

Venice Dies Whether It is not Seen Any More from Water

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1 Introduction

The closing speeches of the last session of the Conference dedicated to El Felze Association are now presented in the form of an interview to the President of the Association – Saverio Pastor – and to the artisan Alessandro Ervas. At the Conference Saverio presented the origin and activities of the Association and Alessandro reasoned on crafts and traditional knowledge from the perspective of the situation of the Arsenal in Venice.

This is not a formal arrangement: the interview took place shortly before the summer break, in July 2016, and has quickly developed into a comprehensive dialogue that has gone beyond the limits set out initially. Interested in not watering down the significance of a two-voices interview that has the care to conclude the volume, we did not focus on some further ideas: for example, in the interview there was a reference to the ‘historic’ debate on the ’70s and on the relationship (or lack of relationship) between the Venice of the artisans and the Porto Marghera of the metal and chemical workers, a theme that, during the interview, has involved Saverio and Lauso Zagato in an engaging discussion.

Obviously, the interview, even if innovative, complies with its ‘philological foundation’, which is constituted by the brief summary of Alessandro Ervas’ talk readable in the Papers Preview document.¹ This is one of the reasons why there is a certain disproportion in the length of the replies of

1 www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/centri/cestudir/documenti/pubblicazioni/CulturalHeritage-April2016.pdf (2017-12-15).

the two respondents; the other reason is due to Saverio's choice to leave ample space to Alessandro, simply jumping into the discussion from time to time with sharp references to (harsh) aspects of the ongoing reality. This spontaneously arisen game of roles has witnessed the complicity of the coeditors, in the hope to have contributed to the better understanding of the topics on CH under current investigation.

2 Artisan and Non-artisan Work: which Relation with Traditional Knowledge?

Saverio: The character of the artisan – a figure mystified and used in very different ways and fields – is a 'amoebic' figure, that is differently described in time, depending on how much and how it is used in a speech.

The rules on craftsmanship that qualify the figure of the artisan-entrepreneur put quantitative limits to the traditional artisan company. But are we dealing with real artisans? Just think to an industrial product made by 'a battalion of contractors'.

Alessandro: The craftsman has a conscience and knowledge of his craft, he holds a story, he comes from a millennial history, and has historical skills and competencies. The expertise comes from either the empirical experience or the very structure of the work, the craftsman starts from an idea, elaborates how to concretize it and then realizes it, working as a part of a chain. The artisan works with style, he has knowledge and understanding over the material, knows how a material behaves in a certain environment and in certain conditions...

The artisan is like a tree, if he does not 'move-act' this is not out of laziness or ignorance (accusations that are often pronounced by the so-called 'ruling class') but he doesn't move 'simply' because he is rooted in a territory, it is part of his constitutive nature to live and operate in a particular place, respecting also the time of that place. The real craftsmanship is the expression of the culture and technologies of a territory, and similarly to trees, the artisan lives if the soil is not contaminated, and if environmental conditions allow his life to express and grow. The craftsmanship must therefore be distinguished from the 'productive activities' that stem from concepts and structural characteristics that are completely different and distant.

If we take away from an artisan the story, traditional techniques cultivated for centuries, the contact with the land, the relationship with the client, the creativity and, not least, the 'business risk' inherent in his work, he becomes a simple 'labourer'. He becomes a 'professional figure' with no geographical significance, and without historical ties with the territory, a figure who can be moved anywhere in the world. This process could

legitimize the relocation and trigger mechanisms of impoverishment and destruction of competencies and skills, that is to *sterilize his being and his work*. Today, perhaps as never in history, to survive, the craftsman/artisan needs to preserve his cultural identity, and must look around with the awareness of how the craftsmanship is a 'fact of culture', turning to those 'cultural heritage's scenarios' that surround him.

Saverio (intervening): [...] in addition to the fact that the artisan has also to gain a minimum salary, he must 'bring home the bacon' to survive.

The definition of who is an artisan provided by Alessandro is very high and also selective. However it clashes with the definition given by the Chamber of Commerce that distinguishes the artisan-artist and artisan-craftsman. It is commendable the effort to provide a high-definition of artisan, close to the notion of medieval crafts: in those days, the craftsman was effectively an artist. On the other hand, in the news and advertising on TV, often the 'artisan person' is considered a rudimentary, scratching being (i.e. a commonly used expression is the "hand-crafted bomb", to indicate a bomb that is created by a 'non-professional person'). The fatigue of an artisan's work, understood as both physical and mental fatigue, but also as a daily effort to acquire the practical experience and the necessary knowledge, as mentioned by Alessandro, is not adequately considered and valued.

