

Longevity and reinvention: Venetianization and the Biennale

John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold

‘There were so many Venetian festivals that, in the end, one day was chosen to commemorate several different celebrations. It had become in essence a ritual city. That is why certain pathways were chosen. Churches were sited at focal points, where theatre and piety converged. Public spaces became ceremonial axes, part of the vast geometry of the sacred city. It was a society of the spectacle. Land and water were conjoined...’

PETER ACKROYD (2010, 81)

Introduction

Had it not been for the COVID-19 pandemic, Thursday 25 March 2021 would have been a day of memorable festivity in Venice. According to the *Chronicon Altinate*, a thirteenth-century compilation of urban myths and realities, the city was founded at noon on 25 March 421 with the dedication of its first church, San Giacomo di Rialto (Ammerman et al, 2017, 1625). The advent of the city’s 1600th anniversary had therefore encouraged local, national and international bodies to collaborate in arranging a celebratory programme to recognise this remarkable longevity. At the outset the programme contained 235 events ranging from talks and exhibitions to waterborne processions and treasure hunts in the Basilica but, in the circumstances, changes had to be made. In particular, the opening celebrations were scaled down to anticlimactic levels, with lockdown provisions and travel restrictions in the face of a third wave of coronavirus infections meaning empty streets and concerts attended by small, socially distanced audiences.

There was nothing new, of course, in Venetians choosing to stage festivals to celebrate landmarks in the city’s history or in using it as a backdrop for those festivities. Venice was ever the Ur-city of festivals. Each phase of its development from a small settlement built on 118 islands off Italy’s northern Adriatic coast to a Mediterranean maritime power had been observed by initiating festivals. Many would stand the test of time. The Candlemastide Festa delle Marie, for example, originated in the late tenth century; the Festa della Sensa, commemorating the city’s symbolic ‘marriage’ to the sea, emerged around the year 1000 (Korsch, 2013); and Carnival, in its earliest forms, was already celebrated by the mid-eleventh century (Gold and Gold, 2020, 41). In due course, these and other popular festivals were conjoined into a formidable annual schedule that was organised, *inter alia*, around saints’ name days, plentiful local feasts, increasingly extended Carnival celebrations, special events recording civic allegiances and military victories, and thanksgivings to mark deliverance from plague and pestilence. To these would be added La Biennale di Venezia – the Venice Biennale – in the late nineteenth century; the gathering commonly regarded as the world’s greatest art show.

This chapter, which is set against this longstanding tradition, explores the development and urban implications of the Biennale. It contains five main parts. After considering the events and circumstances that led to the Biennale’s foundation in 1895, the ensuing section examines the politically inspired festivalization that characterised the 1930s, its growth after 1945 and its increasing ‘Venetianization’ – the term used by Clarissa Ricci (2010, 105) to describe the festival’s tendency to spread spatially from its original hub in the

Giardini into locations scattered throughout the rest of the city. The final parts look at current issues, including the problems facing the city's historic core and the rising disquiet of citizens feeling themselves overwhelmed by the impact of mass cultural tourism on the city's everyday life. It is noted that the hiatus in activity caused by the response to COVID-19 has fed calls for rethinking Venice's relationship with art, tourism, and urban development. The desire for a 'new normal' that is expressed in some quarters, juxtaposed with the views of those who wish to restore the *status quo ante*, provides an important dynamic for future discourse and practice.

Origins

The notion that Venice should stage a regular arts exhibition had various nineteenth-century antecedents (Holt, 1983; Fyfe, 1984; Ward, 1996). These included the salons convened by national academies of fine art, the exhibitions routinely added as visitor attractions to the Expositions Universelles and, more specifically, a series of exhibitions hosted by Italian cities from 1858 onwards as part of a carefully orchestrated strategy of political unification and state formation. Cities with a modern industrial base held national exhibitions (Esposizioni Nazionali) that covered agriculture, industry, and the fine arts. By contrast cities like Venice, which lacked such sectors, proffered smaller and more specialised exhibitions. For its part, Venice had staged an Esposizione Artistica Nazionale in 1887. Opened by King Umberto I on 2 May 1887, this immediate predecessor of the Biennale displayed around 1800 pictures and 170 sculptures. Significantly for future developments, it was held in an elongated temporary structure in the Giardini, the parkland peripherally located on the eastern tip of the main island (Bowness, 1995; May, 2009).

The Esposizione proved a popular success, drawing 100,000 visitors and attracting strong representation from Venetian artists. Admittedly it incurred heavy financial losses and showed the need for improved display and marketing strategies, but it demonstrated the virtues of mounting a regular and prestigious art exhibition. *Inter alia*, such an event could radically enhance the city's position in the art market, create opportunities for local artists to sell their work to an international clientele, and attract wealthy and high-spending visitors to supplement Venice's already substantial presence in the world of tourism (Davis and Marvin, 2004).

The ensuing Biennale embraced the key points from this experience. It was first proposed at a meeting of civic dignitaries at the Caffè Florian on St Mark's Square in April 1893 (May, 2009). Although they first contemplated staging a more limited Biennial Exhibition of Italian Art (Esposizione Biennale Artistica Nazionale), the final decision was in favour of a more ambitious International Art Exhibition of the City of Venice (Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia). It was in this form that the event opened in the Giardini on 30 April 1895. By the time that it closed on 22 October 1895, it had attracted 224,327 visitors. In contrast to its 1887 precursor, it recorded an overall profit, with sales of more than a third of the art works on display. The pattern was now set. By the time that war broke out in September 1914 there had been eleven Biennales, firmly launching Venice as a centre for the international art market venue and attracting more than 400,000 visitors in both 1909 and 1912.

