

Section 03/C

Venice

"...and what is being covered by the Coca cola sign?"

"That is the Palazzo Ducale."

"Ah, cool. Is it for a new reality show?"

Conversation between Italians
overheard on a vaporetto
by the author, Summer 2009

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Avatar urbanism

A street report from Venice

Avatar-town

Though the existing landscape has become an increasingly important source of (pop) creation for art, the appearance of a new avatar-town called Venice remains, in MMXI, a heretic notion. Yet any visit to Venice, on any given day, shows how the failure to perceive the new avatar is simply a refusal to read 'Venice' in its own (new) terms. In MMXI Venice has become a repulsive parody of itself: an entire city turned into a theme park or an orgy of crass vulgarity. An urban arrangement with a unique, unmistakable identity is now stripped of both its authenticity and dignity. Venice has become a paroxysm of a larger phenomenon unfolding all over the world: the genetic mutation of the most fundamental tool at our disposal: our language. Few are able to speak about the language of globalization without sounding snobbish or

ironic, yet, today, a highly 'creative' use of language is everywhere, altering the relationship between words and their original meaning. This creativity comes in many fashions and from a variety of sources, in the West and East alike. Some believe (with some reason) that the notorious Euro-centrism that has misread a great deal is now over and that the steering wheel has been handed to the East, which has become the place toward which the general focus has redirected to find new, interesting 'givens.' This notwithstanding, the archipelago *veneziano*—a timeless laboratory of east-west exchange—sheds unexpected light on the broader cultural issues investing architecture and architectural communication. In consequence, it is important to say something about some words that are currently being used in Venice (and in

○ I wrote the street report in the fall of 2010. In the previous ten years I had spent more time than I can remember in Venice, mostly for cultural

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Italy in general): words such as billboard, sponsor, landscape, territory, and environment that appear to crystallize a larger phenomenon. Is MMXI Venice an emblematic archetype of a temporary cultural involution? Of a profound anthropological mutation? Of the irresistible global passion for the new found avatar-life.

Billboards

In the last decade many Italian conurbations have experienced a radical shift in culture with important consequences for architecture in general and for public space in particular: important historic structures are being transformed into billboards. In 2010 Rome counted 60 historical buildings wrapped by posters. Florence had 37; Milan 261. Venice had only six, including Palazzo Ducale, which John Ruskin had once baptized the 'central building of the World.'

The Bridge of Sighs showed a new avatar of itself: it had turned into 'il cielo dei sospiri—the sky of sighs.' The sighs of prisoners facing a possible death sentence had magically become the sighs of Julianne Moore for Bulgari jewelry. Other important buildings on the Grand Canal got wrapped, making Venice perhaps the most impressive repository of advertisement featured on a grand, almost majestic

*Il cielo dei sospiri,
Venice*



scale that introduced the prototype of a new 'city corridor of advertisement'. International outrage mounted. Even Norman Foster was convinced to endorse a petition signed by the directors of the most important world-class museums, from MoMA to the Hermitage, asking the Italian government—via its Ministro dei Beni culturali Sandro Bondi—to put an end to the blasphemy by changing the law. Bondi didn't reply. The Venetian soprintendente did: 'We only have six buildings wrapped by advertisement, Milan has 261!' She then added: 'Advertisement is essential for the many restoration projects. I recall, however, posters on the scaffolding even on the British Museum or at the Berlin Neue Museen.' Unfazed, the Mayor commented: 'Do we look like Papuans with a ring at our nose?' Are billboards 'almost all right'? Still?

Avatar duck?

In the last ten years, Italy has experienced a few important changes in legislation. Before the year 2000, everything was controlled (and financed) by the State. Today, nothing is.

Local administrations are being asked to look for private sponsorship. In doing so, administrators reveal their incompetence (or over competence?), giving a new meaning to the word sponsor. In

English-speaking countries, a sponsor is an individual or institution that finances a project without asking for a quid pro quo. Generally speaking, sponsors expect to have a reception or a private party or a logo in the catalogue of an exhibition they have sponsored. In Italy the opposite is true: the 'do ut des' law is applied and raised to the nth power, allowing private sponsors to produce what seems to be a temporary aberration: the city space engulfed by enormous posters posted on historical facades with the blessing of public administrators. The temporary immediately becomes permanent given the chronic inefficiency of public work. A hard-core eastern shamelessness in exhibiting misdirected efficiency?