In the definition of who an artisan is, the aspects of costs and prices of the product should also be taken into account: the final price is defined by the cost of materials often not easy to find due to their quality, by the heavy start-up costs and the added asset of the artisan's experience is not adequately calculated and included.

One question may rise: who is an artisan more than another artisan? Should we graduate the professional expertise?

An example concerns the use of plywood in the gondola's construction, it shows that even among the artisans themselves different perspectives exist. On the one hand, some craftsmen are linked to the traditions and traditional practices that recall the dangers brought by innovations and connected to the lost of ancient knowledge; on the other hand, there exist artisans who believe in innovation and consider the other artisans' choices as anachronistic and dangerous for the development of the traditional knowledge and practices.

Alessandro: To remain on the issue of traditional knowledge, looking at the history of the traditional practice and expertise, the process of innovation has always been done by addition/accumulation. If you look at the history of technology in the applied arts, a generation never decided to cancel anything that previous generations created (Sennett clearly catches this point well). Today the reverse is occurring: those looking to maintain

a learning 'logic' by addition rather than replacement are tipped as 'mad'. The question is that often the focus is only on the outcome so, for example, if the goal is to get the iron for the gondola, that iron can be realized also by a 'control-set machine'. We must recognize the worth value of manual skills in order to avoid the risk of losing the 'additional logic'. The *ratio* behind the struggle to preserve the traditional techniques is not a dull attachment to the past, but a philosophical logic as well as a tangible and economic approach.

Saverio: Technologies are helpful, but experience and manual skills make the artisan as much competitive as those who use serial machines: as a consequence, the latter often have to fix a higher price for their goods than those decided by craftsmen using the traditional manual techniques.

3 Venice, Lagoon, Artisans: why Crafts in Venice are Different?

Alessandro: The specificity of Venice is due to many factors. First, the necessity to move from truck-based transportation to the boat-based system has discouraged several companies to settle their offices in the island's territory. The unique architecture of Venice requires various types of *maestranze*. Those *maestranze* existed until when commissions required them. Now, workers for *maestranze* arrive from all around the world without such expertise, an expertise that have dramatically been lost in the last 5/6 years. Venice went through an industrial revolution in which production companies developed also with an industrial character. The second industrial revolution, instead, didn't occur in the island; all manufacturers have turned to land and therefore craft activities have maintained and resisted up to 30/40 years ago. The Venetian craftsmanship, for example, was a construction industry based on quality building, it was a fine construction industry.

Saverio: Looking ahead, in order to safeguard the traditional Venetian knowledge, it would be necessary to take action. The first call is for the MIBACT and local institutions which are requested to start to play a different role. The establishment of a State school in which to cultivate certain skills is not enough if there is no guarantee on the generational change in the practice of traditional knowledge. The transfer of competencies and skills must be ensured. Then, local institutions should favour the demand for traditional know-how and goods produced by means of these traditional practices. Without a reasoned demand, the traditional knowledge can't be kept alive.

In addition, efforts should be directed towards the development of an 'experiential tourism' and not towards a mass-based tourism. The devel-

opment of a more sensible and sustainable tourism can make a decisive contribution to encourage investments for the reconstruction of Venetian traditional goods, such as the rebuilding of historic boats inspired by the existing models. If intelligently conducted, the rebuilding process may become for tourists a reason to visit and enjoy the construction yard and its work, to favour the recovery of the areas historically used in the construction of vessels, to reactivate a local wood-based industry production be it non-industrial and environmentally friendly, to favour satellite activities not monopolized by large financial groups and to create a solid number of jobs. This would help to escape from a blackmail fed up by a touristic industrialized offer, even threatening the environment, whose purpose remains the increase in revenue regardless of any other value. Still, the target should also be the encouragement of awareness and education among people and, more generally, the building of cooperation and alliances with all other subjects making and nourishing the water's civilization, starting from gondoliers and sailors...

4 El Felze, Community, Heritage Communities

Alessandro: El Felze is a 'mutual aid' community, created for mutual consolation with no political weight. For example, a law to protect Venice has been adopted to ban the use of coal and all open fires, including fires coming from the 'forge': if amounting to a certain size, the fires had to disappear. That law has thus *sterilized* a job; all the skills that old forgers could transmit have literally been 'burnt'. Who has acted *contra legem* has then preserved the knowledge, others have adapted their job to this new normative framework; in this way, in the iron-industry two generational rings have been lost. The job of a forger is gone, so the one has to turn to new craftsmanship competencies...towards the restoration or maintenance of metal, for example.

