

Bryan Brazeau

# And If Venice is Sinking

A Case Study of Material  
Pedagogy Using  
Place- and Problem-  
Based Learning on ‘A  
Sustainable Serenissima’



Bryan Brazeau is the Head of Liberal Arts at the University of Warwick, where he teaches a range of interdisciplinary modules including on Truth and Misinformation, Beauty, Underworlds, Paradises, Heroic Constructs, Exile and Homecoming, and on Venetian Culture and Sustainability.

His research interests include early modern literary negotiations of Venetian identity (Lucrezia Marinella), Renaissance Aristotelian Poetics, Chivalric Epic (Ariosto, Tasso, and Cervantes), Christian epic from Dante to Milton, and Classical Reception. He obtained his PhD in Italian Studies from New York University in 2015.



Pressing global challenges are difficult to approach from a single disciplinary framework; indeed, they often require an interdisciplinary framework to address them in significant depth. The very conception of Sustainability itself is often framed within three mutually interdependent dimensions: economic, social, and environmental.<sup>1</sup> Although interdisciplinary, the discourse of sustainability has often been framed through lenses informed by the social sciences, a presentist bias, a focus on innovation and business-based solutions, and a simultaneous focus on multiple global case studies that are often seen in the classroom as scalable and simply interchangeable: a solution for one is often presented as a solution for all. While such an approach is valuable and has brought discussions around sustainability to the classroom, students, researchers, and teachers in the humanities are often excluded from such discussions, and when they are able to participate, their contributions—such as some of the excellent work emerging from ecocritical approaches to literature and culture—are often subsumed under the social pillar of sustainability. This essay will explore a different way of framing sustainability pedagogy, one that argues for the importance and continued relevance of culture as a fourth pillar of the sustainability conversation; an approach that employs place-based onsite transdisciplinary pedagogy and transhistorical approaches; and one that empowers students to appreciate the unique,

1 Tom Kuhlman and John Farrington, What is Sustainability?, in “Sustainability”, no.2.11, 2010, pp. 3436-3338.

embedded, intersecting, and material nature of local challenges with Venice as a case study.

Place-Based pedagogy is an experiential and interdisciplinary approach; it is grounded in local phenomena, encourages students “to awaken to the significance of places,” and fosters “re-engagement with the cultural and ecological contexts of both human and nonhuman existence.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, a place-based approach moves away from a kind of education for “anywhere” that is often taught within specific disciplinary frameworks and acknowledges the embedded nature of living places and spatial forms as products of the inter-relationship between culture, history, ecology, ideology, and lived experience. This approach is remarkably similar in form to problem-based learning, a form of education that begins with complex problems and moves from these to discovering appropriate interdisciplinary approaches and research-based interventions with students as active learners. As our Liberal Arts programme at the University of Warwick (UK) is built around Problem-Based Learning, it seemed only natural to adopt a similar Place-Based approach when teaching “A Sustainable Serenissima” onsite in Venice.

“A Sustainable Serenissima” was first taught as an experimental transdisciplinary pilot module in AY 2018-2019. The module’s learning objectives include

2 David A. Grunewald, *Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education*, in “*American Educational Research Journal*”, no.40.3, 2003, pp.581-801.

critical analysis of local sustainable solutions, analysis of future implementation plans, and consideration of the scalability and adaptability of the problem of Venetian sustainability to other global challenges. A grant from the Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL) at Warwick, allowed us to pilot this module at minimal cost to students, involving teaching in Coventry and a five-day intensive onsite experiential learning experience in Venice. The project was largely a success and provided proof of concept for the module and for this model of teaching. The strategic project grant not only allowed us to successfully teach the module, but indeed to establish a network of colleagues in Venice (activists, industry leaders, academics, etc...) who have continued to collaborate with us on the module. Key to the success of this module has been the invaluable collaboration of the Fondazione Cini and the Progetto ARCHiVe, as will be detailed below. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the module was suspended for a time. A project between the University of Warwick and Monash University in Australia led to the creation of the Alliance Intensive Study Programme (AISP), later to become the Warwick International Intensive Study Programme (WIISP). This innovative programme, which furthers the University's internationalisation of education strategy that aims at providing a global education to Warwick students, allows students to take the module outside of the normal academic terms as an intensive and focussed module over the course of two weeks, with credits carrying into the following academic year. The module was taught as part

of this programme in summer 2021, but unfortunately, due to ongoing issues presented by the pandemic, was taught entirely online. In July 2022, the module resumed onsite teaching in Venice and students were taught onsite for two intensive weeks. The module is now part of the Warwick International Intensive Study programme and will be running yearly. Work on this module and student interests have also led to the creation of a new module that will also be taught onsite in Venice using this pedagogical approach: Venice- Resistance and Representation.<sup>3</sup>