Venice seems to have made a choice. It has developed its own way: communication must out rule space. In other words, the administration is showing a willingness to turn the city itself into a governmental playground. A new, unprecedented message containing a latent margin of interpretation is ostensibly being put out. Architecture as a mere vehicle of public sponsorship? The decline of popular symbols in art was documented by a number of historians throughout the twentieth century. In architecture, meaning was supposed to be communicated through the inherent characteristic

of form, which was the result of a logical process, free from precedent or from direct, immediately recognizable symbols. This found a bewitching summa in a single element of the Italian landscape: the piazza. A traditional, pedestrian-scale, enclosed space where the iconographic apparatus of the main buildings, usually the Chiesa and the Palazzo, held messages whose meaning went beyond their ornamental contribution. This meaning has recently been invested by a new nature, the Avatar nature, the Bulgari (or what have you) logo being its medium. Communication dominates space, even space that used to be sacred, respected, or feared as a symbol of power. As in Vegas, symbol precedes form in space. It comes before it. An avatar of Venturi's duck?

Disneyfication

The real Venice versus the Venetian hotels of Las Vegas or Macao. Who can tell the physical difference? Conceptual difference are numerous, though. The first. While Venice appears unable to sustain the theme park model it has now become—and it is therefore losing money—its new reifications represent formidable money machines. The second. While Las Vegas and its hotels were carefully planned to be theme parks, Venice was not. The third. The Disneyfication of Venice is in

fact insulting for the Disney company, as the latter is much more efficient in managing enormous fluxes of human access and in being profitable. Under Disney management, we would hardly see any trace of the long lines of tourists that surround St. Mark's Basilica and flow into the Piazza daily making it virtually impossible to visit the church and turning the piazza into a souk. One element is common to both. Just as Nevada achieved its identity (a licentious climate) by making room for a general relaxation of legislation, Venice has managed to produce its avatar by following the same route, behind the back of its own (distracted) citizens and with the (silent) support of its visitors. Public servants as new urban design theoreticians?

The real Venice versus the Venetian hotels of Las Vegas or Macao. Who can tell the physical difference?



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Venetian administrators are (unknowingly) implementing the aim of Robert Venturi's Yale studio of 1968: by being 'non-judgmental' they have come to understand a new evolution in culture and have 'begun to evolve techniques for handling it.'

The Venturi team was convinced that there was 'a wealth of architectural information to be culled from Las Vegas,' and lost no time in showing what it was: the rehabilitation of mass culture through an aestheticizing, pseudo-populist value judgment based on the assumption of being in tune with American popular sensibility.

Venturi's aim was to find a somewhat direct architectural translation of Pop Art sensibilities, trying to revalorize the banality of the vernacular landscape of late capitalism. In other words, he wanted to use architecture to achieve what Pop artists had achieved: to make the common uncommon, overlooking the fundamental differences between architecture (or urbanity) and the other arts.

Venturi's ideas now appear to provide the pseudo-intellectual justification of the current mania (in both the establishment and the gut of society) for the substitute rather than the authentic, for the mockery or the parody of something. In a word: the disneyfication of our own life.





○ **VENICE NEW GATE**
30.05.2011

3:30 PM

Man: here you go! on my way to the Venice Biennale... here is what I am welcomed by two steps outside of Santa Lucia: the new Avatar of San Simeone Piccolo 'halfway between Palladio and Byzantium.' Is it still too beautiful to be true?

9:36 AM

Perhaps it now is too 'dreadful to be true!' Wittkower must be vomiting in his grave!

3:37 PM

Come on man! AFTER ALL, NO REGRETS!

