

Visual Arts

A new creation emerges from the Venice lagoon

A garden installation at the rear of a 19th-century palace connects the city to its surroundings



The garden is open to the public as a place to meet, study and relax © Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappellett
Rachel Spence 14 HOURS AGO

“For you live like seabirds, with your homes dispersed . . . across the surface of the water.” Writing in 523AD, Ravenna-based statesman Cassiodorus evoked the enviable lifestyles of the first settlers in the Venetian lagoon — “You may sail up the pleasantest of rivers. Your ships need fear no angry gusts” — with a poetry that has rarely been surpassed.

It’s unlikely the lyrical Roman would recognise Venice today. The reality of between 20m-30m tourists a year makes for thronged streets, exorbitant property prices and a shrinking public infrastructure. As a result, most inhabitants face a daily battle for survival. Many lose. The local population stands at just 54,000, compared to 175,000 in the postwar era.

Little wonder the last decade has seen vociferous public protests against issues such as the lack of affordable housing, cruise ships and the sale of public spaces to private enterprise, such as the beautiful Renaissance edifice that was once the central post office and is now a luxury shopping mall.

In such an intemperate climate, what role can artists play? As home to two of the world’s most prestigious Biennales, of art and architecture, Venice is no stranger to imaginative interventions that take the city as their theme.

All too often, however, practitioners tumble into clichés of, for example, the city as crossroads between east and west, or fail to realise that carnival masks and Murano glass are not the stuff of cutting-edge conceptualism. Those who ignore the problems do so at their peril. There were protests at this year’s architecture Biennale by Venetians who raged against the Victoria and Albert Museum’s championship of London social housing while they struggle to find homes.

Of far more long-term benefit is *Laguna Viva* (“Living Lagoon”), which was inaugurated to coincide with the opening of the Architecture Biennale in May this year. It is a joint project between British-based collective Assemble and Venetian NGO WahV (We are here Venice), a non-profit association that researches and campaigns for the long-term social, economic and environmental welfare of the city. The installation resides in the grounds of the V-A-C Foundation, a contemporary art space on the Zattere waterfront owned by Russian energy tycoon Leonid Mikhelson.

At first glance, *Laguna Viva* seems to be an ordinary garden. Located in the 130 sq m space behind the 19th-century palace — which was developed by local architect Alessandro Pedron — it’s a serene refuge where visitors may read a book, sip a drink or simply observe the olive-green waters of the canal that courses past the iron watergate.

Yet there are curiosities. Why so few flowers? And such an abundance of grasses and shrubs? What are those feathery trees along the wall? And why are all the plants submerged in concrete water tanks?

‘Venetian gardens are precious places. Many, however, are closed to the public so this is a welcome change’

In reality, this is less a garden than an example of a salt marsh — one of the low-lying islands whose grassy pelts float in the Venetian lagoon. Those wispy trees are tamarisks usually found fringing the banks of more substantial islands such as Torcello. The shrubs and reeds encompass samphire, sea lavender and sea aster, known in Italian as *settembrini* for the violet flowers that blossom in autumn and turn the waterscape into a queenly

carpet.

The embryo of *Laguna Viva* was planted as V-A-C director Teresa Iarocci Mavica, a Neapolitan based in Moscow for the past 30 years, cogitated on how best to exploit the empty plot of land behind the palace. “Venice has been violated by tourism,” declares Mavica as we chat over Skype. “We decided to give something back: a public space not just for visitors to our shows but for local people, like the students from the nearby university, to enjoy as a *posto di incontro* [meeting-place]. Somewhere you can study and relax. A place to pause.”

Mavica turned to Assemble “because they are hybrids: artists who are architects, architects who are artists”. The deliberately anti-spectacular approach to rethinking public spaces which won Assemble the Turner Prize in 2015, plus their focus on their long-term relevance to the surrounding community, is devoid of the “faux-nostalgia” which Mavica wanted to avoid at all costs.

As a British-based firm, Assemble knew they needed insider expertise. “We wanted someone who could help us navigate Venice’s social and political issues,” explains collective member Giles Smith, who worked on *Laguna Viva* alongside other members of Assemble.

The “obvious person” was Jane da Mosto, a Venice-based environmental scientist, activist and author who had already collaborated with British architectural firm Muf on Villa Frankenstein, a Venice-focused installation in the British pavilion at the Biennale of Architecture in 2010. The South Africa-born, London-raised da Mosto has worked hard to protect the city that has been her home since 1995. Currently, she heads up *We are here Venice*, which, as she puts it, “addresses Venice’s challenges as a living city and advocates evidence-based approaches to policy-making.” (Muf’s Liza Fior is also on the board.)

“Our attitude is that the health of the lagoon is central to Venice’s identity and intrinsically linked to the wellbeing of the city,” says da Mosto as we sip a delicious infusion of iced saffron tea at one of the tables. She recalls the moment when, after Assemble had called on her for help, she had a brainwave. “At first I couldn’t think what to do with the space. Then I thought: why don’t we just put back what was originally there? And that was the lagoon.”



'Laguna Viva' contains plants and shrubs typical of the Venice lagoon's salt marshes © Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti

Assemble leapt at the proposal because da Mosto’s awareness that the lagoon is “the neglected lifeline to Venice’s existence, glorious past and future survival” dovetails with their commitment, in Smith’s words, to “reclaiming territory for the everyday”.

But the logistics of the transplant were challenging. “Everything is different here,” says Da Mosto when asked about the environmental changes to which the plants must adapt. Care has been taken to incorporate “critical environmental dynamics and compensate for the smallness of the system”, she explains. Nevertheless, there’s more shade in the garden. “At first I was worried the plants wouldn’t cope,” she says, but it turns out that less sunlight has so far been an advantage. “It means plants’ biological activity is slower in the hot season.”

Smith remembers numerous “practical eccentricities” of pulling off a project in this most unusual of cities. “The reality of seeing concrete being mixed in the belly of a boat was pretty startling,” he chuckles.

It’s easy to slot *Laguna Viva* into the lineage of process art where work is displayed while undergoing transformation and even decay. “A garden is a work in progress,” observes Da Mosto. “You can’t always expect to see everything you want. Things will grow, die off and grow again.”

However, one more permanent element is to come. When the Biennale ends in November, Assemble plan to cover the surface of the garden — currently fake grass — in the stunning encaustic ceramic tiles with which they have paved the floor of the Central Pavilion. Made by the Liverpool-based Granby Workshop, which was founded by Assemble alongside Liverpool residents who were battling to renovate their derelict neighbourhood, the tiles epitomise Assemble’s desire to sustain local communities. “We are aware that all too often Venice is treated as a place for temporary events,” says Smith, too tactful to name the Biennale as one such transient project. “But we are interested in a more long-term approach.”

Such an attitude is essential if Venice is to overcome its vicissitudes. Yet the here and now of *Laguna Viva* is also special. “Venetian gardens are precious places,” says Cristina Gregorin, a Trieste-born Venetian resident, professional tour guide and the author of *The Gardens of Venice*. “Many, however, are closed to the public so this is a welcome change.” Gregorin is not surprised Venetians are so drawn to the garden. “The lagoon is a magical, otherworldly place. We like to escape out there because it’s like returning to our roots. But if we’re too busy to make the trip, it’s lovely to know that a slice of it has come to us.”

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