

VENICE IS NECESSARY

A DESIGN EXPEDITION



BY NICHOLAS DE MONCHAUX

The Introductory Graduate Design Studio (Arch 200B) took their annual field-trip to Venice this past Spring. The historic image of Venice haunts architecture and its larger, urban conversation in almost any context. In the context of contemporary architectural education, particularly in imagining how our practice will meet the challenges of an ecologically endangered, digitally interconnected era, Venice's 1000-year record of ecological and cultural stability may well be an essential component of architectural education.

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For all the powerful continuities represented by Venice, the city-lagoon system is currently threatened by discontinuities and disparities of an enormous scale, and under duress from both man and nature. Once a city of hundreds of thousands, Venice now hosts only 65,000 residents, most of whom serve a tourist population of more than 18 million annual visitors. The shallow Venetian lagoon, which for thousands of years cultivated a balance between sea and silt, has in the past 40 years of tourism and industrialization undergone catastrophic ecological changes of level, composition, ecology, and salinity—changes that threaten not only its

identity, but its very organic and urban existence.

The rapid degradation of the environment and the dramatic pace of urban decay poses a real threat to Venice's long history of commerce and construction. A tourist city from the 15th century, Venice was the home of such innovations as hotel reservations, folding maps, and even periodic tourist festivals with their attendant infrastructure, 400 years before the likes of Barcelona caught on. Ecologically, the city was the home of subtle and enormous interventions dating from the 15th century, which redirected rivers and floodplains to preserve the delicate balance of lagoon ecology on which the city depends. In the light of these historic examples, Venice becomes relevant not just to its own future, but to the future of our urbanizing and endangered planet as a whole. Given Venice's history of subtlety, robustness, multiplicity, and celebration, the proposed environmental and economic solutions to Venice's problems appear singular, sudden and even gargantuan. One example is the multi-billion euro MoSÉ floodgate project whose scaffolding now rises at the edges of the lagoon.

At its onset, the studio spent several weeks at the scale of the whole lagoon, moving between digital maps and digital fabrication in an attempt to realize an understanding of the scale and complexity of the lagoon. Then we moved to a specific architectural program, which called for a cohabitation of two widely different parties in the

lagoon's current debates. Our two weeks in Venice were spent partly with these clients—the lagoon's state-sponsored ecological observatory and the contrasting consortium of the city's taxi drivers. Our semester-long architectural study was thus devoted to designing a shared home for these groups, as well as the shifting tourist population of the city. Our attention, however, also remained on the city and lagoon as a whole, gathering first-hand information from official and informal sources, and, most importantly, situating our own imaginations in the shifting *barene* of the lagoon.

As architects, we are predisposed to think of our ground and context as a fixed partner in place-making. As we made unstable encounters with the physical place of Venice—whether standing on the mud at the bottom of a dredged canal, or while camping and sailing the lagoon for several days in a vintage freight hauler, an assumption of fixed context became wonderfully impossible. We were led to an understanding of architecture and urbanism in Venice as a gloriously dynamic, yet vital contributor to a continuous transformation of ground, site, city, and ecology. ^{FW}

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