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Ephemeral architecture as medium for regenerating the historical city. The case of Venice

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ABSTRACT: The Biennale is an event that has been repeated periodically in Venice for more than a century, affecting the evolution of the city. In recent decades a model of regeneration of the architectural heritage based on the artistic event has developed, the latter being able to generate resources that are reinvested in the maintenance of buildings. Ephemeral architecture therefore plays a key role in this process, becoming an "engine" capable of preserving, renewing and updating the historical fabric of the island. In this paper a critical cataloguing of virtuous examples of heritage building regeneration, recycling of materials, innovation in transport, touristic sustainability is presented, in order to propose an ethical code on the basis of which future management models could be developed for this sector of cultural tourism connected to the "Biennial phenomenon".

KEYWORDS: Heritage, Biennale, Gentrification, Touristification, Impact.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Of the 12 million tourists who visit the city of Venice every year, the 5% attend to the Art Biennale, making up a considerable number of about 600.000 visitors. The Biennale is a centenary artistic event of highest international relevance, which has been able to preserve and regenerate one of the most popular districts of the city. In Castello, in fact, there are two large areas, the Giardini and the Arsenale, which make up more than 10% of the surface of the island of Venice.

The Biennale was able to trigger a mechanism of regeneration of the historical heritage in two stages: initially by redeveloping a wooded area of the Napoleonic Gardens by promoting the construction of several National Pavilions, to concentrate almost a century later on a decadent historical complex, that of the Arsenale. Part of the financial support created by the great artistic event was diligently reinvested in order to preserve, renovate and adapt according to regulations many of the historical buildings in this area, which was previously a military area, to make them accessible to a large public. The art and architecture exhibition have therefore become a pretext to regenerate the historical building heritage, thanks to a cultural tourism that has been consolidated exponentially where the dedicated resources had long since been exhausted.

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2.   THE SPRAWL OF THE ART PAVILIONS

The Castello district, one of the most popular in Venice, was for centuries the place of residence of the workers employed in shipbuilding in the Arsenal compendium. With progress and the advent of new technologies, the Arsenal has gravely lost its original function as a production center, while remaining a place of strategic importance for the Italian Navy. In 1980 the fortified citadel was opened to the public for the first time on the occasion of the 1st International Architecture Exhibition, limited to the area of the Corderie building (La Biennale di Venezia, 2017). At that time, the Venice Biennale had been a well-established phenomenon for almost a century, and until then it had been concentrated exclusively in the area of the Giardini di Castello. However, it is only in the last twenty years that the event has acquired increasing proportions, through a process of improvement of the other areas of the Arsenal. In 2013, 60% of the Arsenal was again owned by the City of Venice, which established the Arsenal Office (now replaced by Vela spa) in the northern area, confirming the concession of the south-western area to the Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia. The tripartition defines the administrative borders within the Arsenal, with the southeast area still occupied by the Navy.

Today the International Exhibition is not only located in the two main venues, but it extends throughout the city in a capillary way, temporarily occupying palaces and other historical buildings for exhibition purposes. In 2019 an anomalous event occurred: a national pavilion, the Lithuanian Pavilion, crossed the military walls, temporarily occupying a building owned by the Italian Navy. This operation, which let the hosted organization to win the Golden Lion for "the Pavilion's engagement with the city of Venice and its inhabitants" (La Biennale di Venezia, 2019), shows how a model of regeneration based on the artistic event has been consolidated in the historical city, and how it can be efficient even in areas that are still considered strategic in terms of national security.

3.   HOW TO MAKE CULTURAL TOURISM SUSTAINABLE?

In recent years, however, the city of Venice has experienced a real tourist invasion, and even the Castello neighborhood suffers the consequences. That cultural tourism that has served so much to regenerate the historical building heritage, it has been understood as a source of income even by investors and small entrepreneurs, who have not hesitated in generating phenomena of touristification and gentrification, harmful to the social and cultural fabric in which the Biennale stands.

