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A Portrait of the Architect as a Wood Model

Níall McLaughlin's 2018 Venice Biennale model finds a temporary home in London

By [Eva Branscome](#) • January 18, 2019 • [Art](#), [International](#), [Review](#)



Níall McLaughlin's 2018 Venice Biennale model on view at the festival (Courtesy Níall McLaughlin Architects)

While the U.K. parliament was voting down their prime minister's Brexit deal with the E.U., London's architecture world crowded into the Art Deco Jarvis Hall of the [Royal Institute of British Architects \(RIBA\)](#). Ignoring the overheated political debacle taking place a mile away, they went there instead to celebrate the homecoming of [Níall McLaughlin's](#) 2018 [Venice Biennale](#) model. The event was sold out and the institution's Facebook page showed individuals begging for tickets as if for a music or sports event. But people did not just come to see this installation that will be on display from January 10 to 28—they came to hear Níall speak to them of architecture, culture, nature, and light. He is a storyteller: the poetics of his language seeping into his architecture and vice versa, infusing each other within a reciprocal process.

The “Presences” installation now on display in RIBA’s Florence Hall in a large and beautifully crafted circular table that can rotate. It is devised as a gigantic horizontal sundial and the models of McLaughlin’s buildings sit atop a reflective blue expanse imprinted with constellations of stars. Surrounding this are inscriptions of the yearly rhythms as a calendar of activities that are performed in cyclical repetition within these buildings like a medieval *Book of Hours*. The sun is simulated from a structure above to which lights are attached and as the visitors crank the massive wooden mechanism, the models that sit on top of what could be read as either an inverted celestial expanse or a dark blue sea, are flooded with the undulating light of a rising and setting sun.

The models are all made of blond wood as skeletal abstractions of their different functions and locations: The Garden Theatre in Oxford’s Worcester College and a Song School in Cambridge’s Trinity Hall, a teaching chapel in Ripon College in Cuddesdon, a new castle hall for Bishop Auckland with its watchtower inspired by a wooden bulwark, the Rugby Veterans’ Hall in Limerick, and finally a fish-and-chip shop on the Deal Pier. These designs crisscross the British Isles, representing their cultures in beautiful diversity. What they have in common is that they are all spaces of community and congregation. McLaughlin has treated each with the same sensitivity, learning from the complexities of the individual sites, their people, histories, and geographical idiosyncrasies, not shirking from this challenge but instead drawing inspiration from them. This is site-specific architecture at its best.

The problem with exhibitions is that they only last for a short time and then are gone. At the Venice Biennale this model stood in the Arsenale as a temporary spectacle of learning and inspiration. Now back in London we can see it for ourselves for the next few weeks, but what then? Where will this elegiac creature telling through architecture stories about the cycles of civilization and identity finally be allowed to call home?