The broad themes of “A Sustainable Serenissima” explore the complex problem of sustainability in Venice with students navigating the various and overlapping strands of this problem (economic, ecological, social, historical, cultural), while completing observational and experiential activities in the city and the broader lagoon to link classroom learning to the complexity of Venice as a place. In particular, students worked together to redefine what “sustainability” might mean for a site such as Venice, which only exists due to continued human intervention over centuries in diverting rivers from the lagoon and in reinforcing/maintaining the barrier between the lagoon and

<sup>3</sup> This new module focusses on the Venetian tradition of resistance and the role that representation has played—from the printing of banned books during the Protestant Reformation, to the early feminism of Lucrezia Marinella, to resistance to Fascism, all the way through to small community organisations that continue to resist overtourism, cruise ships, and global gentrification today, and the Biennale as a site for international representations of resistance in Venice.



the sea.<sup>4</sup> Consideration of this difficult problem in group work with active hands-on research also introduced the problem-based learning methodology that would be used throughout the module. Key themes of the module explored various sustainability problems in Venice through the lens of a broad transhistorical and cultural perspective. Below, I have described how this was articulated for the module in terms of the key themes explored, the related site visits that were conducted, and the importance of place-based materials and experiential learning for these activities.

#### A. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: EMPIRE AND THE SERENISSIMA

Prior to arrival in Venice, students were assigned a series of readings to familiarise them with Venice's long and complex history; among other topics, these explored the layered and multicultural nature of Venetian food traditions (looking, for example, at the significant influence of Jewish and Levantine cultures on Venetian culinary identity); the problem of sustaining imperial expansion during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries through analysis of various datasets (financial records, taxation revenues,

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this problematic dichotomy between Venice as Lagoon and Venice as City (famously framed by Proust), and how it might be overcome when thinking about a more sustainable future, see Lidia Fersuoch, *Misreading the Lagoon*, Corte del Fontego Editore, Venezia, 2014, pp. 6-7. Although somewhat dated, for a discussion on the sustainability of the lagoon and the careful balance between preserving cultural heritage and introducing new sustainable solutions, see Marta Moretti, *Venice, Italy: Balancing Antiquity and Sustainability*, in T. Beatley (ed.), *Green Cities of Europe: Global Lessons on Green Urbanism*, Island Press, Washington DC, 2012.

summaries of imported goods); and the importance of traditional Venetian industries, such as printing, shipbuilding, glassmaking, banking, and more.

## B. DEVELOPMENT OF PLACE-BASED OBSERVATIONAL SKILLS

To help the students hone their powers of observation, prior to arrival in Venice they were also presented with a gallery of 3D 360 photos taken across Venice with a RICOH THETA camera and asked to spot the sustainability problems therein (these photos included shops designed for tourists, overflowing rubbish bins, overcrowding on the Rialto bridge, the new barriers erected around Saint Mark's basilica, tourists posing for selfies, and the population counter at the Farmacia Morelli, demonstrating the decline of local residents). Upon arrival in Venice, we discussed these photos, and students were able to identify sustainability problems in only 30-35% of them. At the end of the module, students were asked to look at the same photos and were able to identify sustainability problems in nearly 90% of them.

Returning to the first day, students were introduced to the themes of the module and assigned an observational task (Venetian Bingo); they were asked to sit in a campo for at least 60 minutes and to note their observations. The bingo card that was created balanced both services for tourists and services for locals (such as hardware stores and pharmacies). The results were discussed in class, and

students were surprised by how much of the city suffers from overtourism, along with the way that overtourism is remaking the city in its image.