Display space was at a premium. Quickly outgrowing the facilities provided for the 1887 exposition, additional space was found, first, by substantially extending the central pavilion (Martini, 2010, 69-70) and, later, by copying the policy pioneered by the Expositions

Universelles, whereby nation states provided their own pavilions. This innovation simultaneously achieved two goals: it pragmatically delegated the handling and expense of exhibiting foreign art to national commissioners who worked independently of the Biennale's committees (Alloway, 1969, 112); and it freed up space in the central pavilion for Italian artists. Seven national pavilions had appeared by 1914 and, by the mid-1920s, this had become the standard method for displaying exhibits (Figure 1). From the outset, too, the new festival's impact on the wider city went beyond the indirect changes brought about by increases in tourist numbers. For example, further attractions such as exhibitions of Murano glass were presented during festival time and a new Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna was introduced to house a permanent collection – a feature deemed essential if the city was to be taken seriously as a centre for contemporary art.

FIGURE 1 about here

Politicization and festivalization

The Biennale changed radically after Mussolini's ascent to power in October 1922. The Partito Nazionale Fascista (National Fascist Party) quickly recognised the potential that art, culture, and tourism afforded as media for reinforcing the Party's cultural hegemony, for fostering a new relationship with the Italian people, and for representing Italy to the world. Festivals were now formally reorganised on a quadripartite hierarchical basis. The Venice Biennale of International Art was at the apex of the new structure, with Rome's National Art Quadrennial as the next level down, then four-yearly interprovincial exhibitions, and finally annual provincial festivals as its bottom tier. For its part, Venice benefitted greatly from having Italy's only designated international arts festival, since it was protected from the ambitions of rival cities that might want to develop something similar (May, 2009, 21). In due course, too, management of the Biennale was prised away from the control of the Venetian authorities, with a directly funded body headed by a government appointee, Count Giuseppe Volpi, set up to manage it in early 1930.

These political changes affected the Biennale's contents, albeit mostly indirectly. In the first place, while not facing the proscriptions of modern art that operated in Germany's Third Reich, artists laboured under new regulations concerning their eligibility to submit work. Secondly, the introduction of prizes for contributions that celebrated Fascist ideology clearly impacted on the subjects chosen by artists, just as the dominant role exercised by state agencies when purchasing artwork impacted on the type of art supported and made available for display. Thirdly, the ruling regime's wish to display decorative as well as fine arts in the Biennale would not only change the balance of exhibited materials, it also added to the demands for space, which was already under pressure given the increasing numbers of nations wanting their own pavilions. The immediate solution was to expand the showground on to the island of Sant'Elena, with improved access achieved by providing a new road to link the lagoon side of the Giardini to the historic city. Finally, the regime wished to diversify the Biennale's scope by adding new art forms that covered a wider span of media. After 1930, the creation of ancillary festivals covering film, theatre and music broadened the scope of the Biennale as well as supplying after-hours evening entertainment for its visitors.

These new events took the Biennale to new districts of the city with, for example, the Film Festival establishing its base on the Lido – the leisure resort island in the lagoon. They also boosted visitor numbers in years when the Art Biennale was not taking place, although attendances at all events dropped markedly given the deteriorating political situation of the

late-1930s. The Art Biennales' visitor numbers, which had risen steadily from 172,841 in 1928 to 361,917 in 1934, declined sharply in 1936 due to boycotts imposed as a response to the 1935 Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). The Film Festivals also experienced decreasing participation as various national delegations, production companies and foreign journalists stayed away in the late 1930s due to accusations of political bias in the awarding of prizes.

After 1945, efforts were quickly made to re-establish the Biennale and shake off any associations with its Fascist past, but reinstatement could not be immediate. Apart from the harbour area, Venice had escaped major wartime damage, but the physical decay and non-availability of some of the venues posed problems. During the war, for example, the Giardini had been the centre of the Italian film industry when the Società Italiana Cines and Istituto Nazionale Luce were moved there from Rome. When film production began in February 1944, the pavilions were used as film sets, film processing laboratories and dubbing studios (Di Martino, 2005, 36). Although the film industry had vacated the site by 1946, many of the pavilions needed repair, which their owners were often unwilling to do given the prevailing austerity.

The Film Festival was the first to recommence in August 1946, making use of the Cinema Teatro San Marco and the courtyard of the Doge's Palace in the historic city because the Lido's Palazzo del Cinema and Casino remained occupied by the American forces. The festival only returned to the Lido in 1949. The Art Biennale returned in 1948. While it attracted 216,471 visitors – a number unsurpassed in the postwar period until 1972 – just fifteen nations attended. In these circumstances, empty pavilions were commandeered when necessary. Hungary, for instance, used the Romanian pavilion rather than repair its own (Bódi, 2019, 277). Other pavilions staged specialist exhibitions. The Yugoslav pavilion offered a retrospective for the Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka, the German pavilion showed work by Impressionists, and the Greek pavilion displayed 136 items from Peggy Guggenheim's collection of contemporary art. Significantly, the Italian pavilion showed works by German artists banned as 'degenerate' in the 1930s along with a retrospective of nineteen canvases by Picasso; his first return to a Biennale since his work had been removed before the opening day in 1910.

