



GREENHOUSE BRITAIN  
*Losing ground, gaining wisdom*

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## Introduction

The Harrison Studio and Associates (Britain) proposes a work entitled, "GREENHOUSE BRITAIN". In its simplest form it has been proposed through lectures and seminars in seven venues across Great Britain. Basically, the concept argues that the Greenhouse phenomenon is so urgent, so compelling in the near term, so potentially catastrophic in the long term, and so obviously destabilizing to the environment, that we strongly believe the Greenhouse discourse is vital and will benefit from the voice of culture, particularly the disciplines of visual, conceptual and ecological arts. Presently, this discourse is in the hands of government, planners, scientists, insurance companies, journalists and some community leaders. Artists, writers and other voices of culture have not yet been sufficiently heard.

The propositions that follow and the forms that are suggested emerge, in part, from Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison's series of lecture/performances, *GREENHOUSE BRITAIN: Losing ground, gaining wisdom* and their accompanying responses, and in part from the long history the Harrison Studio has with this subject matter.

The Harrison Studio and Associates have been involved with various considerations of the Greenhouse phenomenon from 1974 to the present. The Harrison Studio is composed of the artists, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison and the exhibition designer, Gabriel Harrison. Its "on the ground" associates are; the artist David Haley, who is collaborating in this work, and the cultural historian and project manager, Chris Fremantle, who has written the initial grant.

## The Concept

The core concept here is a statement and a question.  
“The oceans will rise gracefully. Can we withdraw with equal grace?” It is the guiding metaphor for this work.

The text below is an excerpt from *The Lagoon Cycle* (1978). This closing conversation is between the two characters, the Lagoon Maker and the Witness and accompanies a 7 foot by 11 foot world map, drawn as if the oceans have risen about 300 feet:

*And the waters will rise slowly  
at the boundary  
at the edge  
redrawing that boundary  
continually  
moment by moment  
all over  
altogether  
all at once*

*It is a graceful drawing and redrawing  
this response to the millennia of the making of fire*

*And in this new beginning  
this continuously rebeginning  
Will you feed me when my lands can no longer produce  
and will I house you when your lands are covered with water  
so that together  
we can withdraw  
as the waters rise*

## A new story of place

We believe that the present cultural landscape is largely formed by the dominant cultures of a place. It is formed by a sometimes conflicted, sometimes consensual discourse or narrative from an array of stories, observations and intentions, first spoken by people of these dominant cultures and thereafter enacted on the ground. To our view, such a story has certain fluidity about it, and may change directions for any number of reasons. This work, GREENHOUSE BRITAIN, will be designed to enlarge, deepen and clarify the emerging global warming discourse in Great Britain.

This is a new story of place and would begin with a large model mapping the island of Britain. Projected onto this model the waters will rise at 2 meter increments up to 16 meters with predicted storm surges. (At present, the hundred year prediction ranges from one to five meters, sometimes more). We have all seen the drama of ocean rise expressed in various predictions and, of course, in *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Our second mapping will reflect engineering thinking, such as that currently used, wherein the endangered areas are protected by dikes. These rise in concert with the sea level to make a vast, expensive earthworks that would be very problematic in the long term. Such structures would need to accommodate, not only the ocean rise, but the storm surges and the flow of waters that would enter from un-raised stream beds and from heavy rains. In addition to the dikes, a huge complex and energy-expensive pumping system would also need to be put in place to accommodate rainfall.

At 5 meters 2,200,000 people are displaced with 10,000 square kilometers of land flooded.

Absent from these calculations are predicted storm surge events and possible defense systems.



Opposing this vision or mapping we would present another that would be constructed as if the status quo had been yielded and, in general, letting nature take its course. Then the billions of pounds that would have been spent on constructing the complex system of dams and dikes and pumping system would be spent instead on a new form of settlement for the people that would have to move. We think of this movement of people as modern Global Warming refugees. This new settlement we imagine as markedly different from the "development as usual" construction that presently exists. Monies saved from resisting the ocean might, in many cases, be far better used for resettling the population within a new and possibly more productive and ecologically provident cultural landscape than presently exists.

We think linguistic invention is as important as visual improvisation. For purposes of this work, we are replacing the term "development" with the term "settlement." For us, the term "settlement" has embedded in it the idea of habitat, not only for ourselves but the other living creatures (animals, birds, insects and plants) with which we share the ecosystem within which all structure is built. That is to say, human habitation would be an interactive figure in a bio-diverse sphere.

