

99 years

urban planning & public activism in the city of Venice
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99 years

This essay is interested in exploring community based activist planning in the city of Venice in 2016. Alejandro Aravena brings a social agenda to the biennale this year, which focuses on the relationship between the built environment and the economy. This text takes a specific look at the past and possible future of the abandoned island of Poveglia and the recent activist campaign by Venetians to save the island from commercial development. I speak with individual activists who are part of the Poveglia per Tutti association about the difficulties but also the strengths of community-based activist planning.

Venice lives because of tourism but it is also dying because of tourism. In July 2016, UNESCO World Heritage have recently decided not to put Venice on the list of World Heritage Danger Sites despite its own critical conclusions regarding the significant and irreversible damage to the city. This includes vast cruise ships sailing through the city, damaging construction within the lagoon and an absence of a sustainable tourism strategy.

It is no surprise that since the decline of Venice's population since the late 2000s, Venetians have been cultivating a lively activism and strident opposition towards public issues that affect their urban environment, amid the dismantling of opportunities for participation in decision-making and planning throughout the neoliberal western world.

In Venice, this manifests itself through “No Grande Navi” signs on rooftops, and talk of the Arsenale Forum - a campaign to reclaim the naval area of the city for artists and citizens. As highlighted by Rural Studio's exhibition in the Biennale, housing activists such as the Assemblea Sociale per la casa and Cooperativa Caracol operate within Venice to house the homeless, organising themselves autonomously.



The Island

Poveglia is a fan-shaped island that lies quite closely off the shore of Malamocco, a settlement located on the southern end of the barrier island of Lido in the Venice lagoon. At the base of the fan lies a 17th century octagonal fort, which points towards Lido. The main part of the island occupies 17 acres of land and is separated by a narrow canal. Dilapidated hospital buildings covered in rusty scaffolding lie nearest to the octagonal fort and date from the mid 19th century to the early 20th century.

Inside, collapsed structural remains line the abandoned halls of the old hospital, graffiti written across the old tiled walls. In some places, the roof has fallen in, causing the floor to collapse, openings are entangled in sinuous greenery. Stone staircases remain without balustrades and overturned furniture and defunct machinery stands still.

A rich terracotta brick lines the water's edge on the southwest side of the island and overhead, lies glimpses towards the remaining campanile, the remnants of the church of St Vitale.

From 1645 onwards, the Venetian government built five octagonal forts to protect and control the entrances to the lagoon. The Poveglia octagon is one of four that still survive. In the 18th century, the island was used as a checkpoint for goods coming into the city and consequently a quarantine station (lazzaretto) for the plague. In the 1920s, the existing building were converted into a hospital for long term care but were abandoned in 1968. In 2014, the island was auctioned by the city of Venice, in the hope that the island could be developed and turned into a luxury hotel, like that of the island of San Clemente, located between Lido and Giudecca.

