

The role of craftsmanship in the conservation of Venice. State of the art and perspective

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Topic: T3.4. Plans and experiences for the recovery and maintenance of construction crafts

Abstract

The case of Venice shows how the overall image, the perception of vernacularity of the historical built aggregates, strongly depends on the ability not only to preserve as much as possible, but also to "replicate" the consolidated building techniques to ensure continuity with the actions of restoration and consolidation. This option also contemplates forms of substitution and refurbishment, in contrast with the principles of conservation which favor the criterion of recognizability of the addition and reject the replacement of components, even when executed in an appropriate and harmonious manner, often the only option possible when attempting to preserve the Venetian character of the city's buildings. The most pressing issue is that of the progressive disappearance of local craftsmanship. This is particularly dramatic in the case of Venice, where specific knowledge is needed in order to carry out interventions on elements of historical buildings. The objectives of protection are also of relevance in this case as they present particular difficulty for foreign workers or workers who have completed different training. In this regard, this text examines the measures implemented to counteract this phenomenon, particularly the effectiveness and role of each of the hypotheses examined, already partially addressed in the city, training courses for artisans and technicians; public subsidies and incentives and the role of the authorities.

Keywords: Traditional construction crafts, Artisans, Venice

1. Introduction. The state of craftsmanship in Venice

In 1976 Venice had 102,000 inhabitants, including 2,207 registered artisans, whereas today the population stands at just over 50,000, with the number of registered artisans falling to 1,012 in 2021. Therefore, in the space of 45 years, residents and artisan businesses have been halved¹. This reflects a city with

imbalances in terms of demographics, society and the labor market, brought about by a profound and inexorable selective process.

Young people and the middle classes tend to leave the historic center of the city. This mirrors what is happening in the context of crafts, where certain types of companies linked to the real estate heritage maintenance market survive, as do manufacturing activities and artistic crafts, as well as those related to the needs of nearby residences.

¹ Vettore, E. (ed.), *ARIFFARAFFA. Venezia, quel che resta del Centro storico e del suo Artigianato*, a study by Confartigianato Imprese Venezia, Venice, 2019. Originally, "Ariffaraffa" was the battle cry of the Venetian children who prepared for the great pile-ups when playing in the *campi* (squares) and the *calli* (streets) of Venice, throwing themselves on top of each other for fun or to scramble for sweets,

preferable to the sandwiches or cake slices served at the small parties organized for the many patronages of the city.

In the historic center, half of the artisans are over 50 years of age, with only 2% of young people aged under 30 compared to around 18% of the population aged over 60. In a similar survey conducted in 2002, the average age of craftsmen was almost six years lower: while in 2002 the average age was about 46 years, today it is close to 52. This decrease in the average age of craftsmen up to 40 years of age should be seen as a reflection of the crafts sector in the historic center failing to appeal to young people. Any intervention which aims to modify this trend must necessarily consider the safeguarding of the most authentic forms of craftsmanship, linked to the history, culture and built environment of the city. An additional challenge, to be viewed in parallel, is the preservation of urban vitality, ensuring it does not fall below a minimum threshold.

If we want to preserve the characteristics of Venice which, despite its exceptional nature, still make it a normal and vital city rather than a theme park, work is required on several fronts, including housing and labor.

To do so, opportunities and conditions must be created to facilitate the entry of new residents and the successful access of young people to forms of employment relevant to the vital functions of the city: healthcare, justice, research, liberal professions, essential services and manufacturing. Craftsmanship plays a crucial role due to the traditional close links between artisans and the city: those who both operate and reside in the island city make up 66% of the total. Focusing on craftsmanship will therefore have an effect on local residence, following the premise that the *urbs* cannot exist if the *civitas* is not also preserved.

2. A tradition of 'arts and crafts' corporations

Considering a heritage of manufacturing and building knowledge like that of the lagoon city, this contribution addresses how to restore its status and dissemination. In the emblematic case

of Venice constructive properties, materials, and working techniques add value to the artistic magnificence of the city.

For many years, until the fall of the Serenissima Republic in 1797, there were corporations of arts and crafts, regulated by internal statutes, which were often very strict. In addition, specific acts were implemented for the regulation of professional secrets in order to ensure the continuity of knowledge when younger artisans took over following the retirement or death of their predecessors².