Venetianization

The numbers of participating nations, artists and visitors steadily grew during the early postwar years. The Summer of 1968, however, acted as a watershed with student groups leading protests about the anachronistic structure of the Biennale organisation (unchanged since the 1930s) and the commercialism of an art exhibition that profited from selling the art that it displayed. Resulting reforms started to address the content and organisation of the exhibition, especially with an eye to the competition arising from newly created rival international art exhibitions (Gold and Gold, 2020, 92-3, 103). However, the two developments that impacted most on Venice itself were, first, the establishment of the Architectural Biennale with its pioneering role in regenerating the Arsenale dockyards and, secondly, finding premises for temporary national pavilions and so-called 'collateral events' (see below) in other parts of the city in order to alleviate the pressure on space in the established showgrounds.

Arsenale

Traditionally, the Venice Biennale lacked a distinct architectural dimension, although the work of architects had occasionally featured. In 1972, for example, the 'Four Projects for Venice' exhibits featured unrealised buildings for the city designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn and Isamu Noguchi. In 1974, the newly appointed Biennale President Carlo Ripa di Meana built on this underlying interest by inviting the architect Vittorio Gregotti to become the first director of Art and Architecture. While Ripa di Meana envisaged this as simply extending the existing Biennale, Gregotti recognised the difficulty of incorporating architecture into the Biennale's existing structure, especially due to its extensive requirements for space. He organised small exhibitions in 1975, 1976 and 1978, but these were spatially detached from the rest of the Biennale, using the former salt warehouse (Magazzini del Sale) in the Zattere district. Yet quite apart from the need to find space, this symbolic detachment addressed two distinct goals: first, to meet a commitment to take the Biennale to the people in the wake of the 1968 protests and, secondly, to show that the architectural component would eventually support a distinctive and separate event (Gregotti, 2010, 22-3).

The latter took two further decades to be fully realised, but 1980 saw the creation of a separate architecture department, headed by Paolo Portoghesi, who curated what was later regarded as the first Architecture Biennale. Its theme was 'The Presence of the Past' (Portoghesi et al, 1980). This explored the recent trajectory of architectural practice, with its most notable feature being a faux street, the Strada Novissima, in which twenty invited architects each produced a building façade or a 'self-portrait' of their distinctive architectural styles. These measured up to three storeys high, behind which was an exhibition of that architect's work (Portoghesi, 2010, 39). Needing a building with generous dimensions to house this installation and given that Giardini was already fully occupied by the Art Biennale, Portoghesi turned to the Arsenale.

Conveniently located within walking distance of the Giardini, the Arsenale was once Venice's largest industrial space. Occupying 48 hectares and comprising almost seventeen per cent of the city's land area, the Arsenale was historically the heart of Venice's naval and mercantile power. In the fourteenth century, its shipyards were the wonder of Europe with capacity to construct 60 galleys simultaneously (Menichelli, 2014, 29). Over the centuries, it had been expanded and modernized, culminating in the production of submarines during the Second World War with total employment of around 5000 workers (ibid, 33). Thereafter decline was rapid. Public sector work ceased in 1957 when the strategic naval command role was transferred to Ancona (Pazeri, 2009, 56) and although some naval activity and private sector businesses continued, many of the older buildings fell into disrepair. Yet the general state of dilapidation also presented an unprecedented opportunity. The growing appreciation of the potential of redundant industrial facilities for urban regeneration would clearly earmark the Arsenale as a possible candidate for redevelopment despite the problems of the expenditure needed for a site of this scale, the difficulties of split ownership and multiple agencies, and heritage considerations (given that demolition was not an option).

The ideal space within the Arsenale for the Strada Novissima was the Corderie (the ropeworks). The authorities were initially hesitant about granting permission to use these spaces, since they were still 'full of tanks and armaments' (Portoghesi, 2010, 36). Persistence, however, paid off and led to a groundbreaking exhibition that attracted 40,000 visitors and captivated the design world by promoting a nascent postmodernism. In strategic terms, however, moving to the Arsenale transcended just being a pragmatic solution. Rather the Architectural Biennale was likened to a 'Trojan horse', giving Venetians access to a part

of the city from which they had previously been excluded (Portoghesi et al, 1980, 13) and shifting the centre of gravity of the Biennale closer to the heart of the city. Ricci (2010, 105) heralded this locational shift as initiating the ‘Venetianization’ of the Biennale, ending the Biennale’s detachment from the rest of Venice in the Giardini (Ricci, 2010, 105).

