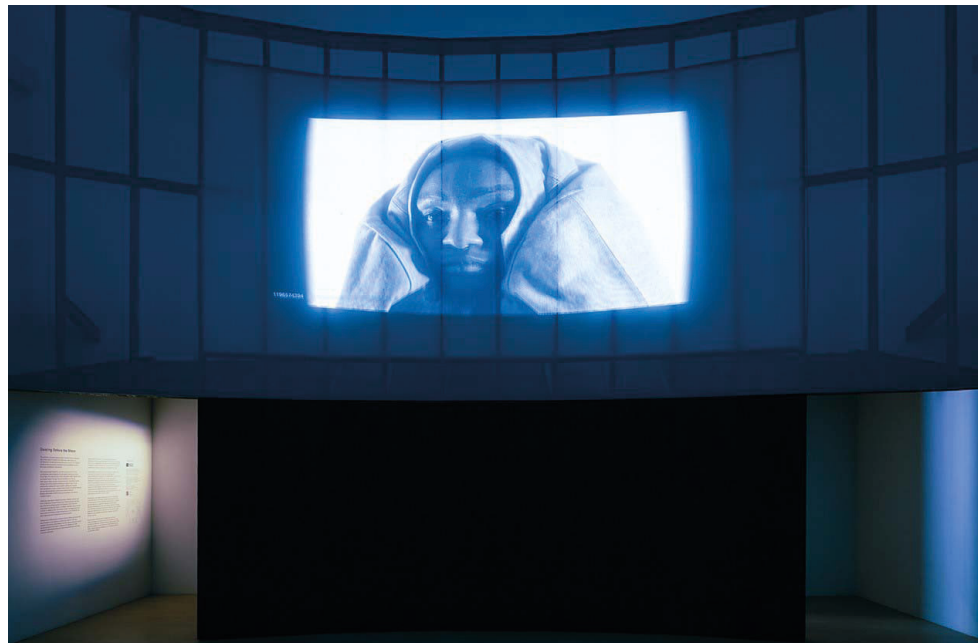
The report identifies four key frames through which the British Council currently operates the British Pavilion: showcasing British art and architecture, supporting the UK's creative sectors, conducting cultural diplomacy, and advancing cultural relations. While these frames are not mutually exclusive, they do reflect different priorities and approaches.

Showcasing, which involves presenting the 'best' of British art and architecture on a global stage, emerges as the dominant frame in the British Council's strategic planning documents. This aligns with the Biennale's traditional function as a platform for national representation and promotion. The British Pavilion has a long history of exhibiting renowned British artists and architects, from Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth in the post-war years to more recent Turner Prize winners Chris Ofili, Steve McQueen, and Jeremy Deller. In February 2020, Sonia Boyce was selected by the British Council to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale 2022, the first black woman to do so. In April 2022, Boyce won the Venice Biennale's top Golden Lion prize with her work *Feeling Her Way*. These high-profile exhibitions not only celebrate British creative excellence but also help to shape international perceptions of the UK as a dynamic, innovative, and culturally rich nation.

Supporting the UK's creative sectors is another key aim, with the pavilion providing valuable opportunities for British artists, architects, and curators to gain international exposure, build networks, and advance their careers. Participating in the Biennale can be a game-changer for individual practitioners, leading to new commissions, collaborations, and critical recognition. It can also have a wider ripple effect, raising the profile and competitiveness of the UK's creative industries on the global stage.

Cultural diplomacy, which seeks to further the UK's foreign policy goals and enhance its international reputation, is also a significant consideration. The pavilion provides a high-profile venue for engaging with global audiences, influencing perceptions of the UK, and strengthening bilateral relationships, particularly with the host nation Italy. Through targeted events, receptions, and visits by high-level delegations, the pavilion can serve as a focal point for diplomatic exchange and soft power projection. In the context of Brexit and the UK's evolving global role, the cultural diplomacy function of the pavilion has arguably taken on even greater significance. As the UK reconfigures its international relationships outside the EU framework, cultural institutions like the Pavilion serve as vital

The main hall of the British Pavilion, leading to galleries showcasing the artists' work. *The Dancing Before the Moon* film, in the main hall, observes rituals performed by the global diaspora in Britain, demonstrating an appreciation of land, community values and the sharing of space. Photos: Cristiano Corto © British Council



mechanisms for maintaining and strengthening European cultural ties. The Venice Biennale's status as the world's leading international art and architecture platform makes the British Pavilion particularly valuable as a space where British cultural achievement can be showcased independently of formal political structures. However, the precise impact of this shifting context on curatorial strategies and institutional priorities would require further research.

Cultural relations, defined as reciprocal transnational interactions between cultures that foster mutual understanding, collaboration, and dialogue, is perhaps the least explicitly articulated frame in the British Council's current approach to the pavilion. While the report identifies instances where the pavilion is already contributing to cultural relations outcomes, such as through the Venice Fellowship programme and the emerging Global

Commissioners' network, these tend to be more organically driven rather than strategically planned.

This is not to say that cultural relations is absent from the British Council's thinking around the pavilion. Indeed, the organisation's stated purpose is "to build connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language." However, in practice, the imperative to showcase British talent and advance national interests can sometimes overshadow the more reciprocal, dialogic, and collaborative dimensions of cultural relations.

