VENICE LESSONS
INDUSTRIAL NOSTALGIA

TEACHING AND RESEARCH
IN ARCHITECTURE

laba EPFL

BORDERS
The province of Venice, which is part of the Veneto region, was renamed the Metropolitan City of Venice in 2015. The Metropolitan City is bounded to the north by the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, to the west by the provinces of Treviso, Padova and the Alps, to the south by the province of Rovigo and to the east by the Adriatic Sea. It consists of a body of 44 communes, including the commune of Venice, which itself comprises the historic centre, the surrounding islands, the lagoon and the immediate peripheral municipalities.

PROVINCE OF VENICE
- Population (2015): 858,198
- Area: 2,466 KM^2, including land covered by water
- Density: 348 inh./KM^2
- GDP: 25,611 (2011, in millions of euros)
- GDP per capita: 27,744 (2011, in euros)
- Languages: Italian, Venetian
- Foreigners (2013): 8.5%
- Labour force: 388,240
- Population of *centro storico* (2014): 56,311
- Average number of visitors to *centro storico* per day (2011): 60,000
- Climate: Humid subtropical
- Average winter air temperature: 4°C
- Average summer air temperature: 21.7°C
- Average precipitation per year: 801 MM
- Coordinates: 45.4397°N, 12.3319°E

VENICE

LAGOON
- Area: 540 KM^2
- Average depth: 10.5 M
- Max. depth: 21.5 M
- Land: 8%
- Water: 12%
- Mud flats, tidal shallows and salt marshes: 80%
- Outflows : Adriatic sea
- Islands : 62
- Inlets: Lido, Malamocco, Chioggia
- Canals: ca. 1500 KM

The Grand Tour to Industrial Nostalgia

"The feelings that hurt the most, the emotions that sting most, are those that are absurd: the longing for impossible things, precisely because they are impossible; nostalgia for what never was; the desire for what could have been; regret over not being someone else; dissatisfaction with the world's existence."
Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

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1   MEMORY AND MONUMENTS, TOURISM AND MUSEUMS: THE INDUSTRY OF NOSTALGIA

The concept of "monument" first took shape in Italy during the quattrocento as a result of the period's ever-increasing appreciation of Greco-Roman culture. The term was used to refer exclusively to the ruins of antiquity, and those employing it were a minority of scholars, artists and aristocrats. As the word's origin indicates – its Latin root *monere* means "to remind or warn" – "monuments accumulate memory in defiance of oblivion".[1] They are the tangible trace of our struggle against the passage of time and towards a sense of permanence. Through ritual and myth, they impose upon us ideas of a shared heritage and destiny, a collective identity. To declare something a monument was a revolutionary concept because it introduced a new reflexive engagement with the past and thus established a rupture with medieval theocentrism, according to which history was a more or less fixed narrative curated by the Church.[2] As a result, history began to be seen as a large depository ready to be scrutinized by anyone with knowledge and taste. Two centuries later, this new perspective would compel the affluent young men of northern Europe to travel south to visit monuments of Greco-Roman culture on what became known as the Grand Tour, the birth of modern tourism. It was an educational rite of passage that could last anywhere from a few months to several years, and along the way, Grand Tourists collected local artefacts such as landscape paintings and antiques, souvenirs that would later furnish the first museums, then known as cabinets of curiosities. The Grand Tour inaugurated a new kind of voyage, one that was highly individualized and motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and knowledge, thereby breaking with the medieval tradition of the religious pilgrimage. If the emergence of the monument marked the secularization of time, then that of tourism marked the secularization of travel.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-18th century, new means of mass transportation such as trains and steamboats initially democratized, and then eventually extinguished, the Grand Tour, replacing it with the first organized trips and package holidays. However, while the vast process of industrialization lent tourism its Fordist model of generic standardization and mass production, it also sparked an unprecedented longing for the preservation of vernacular cultures and landscapes. As a result, the concept of the monument, which had previously been used exclusively in connection with classical antiquities, broadened into the notion of the *historical monument*, a museological label that could be applied to any object of distinct artistic and/or historical relevance deemed worthy of protection. This subtle semantic shift gave monuments a new, quasi cult status by measuring their value as a function more of their abstract temporal character – or sheer age – than of their memorial role in relation to the specific historical moments or events they commemorated. Monuments thus became containers of cultural heritage, the guardians of the collective legacy of a decidedly golden yet imprecisely understood past that was being threatened by a degenerate present:

Relics of a lost world, swallowed by time and craft/technique, the buildings of the pre-industrial era became…cultish objects. In the end, they were given a new and imprecise memorial function, one that was quietly analogous to that of the original monument. On the unstable foundations of a society in the process of industrialization,

they seemed to remind their people of the glory of a threatened spirit.[3]

This reconceptualization of the status of monuments, and its consequent broadening of the spectrum of cultural heritage, confirmed and amplified the metaphor of history as a tangled depository of culture, thereby adding fuel to the fire of 19th-century debates about artistic style. This was the context that gave birth to the museum as an institution, invented as an open field for comparison and collectivization. Its spatial configuration was neutralized and compartmentalized in order to facilitate scientific classification, and for this reason, it adopted an architectural typology descended from the Renaissance palazzo in which rooms arranged in an enfilade embodied the specific style of the collection of artefacts. The resulting linear sequence allowed the staging of a didactic processional path that echoed the narrative trajectory of an art history book.

A century later, the resurgence of authoritarian nationalisms brought about significant changes to the meaning and role of monuments and their relationship with tourism. Monuments became instrumentalized as symbols of national identity, and tourism came to serve as a means of disseminating nationalist propaganda to the masses. António Ferro, director of the Secretariat of National Propaganda for the Portuguese *Estado Novo* (New State), expressed this connection very clearly by remarking that tourism had ceased to be "a small and frivolous industry" and had begun "to perform the utmost role of staging and decorating the nation".[4] Around the same time, large-scale holiday camps were made affordable to the working classes (for example, Butlins in England and Prora in Germany). The end of World War II gave rise to an unprecedented social stability and prosperity driven by a thriving middle class with ever-growing access to affordable means of transportation, such as the car, the first networks of highways, the train and the cruise ship. This period witnessed the advent of mass tourism and the leisure industry, united in the spirit of the democratization of knowledge through cultural consumption:

Together with the development of a society of leisure and its associated cultural (mass) tourism, the great project of the democratization of knowledge – inherited from the Enlightenment and reanimated by the modern desire to eradicate difference and privilege due to an appreciation of intellectual and artistic values – is at the origin of perhaps the most significant expansion of the public of historical monuments.[5]

As before, the evolving entanglement of tourism and cultural heritage prompted new changes to the nature of museums. In the "great project of the democratization of knowledge", museums became quintessentially social spaces, catalysts of mass tourism and urban renewal, and agents of a sense of community achieved through entertainment. They became the grand secular cathedrals of the 20th century and were given the task of fulfilling two deeply contradictory functions: "that of the elite temple of the arts, and that of a utilitarian instrument for democratic education".[6] This new popularized museum was epitomized in André Malraux's theory of the *musée imaginaire*, an archetype that broke conceptually and spatially with the ritualistic sequence of the museum palazzo and was best materialized, according to Rosalind Krauss, in the universal space of Mies van der Rohe and the spiral ramps of Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright.[7] Mies's universal space was borrowed from the industrial open-floor plan, with its massive and neutral enclosure, an infinitely expandable frame in which space is a mere function of structure and content is collectivized by juxtaposition. In similar ways, the spiral ramp provides a similar logic of miscellany by providing a panoramic overview. In both cases, artistic styles are no longer segregated into separate rooms, linear time is disfigured and the art objects from the past

are disarranged in a kind of eternal present. Instead of the didactic sequence of the 19th-century museum, here the narrative – that is, the logical articulation of the objects – takes the form of a collage that the viewer can navigate and interpret freely.