The skills of each building guild, including masons, carpenters, blacksmiths, stone workers, "terrazzo" floor workers, window workers, lime workers and sand workers, were very specific. This high level of technical specialization was the result of a rigid corporate and regulatory structure which determined that each corporation could achieve a high level of technical efficiency and standardization of processes, gradually becoming part of tradition.

In the specific case of the urban complex of the old city and estuary of Venice, the role of the corporations in terms of capillary organization and dissemination and their effect on the preservation of the entire city over the centuries is of great importance. If thinking of a "Fabbrica" model as applied to the city, consisting of 20,000 buildings, the process is identical to that still observed today in individual monuments, including the Duomo in Milan and the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, "Procuratoria di San Marco", where a structure is put into place to favor the continued maintenance of the architectural asset, providing for the needs, initial construction sites, supervision of the supply of materials and intervention techniques. During the nineteenth century this system was greatly downscaled, and the end of the Republic marked the start of a much looser organization, which, although deeply rooted in the socio-economic fabric of the city has been continued within the technical

² On these issues see the study Caniato, G., Dal Borgo, M., *Le arti edili a Venezia* (1990), Edilstampa, Rome, 307 pp.

repertoire, closely linked to construction and material culture. The achievements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also favored an evolution in the forms of maintenance of historical buildings, as can be seen for instance with the introduction of concrete, a technological advance which has also had a profound effect on the preservation of traditional techniques in many other historical settings in Europe. It should be noted, however, that the historical organization of the workspace and the Venetian workers, of which little is left today, for long decades after the fall of the Republic laid the groundwork for the flourishing of a series of specific craft activities. This was done under the guidance of sectors which guaranteed correct and expert practices of maintenance of the precious and fragile city, at least until the turn of the century.

3. Changes within the city

The results of Confartigianato Venezia's research show a great decline in the number of crafts businesses related to construction activities.

This trend, driven by multiple factors, can be read in many different ways.

When considering the size of the city, the amount of work that can be done by these figures is minimal compared to the physiological needs of restoration and maintenance. The spaces left empty by the craftsmen are progressively occupied by other companies, often from outside the city, and their specific operative competence to work in an urban monumental context such as that of Venice is often not suited to the requirements of protection.

Moreover, over the last 30 to 40 years Venice has experienced an explosion of its real estate market, partly due to the strong increase in the value of real estate, attributable to government

funding in the 1980s³, which resulted in speculation on the value of purchases and sales.



Fig. 1. Training for construction artisans, Schio - Vicenza (Confartigianato Venezia, 2019)



Fig. 2. Workshop. Artistic ironworking. Demonstration open to the public (Confartigianato Venezia, 2019)

Furthermore, the progressive increase in tourism has favored the use of apartments for tourist use, providing a form of income. Both these scenarios were also partly the result of the lack of carefully considered protection of cultural heritage⁴ and the introduction of techniques and materials not specific to the historical building but sourced from the construction site of new buildings and from

3 See Trovò, F. *Nuova Venezia antica, 1984-2001- L'edilizia privata negli interventi ex lege 798/84* (2010), ed. Maggioli, Rimini-Milano, 340 pp.

4 Approximately 85% of the houses in Venice are subject to protection in terms of landscape, and are included in the decree on the lagoon of Venice of 1985; for the most part these are the diffuse building fabric, emblematic of vernacular construction and decisive in forming the mass of the city. These require specific authorization for external works (plaster, roofing, windows, etc.). The remaining percentage refers to buildings with features of historical, artistic and architectural value, which require authorization from the Superintendence for all external and internal actions.

other markets. In addition, the working conditions in the lagoon are much costlier than in other areas: transport by boat, the provision of supplies from the mainland, the existence of a suitable laboratory and warehouse, and, in general, the expense that a Venetian shipyard requires, result in a natural selection of craft companies, which are often smaller, unable to amortize critical issues, and vulnerable to risks. In addition to other issues, widely discussed in the Confartigianato study mentioned above, attention should be drawn to the increasingly complex and peculiar regulations concerning intervention in constructions in Italy, particularly those regarding the protection of architectural heritage. According to the Code of Public Contracts and the Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape, operators working in the field of public contracts and cultural heritage must meet a series of requirements and hold certain qualifications. While this should guarantee quality in interventions on cultural heritage, it has also excluded a large slice of the market of artisan operators who are highly skilled but cannot meet the qualification requirements introduced.