4:30 PM

a quick afterthought provoked by the ads. Perhaps what today distinguishes a good architect from a bad



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High tides

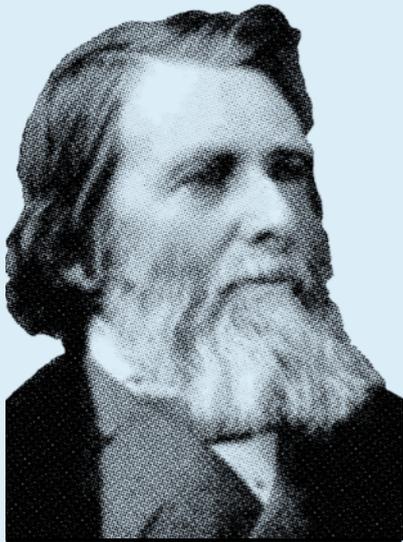
Many international observers wonder if this course of action is the appropriate way of finding sponsorship for the many projects listed on the preservation agenda that, typically, includes only exceptional structures. Some among the more committed ones, like The Venice in Peril fund, a non-Italian institution, tried to shape a more comprehensive outlook. In 2009 the fund commissioned a *Venice Report*, in collaboration with the Department of Architecture of Cambridge University. The Report set out to scientifically analyze Venice's problems. It gathered data about the real (unknown) hard facts of the city: how many people live there, how many tourists visit, how building use is changing, and how it is financed. The fund had previously presented a matter of fact proposal to the administration based on the number of annual visitors—17 million—, having examined the details of the project with Mario Draghi before the latter became Italy's chairman of the Bank of Italy. All moviegoers pay a ticket without complaining. The project proposed making each visitor buy a ticket comparable to a movie ticket. The income from this simple act could finance a twenty-year bond that would make over four billion euro available for financing other projects, through a fund that could be managed by an institution above suspicion such as the Bank of Italy. The mayor was very upset by the unspoken thesis of

The income from visitors' tickets could finance a 20-year bond that would make over 4 billion euro available

the proposal, namely, that the city was not considered capable of managing this fund (or of managing it too well for his party's immediate profit). Silence ensued. This silent regime of self-serving interests has been in power for several decades. It is a sort of radical movement, which has successfully managed to cover most of its real goals with an invisible code of silence. Very few talk about it, yet the regime, like the Duce, never stops working. Some among the most pressing (and real) issues are never even discussed. When referring to Venice, the majority talks about the tide problem. Few appear to be interested in the tide of human material. With nothing in the pipeline to ebb

this flow, the calli and the bridges are so over-crowded on certain weekends of the year that the municipal police forms a human chain separating people walking on the bridges both ways. Any talk of a daily quota to contain the tide is rejected outright.

Save Venice? Or its avatar?

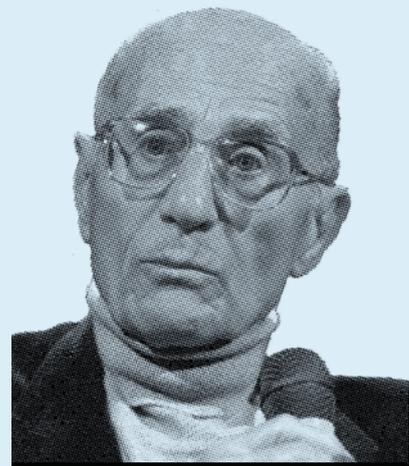


John Ruskin, 1819–1900

For the 'Italian administration,' the British approach remains *ante litteram* uninteresting, as its goal appears to be to solve problems rather than pass new self-serving legislation. Incompetence, reticence, dogmatism reign unchallenged. So does the rotting away of the landscape wrapped by the new camouflage masked as 'shopping advice.' Except for a small minority, no one seems to be troubled by this. The large (silent) majority (civil servants, tourists, citizens, member of the free press, what-have-you) does not even perceive the issue as problematic or is provoked to react against it. Among the 'disturbed,' one group emerges, continuing a long standing tradition: The British, who have traditionally admired Venetians for being the most cunning of merchants and for implementing a Byzantine model which established a close relationship between church and state. This tradition was arguably founded by a remarkable individual: John Ruskin. Born in 1819, Ruskin was mostly considered an inspired dilettante,