The openness of the *musée imaginaire* had the capacity to disconnect works of art from their original function and historical/social context, giving them an independent "cult" status in line with the maxim of "art for art's sake". It changed the way people relate to art in a manner similar to how the media, with its methods of broadcasting and reproduction, changed the way we relate to cultural artefacts in general, demystifying artworks and monuments in order to bring them closer to the masses both spatially and emotionally. The *musée imaginaire* was a container for the recycling of the past scrambled in the manner of pastiche – it was the museum-as-flea-market. Meanwhile, the increasing privatization of art collections and the progressive transformation of cultural value into mere celebrity ("the glamour of the object as photographed, advertised, reproduced") gradually narrowed the museum's cultural function to that of providing a purely aesthetic experience. In today's globalized neo-liberal market economy, competition intensifies the value of the experiential aspects of consumption: "Visitors expect spectacle. As a result, the traditional core activities of large museums – the con-servation and restoration of permanent collections and the pursuit of scholarly research – have been displaced by the need to offer blockbuster theme shows that provide ticket and merchandise revenue."[8] In the 21st century, museums have become cultural malls:

[A sort of] cultural implosion…marks today's aesthetic practice, in which high art as well as the entire field of advertising and kitsch production get collaged into a single picture, and in which the reigning style is that of pastiche. [Ours is an age of] disorientation within the labyrinth of the museum,…[of a] promiscuous attraction to any and all styles,…[and of a] yielding to the glamour of the object as photographed, advertised, reproduced.[9]

In the pervasive order of the "experience eco-nomy", memory itself has become the product: the extraordinary and the "authentic" are the most valuable commodities, and every function ends up being turned into leisure. It is a place-bound economy because of its need to arouse feeling and to form identity by enveloping the consumer-visitor in a memorable experience, and so the significance of art, design and architecture becomes speculative. According to this logic, architecture (and thus urban space) becomes a prerequisite for economic growth and therefore needs to be marketed, branded, packaged, promoted and displayed just like any other product. The experience economy leads to the commodification of not only (st) architecture, design and art, but also of cities, especially their monuments, their historical heritage. The result is that museums are no longer merely containers of monuments; rather, they have themselves become monuments, with cities, in a similar way, being preserved, frozen in time and displayed for tourists' entertainment. The "Bilbao effect" is accompanied by the "Barcelona effect" as the logic of the museum is applied to the *city-museum*, of which Venice's historic centre is a prime example.

The German word "museal" [museum-like] has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relation-ship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. They testify to the neutralization of culture. Art treasures are hoarded in them, and their market value leaves no room for the pleasure of looking at them. Nevertheless, that pleasure is dependent on the existence of museums.[10]

In conclusion, one observes that despite often being presented as conflicting entities – with *tourism* being tied to leisure and the economy, and *heritage* to culture and identity – they are intimately connected and

attuned to one another. Tourism not only guides but also conditions our concept of heritage as well as our strategies for its preservation, classification and museumification. In a similar manner, the value of heritage grows in direct response to its capacity to generate tourist revenue, capital which is then used in conservation with the aim of further increasing tourism.[11] The tourism industry and cultural heritage institutions operate according to a circular logic of self-justification: the industry of nostalgia. Naturally, these contradictory dependencies give rise to questions: If our rationale for preservation is based on tourist appeal, what does this tell us about the legitimacy of our cultural heritage? Is preservation really capable of safeguarding authenticity or does it merely satisfy our retro fascination?[12] After the failure of modernist utopias, is nostalgia replacing the future with an imaginary past? Can preservation embrace a progressive, future-oriented agenda?