4. New rules for restoration

Before proposing useful measures and practices to counteract the trend of progressive loss of craftsmen in Venice and in historic cities in general, it is necessary to address the two norms mentioned in the previous paragraph, adding a third one, the Regulations on public works contracts concerning protected cultural assets of 2017. At the same time, and still in the context of Venice, public buildings should be distinguished from private ones. In turn, private buildings should be separated into those with direct monumental or simply landscape protection measures, because these determine the competence of each entity according to the current norms.

In the case of Public Contracts regarding cultural assets, regulations stipulate that companies must be contracted for works costing more than €150,000. This means that for works below that amount contractors may also be craftsmen, provided however that they pass other checks as laid down in regulations on other issues.

In addition, with the 2017 Regulations, regardless of the threshold amount for the work, contractors must also collaborate with a restorer of Cultural Heritage following art. 29 of the Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape for "monitoring, maintenance and restoration of movable cultural property, decorated surfaces of architectural heritage and historicized materials of real estate of historical, artistic or archaeological interest", as stated specifically in relation to the protection of architectural heritage.

As a result, according to the Public Contracts Code and the Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code, operators working on public contracts for cultural assets must possess a series of requirements and qualifications.

On the one hand, this aspect limits the risk that cultural assets will be the object of interventions by unsuitable companies; on the other, it has excluded a large slice of the market of artisan operators who are highly competent but not sufficiently qualified to comply with the regulation requirements⁵.

In order to participate in public tenders the company must at least include a restorer in its organizational chart, as a result of the profound innovation introduced by the Regulations of 2017 relating to the extension of the mandatory nature of the figure of the Restorer of Cultural Heritage both for decorated surfaces of architectural heritage and for historicized materials. The latter are often whole historical buildings which have been preserved.

⁵ Ministerial Decree August 22, 2017, n. 154 - Regulations on public works contracts concerning cultural heritage, art. 1, paragraph 2, letter c.

With reference to private property, there are no thresholds above which a specific qualification is required to work on cultural property, but it is still required that work should be carried out by a restorer⁶, limited to decorated surfaces, in accordance with art. 29 of the Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code, and not, as in the case of Public Contracts, qualified to restore historic surfaces.

First of all, it is desirable for local companies to try to expand the interventions on cultural heritage in which they can participate by hiring a technical director for restoration. Italian law has recently introduced a system for accreditation to national lists of restorers according to the Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape. This system establishes 12 sectors of competence, including stone, mosaic and derived materials, and book materials, aiming to ensure maximum specialization per field⁷.

Considering that there are 20,000 buildings in Venice, and about 3,000 of these are subject to protection affecting both the exterior and interior, it is clear that there are many buildings in the old city where only the exterior has been monitored. This leaves ample room for the activity of maintenance and restoration, without requiring qualified companies, and this space must be occupied by local companies, bearers of know-how and local operating practices derived from tradition.



Fig. 3. Venetian-style terrazzo, master craftsman training phase. Demonstration for educational use (Confartigianato Venezia, 2019)

6 Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code, D. Lgs 22 January 2004, n. 42, "the interventions of maintenance and restoration on movable cultural assets and decorated surfaces of architectural heritage are performed exclusively by those who are restorers of cultural heritage according to the legislation on the subject", art 29, paragraph 6.

7 The areas of expertise for cultural heritage restorers are as follows: 1 Stone, mosaic and derived materials; 2 Decorated surfaces of architecture; 3 Artifacts on painted wood and textile medium; 4 Carved wood artifacts; wooden furnishings and structures; 5 Artifacts in synthetic materials processed, assembled and/or painted; 6 Textile, organic and leather materials and artifacts; 7 Ceramic and glass materials and artifacts; 8 Metal and alloy materials and artifacts; 9 Book and archival materials and paper and parchment artifacts; 10 Photographic, film and digital materials; 11 Musical instruments; 12 Scientific and technical instruments and tools.

5. Why focus on craftsmanship? Remedies to the crisis

As mentioned at the end of the previous paragraph, most of the buildings in the old city of Venice are not controlled and internal transformations are regulated exclusively by the rules of the Master Plan for the Old City of Venice, which dates back to 1999, and by sector regulations such as the Building Regulations.