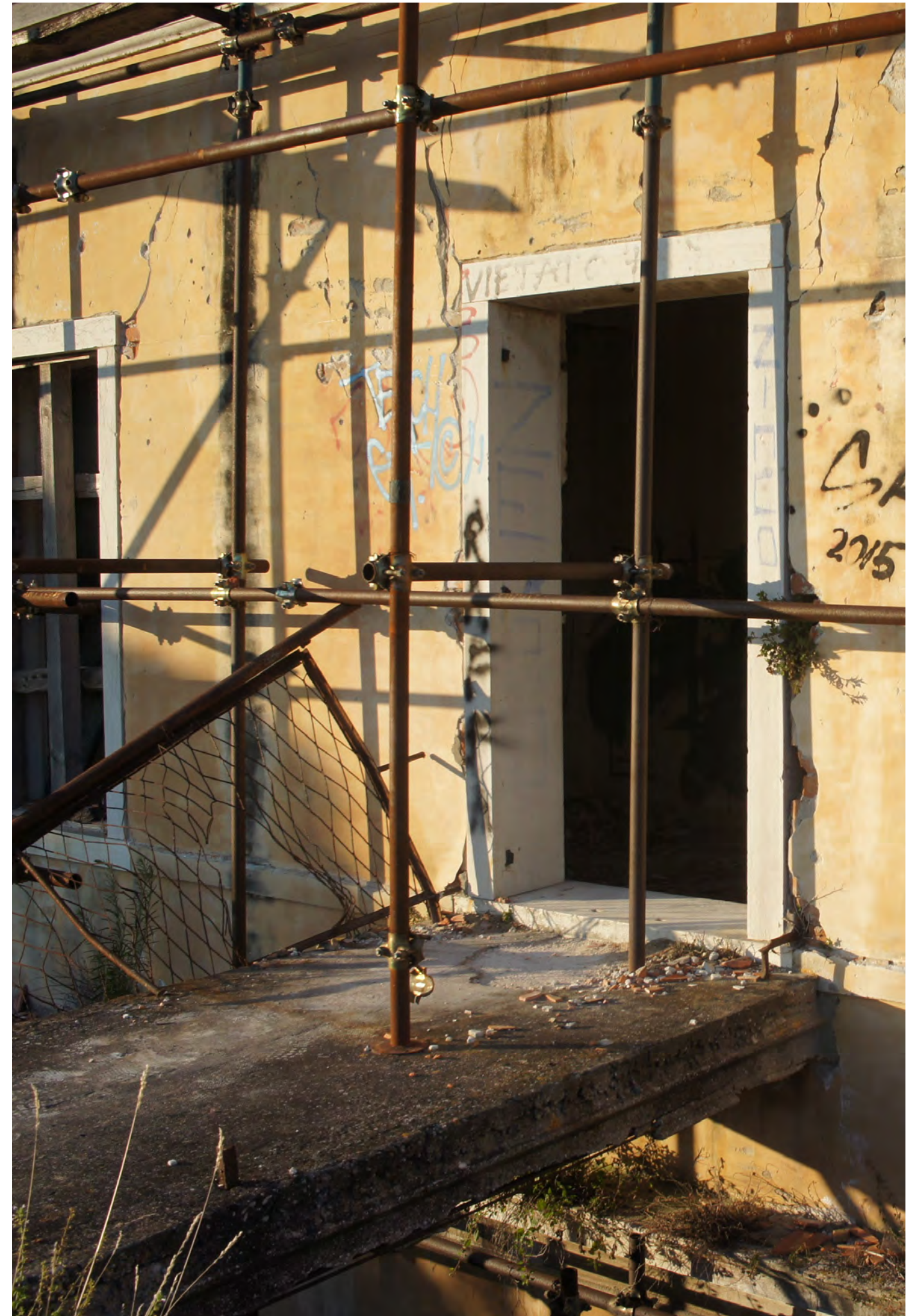
The Association

“Our battle became symbolic, a struggle for a more sustainable Venice, which has been altered by mass tourism. Perhaps now the association is invested with roles beyond its scope and its original statute.”

Lorenzo Pesola, spokesman for Poveglia per Tutti and architect

Poveglia per Tutti was born in March 2014 as a charitable association in response to an auction organised by the City of Venice to put the island of Poveglia on sale for a 99 year lease. By the end of April, 4000 people joined the association and each member pledged €99 to compete for the lease. Discussions have since been established with the city and the association are putting forward ideas for a public park with environmentally sustainable and non-profit activities, which include a place to eat, a hostel, a mooring for boats and a campsite.

The pledge also allows each member to have a democratic say in decisions affecting the future of the island. Those actively engaged in the running of the association are around 100 members. All members are invited to meet every two weeks in various venues around the city. They have since collected €400,000 but they estimate that restoration of the island could require between €20-50million.