PERIMETER LANDSCAPES
LAGOON WETLANDS
LAGOONS ISLANDS
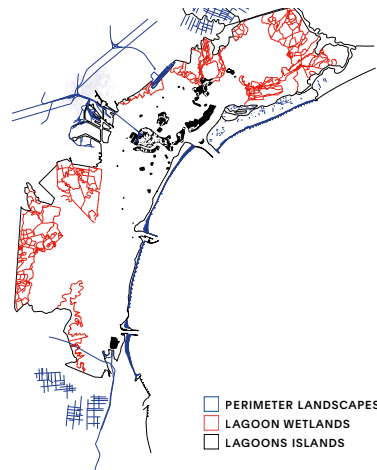
MAP OF VENICE, 2014
LABA (LABORATOIRE BALE), EPFL

AERIAL VIEW OF THE VENICE REGION,
GOOGLE MAPS

2 DYING VENICE? THE TRIUMPH AND PARADOX OF PRESERVATION

Nostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship…It would not occur to us to demand a prescription for nostalgia. Yet in the 17th century, nostalgia was considered to be a curable disease, akin to the common cold. Swiss doctors believed that opium, leeches and a journey to the Swiss Alps would take care of nostalgic symptoms. By the 21st century, the passing ailment turned into the incurable modern condition. The 20th century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with

nostalgia. Optimistic belief in the future was discarded like an outmoded spaceship sometime in the 1960s. Nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes nostalgia is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways. The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space.[13]

The alluring object of nostalgia is notoriously elusive. It is a collective historical emotion, a symptom of what Georg Lukács has called the modern state of "transcendental homelessness".[14] The "home" one longs for when overcome with nostalgia is not as much one's actual home as it is the feeling of being at home in the world. Nostalgia is a romance with one's own escapist fantasy. It represents a rebellion against modernity's linear march of progress, a reaction to the acceleration and fragmentation of our increasingly abstract, generic and globalized world. In a time when "the future is no longer what it used to be"[15] and promises of progress and prosperity have been weakened by increasing economic uncertainty and political/social instability, the past has become a surrogate for identity, optimism and hope. Nostalgia provides an optimal exchange value in the context of the global tourist industry and the marketing of heritage preservation:

Nostalgia has replaced nature as a referent in post-industrial culture. Nostalgia is the result of the massive realization of the concept of history that has occurred in all areas of thought; but, at the same time, it is also a result of the levelling of history that accompanies this surfeit of historical thought. The image of history is no longer the rough-hewn, well-defined road winding up the mountain's side. Its image has become instead the swamp, a morass crisscrossed by the myriad of muddy paths that go nowhere, that disappear into the fogged-in horizon.[16]

The global industry of popular culture appropriates cultural objects, inserting them into a sort of fashion system that decontextualizes and reproduces them, refabricating and selling them as "new" values of identity and pseudo-originality. In this endless propagation of copies, the culture industry produces a simulated culture that pretends to be authentic but is actually industrially manufactured for profit. In this process, reality and representation blend together to the point that there is no longer a clear indication of where the former stops and the latter begins.

While culture sublimates mundane things into something abstract, intellectualizing them, the culture industry does the opposite: it de-sublimates abstract culture into quantifiable commodities and exchange objects, such as *souvenirs*. Cultural production thus becomes a tool "of seduction, of initiation, of a restrained and highly ritualized symbolic exchange".[17] In this context, the fashion system of cultural advertisement abolishes any possibility of uniqueness and difference, because qualitative relations are reduced to pure quantity. De-sublimation[18] generates a false sense of culture that is produced for us at a price, advertised to make us feel that we "need it" and subsequently sold to us as an instantly gratifying commodity:

We live in a spectacular society, that is, our whole life is surrounded by an immense accumulation of spectacles. Things that were once directly lived are now lived by proxy. Once an experience is taken out of the real world it becomes a commodity. As a commodity the spectacular is developed to the detriment of the real. It becomes a substitute for experience.[19]