## Exhibition proposal

The differences between settlement and development, as conventionally used, are profound. They become evident when the differences between a settler and a developer are visualized. For instance, a developer, using the well-known templates that exist in finance, planning, building and land use, generates a speculative adventure with little real responsibility for long-term consequences. The metaphorical shift between development design and settlement design becomes visible at its simplest level - by the selection of an appropriate site and tuning settlement to the carrying capacity of the terrain. We intend, in the exhibition, to locate appropriate sites and conceptually design possible models for such settlements.

This settlement model, expressed photographically and with drawings, maps and text would be on the wall opposing the wall that presents elements of the island as a protected entity. Thus the viewer can, by walking between these walls at the same time, experience these diverse visions of the future. The juxtapositions are separated by a very large model of the whole island, exposing its built nature. Thus, the model, which represents the present, slowly changing, and two opposing futures on opposing walls are available to the viewer all at once at a scale that metaphorically is commensurate with the issues imbedded in the text and images. The model itself would be white. Projectors above it would make visible the rising waters in a constantly changing landscape as partially described on page 5.

At 10 meters, 5,200,000 people are displaced with 26,200 square kilometers of land flooded.

Absent from these calculations are predicted storm surge events and possible defense systems.



10m

What we have written so far, we imagine as a museum installation or large public space with a catalog to be widely distributed. The exhibition that we propose looks at “withdrawal” and defence with “creation and recreation” as co-evolving processes.

At present, we are assuming that the government is moving toward accepting the probability of rapid ocean rise. We suggest that the existing plans for greenhouse emissions control will be insufficient to keep temperature rise at 2° or less. In this context, the rising ocean becomes a form determinant. By “form determinant” we mean the ocean will determine much of the new form, that culture, industry and many other elements of civilization may need to take.

There is another piece of this picture that we wish to give voice to. Up until this present rising of the world oceans, the creators of Western civilization have held and enacted the belief that all limitations in the physical world, particularly in the ecological world, are there to be used and overcome. We think that the rising ocean is an opportunity for transformation, but it is exactly the reverse of a new frontier to overcome from civilization's perspective. Now, from the ocean's perspective, its boundary is perhaps a continuing, evolving transforming new frontier. Therefore, assuming a rapid rise of waters, perhaps as much as 5 meters in 100 years, there are apparently no models of precedence, no information, design, nor planning on the table, with the exception of ocean defenses and the pressures for green development. Hence the question to be expressed in the exhibition is:

**“What would a graceful withdrawal be like?”**

It is the intention of this exhibition to begin generating the thinking, the design, perhaps the new belief structure, and perhaps even indicating new economic structures that may be required for:

1. Moving some percentage of millions of people to high ground.
2. Creating appropriate habitat for them while looking at creating a more carbon sequestering landscape.
3. Moving endangered means of production to high ground
4. Producing the amount of energy necessary to do so when low ground power plants become dysfunctional from flooding.

At 15 meters, 7,900,000 people are displaced with 31,200 square kilometers of land flooded.

Absent from these calculations are predicted storm surge events and possible defense systems.



Applying this type of questioning to the island of Britain, which under such cases could be subject to above scenarios, the following notions appear worth considering more thoroughly than exists in the present Global Warming discourse:

1. At present, the lowlands of Britain are more highly populated than the highlands. Should we then imagine designing more cities that might collectively house a displaced multitude? In which case, transport between them and transport within them and industry within them all need consideration and planning.

2. It would appear that a significant rise of waters would cover some portion of the farmlands of Britain. In addition, due to ocean current change, Britain may become cooler. Therefore, we suggest that, that which remains of the whole island might benefit from becoming, in the main, an island-wide, poly-cultural herding system embedded within a highly-productive open canopy forest. This suggests that the government would have to socialize some resources.

3. Another opportunity here is to look at the ocean far more creatively than we ever have. Presently most fish farms pollute. Poly-cultural farming is the necessity here. The civilization, as we see it, would have to give up most meat (cow or pig, simply because cow takes 10 lbs of food for 1 lb of cow, etc.)

4. Systems of production and generation of waste would need to be refined.

**We as artists understand that answers to all the questions posed are not possible within the exhibition context. Moreover, we understand that many are now making such considerations. However, we expect the presence of such questions to inform our work and be reflected in the imagery.**

## Three histories

In conclusion, we as strangers believe that Britain is at the intersection of 3 histories. There is the history of empire, its beginnings, its growth, its high point at the Industrial Revolution and beyond and its contraction from the 1930s to the 1970s to its present consensual relationship to so many of its former, now independent, colonies. While, part-by-part, we imagine this contraction can be seen as stressful and full of strife, seen as a continuum, we as strangers perceive this withdrawal, this re-forming of self, as it were, as graceful. It is in this sense that we believe that deeply embedded in the zeitgeist of the country is the knowledge or understanding of how to yield terrain.