Despite the 1980 exhibition’s success, the Arsenale spaces remained unsuitable for regular public use for some time. Renovation only started in earnest in 1983, with work to stabilise and restore the Corderie. The Art Biennale used the buildings in 1986, 1988 and 1990 for the Aperto, an exhibition of work by young artists, with the Architectural Biennale using the Arsenale regularly from 1991 onwards. In 1998, by which time the Arsenale’s regeneration had gathered pace, a new law codified the formal relationship between the Arsenale and the Biennale. The Biennale was transformed into a Culture Company from an autonomous body and the southern half of the Arsenale was transferred to the Biennale, with access to funding that allowed it to become directly involved in restoration work. In 1999 it instigated major renovations of buildings shown in Figures 2 and 3, respectively, the Artiglierie (gunneries) and the Gaggiandre (wet docks). This was followed by creation of two performance spaces in the old navy cinema (the Piccolo Arsenale) and the Teatro alle Tese in 2000 (di Martino 2005, 100). Between 2012-2019, more substantive restoration works took place on the Sale d’Armi (armaments) complex to create flexible exhibition and performance spaces. This now allows five of the Biennale festivals – Art, Architecture, Theatre, Dance and Music – to use the Arsenale.

FIGURES 2 and 3 about here

National pavilions

Although offering a recipe for encouraging international participation while keeping the cost of staging the festival at a minimum, recourse to national pavilions has critics who maintain that the buildings symbolise imperialism, support an anachronistic approach to art in a more integrated world, and proffer a model that favours certain nations over others. Despite this, national pavilions remain a popular medium for display, with persistent demand for pavilions from new states that seek to showcase their art in this way. The fact that only Venice among art festivals now retains this exhibitionary form has become part of its unique attraction in providing a distinctive national showcase for countries wanting to promote their artists and art credentials. Nine national pavilions were added to the Giardini between 1952 to 1964, with Australia building a temporary pavilion in 1988 (replaced by a grander structure in 2015) and Korea in 1995 (Catenacci, 2010, 88).

By the 1990s the Giardini was deemed full, with the issuing of protection orders on twelve of its older structures in 1998 ensuring that there was even less room for manoeuvre. In short, there is now virtually no possibility of demolishing, radically changing or altering the layout and structure of the Giardini in any major way (Martini, 2010, 73). While extra space for national contributions was eventually made available in the Arsenale, continuing requests from nations to participate in the Biennales has led to the relaxation of the geographical strictures on the festival by allowing nations to establish pavilions beyond the confines of the existing showgrounds. In the process, the festival would become a truly citywide event rather than being confined to a marginal location. Under the 1998 institutional reforms, therefore, nations were formally permitted to set up pavilions in the wider city. The Art Biennale in 2019, for instance, saw 36 countries have national pavilions

in the city along with a further 21 collateral events. This is in addition to the 30 national pavilions represented in the Giardini and 25 in the Arsenale.

The contemporary festival

As currently constituted, the Art and Architectural Biennales each have three main elements. The first are the curated international exhibitions, for which guest curators are appointed and given responsibility for devising a theme that might lend coherence to the exhibition and engage with cutting edge contemporary artistic themes. Artists are then invited to contribute to the exhibitions, which are staged in the Giardini's Central Pavilion and the Corderie and Artiglierie in the Arsenale. The second element comprises the pavilions run by nation states, which as noted above, commission work and then fund and administer their own spaces. The third element consists of collateral events put forward by not-for-profit international bodies and institutions, individual artists or groups of artists, as well as territories that are not recognised as independent states. In recent years, for example, these have included projects from Catalonia, Hong Kong, Macau, Scotland, Wales, Newfoundland, and Labrador. In 2003 pressure from the People's Republic of China forced Taiwan's exhibition to be permanently reclassified as a collateral event (Wei, 2013, 480). Once accepted and an admission registration fee is paid, the collateral event appears in the Biennale brochure, catalogue and promotional literature and may use the Biennale logo (FBV, 2019, 8). It is then the responsibility of the project to find appropriate accommodation. The distinctive geography of each Biennale is thus shaped by the national pavilions and collateral events that spread themselves throughout the city, using the historic centre, islands and occasionally beyond. Finally, as with other major festivals, a sizeable 'fringe' of unofficial exhibitions and events appear annually in the city, trading ambiguously on the image of the Biennale although not actually part of the festival.

In this process of Venetianization, the Biennale has occasionally spilled over from the islands on to the mainland. In 2008, for instance, the Biennale moved its historical archive to Port Marghera. This was done as part of a broader trade-off of interests. For the city, the archive's removal to the VEGA (the Venice Gateway for Science and Technology) Science Park provided support for an ongoing regeneration project designed to arrest the industrial decline of the waterfront area (Il Quotidiano Immobiliare, 2014). For the Biennale, the move allowed its archival holdings to be brought together for the first time in custom-built premises. Previously housed in scattered locations in the city and not always in ideal conditions, the move to the VEGA was able to accommodate historic documents, Biennale records, the film library, music collection, media library, and poster collection along with research facilities and a conservation workshop.

At the start of 2020, the future for the Biennale seemed assured. The finances of the Biennale were stable, its international scope had expanded, the Architecture Biennale had developed into the premier global architecture exhibition, the Arsenale's buildings were transformed, the exhibition had spread into the city, visitor numbers had risen, and the Biennale's outreach to schools, colleges and community groups had greatly improved. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, quickly challenged the unalloyed positivity of this assessment. Although the shorter Biennales held primarily in the Autumn went ahead with appropriate safeguards, the other festivals were curtailed. Venice was one of the first European cities to enforce restrictions when case numbers in the north of Italy rose dramatically in February 2020. This immediately impacted on the timetable of the Carnival and the Architectural Biennale. The former was ended two days early on 23 February. The

latter, due to open on 23 May was initially retimetabled to 29 August and then, when that was not feasible, postponed again to May 2021.