In the spectacle of mass culture, mass production becomes a production of the masses. Simulation and de-sublimation are the means by which the real is generated without origin or reality. As representation replaces reality, reality becomes a copy without an original, eventually becoming a truth in its own right: a *hyperreal* simulation. Much like advertising, nostalgia offers things that it cannot give, tantalizing us with its fundamental ambivalence. It is "the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity

of all repetitions and denies the repetition's capacity to define identity".[20] It promises deeper authenticity, but what it actually does is simulate authenticity by re-enacting clichés. Nostalgia is the result of hyperreality, but, paradoxically, it is also the underlying principle that feeds hyperreality in the first place – it is both cause and effect, both poison and cure:

The great event of this period, the great trauma, is the decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation… Anything serves to escape this void, this leukaemia of history and of politics, this haemorrhage of values… [A] controlling idea no longer selects, only nostalgia endlessly accumulates:… everything is equivalent and is mixed indiscriminately in the same morose and funereal exaltation, in the same retro fascination.[21]

The recent trajectory of tourism-oriented heritage preservation in Venice has not contented itself with systematically displacing the city's authentic livelihood: because it depends on its "historic brand" in order to remain attractive, it needs to re-enact artificially the traditions it constantly displaces, producing a simulated city. Simulation is turning Venice into a museum of veneers, where the "historic" is preserved as amusement park. This is the paradox of preservation: in order for heritage to exist, its object must die; by dying, the object takes its revenge for being "preserved", and with its death, it defies the very discipline that wants to protect it.[22] This is also the paradox and frustration of tourism: the evanescence of the object in its very apprehension turns tourism into pure simulation, one in which performance replaces experience, reducing it to a souvenir.

The souvenir (*das Andenken*) is the relic secularized… The souvenir is the complement of the "experience" (*des "Erlebnisses"*). In it the increasing self-alienation of the person who inventories his past as dead possession is distilled… The relic derives from the corpse, the souvenir from deceased experience (*Erfahrung*) which calls itself euphemistically "*Erlebnis*."[23]

So it is pertinent to ask what exactly is being preserved, if not the actual reality of the place. Heritage preservation protects culture and excludes from Venice all of those non-cultural, and therefore mundane, functions of the city, such as business and industry, the infrastructure and the living; but ironically, cultural heritage preservation has itself turned into a productive industry, transforming *cultural* value into *capital* value. It is not the city of Venice in a sustainable sense that preservation protects, but rather its *imago* – what the collective imaginary of the outside world has obliged Venice to become. The industry of nostalgia suspends Venice in the one-dimensional state of a segregated interior, an escapist fantasy, an antidote for our anxiety over the loss of references associated with the increasing abstraction and precariousness of late modernity. Therefore, while the historical city is frozen in time for the sake of its global image, international cultural brands such as the Peggy Guggenheim museum and the city's regular Biennales sustain Venice's ability to constantly supply "new" cultural commodities, whether in the form of art exhibitions, cultural events, temporary urban installations or iconic buildings, most of which are shaped by the logic of city branding and tourism marketing more than by the needs of Venice's own tax-paying inhabitants.

Venetians have often voiced their condemnation of these phenomena, for they leave them feeling permanently on display by turning their banal everyday activities into a continuous performance, a sort of cultural zoo. An especially publicized example of local resistance is the grassroots association Poveglia per tutti,[24] which mobilized over 4,000 citizens to crowd-fund a bid for the abandoned island of Poveglia that went on public auction to be sold off to a private party and rendered inaccessible, as has already happened to several other islands that now host luxury hotels. To struggles over the privatization and commodification of public space one must add the whole panoply of gentrification-related problems, such

as the sudden rise of life-related costs (rent, food, essential goods), the replacement of varied traditional shops by franchised tourism-specialized commerce, spatial specialization and traffic complications, to name a few.