a true Victorian, prone to silly exaggerations, generalizations, dogmatism, and flights of foolish rhetoric. Yet, to this day, *The Stones of Venice* is still widely recognized as an incomparable evocation of Venice. 'I am aware of no other European city in which its cathedral was not the principal feature,' Ruskin correctly remarked. In Venice, the main church was the *Chiesa Ducale*, the doge's private chapel, which, in form and meaning was a symbol of the cultural structure of the Middle Ages and of Venice's particular political and religious structure, making it impossible for the Vatican to claim it. The time of Ruskin's first visit coincided with the epoch of the Grand Tour in which Venice was turning into the European capitol of leisure and pleasure based on the carnival, gambling, and the uninterrupted search for *cortigiane*. This Venice, the Venice of Casanova, was, to Ruskin, a city ruined by its own hedonism, luxury, indulgence, and paganism. Venice's degradation was, for him, too much. It was a theocratic republic that, curiously, was worshipped even more in her decrepitude than in her youth, and sank from the midst of her admirers into the grave—as he had predicted—, the waves (of the sea and of tourism) becoming her sepulcher. What would he have said about the rising tide of tourists covering the city daily? Probably, 'Save Venice!' as he was actually the first to say. Save Venice? Or its avatar?

Independency



Indro Montanelli, 1909—2001

Whether Venice or its avatar comes first is ambiguous. In their current confrontation, the shadow is overshadowing the precedent, which, in turn, already has both feet in the grave. Perhaps the 150th anniversary of the coming together of the Italian state (whatever that is) is a good time juncture to see if, one, this goal is still within reach and, two, what its current meaning might be. Indro Montanelli may be said to be the second individual of stature who, alarmed by the exceptional flood of 1966 that so worried the world at large (think of UNESCO's 1969 *Venice Report*), decided to postpone most of his agenda to dedicate an entire year to the '*problema di Venezia*,' as he called it. This aspiration eventually took the form of a long article published in four installments (November 22, 23, 24, 26) in *Il Corriere della Sera* in 1968 and, more importantly, in a forty-five minute long video broadcasted on national television on November 12, 1969. The aim was two-fold: to make the audience at large aware of both the dangers Venice was facing and his own conclusions, which anyone with a sense of reality would second without question. To solve the problem, Montanelli urged, Venice had to be made independent from the Italian state—just like the Vatican State—and be put in the hands of an international organization governed by a competent board funded by generous

private patrons, establishing a new *Magistrato alle Acque* worthy of its name. 'There is no time to waste. And to not waste it, the first thing to do is to institute a high commission for Venice that could cut through the red tape of Roman bureaucracy and the deficiencies of local powers, all of which are by now conditioned by other interests. Venice needs a special statute because it is a city with special problems that require very specific skills and highly urgent decisions. [...] We're not here to give advice: we're not qualified to do so. But constituting an organ endowed with broad powers is not advice. It is a mandatory necessity that cannot be delayed, an obligation that we are already dangerously late in meeting. [...] And since saving Venice is—let's not hide it from ourselves—a gigantic operation that might be beyond our strength, one has to wonder if this organ shouldn't be anchored to some international authority. It would be nothing extraordinary since Venice is not only an Italian cultural asset but one that belongs to citizenry worldwide. And the world would not refuse to help us if we were to demonstrate that we wanted and knew how to do it.

'This hypothesis has many cultural, geographical, religious, and historic justifications that are obviously different from the populist ideological and political



Three independent states: Vatican City, San Marino, Venice

reasoning that fuels the various member of the Lega Veneta. It is also a hypothesis with not one but two precedents: one provided by the Vatican State and the other by Republic of San Marino, two independent states within the territory of the Italian Republic. The hypothesis of a Venetian state, however, has the advantage of being more identifiable, as it floats outside of the Italian mainland. It is also a hypothesis that would conclude the north-south axis that would make more evident the east-west border in which the country is culturally divided, a mark much more cogent than the usual north-south.

