

ARTS

War on the Grand Canal: Venice versus the starchitects

As the Architecture Biennale begins, Venetians who resent unsympathetic uses of their great buildings are finally being listened to

James Imam

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The Grand Canal in Venice
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Lidia Fersuoch is a Venetian through and through, and has devoted her life to saving the city from the ravages of mass tourism and rising sea levels. Yet as we sit in her study on the Venice Lido, from which she runs the conservation group Italia Nostra Venezia, her prognosis is bleak. “By now, for Venice it’s all over,” she says.

The evidence isn’t hard to find. An average 60,000 tourists fill the city’s streets every day. Fed up and priced out, the locals are moving on to dry land, while historic buildings are turned into hotels or rented on Airbnb. The city’s population has fallen to less than one third of its size at the end of the Second World War. So drastic is the situation that *The Times* art critic, Rachel Campbell-Johnston, has suggested that the city be left to sink to a dignified death.

However, something else is happening: the locals are fighting back. A network of activist associations has sprung up to that end. They are organising flash mobs and mass demonstrations and, in one case, launched a shower of printed messages during an operatic performance at La Fenice to publicise their cause. The authorities have waded into the battle too. Last month, in what were unprecedented measures, the mayor introduced tourist-only routes and crowd-control gates. La Serenissima may be on the ropes, but Venetians are not going down without a fight.



The Vatican City pavilion by Norman Foster at the Venice Biennale
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In the Venice Architecture Biennale they may have an unlikely ally. The event is hardly going to ease the city's pedestrian traffic; opening on May 26, it is expected to draw 300,000 visitors to Venice over a six-month period. Yet the world's premier architectural showcase — this year featuring 65 national participations and a busy schedule of additional offerings, including an exhibition from the V&A on the Robin Hood Gardens estate in east London — is a teeming marketplace of ideas. This, surely, is no bad place to start searching for solutions to the Venetian problem.

Not least because the theme, devised by this year's curators, the Irish architects Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara, is couched in rabble-rousing terms that feel acutely relevant to Venice's plight. Organised round the theme of Freespace, it is an appeal for architects to go "beyond the visual" by creating spaces that are fit for the people who must use and live in them. Its precepts are elaborated not in a booklet, but a "manifesto". Elsewhere, Farrell and McNamara have spoken about "arming" the public by including them in the debate. Language, they say, is the "ammunition" with which citizens can participate.

"Architecture is the most political of the arts," says Paolo Baratta, the biennale's seasoned president, clearly relishing the chance to enter the fray. "It is an institution of the hidden constitution, the recognition of public spaces to live in as a basic human right." Yet opportunities for real human contact, he says, are increasingly limited. "We need the piazzas, the streets, the parks more than ever before."



Choon Choi's Paradise Lost, 100 Days of Ennui, Desire and Privation from the Korean Pavilion
CHOON CHOICHOON CHOI

Can architects really save Venice from going down the pan (or from descending into the salty depths)? If so, what do they propose? Can lessons be learnt from China's exhibition, *Building a Future Countryside*, which explores the *xiangchou* literary ideal of a return to pastoral life? Should Venetians follow the Holy See — one of seven states making biennale debuts — by relocating to the Venetian island of San Giorgio (which, thanks to Cardinal Ravasi, houses a series of wooden chapels designed by figures including Norman Foster)? While certainly tantalising, this year's Cruising Pavilion (operating independently of the biennale, but opening at the same time), which celebrates homosexual sex in public places, is probably too niche to help Venice. And Britain's proposal, *Island*, may leave you feeling that the city has no future at all; the curators, Adam Caruso and Peter St John, have made the British Pavilion an empty space redolent of the perils of (potentially Brexit-inspired) isolationism.

There are more constructive suggestions. Ireland's *Free Market* proposes the declining rural market as a model for social exchange (it will tour Irish towns in 2019). However, the prize for realising that Venice needs solutions, and fast, goes to France. The Paris studio *Encore Heureux* not only curates the main exhibition, *Infinite Places*, but has also collaborated with the underground Venetian collective *Biennale Urbana on Esperienza Pepe*, a project that has turned the Guglielmo Pepe barracks on the Lido into a hub where creatives can meet, work and even sleep.