Historically, Venice has lived well with its constant stream of foreign visitors. It has always been an international city, a patchwork of ethnicities and cultures whose presence is still evident today in the city's network of old *fondachi* (former merchant trading centres and residences for distinct ethnic groups) and its sustained religious tolerance. At the peak of its golden age, the Venetian republic vied effectively to be considered Europe's cultural capital and welcomed many foreign scholars, artists and intellectuals. The city's Carnevale, which once lasted for several months and gave Venice its international reputation for hedonism and sensuality, made it a prime destination on the Grand Tour and stimulated a dynamic local tourism economy. The problem of today's Venice is certainly a matter of scale, but it is also a matter of *quality*, because for the most part, the majority of foreign visitors today engage with the city according to a model of cultural appropriation, using Venice without offering much in return. Tourists exploit the cosmetic spectacle that is laid out for them, seeing and experiencing the stereotype they expected to find: the romantic ruin. At the same time, they are exploited by a vicious consumption system characterized by inferior products and artificial experiences: Murano glass made in China, revivalist Carnival masks, miniature gondolas and other touristy fare. Nostalgia – together with its associated industry – is what is at fault here, because it reduces every interaction to a souvenir, or to the adoration of relics, thereby impeding any possibility of real progressive reciprocity. Preservation nourishes the myth of the dying Venice and, at the same time, uses this supposed imminent death as justification for further preservation work.

Venice's romance with death, decay and decadence is not new. The city's decline, or even dis-appearance, has been anticipated for about two centuries already, and yet, despite the very real threats of flooding by high tides and tourism or of mere political irrelevance, Venice is still an attractive and functioning city. Venice has always been self-conscious about its global image, and it has always employed the tool of myth for the purposes of political propaganda. The *Serenissima repubblica*, or most serene republic, showcased itself as a free and just republic, a virginal city married to the sea, protected and legitimized by its holy patron, St Mark. The place evoked by these myths ceased to exist with the republic's fall to Napoleon, and once Venice's status as the exemplar of political progressivism was eclipsed by the French and American revolutions a panoply of negative cultural imagery associated with instability, repression and decay became increasingly dominant in the city's representation. This Venice was the melancholic one appropriated by the Romantic movement. Culturally frowned upon at first, it was soon perceived like a vanitas painting and was thenceforth heralded as the icon of an aesthetic fascination with oldness. In the 20th century, this mythology was sustained by encouraging the triumph of preservation over urban development:

> Venice needs to embrace tourists and its surrounding waters as resources rather than threats. It must urgently move away from a redundant model of development on its outskirts and conservation in the city centre. To achieve this end requires a critical challenge to the three key components of the contemporary Venetian metaphor: *sustainability*, *climate change* and the *risk of tourism* [authors' emphasis].[25]

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is a long-term programme that requires planning. The regressive nature of nostalgia-driven preservation has stifled the potential for planning and development and has created a stark urban contrast between the historic centre and its hinterland, the many islands in the lagoon and the *terraferma* (mainland). The triumph of preservation in the *centro storico* has both contributed to its mythical status as a place to visit in order to escape from modernity and unequally distributed the benefits and problems generated by modernization.

While the centre is calcified into an object-museum, the surrounding areas are treated as pragmatic infrastructure. Is it possible to imagine a sustainable model of development that subverts this hierarchical foreground/background relationship?

CLIMATE CHANGE

As ocean levels rise due to global warming, the threat of flooding/sinking that Venice is facing (and attempting to address) provides a glimpse of the future of the global age of the Anthropocene. As the distinction between man-made and naturally caused phenomena breaks down, what we consider "historical heritage", "natural environment" and "modern development" need to acquire a more coherent and shared meaning. In an ecological sense, Venice has the utopian potential of being an environmental metaphor for the rest of the world.