Avatar-life

In Italy, problem avoidance is a much appreciated way of being. So is avoiding providing answers to uncomfortable questions by diverting the attention to a different topic altogether generating a fumus that has the goal of forgetting the issue demanding to be examined. This lifestyle is the result of a number of dichotomies: the difficult dialectic between spirit and matter (with the obvious religiously-motivated belief that it is spirit and not matter that shapes the course of history) and the equally difficult dialectic between the rhetorical legacy of the Italian war of independence called, with typical turn of rhetoric, Il Risorgimento (with

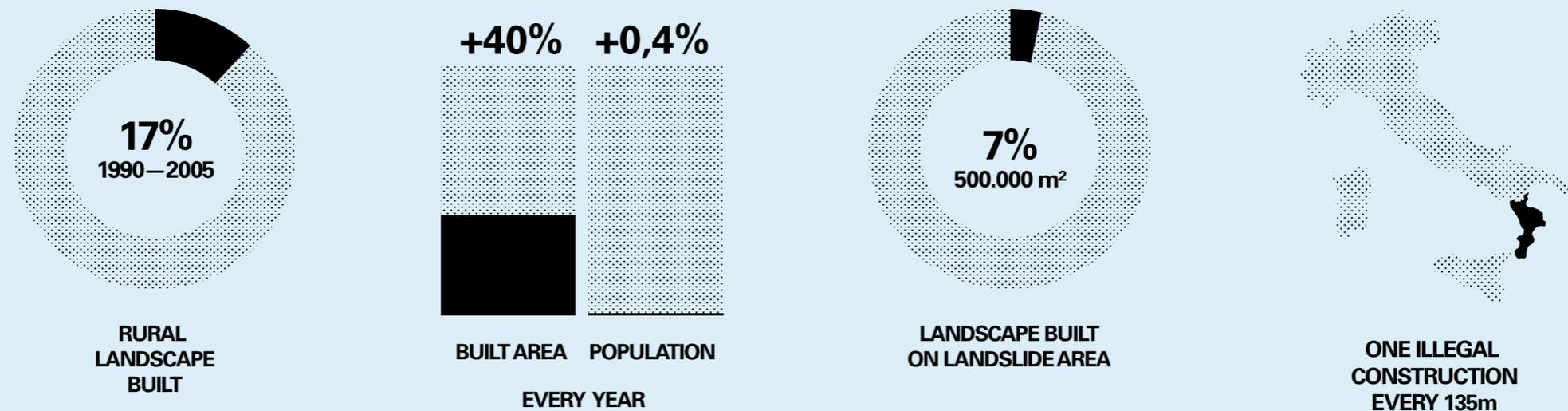
its extravagant claims about the country's glorious future destiny) and the inability to face hard facts. It is interesting to note that in MMXI, forty years after Montanelli's video, this attitude is still at the core of the country's inability to face problems like that of Venice, problems that requires detachment, eradication of the vices that centuries of despotism and clerical rule have engendered: subservience, indiscipline, excessive materialism, lack of material ardor, amoral familism. Italian administrators find it more convenient to resort to a readymade concept ready to be used for many purposes: the concept of the avatar.

Avatar-life has become our daily life, almost everywhere. Yet, in Italy, something else is noticeable: the coming together of the top and the bottom of society, both fatally attracted by their own (hedonist) gut feelings. A double movement is coming together: a top-down state-managed semantic confusion backed by authority merging with a bottom-up spontaneous and diffuse daily misuse of vocabulary. The two nurture each other. In a way, they have become complimentary to bring about what both parties—the 'responsible head' and the 'hedonistic gut' of society'—are most interested in—the show for the show's own sake—even if it entails altering the facts.

Open season

Article 9 of the Italian Constitution is a perfect example of such double movement. It reads as follows: 'The Republic promotes the development of culture and scientific research. It protects the landscape and the historical heritage of the Nation.' As it is well known, in Italy, investment in research has never been consistent, and, in recent years, the landscape has been disfigured beyond belief in utter contempt for the country's unmatched treasure. According to UNESCO, over fifty percent of the world's cultural heritage is located in Italy. This percentage is not a matter of quantity but, rather, of quality, based on three main factors: the secular harmony between cities and the landscape; the capillary diffusion and the continuity of use in situ of churches, palazzi, statues; and the fact that the patrimony is evenly distributed in cities and landscapes. This makes it a whole that, like Venice, is larger than the sum of its parts. All of the above does not provide the basis for any official discussion of the landscape, which is being disfigured at an incredible rate. When did the process start? Telescoping the glorious story of how Italy got into its current mess, one should recall the mid-1980s—significantly dubbed the *anni di fango* (mud years)—, when an unprecedented experiment was attempted. For the first time ever, a 'socialist' administration was put in charge of ruling the country. Only five years