Venice is a city that has preserved its medieval morphology, becoming a great historical center surrounded by water. In the last 70 years the population of the city has decreased drastically, and in particular the figures become more sensitive in the historical center, which has seen its population decrease from 175.000 inhabitants in 1951 to 52.000 today (De Rossi, 2015). There are several theories about the causes of the depopulation of Venice: the deterioration of the houses, the maintenance costs, the difficulty to move, the increasing number of floods due to the exceptional high tides, the excessive tourism, etc. "Venezia che muore" (Venice dying), verse from a song by Francesco Guccini (Guccini, 1981), related precisely these phenomena that were already present at that time. In particular, the touristification of the city is a phenomenon that has taken on worrying proportions: every year the historic center is visited by more than 12 million tourists (TGR Veneto, 2019), in the city and on the islands there are almost 7.000 offers of Airbnb tourist apartments, 82% of which refer to entire houses or apartments (Cox, 2016), and every year about 500 cruise ships cross the San Marco basin (Massariolo, 2019).

Parallel to the city's tourist activity, gentrification has taken place in some of the city's neighborhoods and islands. Gentrification generally occurs when in the popular areas of the historical center the middle class takes over from the local population, following the disinvestment of manufacturing centers in favor of activities linked to the tertiary sector, which leads to the regeneration and renewal of the urban fabric, with the consequent increase in the prices of immovable goods (Treccani, 2012).

In the city there are some virtuous cases of initiatives related to sustainable tourism, as well as movements of fight for the citizens' rights, in opposition to precariousness of housing and job. However, these are isolated or marginal ventures, which are unable to have a strong impact on the governance of the city.

4.   THE IMPACT OF EPHEMERAL ARCHITECTURE ON THE HISTORIC CITY

A praiseworthy aspect of the Biennale is instead to make possible the construction of ephemeral architecture in a context strongly bounded from a monumental and landscape point of view, fomenting a creative and innovative added value linked to the contemporary world. These ephemeral installations are sometimes artworks themselves, or they can become functional to the works of art, constituting their setting, such as the national pavilions. Often the cases of ephemeral architecture are not so evident, and are camouflaged within the work of art, constituting a built creative apparatus that interface at different levels with the architectural heritage or the protected landscape context in which they are hosted. And it is precisely this combination that challenges local regulations and institutions, acting in the grey sphere of legislation, and becoming driver of innovation also in other fields. The architectural project, therefore, also in the artistic and patrimonial range, continues to have great potential of innovation.

These aspects make it possible to categorize the relationship between ephemeral and heritage architecture according to a taxonomy of impact within three major thematic areas: city, citizens and architecture.

4.1   *Environmental, financial and administrative impacts on the city*

As far as the environmental impact of the Biennale is concerned, it is certainly to be acknowledged that the organizers are committed to promoting the recycling and reuse of the materials used in the installations, an initiative that has recently been introduced in the exhibition regulations (La Biennale di Venezia, 2020), without however providing clear guidelines or priority, focusing instead on a rhetoric of ethical imprint. Recycling and reuse of materials are serious issues, which should be structured in greater depth, given the large amount of waste materials that are produced each year during the exhibition's dismantling period. The same is true for logistics, which do not comply with the use of eco-sustainable energy sources, on the contrary increasing the production of harmful gas emissions into the atmosphere, given the non-compulsory use of filters or catalytic converters in boat engines, just to give an example. Recycling and environmental sustainability are themes dear to contemporary architecture, and many architectural firms around the world devote particular attention to these aspects, making them the cornerstones of their modus operandi. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the access rooms to the international exhibition *Reporting from the Front* (Aravena, 2016), for which waste materials from the dismantling of the plasterboard partition walls of the previous Biennale were used. A few years earlier the German Pavilion had already hosted an exhibition entitled *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle* (Petzet & Heimeyer, 2012) in which projects carried out in the country following these criteria were presented. At the Biennale *Out there: architecture beyond building* (Betsky, 2008) were invited many architectural firms that were experimenting construction technologies using recycled materials, such as exhausted tires and other waste from the automotive sector, household appliances, plastic tanks, scaffolding and metal structures, containers, etc., and this fervor animated the collaboration between exhibitors and local groups who saw the recycling of materials from the stands as a great resource for developing projects within the city. In those years the Rebiennale project was born, an independent collective that systematically collaborates with the stand builders in order to recover waste materials with which to build equipment, furniture and handcrafted objects to support the most vulnerable sections of the local population.