RISKS OF TOURISM

On average, Venice's population breaks down into thirds: one third are residents, one third are commuters and one third are tourists.[26] This statistic is, of course, difficult to calculate with precision considering the large number of second-home owners, AirBnB users and other unregistered visitors. What is a tourist, precisely? While vilifying mass tourism is easy, this perspective does not acknowledge the complexity of the circumstances. Nevertheless, a new kind of tourism, one shaped by sustainable-political principles rather than market logics and focused on creating value rather than just revenue could make a significant difference. Then, perhaps tourists, students, commuters and others would be able to join residents in a city that combines modern development with the maintenance of historical heritage.

BENEDETTO BORDONE, *VINEGIA*, 1528

GOOGLE MAPS, AERIAL VIEW OF THE NORTHERN LAGOON

3 THE HYPOTHESIS OF ARCHITECTURE AS ENVIRONMENTAL OBJECT

Venice's binary system of development, which preserves the old city centre as an object-monument while modernizing its hinterland, is highly problematic. It creates an unbalanced dualist relationship between a *familiar inside* and a *strange outside* – more specifically, the premodern city-museum and the modern field of urban sprawl – that is paradoxically characterized by both antagonistic opposition and interdependence. This idea of *inside* – a delimited *zone* of cultural familiarity – is closely associated with the sentiment of nostalgia, which, as articulated earlier, means the longing for a return to an idealized or imaginary *home*. In simple terms, a home is

what we build to keep out the unfamiliar, and nostalgia is thus a yearning for a safe and comfortable *distance* from that which is strange, foreign, unknown. On the scale of a city, the feeling of nostalgia is detrimental to a healthy sense of the collective. Perhaps a much more productive attitude would be to replace the metaphor of *home* (which is associated with the *nostos*) with *house* (the *oikos*) and substitute *nostalgia* with *ecology*. Then we might be able to imagine Venice as a sort of open dwelling that emphasizes diversity, openness and intimacy, instead of seeing it as a nostalgic homeland that favours distance, objectification and fetishization. Ecology (*oikos*, "house" + *-logy*, "study of") is a discipline of thought concerned with cohabitation on a planetary scale. In this framework, *house* has a completely different meaning from *home*: it means "dwelling" but without the emphasis on anthropocentrism. Ecology tells us that every *inside* is shot through with the *outside*, because local causes can have distant non-local effects, and therefore distance is an illusion and familiarity is an artificial construct. The "here" is already contaminated with foreign bodies and alien effects, and trying to keep all of this out is an escapist endeavour. Ecology has infused our cosy homes with an uncomfortable sense of the uncanny – a forced intimacy with strangeness.

According to Freud's definition, the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) is something that is both familiar (*heimisch*) and strange.[27] It is the revelation of what is private and concealed, of what is hidden, not only from others, but also from the self. It is a sense of familiarity that contains traces of the unfamiliar or the unknowable – the invisible side of a thing. Nostalgia, together with its mechanisms of preservation, has the goal of mitigating the uncanny. Ecology, in contrast, is fundamentally uncanny and anti-nostalgic. We live in an age of ecological grief masked by the cynicism of ideological denial, and, ironically, preservation is often more of a symptom than a solution. What we are grieving is the loss of our anthropocentric world view, or what we might call the feeling of being at home in the world. In the uncanny era of the Anthropocene (literally, the human era), human history has collided with geological time and given rise to strange and sweeping human-induced phenomena that are mostly beyond our control and largely imperceptible to our senses (global warming, mass extinction, pollution).[28] The global level of human impact on the planet has ended the separation between nature and culture and made artificiality a pervasive planetary condition. In so doing, it has rendered the very concept of a homely environment – the neutral and benign context for human activity – obsolete. The environment has taken centre stage, claiming that it itself is also the result of human authorship, agency and care (or the lack thereof). This foregrounding of the environment has left a gap in the relationship between humans and their surroundings in which our old ideas of *place* and *context* – fundamental values in the adaptation of project to site – have been called into question. Acknowledging the present global condition of artificiality demands a new level of design responsibility. From architects, it demands the ability to advance the discipline beyond a relationship between architecture-as-object and landscape-as-surrounding. To speak of architecture as the creation of environmental objects means to invert this relationship. Objects and systems, buildings and landscapes, historical heritage and infrastructural systems can thus be integrated into the larger ecology of territorial weaving. This would result in a type of contextualism that is not about familiarity, but rather about revealing the unconscious qualities of the site and rendering them visible; an ecological phenomenology that welcomes the strange and disrupts the figure-ground relationship with its hierarchy, privileging the positive figure over the passive ground; an architecture that interweaves scales and is attuned to climate, geological strata, landscapes and ecosystems.