after the end of this 'experiment,' it became evident that the socialists had been responsible for relaxing legislation for their immediate political (and pecuniary) benefit. The degree to which they had done so was unimaginable, making the corrupt administrative practices of the Christian Democrat cabinets that had preceded (and followed) them look amateurish. Since then, 'open season' has been tacitly declared on the Italian landscape, which is now on sale for clearance based on a deregulation model with a catchy label, '*padroni in casa propria*'—masters of our own domain. The Italian landscape, the celebrated 'Garden of Europe,' used to be a revered model of urban growth and legislation. Italy is the first country, and one of the few, where the landscape is 'protected' by the constitution. Of late, however, the Italian landscape has gained a leading role in a new discipline, one that is officially less respected (yet silently approved): the 'camouflage' of both its heritage and its territory. This is taking place via a two-pronged activity typical of the reigning culture of the avatar, the culture in which you say one thing but what you really mean is the opposite. The Italian government keeps producing, without embarrassment, great amounts of confusing legislation supposed to make room for sustainable development that is, on the contrary, instrumental in achieving a different goal: the selling to the highest



bidder of all available soil for the purpose of sealing it at a rate never before seen: 161 hectares per day. This model has the (silent) benefit of increasing the number of floods and landslides that, in turn, create an official excuse for the only state able to interest the Italian mindset: the 'state of emergency.' From 1990 to 2005, seventeen percent of the rural landscape was used (read, built). Every year, there is a forty percent increase in the built area that is meant to provide for a population increase of 0.4 percent: a one-hundredfold discrepancy that turns everything into a fragile (and abandoned to itself) no-man's sprawl subject to earthquakes, inundation, floods, and landslides. Building abuses are periodically 'condoned' by the central government with a small penalty to counter a

chronic lack of funds that has gotten so radical that—truth be told—there are officially no resources left to hire new human resources. In ten years time this will have the exhilarating effect of finding the vast majority of personnel employed in the entities governing the landscape in retirement, and the landscape will be left to rot. Seven percent of it, about 500,000 areas in total, is already officially listed as zona franosa (landslide area). Official data doesn't register the popular and diversified 'outside the law' practices like the abuso edilizio (illegal construction) that, in places like Calabria, takes place every 135 meters. It does, however, register that the practice of soil sealing proceeds at a frantic pace in spite of the notorious population decrease.

Legal avatars

In the last quarter of a century, the rural territory has decreased by 3.5 million hectares, while in the last half a century the urbanized area has increased by a 500 percent ratio. In short, the landscape is the 'great sick man' of Italy even if the topic is of interest to no one. The current parliamentary discussion moves (silently) toward a further aggravation of the problem, as the federal stance is likely to become 'a mere instrument in the hands of ruthless administrators for the final commodification and cementification of the territory and the naturalistic patrimony,' as Galli della Loggia noted in August 2010 when a new law proposed to put approximately 20,000 properties of the federal demanio (state property)—seashores, beaches, lakes, street, squares, hills, entire mountains—up for sale to the lowest bidder (the area of the Dolomites is available for 866,000 euro). This 'sack of the environment' is perpetrated not by Attila the Hun but by the very political and financial elite that is supposed to preserve it. The problem, as everybody knows, is not an object of discussion and is not even mentioned during political campaigns. The situation is so intricate that nothing can be done. The 'eye of the legal needle' is blocked by intertwining threads that form an inextricable entanglement. Everything is worded (legally) so that no one apparently knows