### IMMIGRATION AND IDENTITY IN VENICE

Once overtourism was established as a key theme and the sustainability of Venetian identity was discussed, students were encouraged to query the problem of Venetian identity itself. What does it mean to be Venetian? Through discussion of this problem, students were led to the question: what was this identity that was under threat and how did it come to be established? To consider this problem, students read selections from Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*, exploring the key contributions of Bangladeshi migrants in Venice and the Veneto today, along with a series of scholarly articles.<sup>5</sup> Each group of students was tasked with exploring a particular migrant community in Venice (Jewish, Slavic, German, Turkish) and their contributions to Venetian culture. Students also explored contemporary issues of migration in Venice, looking at existing government policy, activism, and political resistance in the city, focussing on the case of Pateh Sabally, the Gambian refugee who drowned in the grand

canal in 2017 with tourists looking on and filming.<sup>6</sup> Students also explored the Ghetto Nuovo and the Ghetto Vecchio in Cannaregio, to explore how the Jewish community in Venice contributed and continues to contribute to Venetian identity. This also prompted a fascinating discussion on the cultural differences and different perceptions of tourists, migrants, and refugees. Following a visit to the Ghetto, in order to consider the fragility and difficulty of preserving cultural traditions, students were brought to Arzanà, a small charitable organisation that is focussed on the preservation of historic Venetian boats, where one of their members discussed the history of the organisation, the history and unique nature of Venetian boats (not only gondole), and the difficulty that the organisation has had in trying to campaign for a museum for the history of unique Venetian watercraft.

### C. WICKED PROBLEMS: VENETIAN ROOTS AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

Throughout the module, students explore Venetian ecology and the fragility of the lagoon from a variety of perspectives including historical, cultural, and ecological viewpoints. Students prepare independent research on a topic regarding

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Sabally's drowning and how it was echoed by Carlo Martiel's thought-provoking entry for the Cuban Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale, along with a reflection on how this event and the responses to it echo ongoing discourses around the intellectual frameworks that frame migrant crossings in the Mediterranean, see Ellie Byrne, Migration, Disaster and the Globalised Mediterranean: Between Barca Nostra and Vertigo Sea, in "Parallax", no. 27.1, pp.46-62, p.55.



Students learning about the history of gondole at Arzanà



Handling a traditional adze used for shipbuilding

historical Venetian ecological management—for example looking at how forests and fish stocks (particularly in the *valli da pesca*) were managed during the *Serenissima*, where input from local residents and a symbiotic relationship with the ecosystem were often crucial to sustaining Venice—and share their work with each other, thinking about how such ecological issues intersect with the complex cultural and social problems explored on the module.<sup>7</sup> As part of this theme, students also analyse the threat of rising water levels in the lagoon, increases in *acqua alta* over time, and note the specific architecture of Venetian buildings, including that of the traditional *fondaco*, built with the problem of rising water in mind. We also spend two full sessions on the complex problem/solution to rising tides considering the MOSE Dam, its problematic history, and ongoing problems despite the fact that it is currently operational. After learning about the dam and its problems, students participate a simulated pressurised learning activity, where they assume it is 2035 and the hinges on the dam gates have begun to rust; with *acqua alta* alarms sounding and in groups where they take on various roles (politician, ecological scientist, Venetian resident, tourist, mayor of Venice, etc...) students must either decide to raise the MOSE, which may not come down again—potentially

7 Readings include (among others) Karl Appuhn, *A Forest on the Sea: Environmental Expertise in Renaissance Venice*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2010; and Tomaso Fortibuoni, *The Progressive Deregulation of Fishery Management in the Venetian Lagoon After the Fall of the Repubblica Serenissima: Food For Thought on Sustainability*, in “Global Bioethics” no.25, 2014, pp. 42-55.

destroying the lagoon's ecosystem; or decide to not raise the dam, destroying the city. They are given 30 minutes to conduct research and must make a decision at the end of this time, defending their choices with evidence and research to the group.