In terms of finance, the Biennale is a phenomenon that creates an economic induction for the city of Venice, attracting large foreign capital in a local economy based on proximity. Anyway, the participation to Biennale is a costly and not always sustainable choice for countries, moreover

the available spaces are usually very large and require constant maintenance and restoration. In 2014, the worsening of the internal crisis in Venezuela led to an exhibition break in the pavilion at the Giardini, displaying a statement referring to the architect who had built it, Carlo Scarpa, inviting the public to observe architecture as a work of art. The communiqué was followed by an incredible press silence, and few are the testimonies that can be found, mainly films and amateur photographs published on the internet by visitors to the exhibition. In 2019, it seemed that the pavilion might suffer the same fate, but it opened a week late. In 2020, however, news of the postponement of the whole Architecture Biennale was received, for sanitary reasons linked to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Biennale also challenges the administrative and managerial component of the city of Venice, questioning and revolutionizing the regulations of local institutions, which constitute somehow the static part of the process. Few local institutions are in charge of the evaluation and approval of an extraordinary number of complex proposals, requiring a considerable administrative effort and the adoption of special administrative procedures, as for example the conference of services, in which all the representatives of the local institutions involved participate. In 2015 the Icelandic Pavilion proposed *The Mosque* at the deconsecrated church of Santa Maria della Misericordia. It was a critical intervention from a theological point of view, as elements of two distinct religions, the Muslim and the Catholic, were mixed, with the intention of highlighting how the two cultures had found in Venice a place of encounter and fusion over the centuries. Part of the local population, supported by the representation of some exponents of conservative political parties, understood the operation as a provocation, showing their dissent since the opening of the exhibition. After two weeks of controversy, the pavilion was closed following a petition in the public prosecutor's office. The mechanism that led to the suspension of the exhibition activity in this case consisted in the restrictive application of the rules of public entertainment, through strict controls and inspections that led to declare the space "dangerous for public health", as it was not considered in compliance with health and fire regulations (Bialasiewicz, 2017).

4.2 *Cultural, social and occupational impacts on citizens*

Every year a great cultural debate takes place on the works exhibited at the Biennial, resulting in the publication of numerous articles, general and country-specific catalogues, and archival materials. However, the Biennial suffers from a branding phenomenon, which often involves manipulation of information. Even publications that escape this system of information control are seen as propaedeutic, as potential creators of diversity and as a further hint for institutionalized debate. The Biennale entitled *All the World's Futures* (Enwezor, 2015) was rather controversial from this point of view, as it was possible to observe among the guests the presence of many voices with radical positions opposed to the institutionalized event, and at the same time a sort of breaking of the geopolitical boundaries of the Biennale, which for the first time allowed access to the official cultural debate by some representatives of local activism, incorporating these realities within the great event and strengthening the institutional image of a Foundation open to all kinds of views, in the name of the "pluralism of voices" mentioned in the exhibition catalogue. Among the disruptive actions in the city, it is worth mentioning the occupation of the Guggenheim Museum terrace by the Gulf Labor artists' coalition, as part of a series of protests engaged by the group to denounce the working conditions to which the "invisible" operators of the museum culture factory are subjected, starting from the workers who build these monumental buildings in the big cities of the Middle East, to the precarious workers who set up or manage the exhibitions in the big Western museums (Ross, 2015).