who is responsible for what. An over abuse of regulations and legislation (promulgated by the so-called left-wing and right-wing parties alike) has produced a stratified (and inextricable) legal wild wood where three avatars compete for one key word: paesaggio (landscape), territorio (territory), and ambiente (environment). The first is protected by the Stato (Ministero dei beni Culturali), the second is governed by the regione and the comune, the third is everybody's lot, from the comune to whatever ministries might be involved. The resulting confusion is a further reflection of the greatest Italian invention: the blurring of responsibility to avoid risks of any kind, including legal ones. The dispute is not abstract: if one has to cut dead (burnt) pine wood who gives the permit? The state, the region, or the municipality? Does one have to wait for a Constitutional Court ruling, which, since the court is engulfed by hundreds of thousands of similar predicaments, will materialize when there is no landscape to speak of?

Avatar urbanism



Salvatore Settis,
*Paesaggio Costituzione
Cemento*, 2010

The particularities of Avatar urbanism have been described by Salvatore Settis, who is perhaps the most authoritative figure trying to make the problem clear to the public. His 2010 book, *Paesaggio Costituzione Cemento* shows the full scope of the somewhat surreal, long-term trajectory of Italian legislation for ‘protecting the landscape and the historical heritage of the Nation.’ The book describes the basic structure of Avatar urbanism. Contrary to what the constitution prescribes for the landscape, postwar devastation or sheer rape seem to be more interesting and self-serving than protection, negating de facto a more than two-century-long tradition. The book is essential in understanding the avatar life with which a number of crucial abstract entities or concepts have been invested by postwar Italian legislation. In this virtually inextricable legal wild wood, countless hours are spent in countless courtrooms by unprofessional and self-serving lawyers to determine where the landscape ends and the environment begins, when in reality they are one in the same. To the bewilderment of the few responsible citizens, the same applies to determining the semantic difference between the Republic, the Nation, or the State and their mutual sphere of influence and power, or to determining whether the regione has power over the provincia or the Stato in

a permanent condition of friendly or non-hostile fire that has nothing friendly and everything hostile about it. All governing bodies actually have a vested interest in issuing building licenses that have the advantage (for the administrators) of producing the cash they need to govern. The result is that all such competing (legal) avatar figures—the landscape, the territory, and the environment—are sold to cover the enormous fees the administration has to pay to a plethora of external consultants. The book also shows how the central administration has managed, throughout an astonishing number of different cabinets, to establish several different ministries with overlapping responsibilities and no real authority: the Ministero per i Beni Culturali, the Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, the Ministero per l’Ecologia, the Ministero per l’Ambiente, the Ministero per i Problemi delle Aree Urbane, and finally the Ministero del Turismo. All of these entities have succeeded in reaching one tacitly shared goal: to make sure that no air whatsoever is left for the environment to breath.

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The environment is left to suffocate

○ Tap to read the article

Corriere della Sera,
16 giugno 2010

Il caso

In Gazzetta Ufficiale l'incarico di «impulso e coordinamento» per modificare le norme sulla salvaguardia della laguna

Brunetta battuto come sindaco torna plenipotenziario a Venezia

Delegato dal governo a riformare la legge speciale. Cacciari: indecente



The environment is left to suffocate, strangled by the constantly growing number of self-serving authorities. Insofar as authority over its administration (or safeguarding efforts) is concerned, Venice is perhaps the most extreme example of this legal, yet anti-constitutional, 'sea of juridical confusion.' Since 1973, no less than three special laws have been approved for Venice by the national government (1973, 1984, 1992). No less than seven authorities (Commissione di Salvaguardia, Comitato, Magistrato alle Acque, Consorzio Venezia Nuova, Regione Veneto, Provincia di Venezia, Comune di Venezia) with over-lapping competences (and veto power) are now in place. They all argue with each other about the best course of action for 'protecting' the city or the lagoon, even though the two cannot be separated. Yet, for the

political purpose of paying as many stipends as possible to a large number of officials that failed to get reelected, the city and lagoon are treated as two separate entities, making it possible to reach one silent goal: to weaken the system to make it as powerless as possible. This is shamelessly confirmed by occasional 'promotions' whose only goal seems to increase, if possible, the confusion.

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Long live Avatar urbanism!