Saverio: The El Felze Association fails to be quite proactive and concrete. Many craftsmen don't think it is important to have apprentices; the model we propose is fascinating because it continues a story, but it doesn't seem to produce followers. El Felze came too late; many, too many masters have left the profession, often without followers since other working models seem to be more effective and more attractive: the refined handiness needs a lot of years of apprenticeship and this factor seems unacceptable to many young people. On the contrary, new technologies, and new materials, offer the mirage of a 'smart' good/product, and this can undoubtedly captivate more. The main problem is therefore: how to help the artisans in the preservation of traditional knowledge and how to involve institutions?

Alessandro: We need JUDICIOUS institutions. In addition there is an objective issue connected to the existing legislation. According to the legislation in force, some workspaces don't comply with environmental standards and this situation is not conducive to the training of new craftsmen and the transmission of knowledge. Moreover, the current legislation doesn't promise educational formulas that favour new learning and knowledge. A prime example of the interest (or even better of the lack of interest) of the politics towards these issues is the current status of the Opificio delle Pitture Dure in Florence where the historic laboratories survive with extreme difficulties and where there exists the lock of the personnel's recruitment in the public administration. So, the precious generational change and the exchange of experiences between elderly and young people – that is at the basis of any transmission of traditional knowledge and practices – don't occur, even *ope legis*. So a jewel of our culture is forced to languish, skills and competitiveness are lost, also due to the pure ignorance coming from the side of politicians and the legislative power. The legislation is extremely punitive: it imposes a series of obligations to the extent that, at the end, the game isn't worth the candle. Indeed, the law often requires that apprentices go through an impossible series of medical tests. And to adapt the places to the required environmental and health parameters requires great investments, investments that can't be managed.

Saverio: Therefore, education must also concern the legislator's duties. A legislation that hinders us exists; on the contrary, we should be helped to hire people without risking too much and being able to guarantee them a fair salary. But to get these conditions, we need to have work, and to have work we need to have the market's demands.

For example, the Regulatory framework on Procurement should enhance the positive features of craftsmen, providing these entrepreneurs a concrete chance to be part of the production cycle. The need to create a market therefore is strongly linked to the education of politicians and legislators, but this educational wave should also include the possible buyers who have to be sensitized and adequately informed.

The key aspect of this process is to guarantee the existence of a town community worthy of this name: the institutions must safeguard those workers who decide to stay in the island city and the persistence of the production's poles. The problem is that the market doesn't rule nor feeds itself spontaneously, contrary to what is generally believed...

5 The Participation of Communities, Heritage Community in the Public Action for the Safeguarding of Traditional Knowledge

Alessandro: The participation of heritage communities can be ensured even paying attention to public works, in the sense that they should be provided with room for the usage and practice of certain traditional knowledge. The techniques are languages, they are not fossils.

Public institutions can and must make specific choices. Artisans can't participate in tenders built at the downwards. There must be institutional interest and willingness to spend more for products made through certain types of knowledge and practices, because there is the political interest to an effective safeguarding of local cultural heritage.

Saverio: A concrete problem exists: how to actively involve the communities. Heritage communities are clearly identifiable as an entity, but they are 'ephemeral'. In addition, there is a consistency problem: at emotional level, we have always found supporters, coming from very different social sectors, but then when concrete actions are requested, the enthusiasm gives way to 'sloth/indolence'. The politicians go across roads at the horizon of which the craftsmanship is an insignificant detail; indeed also the citizen/buyer prefers to focus on the price's analysis than on savour and on the quality of the product to buy... Therefore artisans are now like whiteflies.

Alessandro: Communities are established at an ideal level but then, in the transition from the concept to concrete action, everything falls apart.

6 Arsenal As a Symbol of a Shameful Will towards a Cultural and Productive Sterilization?

Alessandro: The Arsenal has been a place where to work and where gather together. The Arsenal's destiny, as an issue, has been raised in a variety of ways. Over the years, also in a joined effort with other associations, a project that aimed to use its spaces to create a school of restoration was proposed. Italy lacks a centre of restoration of wet specimens, a benchmark for marine archeology as it is represented by the Opificio (Mill), like Venaria Reale. In Venice, specific centres on material of wetland archeology don't exist and it would be great to have one. There are places in the Arsenal that still maintain their constructive characteristic, which have a formal meaning: such as *la tesa alle nappe* and the *Fabbri*

workspace. These two places have held their own specific features and can be used without setting a huge project to support it.