"We wanted to do something for the city rather than simply talk about architecture," says the curator Nicola Delon. Yet he admits that such concrete applications of *Freespace* are rare at the biennale. So what will happen to the *Esperienza* after the show? That is impossible to say since as an "infinite place" it is in continuous metamorphosis and will define its own lifespan.

For signs of a more permanent architectural legacy head away from the exhibitions and into the full labyrinthine complexity of Venice itself. There it becomes clear that much is being done to salvage the city from the trample of tourists. Academics

university, IUAV, last year held a contest to renovate it in a counter-offensive “against the museification of every historic space”. And thanks to the efforts of the culture fund the Fondazione di Venezia, the Casa dei Tre Oci — an opulent neogothic palace built by the symbolist painter Mario de Maria on the island of Giudecca — functions as a suave photography gallery.



The Holy Rosary Church at Shettihalli, part of the British event, Island
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Even superstar architects, locally abhorred for their flashy but impractical projects (think Santiago Calatrava’s hazardous glass-bottomed bridge over the Grand Canal), are starting to sound as if they care. The British architect David Chipperfield has been charged with restoring one of Venice’s prime spots (is that a blessing or a curse?). The Procuratie Vecchie, which skirts the length of Piazza San Marco and once housed Venice’s governors, has been closed to the public for 500 years. In a project expected to be completed in 2020, Chipperfield has grandly pledged to “return the building to the people, as a place to love and a font of inspiration”.

One project with even bigger ambitions is taking place not in the lagoon, but on the mainland in Mestre. Annexed to Venice by Mussolini in the 1920s, Mestre was thereafter blighted by rampant industrialisation and unchecked urbanisation. The Fondazione di Venezia wants to spark its regeneration with M9, a €110 million (£8.7 million) state-of-the-art multimedia museum and “micro-smart city” that will open in December. The seven-building complex will be connected by a square as a symbol of renewed liveability. If Venice is to have a future, explains the foundation president Giampietro Brunello, the strategically positioned Mestre is going to be crucial.

Yet that statement is rejected by the locals I meet. Building M9 in Mestre, they say, is a betrayal of local interests. Glitzy renovations, too, are full of promise, but usually worthless. The Fondaco dei Tedeschi, formerly the Renaissance headquarters of German merchants, is at the foot of the Rialto Bridge. In 2016 its owner, Benetton, with the help of the Dutch starchitect Rem Koolhaas, transformed it into a luxury superstore. Fersuoch looks sick when she tells me this. The legal battle she initiated against apparently unsympathetic interventions failed.



An anti-tourist protest in Venice in 2016
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Feeling abandoned, Venetians are making their own proposals for the city. The most ambitious is the Forum Futuro Arsenale (FFA), an alliance of about 40 voluntary associations that has grand designs on the Venetian Arsenal. It believes that the largely disused 45-hectare complex should be turned into a centre for revived traditional industries (including shipbuilding) as a model for a non-tourist-dependent local economy. Yet the FFA's thorough proposals have so far fallen on deaf ears. The response of the city council, the site's biggest owner, was "inadequate", says the FFA spokesman Roberto Falcone.

I meet members of the FFA with the environmental scientist and crusader for the Venetian cause, Jane da Mosto, at her lavish canal-side palazzo. Her charity, We Are Here Venice (WAHV), boosts activist associations by honing communication between itself and the authorities. For Venetians to make themselves heard, an administrative split with Mestre (the population of which outnumbers that of Venice) is required. While that will be proposed in a referendum in September, none of the three previous votes of this kind has achieved such a result.

Yet WAHV offers a ray of hope. On my second visit to the palazzo, Da Mosto is about to leave with the horticulturist Lorenzo Bonometto for a survey of Venice's lagoon. She has been enlisted by Assemble, the London-based Turner prizewinning collective, to design a garden installation at the Palazzo delle Zattere, a new art gallery run by the Russian billionaire Leonid Mikhelson's V-A-C Foundation. Briefed to create something relevant to Venice, she has chosen to celebrate Venice's lifeblood: a micro salt-marsh habitat that will be housed in tanks made from tiles made in a Liverpool ceramics factory.

In the context of Venice's struggles the Zattere case may look trifling. Yet it's the most worthwhile example of something resembling Freespace in action. Here, the architects went to the locals first instead of superimposing their visions on an alien community. What better way to help Venetians repossess their troubled city?

The Venice Architecture Biennale runs from May 26 to November 25.

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