The second history is embedded in the astonishing, for us, national response to the threat of invasion - to unify and mobilize the country. We see a partial metaphor here. We do not see the world oceans as attacking the isle of Britain, but we do see the need for the country to mobilize with the same integrity, vitality, cooperation, depth of purpose and "all-in-it-togetherness" that typified the war years and the reconstruction thereafter.

The third history that we see is one that this proposed work of art seeks to co-join with. It is the new history that is coming into being in a 30-year Now with a growing understanding of the urgency embedded in a 30-year Moment.

### THREE QUESTIONS

Three questions have been asked most repeatedly of this work. They are: What is meant by 'plasticity of discourse'? Why use the term 'refugees'? And, why use a proposed 5, 10 and 15 meter rise, when particularly the 10 and 15 meter rise may be seen as extreme and improbable except in the very long-term?

### ON PLASTICITY OF DISCOURSE

Here we wish to enlarge our earlier assertion that the cultural landscape in any given place is formed by the dominant cultures in that place. Furthermore, we believe the initial formation begins with a discourse and the early parts of such a discourse often take a narrative form. That is to say, people tell each other stories about what they imagine or desire to happen. At least in our experience, such narrativity has flexibility in it. It is in this point of a discourse or a cultural narrative, where there is the greatest flexibility, and therefore the greatest opportunity for engagement and change. Often these circumstances are coupled with a sense of urgency that we call "the urgency of the moment." For many of the works that we have done in environments that were in a state of transition there was a critical period of time, often a year or two, where a discourse was forming in planning communities, in newspapers, in public attitudes, in financial circles, and in intergovernmental agencies about what to do or how to cope with an event structure that had had serious consequences for the environment. In San Jose, the discourse was about whether to spend millions of dollars putting the Guadalupe River underground in a tube and building over it. In Holland, it was about where to put or how to cope with the environmental impact of a proposed 6 or 7 hundred thousand houses to meet future population projection, with all of the associated infrastructure in a most unfortunate place. In Santa Fe, it was about drought and a dead river. In England, it is the discourse on Global Warming. In each case, if the discourse itself becomes codified and rigidified, controlled by a narrow group of people, then the outcome in the environment is unfortunate. Thus, we have found that the opportunity for maximum creativity to result in maximum positive effect in a given circumstance is while the discourse is still plastic. In the

case of San Jose, the several million were put partially toward restoring the river. In Holland, a whole region was saved and the history of the countryside saved. In Santa Fe, a watershed was helped to begin restoring itself. The isle of Britain is an open question.

### ON REFUGEES

For instance, we are imagining the lowest lands of the Mersey Basin or Hull, with the waters rising in such a way that thousands of people become homeless, de facto local refugees. Their lands have been captured, their homes destroyed by a force majeure. How can a wealthy ensemble of countries like England, Wales and Scotland respond intelligently? Compassionately? Quickly and carefully with new places of wellbeing? After all, the story of New Orleans in America is an obvious counter-example. That which we propose to design will take up issues of conviviality, nurture, structure and commons and these issues will guide the design.

### PROJECTING A 2 TO 16 METER OCEAN RISE ON THE MODEL ITSELF

Why look at the 2 to 16 meter possible ocean rise when the predictions for the next hundred years vary between a little less than 1 meter at the low end and 5 meters or more at the high end? At present, we the artists believe that the tipping point has happened, the exponential effect is in process. We are concerned that the runaway or positive feedback loops in the Global Warming drama outweigh and will outweigh more over time, the negative feedback loops which tend to be climatologically stabilizing. If the calculations are right, the Greenland and Arctic Icepacks will melt in tandem with the glaciers. We are looking at an approximately 40 foot ocean rise. We should be prepared for more drastic environmental changes so that we are not caught unaware. What does it matter whether it is 100 years from now or 200 years from now, or sooner, or 400 years from now that this vast movement of water happens. In any case, dramatic change is highly probable in less than a 100-year Now. We find it important to imagine and thereafter express what the cultural landscape might become.



***Harrison Studio & Associates (Britain) are working in partnership with:***

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