

**Giulia Foscari (2014). *Elements of Venice*. Zürich: Lars Müller. 692 pp. €29 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-03778-429-7**

This book explores Venice's architectural progress that is deeply embedded in the city's buildings. Moulded and adapted to suit political ruling classes, and built from the riches accumulated through Hanseatic merchant trade, these buildings represent a true Venetian value. And, as author rightly puts it, this value cannot be simply expressed in gold nor with movable artefacts that Napoleon looted in 1797, but in what was left behind – a living urban fabric of Venice; physical aspects of urbanism, emphasizing building types, thoroughfares, open space, frontages, and streetscapes.

The author explores a metamorphosis of Venetian building elements (p. 31) and in the process of autopsy, dissects them as the body's organs. Interestingly, this autopsy mirrors 'deconstruction' in the sense of Derrida (1985) as "the undoing, decomposing, and desedimenting of structures." The author chooses Françoise Braudel's comparative historiographic method, briefly mentioned in Preface (p. 10), as a means of moving forward. Influenced by Marc Bloch's work (1954), Braudel's method is best seen in *The Mediterranean World and the Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II* (Braudel, 1992). The author manages to transform a wide range of historical material (maps, drawings, photographs and documents) into a delightful and stylishly written book. The dissection of Venice's buildings covers 12 elements, making it a total of 12 chapters, and 692 pages. Each element is represented in a historiographic storytelling manner. Since both Braudel and Bloch argued for understanding the events that shaped the mentality of cities and civilisations and their traditions through the stories of everyday material life, which speak on behalf of marginal and excluded citizens, this gives storytelling a well-deserved place within the book and within comparative methods more generally.

The focus of *FAÇADE*, the first and the most extensive chapter, is on illustrating the façade's role in expressing the theme of freedom and order in Venice. The author introduces the palaces of Saint Mark's Square and discusses different types of façades; expansion, stacking, multiplying, mezzanines, stone glazing, overwriting, painting and the doge's palaces. Influences were arriving from everywhere; citizens, religion, orientation of churches, sculpture versus order, monastic churches, the façade paradigm itself, exercises in freedom and buildings without façades, the relationship between Serenissima and the Napoleonic Republic, pedestrian forum, icons, industrial architecture, the Lido, and tourism. The following chapter, *STAIR*, draws the reader's attention to the theme of independence in buildings; external stairs, internationalisation of stairs, and promenades. Population density, land value and Venice's rental market led to the rise of 'fraterne' – a shared inheritance between the brothers, all of which inspired an internationalisation of stairs (p. 172). The inclusive design of bridges played an important role in mediating water and island space, not only in Venice but beyond, in the Adriatic historical port cities. The next chapter, *CORRIDOR*, is preoccupied with Venice's obsession with the corridors which influenced and were in turn influenced by different stimuluses and their relationships; rue-corridors, the cells and corridors, hospital corridors, bureaucracy, sacred spaces, the hotel corridors and passages. In *FLOOR*, one of the most recognisable cultural features that appears in almost every corner of Venice's space, was inspired by a whole set of fragile environmental factors; artificial soil and its boundaries (p. 294), pavements of memory and erasure (p. 300), fusion of natural religion and the Christian faith demonstrated by burying people under the floors, cavities as flooring in churches (p. 303), and curious Maiolica tiles floors (p. 304). The subsequent

element, *RAMP*, reminds the reader of Venice as the city with the greatest number of streets (p. 229), connected by bridges and where the bridges, seen here as “architectural barriers” for anyone with mobility issues, use ramps to deal with this problem (p. 252). The author reveals the element *ROOF* as a building technique that reflected the Venetian Republic’s wealth and its historical link with Constantinople (p. 562); lead roofs, cupolas, wooden structures, and pediments, terraces, rainfall collectors, light filtering, pavilions and dormers. Venice enormously cherished the element *CEILING* as a stratification of art form that reflected the religious and historical themes. The author emphasises how its wealth allowed and inspired Venetian architects to develop a wide range of techniques; false ceilings, hull beams and carved wood, geometry, paintings, and perspectival illusion. Venice’s love for the *DOOR* started with a *porta d’acqua* – a water gate (p. 432) – and is visible in every single building of the city. People were allowed to pursue their architectural language in dividing the urban space; a private from public space, and the individual from the community. The function of these doors mirrored social and cultural circumstances, e.g. justice and history, transparencies, imprisonment and segregation, death and the renaissance, and this is reflected in different types of doors; water gates, closed doors, cusped doors, transition doors, double entrance, and deformed doors. The element *FIREPLACE* holds a special relationship with the city’s social history, considering that there were a total of 25 fires between 976 and 1996 (p. 519). As the author notes, fireplaces added a flavour of sociological melancholy to the urban landscape and served as a functional masterpiece of fireproof engineering, creating a “Venturi effect,” a special form of ventilation that could extinguish sparks before they reached the chimney (p. 505). Models ranged from chimney stacks to external flues, fireplace accessories, portable hearths, and furnaces. The author dedicates the following chapter to the element *WINDOW* which, broadly speaking, governs the way people see the world inside of private space. What dictated its evolution was, one on hand, a dense population and houses being built next to each other due to a shortage of space, use of waterways as transport route, and on the other, a desire to get the most out of light and ventilation. The author then turns attention to cultural aspects of the window that signalled a historical turning point; fretwork polifore of the regime, corner windows, the evolution from cloth-covered panels to bottle glass, ‘Venetian’ blinds and modern ribbon windows. Perhaps the most useful role of the next element, *BALCONY*, was to emphasise the authority of political elite (p. 577). With the earliest balconies appearing in 1500, they evolved from being functional to aesthetic elements; the prince balcony, overhands, the balcony cannon, modillions, balustrades, religious balconies, and, finally, modern balconies used for sightseeing (p. 598). The last chapter is dedicated to *WALL*, an essential part of the construction system of Venetian houses. The author reminds the reader that building a house in Venice was, de facto, art and an empirical process born out of the need to anchor structure in unstable lagoon soil (p. 605). The tripartite layout, a hallmark of the typical Venetian house, was supported by four main parallel walls, including the outer and inner walls. The author illustrates a wide range of these walls; brick walls, overhanging walls, oil on canvas, frescoes, boiserie, concrete walls, partition walls, stone walls, wailing walls and the wall of Arsenale.

Without a doubt, the metamorphosis of Venice continues and in the process, creates an unavoidable paradox associated with Venice’s myth; where any change to the city’s form is seen as an offence to the city’s myth. A century-old Venetian saying ‘com’era, dov’era’ (p. 154) ‘the way it was, the way it should be’, nevertheless, remains a powerful weapon in the religious battle between classicism and modernism in island city development. How Venice chooses to deal with its contemporaneous challenges from submersion, mass cosmopolitanism and cruise tourism, and connects this to its Venetian tradition inevitably falls to the future



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generations. This need for a better understanding of how urban island space can be sustainably developed has implications for urban island studies more broadly. Braudel's and Bloch's comparative method for Venice could be replicated in studies of cultural heritages in Mediterranean Adriatic port cities where Venice's impact remains well preserved. In this sense, this fascinating book is an invaluable source for interdisciplinary academics interested in the role of architecture in sustainable development of island cities like Venice, and beyond.

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