

Ceramics and
environmental
activism:

Laguna Viva

Colin Martin visits the permanent encaustic tile installation at the V-A-C Foundation in Venice, to discover more about the background of the tiles and their manufacture in Liverpool

Walking through the Central Pavilion's domed Salon Chini at the Giardini during the 16th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice in 2018, the only exhibit appeared to be a large typographic poster that resembled a 19th-century trade union banner. Titled 'Granby Workshop - Handmade Ceramics Liverpool', it prompted a glance downwards at the Salon's octagonal floor, which was laid with yellow and red encaustic tiles on a predominately blue-tiled ground. Initially 'read' as an abstract pattern, closer inspection revealed smaller areas with mainly yellow or red tiles (or a combination of both). These formed outline or solid geometric shapes, primarily rectangles, which resembled Oriental rugs scattered on a mosque floor.

Twelve austere wooden benches arranged randomly on the highly decorative floor, coupled with the Salon's cupola, hinted at an ecclesiastical affinity with the city's historic Basilica San Marco. The Architecture Biennale's guidebook identified this puzzling-at-first-sight installation as *The Factory Floor*, conceived by the Turner Prize-winning, multi-disciplinary collective Assemble. 'The exhibit involves thousands of clay tiles [8,000], which creates a distinctive territory through material alone,' explained the Biennale curators, Irish architects Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara. 'Each tile captures a moment of chance in the act of making.'

RE-PURPOSING MATERIALS

Most Biennale installations are scrapped after just six months, but Assemble has a policy to re-purpose building materials where possible, so there was a previously agreed plan to recreate *The Factory Floor* elsewhere in Venice with a permanent tenure. After the Biennale closed in November 2018, the 8,000 tiles in the Salon were carefully taken up and transported by boat (how else could they have been?) to the V-A-C Foundation, an arts and exhibition centre, in the Palazzo de Zattere, Dorsoduro. There, supplemented by an additional 4,000 Granby Workshop tiles, they were subsequently installed according to plan, shortly before the 58th International Art Exhibition opened to the public in May 2019.

GRANBY WORKSHOP: STAGES IN ENCAUSTIC TILE MANUFACTURE

- Single colour clay bodies are mixed mechanically
- Two (or more) different coloured clay bodies are wedged by hand to create a 'marbled' clay body
- The 'marbled' clay bodies are manually sliced to approximate tile thickness, using a wire
- Strips of coloured clay body are randomly placed on top of individual tile slices
- Two individual tiles are placed on a base plate of a 60 tonne hydraulic press
- The pressed tiles are then removed from the top plate onto a flat sheet
- Scraps of clay body are removed from the margins of pressed tiles
- The pressed tiles are allowed to dry, before being fired in an electric kiln
- Each fired Granby Workshop tile is unique



There is an interesting story on how this project evolved, beginning with an extraordinary installation at the British pavilion for the 12th International Architecture Exhibition. In 2010, the environmental scientist and Venetian resident Jane da Mosto, working with the British firm muf architecture/art, installed a 14 square metre section of the Venetian Lagoon in a steel tank on the balcony of the pavilion as part of its *Villa Frankenstein* exhibition. The 'attractions' listed on the promotional poster included 'a live breathing salt marsh'.

Da Mosto's objective was to raise public awareness of the fragility of the Venetian Lagoon, upon which the city depends for its continued existence. In 2015, she co-founded

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VENICE TIMELINE


- **2010:** Assemble, a multi-disciplinary collective working across architecture, design and art, founded in London. At the 12th *International Architecture Exhibition* Jane da Mosto, in collaboration with muf architecture/art, installs a section of the Venetian Lagoon in a balcony tank at the British pavilion, as part of its *Villa Frankenstein* exhibition
- **2012:** Jane da Mosto co-founds *We Are Here Venice*, a think-tank and activist platform, of which she is executive director
- **2015:** Assemble establish the Granby Workshop, an architectural ceramics manufacturer in Liverpool. Assemble awarded the Turner Prize for projects including their ongoing collaboration with Granby residents and others in regenerating Granby Four Streets in Toxteth, Liverpool
- **2017:** Assemble and *We Are Here Venice* collaborate in developing a public engagement strategy for the V-A-C Foundation
- **2018:** Assemble installs *The Factory Floor* in the central pavilion, Giardini, during the 16th *International Architecture Exhibition*. *Laguna Viva* ('Living Lagoon') is installed at V-A-C Foundation, Palazzo delle Zattere, Dorsoduro
- **2019:** Assemble completes their tiling design, complementing the *Laguna Viva* installation, using encaustic tiles reclaimed from their dismantled central pavilion installation, to coincide with the opening of the 58th *International Art Exhibition*

We Are Here Venice, a non-governmental think-tank and activist platform. It continues to sound regular wake-up calls highlighting the potentially disastrous environmental effects of cruise ships and climate change on the city, which is already being subjected to more frequent and higher aqua alta ('high water') episodes.

RAISING AWARENESS

In 2017, Assemble and *We Are Here Venice* developed a long-term strategy to enable the V-A-C Foundation to engage with locals and tourists on the complexities of everyday life in Venice. The first stage, *Laguna Viva* ('Living Lagoon'), coincided with *The Factory Floor* installation at the Giardini in 2018. It is a permanent outdoor installation of a typical section of the Lagoon's salt marsh habitat, arranged according to botanical associations and functional morphology, housed in several tanks in the Foundation's courtyard.

The second stage, realised in 2019, utilised the Granby Workshop tiles salvaged from *The Factory Floor* installation (along with the additional 4,000 new tiles) to create a tiled landscape extending from the canal at the rear of the Foundation, through its courtyard and covering the sides of the tanks, continuing into the ground floor café, where it covers the front of the bar and the floor. More than simply a pleasant location for lunch in the sunshine or sipping a glass of wine, the permanent *Laguna Viva* installation provides a resource for raising awareness of ecological resilience and the natural systems that could help ensure the survival of Venice. Ceramics as agents of environmental activism, not simply as café crockery!

In making their encaustic clay tiles for the Assemble Venetian installations, Granby Workshop reinvented the traditional manufacturing process, formerly used in making highly decorative floors for medieval churches and Victorian civic buildings. Instead their encaustic tiles are unglazed, vitreous ceramic, with colours and patterns formed from the colours of the clay bodies, not surface-applied. Each tile is as unique as Venice itself. 

For more details visit assemble.co.uk; granbyworkshop.co.uk; v-a-c.ru; weareherevenice.org