Activism

Poveglia per Tutti is self-organised by citizens of Venice through informal means, informed by the experience of architects and urban planners within their membership. The association represents a way in which crowdfunding can be a means to fund a social cause, but also to put political pressure on the government.

“Our campaign was a provocation. We were aware of the contradiction to propose a collection of public funds to buy a state-owned asset, which therefore was already public. Perhaps if such a thing became the norm, we should ask ourselves what is right and find other solutions.”

At the heart their campaign is their co-created statute, which serves as the foundation of their association and as a manifesto to take forward the social values they want to see come to fruition in a built restoration project for the island. This statute outlines their methods of democratic decision making, where the funds are directed and their values surrounding eco-tourism and protection for the future of the city.

Equally key to the organisation are the members who deal with public relations and are responsible for the information that is circulated online and on social media. “We were lucky with the communication skills of our press members, especially at the initial stages of the auction,” says one member. “We were ‘newsworthy’ as they say in journalistic jargon, for the auction period, and shortly after when we began talks with the state.” Poveglia per Tutti has rightly been able to command an audience with the international press, including British publications such as the Telegraph in 2015¹ and the Guardian in 2014².

A difficulty they encountered was governing themselves collectively as internal dynamics tend to distract energy away from the campaign itself, as all members are volunteers. Controversies with the Mayor of Venice followed during a continued participatory drafting of their manifesto, reducing the money that could be spent on public relations.

One of the association’s main objectives if they are successful, is to promote an eco-tourism model. A regulating policy such as an occupancy tax similar to one discussed for San Francisco would be one of their priorities, one member says.

In this member’s opinion, UNESCO could intervene on the number of facilities for rent and ceasing to grant rent permits. However she acknowledges this is a huge task with 30 million visitors a year and only 55,000 surviving Venetians.

As for the expertise that the membership commands, Poveglia per Tutti is a strong example of how architects and urban planners should engage directly in activism within the city, as a direct result of their training, rather than protecting their own professional status. At the moment, Italian architects struggle with crippling bureaucracy within Italian planning, stemming from the balance between preserving tradition architecture and introducing the contemporary. On the other hand, Italy has the highest number of architects in Europe per 1000 people of the population³. Moreover, Venice itself is well positioned within the context of the Venice Architecture Biennale and the faculty of architecture at IUAV (Università Iuav di Venezia), to make strategic decisions about their own city.

¹ <http://s.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/projects/venice-poveglia/index.html>
² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/22/poveglia-venetians-fight-to-save-haunted-island>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/12/arts/international/in-italy-an-oversupply-of-architects.html>



Interview

with Ambra, a member of Poveglia per Tutti

July 2016

Grace

How important to you think crowdfunding is to the future of our cities?

Ambra

Citizens should take more interest in the fortunes of Venice. We shouldn't feel like we are becoming victims. Unfortunately this kind of mass tourism without protections for the city and citizens is causing an increase to the cost of living that pushes out historic Venetians and young people at the rate of 1000 people a year. One of the reasons that encourages the Poveglia activists to move forward is to show that the contribution of everyone, regardless of expertise, can change the state of things, effect city policy and the quality of life in the city.

G

What role has crowdfunding had to secure the success of this campaign?

A

Crowdfunding can be a mode of planning. Ours was a provocation. We were aware of the contradiction to propose a collection of public funds to buy a state-owned asset, which was therefore already public. Perhaps if such a thing became the norm, we should ask ourselves what is right and find other solutions.

G

What do you find are the difficulties with crowdfunding for a project and dealing with so many people who want their views to be heard?

A

The association has been in the news because the group is self-organised and self-governed. We liked the participatory element and it was a characteristic that we intended to keep because we thought it fair that everyone had to agree if we decided to make decisions about public assets. Though it has been difficult to govern ourselves collectively as internal dynamics tend to distract energy away from the campaign itself, as all members are volunteers.

G

Do individuals have different aspirations for the future of island?