The Urban Plan has had the great merit of preserving the main typological structures of the city, such as the position of the attics and the morphology of the roofs: it has substantially covered most of the building activity in the territory. However, the typological nature of the Plan itself does not define the preservation of the authenticity of the material, or prescribe to

preserve it as such, but rather generates the obligation not to alter the distribution and position of the constituent elements.

It is understandable how, following this logic, many surface finishes, floors, interior and exterior doors and windows, partitions and walls are at risk of being treated not as unrepeatable documentary assets but as replaceable components. In this setting it is necessary to control the encroachment on the city's building situation, which has depended on the market, with only fiscal or corporate requirements.

This condition has probably influenced the progressive ousting of local artisan firms from the slice of the market linked to Venetian private buildings, especially to those without protection measures, thus giving rise to a progressive reduction in active firms.

In order to contrast this inexorable decrease, also determining the progressive loss of skills, which, if not passed on, often remain inaccessible after the death of the companies, it is necessary to foster continuous demand for artisan services, guaranteeing their survival and possible growth, under the aegis of Protection Bodies such as the Soprintendenza ABAP for the municipality of Venice and the Lagoon. Both these have competence in the territory over monumental protection, which concerns only the interior of the buildings, and landscape protection, concerned with the exterior.

In the case of constraints affecting monumental buildings there are many types of works which require skills specific to the execution. These can be made mandatory by indicating some operational prescriptions in the authorized actions in order to maximize the results in terms of protection and correctness of the restoration work, while not referring to decorated surfaces, which are strictly speaking the competence of the restorer of Cultural Heritage.

In the case of a *terrazzo* floor, a mixture of lime, sand and stone aggregates of various kinds, some interventions can be suggested, such as the use of linseed oil left to soak in for two days or mimetic integrations, resurfacing or

traditional remaking methods. These techniques are certainly characteristic of the enterprises qualified for public works, but are also used by many artisans, who have often practiced such techniques for decades. The same is true for the treatment of interior surfaces, interior partitions, ceilings, windows and doors.

In terms of the external parts, the most important element, other than the architectural layout and the elements defining stone openings, is the plaster, which in order to protect both the landscape and the monuments, should be traditional, made of lime mortar, or marmorino, or cocciopesto, thinly laid in the masonry courses.

These directions are highly relevant to the way in which the works are carried out. They are very precise interventions, linked to a tradition of local know-how, and are often determined by the values of the buildings to be preserved, so that they generally rule out the participation of companies capable of carrying them out correctly, even though these may employ local artisan workers.

A further contribution to reversing the trend and bringing the new generations closer to crafts can be found in the institution of the "bottega scuola", as introduced by Veneto Regional Law no. 34 of 2018⁸. These artisan workshops are an ideal place to enable young people seeking employment to meet employers in possession of the "know-how". These are a basic medium for the generational transfer of business. This regional norm could help identify those continuing the business, when they are not already to be found within the company-family, by using six-month apprenticeships with public funding which could possibly be followed by apprenticeship or definitive contracts.

In addition, taking into account the fact that artisan entrepreneurs are not given to investing resources for up-to-date training for themselves or their employees and collaborators, in a

⁸ Veneto Regional Law October 8, 2018, n. 34 "Standards for the protection, development and promotion of the Veneto craftsmanship".

broader perspective, it could be very useful to promote training offers combined with consultancy. These could include management control, management consultancy, technical-regulatory updating, help with enrolling in the public administration market, and customer care training to deal with clients and employees correctly.

Training can also narrow the gap between labor demand and supply: a prime example of this, emblematic of Venetian craftsmanship, is traditional shipbuilding.

For about ten years in the early 2000s, a school for trainee shipwrights operated, initially able to replace the function of the shipyard as a natural source of codification of manual knowledge, composed of good practices and specific languages. These courses coordinated by Confartigianato Venezia and supported by the Veneto Region, through funding from the European Social Fund, have enabled young participants to enter the job market more quickly, both to their advantage and to that of the host companies. This laid the foundations for a stable and lasting establishment of new labor in Venetian shipyards.

This experience can be repeated: it is important to set up a "control room" to map the training offer and, above all, to cross-reference the demand and supply of internships, through a database easily accessible to both host companies and young aspiring craftsmen.

