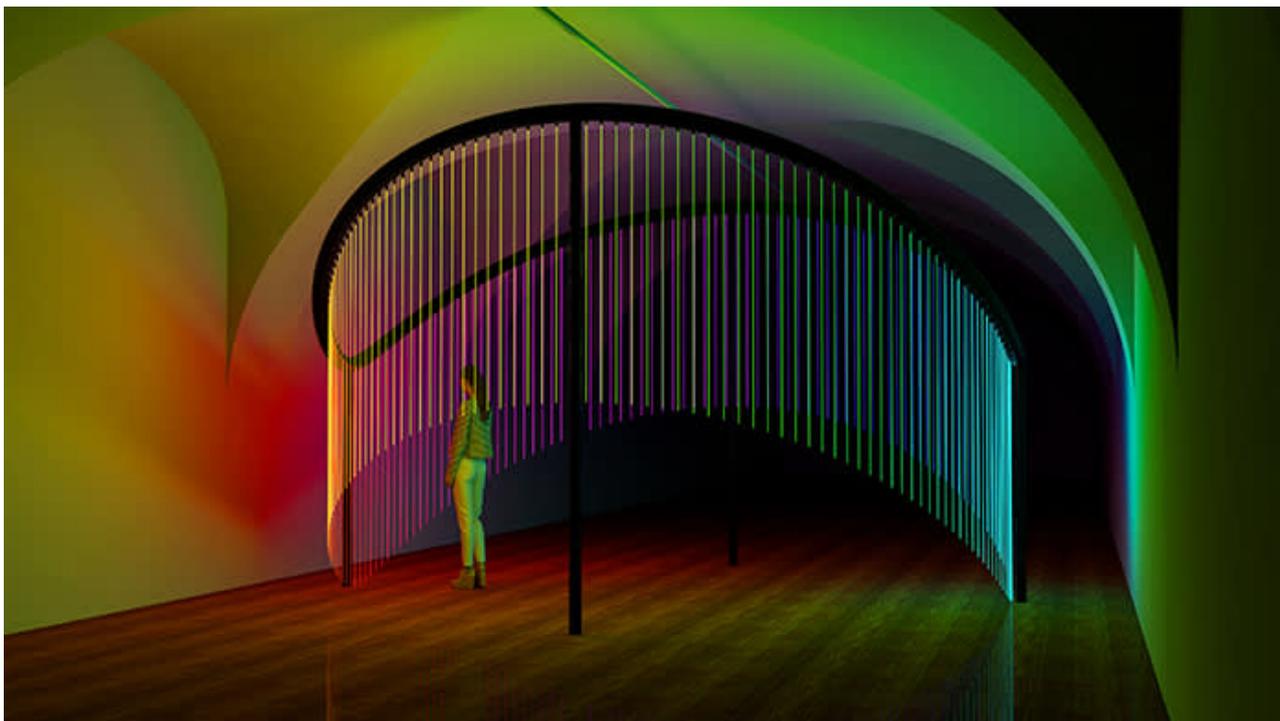


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Time to get emotional about design

Greek rebellion, Australian positivity — London's Design Biennale wants to make us feel as well as think



Australia's 'Full Spectrum' made of 150 fibre-optic strands

Madison Darbyshire SEPTEMBER 3, 2018

Flynn Talbot was in Perth when the Australian parliament legalised same-sex marriage in December 2017, ending nearly a decade of bitter debate. [Celebrations exploded across the nation](#): posters and banners went up in public squares, people danced in the streets and venues threw open their doors to host mass-marriages for happy couples.

“There was a massive, immediate, visual response across the country,” recalls lighting designer Talbot. “It totally changed the mentality about what relationships could be, what love could be.”

It also inspired him to design something to capture the mood: “I wanted to make something bright, colourful and fun that would celebrate that — something that would represent a positive Australia.”