As elsewhere in the world the changes wrought by COVID-19 on everyday life led to discussions on how the pandemic might affect society in the medium and longer terms, especially regarding broader issues of urban form, work-life balance and environmental sustainability. For the *centro storico* (historic centre of Venice), the challenge brought by the pandemic reinforced existing debates about housing, population change, the dominance of tourism in the economy, the environment, and conservation of the built heritage. These had been building in intensity since the Millennium, but there was now an added urgency to debate about how the future should look; a future in which the Biennale was also part of the discussion.

To elaborate, this particularly involved the relationship between tourism and the *centro storico*. Venice was already beset by a complex skein of economic, social and environmental problems, which revolved around the interlinked issues of population numbers, housing, the economy, regular flooding and the growth of tourism (Nolan and Séraphin, 2004; Séraphin et al 2018; Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019). Certainly, the decline and aging of the population in the historic core of the city had been a concern since the 1950s. Caused by overcrowding, the poor condition of the buildings, and the attraction of new housing developments on the mainland, the phenomenon was accelerated by the severe floods of 1966 (Città di Venezia, 2017, 22). Over the past thirty years this has been exacerbated by the growth of tourism. Fuelled by cheap air fares and the growth of new tourist flows (particularly from South-east Asia), this ‘overtourism’ or mass cultural tourism was greater than the facilities and amenities of the city could support. The carrying capacity of the historic city is calculated at 52,000 tourist presences a day while an estimated 77,000 were recorded in 2018 (Smith and Da Mosto, 2020, 11). Apart from the pressure this puts on the pedestrian pathways and open spaces particularly in the ‘Bermuda Shorts triangle’ – the area between the Rialto Bridge, St Marks’s Square and the Galleria dell’Academia (Davis and Marvin, 2004, 79) – it also overloads the water transport system creating difficulties for residents and workers to get around the city. Moreover, cheap cafes, restaurants, and souvenir shops have replaced the convenience stores and services that typically served the resident population. Changes to the housing regulations in 1998 and 2002 encouraged landlords to move away from residential leases in favour of short-term tourist lets, exhibition spaces and, since 2008, Airbnb. It is calculated that by 2019 there were more tourist beds available for rent in the historic city than residents’ beds (Smith and Da Mosto, 2020, 13).

Against this background, the triangular relationship between the city, the Biennale and tourism is clearly of considerable importance. As a festival that now lasts roughly six months (May-November), the Biennale spans the city’s peak tourist season and, although a source of visitor numbers in its own right, is also well positioned to help to ameliorate some of the pressures of overconcentration. In its early days, the Biennale had an important role in promoting tourism but, given that tourism has now reached problematic proportions, current debate now revolves around how the Biennale could play a more constructive role in helping to alleviate rather than exacerbate the difficulties which the historic city is experiencing. To do so requires encouragement of the positive aspects of the Biennale while mitigating the negative.

The positive aspects of the Biennale are usually framed in terms of the economic and regenerative role that the festival plays. When discussing the current tourism crisis, the

characteristic types of tourists visiting the Biennale are often contrasted favourably with those stereotypically supposed to flood the *centro storico*. Often depicted as the ‘wrong type’ of tourist or ‘hit and run day trippers’ (Smith and Da Mosto, 2019, 7), their sundry misdemeanours are said to include not being interested in culture and lacking appreciation or respect for the city and its heritage (Giuffrida, 2021). By contrast, those attending the Biennale are seen as wealthier, as spending money on accommodation and hospitality in the historic city and as engaging with Venice’s artistic heritage. The Biennale readily chimes with the goals of Venice’s campaign for responsible tourism. This sets out a code of behaviour for visitors and seeks to encourage them both to visit less well-known districts of the city and to consider arriving at quieter times of the year (Città di Venezia, 2021). Biennale visitors heading for the Giardini and Arsenale or hunting for the pavilions and collateral events spread around the city fulfil this agenda and, given the length of the Biennale, they also visit in the spring and autumn. The ‘Detourism’ campaign run by the City of Venice, which lists its goals as promoting:

slow and sustainable tourism, encouraging travellers to go beyond the usual tourist sights, stumble upon unique experiences and see Venice with new eyes (Città di Venezia, 2021)

specifically identifies the Biennale as a focus for responsible tourism. It is an example of what Venice’s tourism minister Simone Venturini terms ‘quality tourism’, with the recommendation that Venice needs to ‘promote international events and exhibitions and to attract visitors who want to stay for more than a quick visit’ (Ghiglione, 2021).

A further positive feature of the Biennale stems from the fact that it is large enough to make a significant contribution to the local exchequer, with a discernible impact on employment patterns in the city. While the numbers employed in full time positions by the Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia varies throughout the year from around 50 to 200, there is also a small army of temporary and part time staff whose livelihoods depend on the various Biennale Festivals. *Inter alia*, this ranges from curators, designers and researchers to the service roles of room attendants, caretakers, catering staff, retail, teachers and exhibition guides. The Venetianisation of the Biennale has made opportunities available for consultancies, events companies, and freelancers who, collectively, work to support nations and artists looking to locate outside the Giardini and Arsenale, helping them to navigate the rules and regulations involved in planning, setting up and staging exhibitions. It was estimated in 2013 that the value of contracts to Venetian businesses was around €25 million (AN, 2013).