A

Certainly there are different inclinations, but would not say they are at odds with each other. The ambitions set out at the shareholders' meetings and the statute represents us. In general we have to figure out how the association will respond to the reality involved in the redevelopment of the island, first social then structural.



G What stage of the negotiation are you at now? In an interview in December 2015, the association claimed it would return all the money to the subscribers and disband if you have not secured some sort of title on the island by the beginning of 2016.

A We have always considered this the last option. An option that could and should be implemented in case the public sector and the city had abandoned the negotiations and that the association did not have the tools to try to achieve its objectives for the island. It is one way that we have tried to remain transparent to those who have funded us.

To date, the negotiations are continuing and there are perhaps new signs of hope, we will see in the coming months whether this optimism is really motivated!

G Is the goal to develop or mostly restore the island?

A The goal is to restore the existing not to demolish but it will require a large fundraising campaign, the estimate is around €20 million. We hope to save the historic bell tower and the church. According to the draft statute prepared by the association, we would expect in a first step of securing the town, and substantially reinforcements the existing buildings where possible.

G How important has the role of the media been in the founding of the association and the following running of the campaign?

A The difficulties of the campaign are firstly public relations, from how the content is disseminated and the extent to which the campaign is exposed. This depends very much on the attention and the degree of involvement of the public, which has positive and negative peaks.

At the beginning, we were lucky because of the skill of our communicators in the initial stage in reaching the foreign media. We were 'newsworthy' as they say in journalistic jargon, for the auction period and shortly after when we began talks with the state. We were 'the dream for Poveglia'. Then after the controversy with the Mayoral elections, the newspapers ceased to give us the exposure that they had done before. At that time, the association was focusing on the participatory drafting of the statute, which reduced the money that could be spent on public relations. These factors meant at that time we lost the attention of the wider public.



G	Do you think architects should play more of a role as activists in the future planning of Venice and of the built environment?				lagoon. UNESCO could intervene on the number of facilities for rent, ceasing to grant permits. However, at the moment there are 2000 hotels in the city and 30 million visitors a year compared with 55,000 surviving Venetians.
A	I think activism should be the natural consequence of the training of architects and urban planners, at least those that I know are involved in activism though some seem more oriented to safeguarding the interests their own trades. This is understandable given the bureaucratic jungle with which an Italian architect has to confront.		G	If you win the campaign to develop the island, what will stop tourists from taking it over like what has already happened to the rest of the city?	
G	What is the difference between attitudes towards architectural design and planning of the city in Venice?		A		We do not contest the tourism itself but this type of tourism. We would like to develop of a slow model of tourism that respects the nature of the place and maintains the peace.
A	In my opinion, the Venice Architecture Biennale and the importance of the university faculty mean that architects tend to think in abstract terms. Planners instead tend to think at the local level which is good, but perhaps is not a popular outlook. One of the few faculties in Italy, which is exclusively oriented towards urban planning was recently downsized as has happened at IUAV. Though a professor of urban planning and some students still lend themselves to activism.				
G	Are students of architecture at IUAV members of the association?				
A	Among our partners there are many architects and we have had a very active membership of architects and urban planners. We have had students though in fact the average age of “active members” is around 40 years old. Not that many twentysomethings.				
G	Is the donation set at €99 for each individual?				
A	Anyone is free to donate any sum at will. When we finished the fundraising campaign for the auction we stopped asking for €99. Currently, to join the association has a cost of €19 which is the cost of the membership card. Membership is for life so there is no need to annually renew your membership. The goal is to keep the money received from shareholders whilst discussions with the state are ongoing and not to accumulate additional, unnecessary funds.				
G	Do you think the city should regulate the number of tourists who come to the city? For example like an occupancy tax they are thinking of introducing in San Francisco?				
A	One of the association’s purposes, if we can get the grant, is to promote an eco-tourism model. The warning from UNESCO (in July 2016) draws attention to the situation in Venice where two residents a day leave the				



Thanks to

Poveglia per Tutti

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