Therefore, in addition, the "factory schools" could be supported by a dedicated line of training centers for the transmission of skills and techniques of artistic, traditional and typical craftsmanship.

Recently, the experience carried out by the IUAV University of Venice and Confartigianato Venezia has attracted some interest, as it involves a series of practical demonstrations by artisans to university architecture students, aiming to raise awareness of the issues that unite architectural restoration, cultural heritage and craftsmanship⁹.

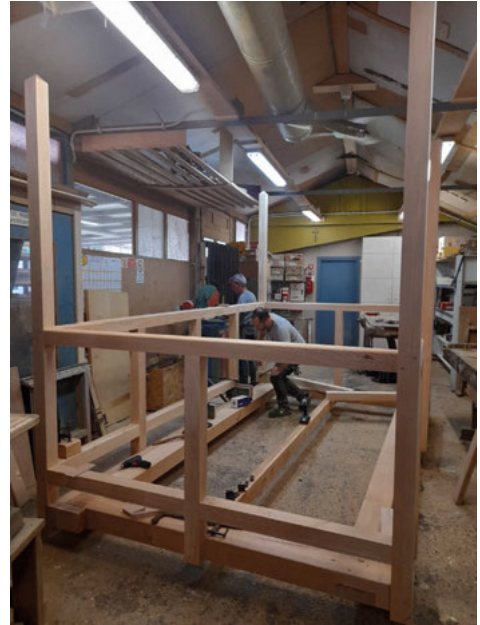


Fig. 4. Laboratory execution of typical Venetian wooden *altana* (Confartigianato Venezia, 2019)

6. Conclusions

Alain Lardet, former director of the well-known furniture brand Poltrona Frau, works to promote design and creativity; he is a co-founder of the Festival du Design in Paris. He also curated the Fondation Bettencourt Schueller's exhibition promoting art crafts in France for the Homo Faber event, held in 2018 in the Fondazione Cini on the island of San Giorgio in Venice.

According to Lardet "We are witnessing a decisive move away from standardization and our societies obsessed with speed and mass consumption. In this context, the craftsmanship of excellence and its fertile dialogue with art, architecture and design offers a welcome alternative and opens the way to the renewal of

⁹ Squassina, A., *Una strategia di conservazione dell'autenticità materiale a Venezia: dal rivestimento murario al pae-*

saggio urbano, in *Loggia Arquitectura & Restauración*, n. 34-2021, pp. 62-85.

these professions, as well as the rediscovery of their nobility and their ability to enchant the world. Venice is the ideal stage, a city which, by virtue of its geography and its deeply human rhythms, represents a symbol of resistance against the tyranny of all and sundry, as well as concrete proof of the power of beauty that lasts in time¹⁰.

This is the authoritative thought of an intellectual capable of grasping the weak signals of the society of the near future. However, it clashes with the daily image of a city that has not yet acquired awareness of these changes and proceeds in a diametrically opposing direction. To those who ask us if the complex of artistic/manufacturing handicrafts, extended to the excellence of the conservative restoration of the housing heritage, could be a candidate for the role of an economic alternative to the predominant mass tourism in Venice before the pandemic, our answer, in all honesty, can only be no. At least today.

The prediction is that once the health emergency is over, tourism will come back to oppress the city; the pressure of thirty million visitors, most of whom are trippers (75%), and the fierce competition for land use will return.

It is therefore clear that without radical and lasting interventions, without a project, Venice runs the risk of the irreversible loss of its urban complexity. It is also clear that, in this scenario, safeguarding Venice must also include the protection and the support of what remains of its craftsmanship: still a cohesive element for society, still generating income and employment, as well as beauty and well-being¹¹.

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10 Installation panel of the *Homo Faber* Exhibition, Venice, San Giorgio island, Cini Foundation, 2018. The text is also cited in Vettore, E. (ed.), *ARIFFARAFFA. Venezia, quel che resta del Centro storico e del suo Artigianato*, a study by Confartigianato Imprese Venezia, Venice, 2019, p. 276.

11 E. Vettore edited section 1 "The state of craftsmanship in Venice", the second part of section 5 "Why focus on craftsmanship? Remedies to the crisis", and section 6 "Conclusions"; F. Trovò edited the remaining parts of the contribution.