The final positive aspects linked to the Biennale stems from its links with urban renewal. As noted, it has played a major role in regenerating the Arsenale and creating access to a part of the city that previously lay behind closed doors. More incrementally perhaps, landlords have been able to rent property for exhibition spaces supported by the noticeboard system of listings run by the Biennale. The income generated by these lets has been a major source of funds for maintaining and renovating buildings in the historic city that are costly to maintain due to their age, proximity to saltwater and propensity to flood periodically. In these sundry ways, the Biennale can be conceived as an event that has fitted into the historic fabric of the city and uses existing infrastructure sustainably.

Nevertheless, while the Biennale seems to constitute be a perfect fit for the city, more radical voices challenge the real extent of the festival’s impact on the city, indeed identifying

an ‘increasing awareness of the disconnect between the Biennale and Venice’ (Smith and Da Mosto, 2019, 3) that runs counter to the Venetianization narrative. These arguments are bound up with the relentless growth in the size and geographical spread of the Art and Architecture Biennales under the long-term reign of the Biennale’s President, Paolo Baratta (2008-20). This, for example, has a notable effect on the property market, in which the Biennales are seen, first, as encouraging landlords to take premises out of the permanent residential sector in favour of short lets or, secondly, renting out space for exhibition purposes.

The former relates to the demand for short-let accommodation from the cadre of ‘creatives’ associated with the preparation, running and dismantling of the pavilions and exhibitions of the Biennale and fringe events, not to mention the dealers, agents and collectors who attend the Biennale preview. Landlords can gain greater returns from these weekly and monthly lets than from leasing residential properties to permanent residents. Pre-COVID-19, at least, the demand generated by the Biennale had helped fuel rent rises in the historic core and had boosted property prices by attracting the interest of foreign buyers (Roberts, 2019).

The latter relates to the opportunities afforded to landlords to rent sites for national pavilions and collateral events. Doing so takes properties out of alternative long term uses, not only as residential accommodation but also for equally needed spaces for local businesses such as retail services for local residents or workshops for services and craftspeople (Smith and Da Mosto, 2019, 8). In 2017, Scheppe (2018, 25) calculated that 472,867 square metres of exhibition space were listed on the Biennale website as available for rental in the city outside the Giardini and Arsenale, at prices that far outweigh rents possible from local businesses.

While widely earning credit for reinvigorating part of the city and for providing public access, the Biennale’s pivotal role in the regeneration of the Arsenale is also not without criticism. For all that is said about increasing access, the Biennale effectively takes over these spaces for around two-thirds of the year effectively removing them from the public realm. There is also frustration with the slow pace of regeneration and lack of strategic vision for the whole complex, with an influential local pressure group (FFA, 2016, 2) maintaining that:

this area [is] possibly the last chance to forge a healthy future for Venice as a city. So far, isolated from the negative effects of mass tourism that are manifest throughout the rest of Venice, the Arsenale is a large enough area to significantly influence the socioeconomic development of the city and yet sufficiently self-contained to be administered with a unified and integrated vision.

It is argued, for instance, that the Arsenale’s renewal fails to engage with residents in the sense of providing leisure spaces that could improve quality of life. In addition, despite the Biennale clearly being a major player in the city’s creative economy, critics maintain that more could be done to foster employment. This might be supplying much needed studio space for artists, musicians, dancers, and theatre groups or initiating projects that would boost jobs in the non-tourist economy which would resonate with Venice’s traditional industries and craft skills (FFA 2016, 5-18).

Conclusion

The disruption wreaked by Covid-19 on the festival and cultural calendar has led to much soul-searching globally over ways of delivering the arts to local and international audiences. For the historic centre of Venice where the art and cultural sector is faced with the demands of tourism, questions of sustainability, and conservation of the built heritage, the events of 2020 seemed an historic opportunity for reflection and action to bring about a change of direction. Commentators sensed the possibility of a ‘new normal’, with words such as resetting, rebooting, rethinking, or reimagining being mobilized in support of a more sustainable future for the city of Venice (Allnut 2021, 6; see also Armstrong, 2021 and Momigliano, 2020).

The postponement of the Architecture Biennale to 2021 primarily meant presenting exhibits that had already been prepared, although adjustments were necessary to navigate COVID-19 restrictions on travel to Italy, shipping problems, and funding issues (Karanja and Mutegi, 2021). While some pavilions provided digital content in parallel with the physical exhibition, most did not. Some critics bemoaned the failure to respond to a changing world in which architectural practices had been forced to find new and innovative ways of working, where attitudes to urban life were in flux, and where environmental attitudes were changing (Walsh, 2021, Zancan, 2021). The lack of engagement with residents and local businesses at a time when the collapse of travel had removed international tourists was seen as a wasted opportunity (Smith, 2021). However, there was a strong presumption that 2021 marked the end of an era and that change was inevitable.