In the social sphere the impact consists in the generation of a cosmopolitan climate, but also touristification and gentrification. The Biennial, indeed, is a cyclical phenomenon that causes expectation in the local and global population, together with fear of excessive mass-tourism and gentrification. The intervention of Rural Studio, the only North American invited to the Biennale conducted by Aravena, should be classified in the social sphere, for having managed to create a setting that generates a return for the city and its inhabitants already starting from the design approach. Rural Studio is the branch of the University of Auburn, Alabama, where students have

the opportunity to design and build buildings and other facilities for the benefit of the local community (Freear et al. 2014). The director and professors of Rural Studio decided to apply their methodology at the 2016 Biennale, creating opportunities for local communities. After a few visits to the city, the American team decided to support two local projects: a cooperative that manages a shelter for homeless people and an organization that restores abandoned social housing. The two realities were proposed to provide a list of materials useful for the development of their projects. With these materials, still packaged, was assembled the Biennale's exhibition: mattress nets, cabinets, wooden wool panels. In this case it would even be improper to speak about recycling of materials, as the elements remained packed until they reached the site where they were used by the two local organizations, meaning the passage through the great event as a temporary configuration of these items.

Local people are furthermore attracted by job opportunities created within Biennale's event in the cultural, artistic, technical and architectural fields. Safety at work is very advanced, but working conditions require much more effort than standard jobs, requiring a lot of technical specialization and flexibility in working hours, contributing even more to the increase in the number of workers in precarious working conditions. In 2009, a strike by the Biennale workers was proclaimed, with the aim of regularizing temporary contracts and ensuring greater work continuity within the institution. Over the years, various proposals have been made by the management, starting from the experimentation of cultural mediators in charge of interfacing with the public, up to the workers defined as "active catalogues", the human incarnation of a multimedia info-point. A curious fact happened in 2006, when the French Pavilion hosted the Exyzt collective, which built an ephemeral architecture that spatially intersected the building, becoming for five months the temporary residence of the architects-artists. An action that challenged the regulations of the Biennale to the point of being considered an occupation, questioning not only the public-private relationship, but also interrupting the dualism of residence-work.

4.3   *Design, technological and historical heritage impacts on architecture*

Architectural heritage in Venice is being regenerated in order to house artworks and ephemeral architecture. The funds created for the Biennale, indeed, are partly invested to preserve, renew and adapt the existing building heritage, marked by the post-war decline years. But one question arises: can the "rush" to mount the exhibition be detrimental to the historical and architectural heritage? It is interesting to recall in this case the work that the artist Lorenzo Quinn had installed on the occasion of the 57th International Art Exhibition. At the vernissage of the exhibition, two large sculptures were placed in the Grand Canal, in front of the Rialto Market, representing two hands with forearms, emerging from the water to support one of the Venetian palaces. The work was called *Support*, conceived with the intention of declaring how much Venice needs a kind of Leviathan to save it from its ineluctable destiny of decadence. It was a work of great visual and media impact, which immediately acted as a bait to attract all the international attention to the city. Going deeper into the administrative process that led to the creation of this marvel, it is curious to see how it was a private initiative that went beyond the organization of Biennale, having instead obtained the patronage and support of the administration of the City of Venice. A work of great landscape and monumental impact, which probably concealed the risk of damaging the heritage that was ideally intended to protect.

In this context, it is the architectural design that justifies the presentation of the artwork. The vast majority of projects presented to the Biennial's organizing committee are approved, not without some modifications. However, it happens to some projects to be rejected and drastically reduced. This aspect brings back the utopian component of the process, leaving some projects on paper. In 2018 a group of architects invited to participate in the Biennale proposed the project for a temporary national pavilion, to be installed near the Giardini. The premise of the project was to question the concept of boundary, the border between city and nature, the meaning of national pavilion. The designers proposed a critical intervention, which consisted in extending a portion of a bank of the island, to be installed in the marshy seabed of the lagoon, christening the project *The Swamp Pavilion*. After a long phase of research on site and a series of design workshops, the

designers thought of a sort of temporary quay, supported by poles embedded in the seabed, which could be accessed through a system of stairs and ramps positioned at the edge of a public sidewalk. The project took into consideration the static nature of the city, creating an additional rigid platform, and the dynamism of the lagoon, proposing a series of quays and floating objects accessible to the public, thus becoming a real interface between the city and the lagoon. It was certainly a very ambitious project, and it was very fascinating. Having examined the feasibility with companies, engineering studies and meetings with individual local institutions, the project was presented at the conference of services in February of the same year. The reasons for the decision taken by the local authorities gathered for the occasion are still unknown, the fact is that the project was rejected, to the great disappointment of the designers, the curators, the commissioner and all collaborators. These and other reflections are reported in *The Swamp School Manual(s)* (Urbonas, 2018).