As part of this theme, students also explore the negative impacts of motorboats and cruise ships on the city's architecture through wake wash that erodes the foundations of buildings. Students learned about the infrastructure of the city and about the construction of Venetian houses with a salt barrier of Istrian stone to prevent capillary rise of salt and minerals within the brickwork and masonry. They also discovered that as sea levels rise and acqua alta events become more frequent, the water often goes beyond this level, posing a significant threat to the structural integrity of the city. Through these discussions, students come to recognise that the problem of ecological sustainability cannot be divorced from the profound cultural traditions of living with the lagoon that the Venetians had developed over centuries, and that these traditions could be used to inform approaches to present solutions. This realisation occurred not in the classroom, but during an ecological tour led by Luana Castelli of the lagoon's mud flats and salt marshes, along with a visit to I&S farm on the island of Sant'Erasmus: a biodynamic organic farm with cultivars unique to the lagoon and a business model that makes the most of tourism and local agricultural traditions. The visit to this farm also





Students learning about organic agriculture in the lagoon and tasting locally-grown food at I&S farm, Sant'Erasmus.

allows students to see the sandy and dry soil of the island, experiencing the soil firsthand and gaining understanding of the complexity of living in and with the lagoon.

#### D. AIRBNB AND DESTINATION ITALY: FROM THE GRAND TOUR TO THE GRANDI NAVI

After considering ecological sustainability, students consider the use of place and space in Venice. They explore the complex problem of economic sustainability with relation to Airbnb and short-term rentals by conducting research across various materials, examining scholarly articles, listening to podcasts about the problem of Airbnb in other cities (New Orleans and Barcelona), and exploring economic data about Airbnb levels in Venice (via data from Inside Airbnb). Students also explore the report produced by the NGO “We Are Here Venice” on the problem of overtourism in the city and reflect on the difficulties of inhabiting and reimagining local life in a city that is increasingly being given over to a monoculture of tourism, while looking at the political interventions that have attempted to address the problem (such as Brugnaro and Nardella’s “Decalogo” of proposals to relaunch Florence and Venice as cities of art from 2021 and the legal proposal raised by the group Alta Tensione Abitativa).<sup>8</sup> Students who read Italian are encouraged to explore the

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Smith and Jane Da Mosto, *Whose City is it Anyway?/Ma dopo tutto di chi è la città?*, We Are Here Venice, Venice, 2021, <https://www.weareherevenice.org/whose-city-is-it-anyway/>.

work of Sarah Gainsforth on the role of Airbnb in radically changing the housing stock of Venice and cities around the world.<sup>9</sup>

Having explored the extent and complexity of the problem of tourism in contemporary Venice, students then reflected on the roots of Venetian tourism via a framework provided by Stephanie Hom's *Beautiful Country*.<sup>10</sup> Adapting her conception of "Destination Italy" to "Destination Venice," students discovered the importance of Italy for the Grand Tour, the key role played by Thomas Cook in the nineteenth century in constructing the idea of "tours to Italy," representations of Italy and Venice abroad (such as the Venetian hotel and casino in Las Vegas), and the paradox of how tourist expectations are reshaping the urban landscape of Venice itself to conform to the global tourist imaginary.

#### E. THE FONDAZIONE CINI AND ARCHiVe: ADAPTIVE REUSE OF URBAN SPACES, THE CHANGING FACE OF THE CITY, AND QUESTIONS AROUND DIGITAL VS. ANALOG PRESERVATION

Following on from the previous topic, students explore the theme of adaptive reuse of urban spaces, looking at multiple case studies. Students read about, discuss, and see for themselves the transformation of the Fondaco de'

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Gainsforth, *Airbnb città merce: storie della resistenza alla gentrificazione digitale*, Deriva Approdi, Rome, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Stephanie Malia Hom, *The Beautiful Country: Tourism and the Impossible State of Destination Italy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2015.

Tedeschi by DFS and the complex issues raised by the private restoration of publicly listed buildings.<sup>11</sup> Students are also encouraged to visit and take photos of suggested buildings and spaces, preparing them for a visit to the Fondazione Cini. Suggested sites include, but are not limited to: the Molino Stucky, the Arsenale, the Fontego de' Turchi, the Teatro d'Italia Cinema, the Scuola Grande della Misericordia, the site of the former Macello di San Giobbe, and Tronchetto. This work prepares students for the centrepiece of the module: our day on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, where students visited the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, the Teatro Verde, the Vatican Chapels, and the Progetto ARCHiVe. Throughout the day, students were encouraged to think about how urban spaces and islands in the lagoon can be preserved and reused in new ways to foster local culture that lives in symbiosis with the lagoon and its culture.