Reimagining the Pavilion through a Cultural Relations Lens

Given the British Council's mission as a cultural relations organisation, there is arguably a compelling case for more intentionally leveraging the pavilion as a platform for cross-cultural engagement and exchange. By applying a cultural relations lens to its management of the pavilion, the British Council could not only advance its own organisational objectives, but also pioneer a new model of pavilion diplomacy that is more responsive to the needs of an interconnected world facing shared challenges.

So what might this look like in practice? At a strategic level, it would mean explicitly articulating cultural relations goals and priorities in the pavilion's planning documents, alongside those related to showcasing, sector support, and cultural diplomacy. This would provide a clear mandate and direction for pavilion activities, and help to ensure that cultural relations considerations are not treated as an afterthought or a nice-to-have.

Operationally, it would require embedding cultural relations priorities throughout the pavilion's curatorial processes, public programming, and engagement strategies. Suggestions from interviewees included:

Defining specific cultural relations objectives and indicators to guide pavilion activities and measure their impact. These could relate to fostering dialogue and mutual understanding between British and international audiences, facilitating cross-cultural collaborations and knowledge exchange, or engaging diverse communities and perspectives in the pavilion's programming.

Selecting curators and artists whose work aligns with cultural relations goals and who are skilled in facilitating cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration. This might mean prioritising practitioners with a track record of socially engaged, participatory, or co-creative practice, or those whose work explores themes of global relevance and resonance.

Designing events, and educational programmes that encourage active participation, mutual learning, and co-creation with diverse audiences. This could involve interactive installations, workshops, symposia, or performances that create opportunities for visitors to share their own stories, perspectives, and creative responses, and to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other and with pavilion staff and artists.

Investing in digital technologies to extend the reach and accessibility of the pavilion's cultural relations initiatives beyond the physical site. This could include online platforms for virtual exhibitions, webinars, and community engagement, as well as social media campaigns and digital storytelling projects that amplify diverse voices and perspectives.

Proactively seeking partnerships and collaborations with other national pavilions, cultural institutions, and local communities to develop shared

projects and narratives. This could involve co-commissioning works, co-hosting events, or co-developing educational resources that explore common themes or challenges from multiple cultural perspectives.

Capturing and sharing best practices and lessons learned to contribute to the wider field of cultural relations and inform future pavilion strategies. This could involve commissioning evaluations, publishing case studies, or convening dialogues with other pavilion managers and cultural relations professionals to exchange insights and ideas.

By taking these steps (and no doubt there are others), the British Council could potentially achieve significant cultural relations outcomes by leveraging the unique profile of the Venice Biennale. This has the potential to add value to the global impact of its arts and culture activities, and establish the British Pavilion as a space where diverse perspectives are explicitly valued, meaningful connections are forged, and collective action on global challenges can be catalysed.

Conclusion

The British Council's management of the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale is a complex undertaking, shaped by multiple frames and aims. While showcasing British art and architecture, supporting the UK's creative sectors, and advancing cultural diplomacy are all important objectives, there is an opportunity to more fully realise the pavilion's potential as a platform for cultural relations.

By strategically aligning the pavilion's activities with cultural relations goals, the British Council could not only deliver on its organisational mission but also set a new standard for national participation in the Biennale - one that prioritises genuine cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and collaborative problem-solving. For this to happen, there would need to be a shift in mindset and practice, from seeing the pavilion primarily as a stage for national self-promotion to also embracing it as a space for global dialogue, learning, and co-creation. This could be achieved through planning processes which aimed from the outset to deliver cultural relations outcomes.

In an era of complex global challenges that demand collective action across borders and cultures, this reimagining of the pavilion's purpose and potential could not be more timely or urgent. In this way, the British Council could not only enhance its own impact and reputation, but also inspire other nations to follow suit, potentially pointing to a viable and sustainable future for national pavilions, and impacting on the Venice Biennale as a whole to help realise its potential to evolve into a more dynamic, inclusive, and socially relevant platform for international cultural engagement.

This is not to suggest that the British Council should abandon its other objectives for the pavilion, or that cultural relations should be pursued at the expense of artistic excellence, sector development, or diplomatic interests. Rather, it is to argue for a more integrated and balanced approach that recognises the interconnectedness of these aims and the unique potential of the pavilion to advance them all in mutually reinforcing ways.

Ultimately, the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale represents a significant opportunity for the British Council to put its cultural relations mission into practice on a global stage. By embracing this opportunity with creativity, vision, and a spirit of openness and collaboration, the organisation could not only enhance its own - and the UK's - impact, reputation, and relevance, but also potentially contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable model for international art and culture.

Author's Biography

Stuart MacDonald is a former senior UK and Scottish Government civil servant with over 25 years' experience advising on culture and education in international relations. As Founder Director of ICR Research since 2019, he specialises in soft power and international cultural relations consultancy.

His extensive career includes establishing the Centre for Cultural Relations at the University of Edinburgh (2012-16) and developing professional programmes for the European External Action Service. As Head of international Engagement through Tourism, Culture and Sport in the Scottish Executive, he

led public diplomacy initiatives with the USA, France, Sweden and China. His government roles encompassed museum policy in England, Cultural Policy and cultural funding, educational policy and digital strategies for culture and education.

MacDonald currently serves as a Research Fellow at the University of London, as an Associate of the Edinburgh Futures Institute, and is a member of the Advisory Board of CREDO, the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence in Diplomacy and Cultural Relations at the University of Siena.