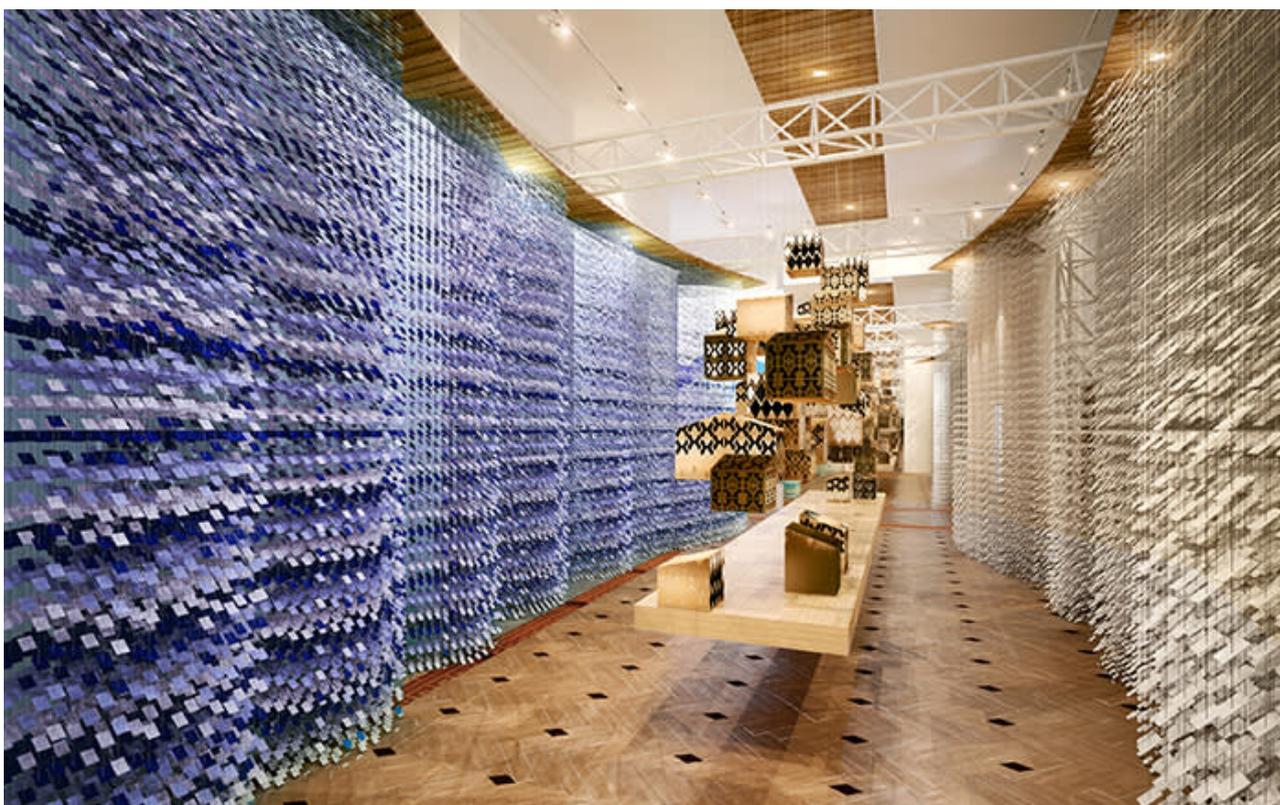
The result, a full-spectrum colour light installation made up of 150 fibre-optic strands, is one of the works exhibited in this year's [London Design Biennale](#) at Somerset House. Talbot's installation will join submissions from 40 other countries, cities and territories, all in conversation around a single theme: emotional states.

The concept is the brainchild of artistic director Chris Turner, who is also keeper of design,

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architecture and digital at the Victoria and Albert Museum. It's a theme he has been interested in since he did his PhD on the history of emotion. It builds, too, on the work of London's inaugural Design Biennale in 2016, themed Utopia. "In the last biennale, the best exhibits were the most visceral and immersive, that communicated moods and manipulated your emotions," Turner says.

This theme seems fitting at a time when measurements of global mood and "gross national happiness" are gaining traction alongside more traditional criteria of a country's success such as GDP. In 2012, the UN launched its first World Happiness Report, encouraging countries to use the metrics to guide social policy. In 2016 the UAE appointed a minister of state for happiness — and last winter, the UK appointed its [own minister of loneliness](#), in recognition of a national epidemic.



Guatemala's textile installation 'Palopo', based on a vibrantly painted town

"Measurements are a way of demonstrating that emotions matter, that these are not irrelevant outbursts, but a part of politics," says William Davies, author of the forthcoming book, *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World*. Indeed, the recent rise of populism around the world has been perceived by many politicians as an emotional outburst from those fearful about their place in the world.