Students from Warwick worked with students from Ca' Foscari and the Factum Foundation throughout the day. We began with a tour of the Vatican Chapels and the Teatro Verde, led by Francesca Salatin, where they reflected on how such spaces might be used productively, along with the ephemeral nature of Biennale art exhibits and the

11 One article that provides a good overview of this transformation and the questions it raises is Cristina Boniotti, Renata Codello, and Stefano Della Torre, *The Creation of a Public Space Within a Private Commission: The Case of the Fondaco de' Tedeschi and Its Change of Use*, in "Scienza e Beni Culturali XXXV Convegno Internazionale," Edizione Arcadia Recherche, Marghera, 2019.

complexities of preserving them. The Vatican Chapels also allowed students to reflect on how tradition and innovation can intersect with local figurations of space and place. These reflections on how and why we preserve cultural heritage and the importance of sustainable preservation were continued in a visit to the cutting-edge digitisation laboratories of the Progetto ARCHiVe, guided by Ilenia Maschietto and Costanza Blaskovic. Given previous discussions on the overtourism of Venice, students discussed and reflected upon the value of preserving cultural heritage digitally, and what is both gained—accessibility, more sustainable ways to experience cultural heritage—and lost—tactility, direct contact with materials, the physical encounter with a particular work or piece of art—through digital preservation and digitisation. These conversations were continued throughout a tour of the Fondazione Cini, also led by Ilenia, and the question of what is both gained and lost through digital reproduction was incredibly pertinent when viewing the reproduction of Veronese’s *Wedding at Cana*—a fully digital (and very detailed) reproduction of the work stolen by Napoleon and now hanging in the Louvre in Paris. Some students who were familiar with Walter Benjamin brought up the questions raised in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” prompting us to think about the fetishization of original artworks and cultural heritage, and whether advanced digitisation and reproduction technologies devalue the “aura” of a work of art as Benjamin claimed, or whether they might—writ large—offer a

potential yet unexpected solution to the overtourism of Venice through virtual visits or visits to reproductions of the city's main tourist attractions.<sup>12</sup> These thoughts led us to asking what was the fundamental difference between Venice as a city and reproductions of the city's attractions in Las Vegas, Macao, and Tokyo, particularly if Venice continues to lose residents and reshape itself to conform to the tourist imaginary. Students agreed that one of the key elements of Venice was the city as a living entity with local residents and the ongoing local production of art and cultural outputs.

In learning about the efforts of Vittorio Cini to not only renovate the former Benedictine abbey that was on the island, but also to recover the wooden furnishings of the Longhena reading room, students' reflections on how the reframing and reuse of these spaces, along with their contrasting visions of restoration prompted an engaging discussion about how to preserve Venice's heritage buildings while also adapting them to modern needs and uses. This discussion formed the basis of an archival research activity held in the Fototeca of the Cini. While earlier, the students had reflected on digitisation as a form of preservation, here, thanks to Ilaria Turetta, the students learned about the analog history of the Fototeca, along with the richness of the expansive photographic archive with photos of Venice from the late 19th century through to the 1970s. Students were given instructions for consulting archival materials

12 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in Hannah Arendt (ed.), "Illuminations," New York, Schocken Books, 1969.

and then tasked with researching how Venice had changed in the twentieth century, with particular reference to the photos they themselves had taken that weekend. Students were surprised to discover images of the collapse of the bell tower in San Marco, of the immense flood in 1966, and even of the squero of the Arzaná where we had been earlier in the module. The activity allowed students to not only have first-hand exposure to archival materials, but also to follow their own interests through independent research. The following day, in class, students presented their comparison between sites they had observed in contemporary Venice and what they found in the photographic archive. Some discovered that the high water mark on the buildings had risen significantly, others lamented the transformation of the Fondaco de' Tedeschi, while other students reflected on what the archive did not contain and buildings that were not considered worthy of being memorialised as important for art and architectural history—such as photos of the neo-Gothic, twentieth-century “Teatro d'Italia,” which has since been transformed into a supermarket. These reflections then fed into our next activity, which was imagining how Tronchetto might be re-used, now that it was no longer a cruise ship terminal (sadly, the innovative solutions devised by students—such as a local hub for artists, a museum of Venetian resistance, or a new site for a university institute studying Venetian ecology—are no longer possible as the site is now being prepared for a new 324-room hotel).