In Venice, architecture has always been environment. From its first settlement by humans, the lagoon has been a complex artificial ecosystem shaped by a continual cycle of renewal and compromise.[29] Paradoxically, preservation is halting this symbiosis by objectifying and foregrounding the so-called *centro storico*, turning it into an archipelago of insulated "insides". Venetian nostalgia is the longing for a bygone urban/architectural language in which things meant what they *said* and *said* what they

meant – a world of coherent environments, contexts where social and historical representations were clear, discernible, familiar. Modernity is the unknown strangeness from which nostalgic Venice shields itself. Modernity, with its powerful forces of abstraction (*abstrahere*, from *ab-*, "from" + *trahere,* "to uproot") and de-contextualization, renders things meaningless and indiscernible, and is at the root of nostalgic anxiety. The hypothesis of architecture as environmental object is an exercise in the principle of ecological contextualism (*contexere* means "to merge together") according to which architecture is seen as a weaving together of connections, a revealing of uncanny textures.

Due to its very specific urban morphology, Venice is indeed a special city that deserves to be preserved. But what ought to be preserved is not its fetishized image, but rather its innate potential to showcase an alternative model of living: car-free, community-based, specific and local – ecological in its complex mediation between artificial and natural. It is this real Venice, not its nostalgic surrogate, which offers a progressive alternative to the far more diffused model of globalized, displaced, generic, abstract spatial production. This Venice is more than just a cultural appendage. It is a world in and of itself – a layered, multi-functional and "deep" territory whose relationship to the outside is open and whose historical heritage is not drowned in melancholy about the present. This is the reading of Venice that this publication simultaneously interprets and proposes.

This volume presents the results of the second of a series of studio courses offered by laba (Laboratoire Bâle), the satellite architecture and urban design studio of the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL). These courses are designed to experiment with the architectural and urban forms and the environmental aesthetics of our advanced industrial society.

Venice Lessons: Industrial Nostalgia presents the research and the design proposals of the studio course offered in the 2015–16 academic year. Its three-part structure reflects the academic method employed in the studio. Part one, "Territory", presents an interdisciplinary reading of the territory of the Venetian lagoon and culminates in a territorial reading that we call a "Territorial Constitution". Part two, entitled "Field", documents a field trip and workshop that took place in December 2015. And part three, "Architecture", illustrates twelve architectural designs produced as critical syntheses of the analysis and commentary generated in response to the studio course's core themes. These designs explore the thin line between cultural experience and simulated performance that becomes apparent when *place* is replaced by *event*, and *memory*, by *entertainment*. They investigate architecture's relationship to time and context in a collective project of urban renewal that goes beyond the consumerism of historical heritage which characterizes the current model of the city-museum.

Venice Lessons aims to contribute to a broader discussion of teaching and research in architecture. With this in mind, *Venice Lessons* has been expanded with the addition of a fourth part that pays tribute to *This Is Venice*, the wonderful children's travel book by Miroslav Šašek. Through its many beautiful illustrations, this book explains the character of the *centro storico* of Venice in an elegant and pertinent way. Having read this introduction, you will certainly understand that we found Šašek's title *This Is Venice* rather provocative. Our understanding of Venice today is much broader, for it encompasses the whole urban system that stretches from the *terraferma* across the lagoon and out to the sea. By annotating Šašek's fantastic book, we aim to convey this updated, contemporary interpretation of Venice.

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