Denying the evidence of the specificity of a place means to inhibit the potential contained in the same reason of its construction, to effectively subtract the place to a use consistent with its nature and to the values' preservation that the place itself embodies.

Therefore, it is not a fortuity if all projects aimed to reuse those areas and if the attention to the specificity of the place has been ignored or accused of being too complex to be realized or even boycotted: the truth is that a real scientific sterilization of places has been advanced. These places have been emptied of their machinery, floors and everything that characterized them from a point of view of industrial archeology, making them simple 'sale sites' defined by tables of costs so dear to the white cubes' lovers. A concrete proposal concerns the idea to make the Arsenal a tangible place for training, setting up real laboratories.

Just think to the value that could exist if a collaboration with the Biennale would be established.

Unfortunately, the institutions don't cooperate and don't take a stand, there is a mock concern from their side: the Arsenal Office of the Municipality of Venice, for example, has provided false information on the place. It asserted in writing that the Arsenal has been opened since the State property has been transferred to the Venice Municipality. On the contrary, it is the Military Navy that has managed the Arsenal, opening its doors to thousands of people and to the Venetian schools' students. This has been possible because of the collaboration with associations such as The Archeoclub, Venice office and the El Felze Association, as well as the Touring Club that in the Arsenal has organized events for thousands of visitors, starting from the celebrations for the 900th anniversary of Arsenal's foundation. There has been some edition of *Mare Maggio* and other initiatives organized by other Venetian associations... Therefore we have to say that the more readiness has come from the Military Navy.

Still, in the website of the company Arsenale spa (now in liquidation) and connected to the website of the Arsenale Office of the Venice Municipality, the only description of the Arsenal is nothing but a table with the indication of available surfaces (covered and uncovered areas) described by the respective volumes in cubic meters. This is nothing more than the formula used for selling industrial hangar anywhere in the world. Moreover, the Arsenale Office has drawn up a reuse plan of the places which further penalizes their specificity, to the point to eliminate the unique characteristics of these buildings.

Saverio: While the city government and Arsenal spa seem to plan questionable projects, several associations and citizens' movements came together forming a Forum (The Forum Future Arsenal) with the aim of bringing out

the true interests of the citizens towards this crucial example of cultural and monumental heritage.

Alessandro: The ongoing sterilization process is based on the falsehood, hypocrisy, silence and indifference. At least ten years of initiatives to keep the Arsenal accessible, some of which even agreed and often implemented by the municipality offices (the 'Educational Itineraries' for example), have been deliberately ignored. All the positive examples and the experience gained by those who, often voluntarily, committed for the public use/re-use of the Arsenal have been wiped out by a *scientific desire to annihilate the memory*. The reuse and reopening of the *forge* that are located at the 'Stradal Campagna' - in which I have been personally involved with the Archeoclub and the Educational Office of the Municipality - were never mentioned nor considered as a prior example of a suitable reuse of places. On the contrary, new ostentatious initiatives have been put forward. This is the key-track towards sterilization. By erasing the connotation of the places, their soul is taken away such as Biennale hosting the wines' exhibition or the jeans fashion show. They make the memories disappear and eventually the same place disappears. There are fake projects in Venice and also mock care. For example, in the projects produced by the Iuav's students, in collaboration with professors and other experts, there was no mention of the old electric Argano of 1917 which exists also at the *tesa alle biciclette*: at first sight, it appears as a little metal box, very well preserved inside, but that has been totally forgotten. If subjects such as the University and the City's Council promote projects for the restoration-repair of the area without taking account of the characterization and specificity of those places, and without involving the associations that for years have been committed to their utmost to ensure their reuse, it means that the projects haven't been seriously conceived to effectively save and safeguarding the place.

Saverio: Regarding the Arsenal, too much space has been given to the Biennale. In some respect, this allowed us to save some artefacts, but the cry of alarm launched here is important because it puts the *historical memory* at the centre of any reasoning, elevating it above other thoughts on the role of culture and art.

Historical memory is the most important value that a heritage community holds: in a city like Venice, if we don't remember our roots, if we don't remember of being born out of water, with the water and for the water, we lose all our specificities and we might abandon Venice as well.