As the preceding text has aimed to illustrate, this approach is quite different from one that would be based

within a particular discipline. In this module, students studied concepts from fields ranging from the Digital Humanities to lagoon ecology and combined these in interdisciplinary and creative ways. Through the use of place-based pedagogy and problem-based learning, students were able to experience a rich immersion in the problems faced by Venice today, gaining a unique appreciation of the local complexities of these issues. It was only in the final sessions of the module that students noted how many of these problems—overtourism, rising sea levels, political corruption, pollution from heavy industry, gentrification and the destruction of local communities, struggling with the problem of how to adapt to modernity while maintaining traditions of cultural heritage—were not only problems facing Venice, but indeed were global challenges that intersected on a local level in the problems of Venice. Moreover, rather than focussing on mastery of disciplinary concepts, the module trained students to refine their powers of observation, to question their own biases and positionality, to see themselves as leaders in their own education, and perhaps most importantly, to grow as researchers able to make meaningful interventions in complex problems through asking focussed research questions and conducting independent analysis.

For their final assessment, students were asked to write a research paper on a topic of their choice or to





Students conducting research at the Fototeca of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini



Students conducting research at the Fototeca of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini

put forward a policy proposal (nearly all students chose the research paper as policy proposals for any aspect of Venetian sustainability appeared far too complex as problems). Students on the module have written on a very wide range of topics: comparing Venice and Antarctica with regard to the problem of cruise ships; drawing on frameworks of hyperreality and simulacra in Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard's writings to interrogate the nature of Venice as a postmodern cultural construct; proposing policy solutions to the clam fisheries in the lagoon; to exploring the intersecting layers of political roadblocks—from the local to the global—standing in the way of meaningful sustainable solutions. None of this would have been possible without direct experience of and contact with Venetian materials—from the sandy soil students felt and the organic vegetables they tasted at I&S farm on Sant'Erasmus, to the traditional boat-making tools they handled at Arzanà, to the samphire they tasted when walking through salt marshes, to the tactility of the photos and schede that they handled in the Cini's fototeca when thinking about transformations of urban space. Such an approach not only encourages students to experience the object of their study firsthand, it also creates emotional and personal connections with these materials, fostering a sense of duty and care for preserving them for future generations.

ARChiPub  
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FOCUS RESEARCH 01

Venice Material

VOL. 003

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ARCHiVe  
Analysis and Recording  
of Cultural Heritage in Venice

is a project by  
Fondazione Giorgio Cini  
Factum Foundation  
EPFL-Digital Humanities Laboratory

Supporting funder  
The Helen Hamlyn Trust

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Publisher  
Fondazione Giorgio Cini Onlus  
Island of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice

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ARCHiPub. On Cultural and Digital Matters is an interdisciplinary book series that gathers research on topics such as archival studies, digitisation projects, and cultural heritage conservation. Each volume focuses on a research theme, to be explored by authors from different academic backgrounds.

This contribution is part of the focus research *Venice Material*. Venice Material is the starting point. Venice as a city, as an environment in which history has formed the present civilization and as a fertile humus of ever-new cultural sap. Venice as a bridge between worlds that were sometimes created, sometimes destroyed and still a bridge between ways of producing culture as a primary good. Venice is made out of matter, stone, painting, poetry, a rich and sensitive work, layered materially and immaterially like no other city in the world. Venice as a launching pad for new experimental horizons, as a landing place for new generations of scientists and creative people. But Venice is also considered as a subject of study, a focus of scientific and humanistic research, endowed with the persuasive force of authentic insights that seem to multiply rather than run out. Venice as an object to be investigated, disassembled and reconstructed, digitized and disseminated, curated.