In Venice the new technological systems are superimposed on the existing ones to guarantee the security of the spaces open to the public. A substantial part of the interventions to bring historic buildings in line with regulations consists of the application of technological systems to adapt existing structures so that these can be opened to public in safe conditions, in accordance with current rules. These typologies of interventions are subject to review by the Superintendence of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape (SABAP) and other local authorities, but from the point of view of architectural heritage protection these enjoy special attention, since due to the contingent needs their impact on the set of protected buildings is greater than the installation of ephemeral architecture such as a temporary facility. Also, in landscape protection standards, installations enjoy a particular passe-partout regime that immediately draws attention when observing the position of installations within the fabric of the city, with solutions aesthetically more similar to those that would apply to an informal urban conformation in comparison with the standards of the contemporary city. When in 2019 the organizers of the Lithuanian Pavilion decided to set up their exhibition inside one of the historical storages of the military arsenal, the building, consisting of a single large volume interspersed with a mezzanine, had been renovated a few years ago and was apparently accessible. During an in-depth study, carried out with the help of the Institute of Maritime Military Studies and the Military Genius, it was discovered that the building, in order to accommodate a public made up of civilians, needed further adaptations of technological and structural nature. In particular, a ring fire-fighting system equipped with 4 hydrants was created, fire signs and powder extinguishers were positioned, the structure of the access staircase to the mezzanine, considered historical, and the parapet of the same were reinforced. Outside, remaining in the military area, the access path to the pavilion was rough and without an adequate system to overcome the architectural barriers. Therefore, a system of removable ramps built with recycled wood was installed to guarantee the complete accessibility of the area, and the paths for the public were delimited by barriers for security reasons in military areas. The operation involved a fairly complex bureaucratic process, since monumental and landscape authorizations and other minor administrative practices were required, but these were accepted willingly because the interventions were considered respectful of the peculiarity of the protected places and compatible with the conservation of the elements of environmental and landscape interest.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the course of this analysis numerous cases of interaction between ephemeral architecture and the historical-artistic heritage are reported, revealing curiosities, merits and defects in the installations over the last 15 years. The heterogeneity of the experiences reported is indicative of the complexity of a great secular artistic event such as the Venice Biennale. The proposal for a code of ethics to manage this multitude of events is very ambitious, and first of all must be acknowledged the great work done by local institutions and authorities, which every year succeed in managing the phenomenon well despite all the difficulties.

This brief backstage excursion behind the scenes of the artistic spectacle has revealed failures, closed pavilions and projects that have never seen the light of day, but also extraordinary projects

that can be identified as virtuous cases from which to draw inspiration in order to progress with the evolution of the great event, to reduce the environmental and social impact that this mechanism entails, in order to guarantee a general sustainability of the "Biennial phenomenon" that is up to the great quality of the works on display. So, trying to reorder the taxonomic categories that have guided this analysis, these could be organized differently, aiming at the following objectives:

- Define a working and technological economy connected with the cultural tourism that contributes to the development of the city, reorganizing the work within the exhibition boundaries so as to guarantee economic stability and work continuity for the operators, thus stimulating residency in a city that risks depopulation;

- Stimulate new management models for the social administration of the architectural heritage, for the benefit of citizens, making official the collaboration with associations and local groups, encouraging the development of projects in favor of the less well-off social strata;

- Promoting a culture of sustainable design for the benefit of architecture, considering materials as a precious resource, designing installations that do not produce waste and introducing regulations that encourage the use of renewable resources at the expense of means and behaviors harmful to the ecosystem.

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