This was certainly the case in terms of the management of the Biennale. Its newly appointed president, Roberto Cicutto had stated the Biennale should seek a more central role in the city’s economy and promote greater collaboration with Venice’s arts institutions and universities. Nevertheless, such goals are not always easy to achieve. One of the first projects under Cicutto’s regime, for example, will be to move the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts (ASAC) from Porto Marghera on the mainland to the Arsenale, to create a research hub, with a conservation centre, professional residencies, conference and exhibition spaces. This is designed to attract ‘students, talent and investment to the city, repopulating the historic centre and diversifying its economy’ (Imam, 2021, 12). Together these facilities would ‘push’ the Biennale’s activity ‘beyond the shows of the festival’ bringing people to Venice 365 days of the year to teach, learn and research’ (Spense, 2021, 4). Yet, as noted previously, part of the archive had been deliberately moved to custom-designed premises in Port Marghera in 2008 as a headline component of that area’s regeneration strategy. Its further relocation little more than a decade later can only serve to undermine that strategy, but it does chime with calls for the Biennale to connect with the non-tourist economy.

The Biennale is undoubtedly vital for the Venetian economy. It received a major grant in early May 2021, which amounted to 12 per cent of the Italian Government’s culture budget. This was designed to maintain its international standing (Zancan, 2021). For the Deputy Mayor of Venice whose portfolio includes tourism, the post-coronavirus imperative is to:

‘reinforce Venice as a major European centre of culture – including avant-garde. This would turn us into a world capital of the arts. We also want to be one of Europe’s fashion centres’ (ITB 2021).

This is a return to reliance on international tourism, albeit aimed at visitors who will engage with its festivals, events and cultural offer. Yet, as has been seen in this chapter, how these festivals and exhibitions are staged and how well they connect to both the Venetian non-tourist economy and Venetians themselves will determine whether events can provide a stable and sustainable future that addresses the complex needs of the city.

References

- Ackroyd, P. 2010. *Venice: Pure City*. London: Vintage Books.
- Allnut C. 2021. After the deluge, *Financial Times, Weekend House and Home*, 27/28 February, 6
- Alloway, L. 1969. *The Venice Biennale 1985-1968: from salon to goldfish bowl*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Ammerman, A.J., Pearson, C.L., Kuniholm, P.I., Selleck, B. and Vio, E., 2017. Beneath the Basilica of San Marco: new light on the origins of Venice. *Antiquity*, 91(360), 1620-1629.
- Armstrong, M. 2021 Venice considers a new tourism model after Covid-19 lockdown. *Euronews*, 21 April. Available online: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/19/venice-considers-a-new-tourism-model-after-covid-19-lockdown>.
- AN (*Art Newspaper*) 2013. Venice banks on Biennale profits. *The Art Newspaper* 22 (248), 8.
- Bertocchi, D. and Visentin, F. 2019. 'The overwhelmed city': physical and social over-capacities of global tourism in Venice. *Sustainability*, 11, 6937. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11246937>.
- Bódi, K. 2019. Looking forwards or back? shifting perspectives in the Venice Biennale's Hungarian Exhibition: 1928 and 1948, in B. Hock, K. Kemp-Welch and J. Owen, eds. *A Reader in East-Central-European Modernism 1918–1956*. London: Courtauld Books Online, 268-82.
- Bowness, S. 1995. The British Pavilion before the British Council, in S. Bowness and C. Phillpott, eds. *Britain at the Venice Biennale 1895-1995*. London: British Council, 17-36.
- Catenacci, S. 2010. Beyond the Giardini of the Biennale: some considerations on a supposed mode', in C. Ricci, ed. *Starting from Venice: studies on the Biennale*. Milan: Et Al Edizioni , 78-88
- Città di Venezia, 2014. Detourism: travel Venice like a local. Available online: <https://www.veneziaunica.it/en/content/detourism-venezia>
- Città di Venezia, 2021. Good Rules for the responsible visitor. Available online: <https://www.comune.venezia.it/en/content/buone-pratiche-il-visitatore-responsabile>.

- Davis, R.C. and Marvin, G. 2004. *Venice, the Tourist Maze: a cultural critique of the world's most touristed city*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Di Martino, E. 2005. *The History of the Venice Biennale, 1895-2005: visual arts, architecture, cinema, dance, music, theatre*. Venice: Papiro Arte.
- FBV (Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia) 2019. *58th International Art Exhibition, 11th May to 24th November 2019, Procedure for Collateral Events*. Venice: Visual Arts and Architecture Department, La Biennale di Venezia.
- FFA (Forum Futuro Arsenale) 2016. *The Venetian Arsenale and the City*. Venice: Forum Futuro Arsenale.
- Fyfe, G.J. 1984. Art exhibitions and power during the nineteenth century. *Sociological Review*, 32(S1), 20-45.
- Ghiglione, D. 2021. Venice braced for tourists' return as liner sail into hot water. *Financial Times Weekend* 26/27 June, 4.
- Giuffrida, A. 2021. Venice renews crackdown on bad behaviour as tourists return. *The Guardian*, 22 June. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/22/venice-renews-crackdown-on-bad-behaviour-as-tourists-return>.
- Gold, J.R. and Gold, M.M. 2020. *Festival Cities: culture, planning and urban life*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Gregotti, V. 2010. Vittorio Gregotti in conversation with Aaron Levy and William Menking, in A. Levy and W. Menking, eds. *Architecture on display: on the history of the Venice Biennale of Architecture*. London: Architectural Association, 21-33.
- Holt, E.G. 1983. *The Triumph of Art for the Public, 1785-1848: the emerging role of exhibitions and critics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Il Quotidiano Immobiliare 2014. The VEGA Waterfront Project. Available online: <https://www.vegapark.ve.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/VEGA-WATERFRONT-EBOOK-eng-light.pdf>.
- Imam, J. 2021. The man looking to the Venice Biennale's past to ensure its post-pandemic future. *Art Newspaper*, 333, (April), 12.
- ITB (Internationale Tourismus-Börse Berlin) 2021. Venice aims to create a brighter, more sustainable tourism future. Available online: <https://news.itb.com/regional-spotlight/europe/venice-tourism-autonomy/>
- Karanga, K. and Mutegi, S. 2021. We should allow an African curator to turn the whole thing on its head" Available online: https://www.dezeen.com/2021/06/07/venice-architecture-biennale-african-contribution/?li_source=LI&li_medium=bottom_block_1