Owing to its global nature, the biennale is inherently political. Countries work for two years to put their best foot forward and, often, to share the news they would prefer the world to hear. "It's an apt time to ask designers and countries to add to the conversation about how people around the world are feeling," says [Sir John Sorrell](#), one of the co-founders. Like emotion, he says, "design is an international language. I've been saying that for 50 years. The biennale is a conversation about design."

The biennale's team works to encourage countries to produce honest submissions, and to eschew ideas that would be more at home at a craft fair. This year's mandate was to "investigate the

important relationship between design, strong emotional responses and real social needs”. Talbot’s installation was a natural fit: “Light has this intangible magic to it,” he says, “the same as the feeling that is happening in Australia right now.”

Other installations will include one by Brazil that’s designed to evoke the topography of the country’s breathtaking rainforest but also to recognise its fragility in the face of rapid deforestation. A wall of rotating hourglasses designed by the UAE questions the perception of time in a rapidly modernising economy. A textile installation of a Guatemalan town that paints its houses vibrant shades reflects on the use of colour to promote sustainability and attract tourists. A Lebanese pavilion blocks all outside noise, allowing visitors to sit in perfect silence.



Greece's installation 'Disobedience', with its lead designer Nassia Inglessis

While the biennale’s theme provides countries with an opportunity to showcase their top design talent and present a vision for where they are going, it can also be an examination of where they have been. Greece’s submission, “Disobedience”, is a structure designed to challenge the perception that architecture is something static and unresponsive to our emotional state. The work is made to morph and transform itself through contact with human bodies. According to its lead designer, Nassia Inglessis, by interacting with it a visitor will become “a disobedient actor” and sense “how they can adjust their environment and create space that wasn’t there before”.

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Disobedience, Inglessis explains, is not a fixed emotional state but a journey, “starting with curiosity or frustration to ambivalence or temptation, which ends in an excitement, or a wonder”. That journey has been a part of Greece’s long history, she says, but also of its temperament. “Look at Icarus, the cautionary tale, and Prometheus, who disobeyed the gods,” she says. “Greece is in a time where a lot of things need to be rethought and the status quo needs to be disobeyed. What I’m

trying to express is that that can be reconsidered with a view of ‘What could take the place of the current status? What could be new?’”

Encouraging visitors to think about design, and approach problems as a designer might, is important to the biennale’s mission. From laundry hampers to democracy, “everything is designed by somebody,” says Sorrell, gesticulating around his perfectly curated office. “Design can absolutely make things better, when it’s done right.”

All good design must obey three basic principles, he adds, quoting principles set down by the Roman architect Vitruvius: “It must be well-made, fulfil its function, and it should delight.”



Brazil's 'Desmatamento', evoking the beauty and fragility of the rainforest

Delight is certainly palpable in this year’s biennale entries, which seem to drift towards the happy side of the emotional spectrum. “Designers are optimistic people. It’s a fact,” says Sorrell. “Designers wake up in the morning asking, how can I make the world a better place through design?”

For Chris Turner, consumers should be sceptical of the “evangelism” of good design. But they should also push back against bad design — and think about how they define what’s good and what to have emotional attachments to. He hopes that the emotions communicated by this year’s biennale will encourage people to think about the different ways great design can make us feel. He hopes, too, that it will raise profound questions, such as how “emotionally durable” design is.

“We have iPhones that update every one or two years. [Is that good design?](#) Or is [good design] an

old watch that people keep for generations?” he asks. “When you look at the design literature, it’s all about how you can get people to desire your particular consumer objects. But can we look at that in a different way? Can people be educated to desire and have an emotional connection to things that last longer than five minutes?”

While it is unlikely that the biennale will put forward any new theories of global democracy, Sorrell wants visitors to come away with an increased understanding of the power of good design to have an emotional impact and create more delight in the world.

“Especially in a world that is so fragmented, it is important to come together and have a conversation that is positive because everyone involved wants to do things better,” he says. “We could have an accountancy biennale but it wouldn’t be as exciting for the public.”

“Emotional States” is at Somerset House until September 23, 2018; somersethouse.org.uk. Madison Darbyshire is a journalist on FT Special Reports

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