- Korsch, E. 2013. Renaissance Venice and the sacred-political connotations of waterborne pageants, in M. Shewring, ed. *Waterborne Pageants and Festivities in the Renaissance: essays in honour of J.R. Mulryne*. Farnham: Ashgate, 79-97.
- Martini, V. 2010. A brief history of how the exhibition took shape, in C. Ricci, ed. *Starting from Venice: studies on the Biennale*. Milan: Et Al Edizione, 67-77.
- May, J.A. 2009. La Biennale de Venezia: the evolution of an institution, in E. aus dem Moore and U. Zeller, eds. *Germany's contributions to the Venice Biennale, 1895-2007*. Cologne: DuMont Bucheverlag, 17-30.
- Menichelli, C. 2014. The Arsenale yesterday and today: history of a complex in transition, in M. Venore, ed. *Heritage and architecture of urban landscape under production*. Tricase: Libellula Edizioni, 29-42
- Momigliano A. 2020. Venice tourism may never be the same: it could be better, *The New York Times*, 2 July. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/02/travel/venice-coronavirus-tourism.html>.
- Pazeri, L. 2009. The Arsenale: a 50-year stalemate over its change of use, in J. Da Mosto, ed. *The Venice Report: demography, truism, financing and change of buildings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 56-58
- Portoghesi, P. 2010. 'Paolo Portoghesi in conversation with Aaron Levy and William Menking', in A. Levy and W. Menking, eds. *Architecture on display: on the history of the Venice Biennale of Architecture*. London: Architectural Association, 35-47.
- Portoghesi, P., Scully, V., Jencks, C. and Norberg-Schulz, C. 1980. *The Presence of the Past: the first International Exhibition of Architecture, the Corderia of the Arsenale*. London: Academy Editions.
- Ricci, C. 2010. Installation and display strategies at the Venice Biennale: Prolegomenon, in C. Ricci, ed. *Starting from Venice: studies on the Biennale*. Milan: Et Al Edizioni, 99-108
- Roberts H. 2019. The role of arts in Venice's property market. *Financial Times*, 21 June. Available online: <https://www.ft.com/content/124ba730-8dc0-11e9-b8cb-26a9caa9d67b>
- Scheppe, W. 2018. *The Ground-Rent of Art and Exclusion from the City*. Available online: https://www.arsenale.com/downloads/Ground-Rent_and_Exclusion_from_the_City_2018.pdf
- S raphin, H., Sheeran, P. and Pilato, M., 2018. Over-tourism and the fall of Venice as a destination, *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, 9, 374-376.
- Smith, C. 2021. The Venice Biennale needs radical changes to maintain its relevance and repond to local needs, *Architectural Review* 1482 (June), 66-67.
- Smith, C. and Da Mosto, J. 2019. *How was it for you?* Available online: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vaIiVqxMaXWo7NMNagH6T2lz8yj9ws8/view>
- Spence, R. 2021. A place for us? *Financial Times, Weekend House and Home*, 22/23 May, 4.

Walsh N.P. 2021 The Venice Biennale Pressed Pause, While Everyone Else Changed the Game. Available online: <https://archinect.com/features/article/150271426/the-venice-biennale-pressed-pause-while-everyone-else-changed-the-game>

Ward, M., 1996. What's important about the history of modern art exhibitions? in B.W. Ferguson, R. Greenberg and S. Nairne, eds. *Thinking about Exhibitions*. London: Routledge, 331-340.

Wei, C-C. 2013. From national art to critical globalisation: the politics and curatorial strategies of the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. *Third Text*, 27, 470-84

Zancan R (2021) Venice Biennale. Biennale, Stop Making Sense! Available online: <https://www.domusweb.it/en/speciali/venice-architecture-biennale-2021/2021/biennale-stop-making-sense.html>

CAPTIONS

Figure 1 Designed by Fausto Finzi, chief engineer for the Venice municipality, the neo-classical French Pavilion houses France's national representation during the Venice Biennale festivals. Opened in 1912, it was one of the first seven pavilions constructed in the Giardini before the First World War.

Photograph: John and Margaret Gold

Figure 2 The Gaggiandre in Venice's Arsenale, built between 1568-73 to designs attributed to the sculptor and architect Jacopo Sansovino, overlook a large internal dock (taken in July 2015)

Photograph: John and Margaret Gold

Figure 3 View along an internal street (Strada Campagna) in Venice's Arsenale looking towards the former Gunneries (Artiglierie). The north and south armaments (Sale D'armi) are, respectively, on the left and right of this photograph (taken in July 2015).

Photograph: John and Margaret Gold