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Learning from Venice

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Learning from Venice

Max Ryyänen

Abstract

What role does arrival play in our aesthetic interaction with a city? Traveling to Venice drastically changed following the building of the railway. The way the city was perceived was wholly altered. The façade of Venice moved from the harbor to the railway station, without any changes being made to the city itself or its architecture. How did this change Venice and how did it change visiting it, and what can we learn from this case?

Key Words

architecture, city, cities, environmental aesthetics, experience, movement, tourism, traffic, Venice

1. Introduction

Venice is a city with a remarkably rich and appealing cultural heritage. It offers its visitors an outstanding compilation of architecture, inspiringly maze-like city planning (or the lack of it, as some of us would put it), distinguished museums representing a broad variety of human accomplishments, from naval history to visual arts, without forgetting the unique sensation of water it is known to possess and its unforgettable urban landscapes that have more or less become paradigmatic for western romantic sceneries, 'romantic' here pointing more to the culture of love than to the artistic era of the 19th century. Besides this, and at least partly because of it, Venice has also become a central tourist attraction.

Following this, visitors deal with Venice through a broader variety of approaches than with most other cities. The "readings" of all tourist cities are based on different ways and socio-economical levels of accommodation, townships and cultural fields chosen for leisure and routes used to move around the city. But Venice offers a particularly rich texture for scrutiny, and there exists a broad variety of traditions in approaching the city. For example, the Venice of an art tourist may not at all be similar to the Venice of someone spending his or her honeymoon there, and the same applies to wine tourists or those who come to Venice just because they happened to like a copy of it that they may have seen in Las Vegas, Rimini, Brussels or Shenzhen.^[1]

Most visitors, though, do not restrict themselves to just one approach, and ways of dealing with Venice, as with any other historical city, can and sometimes even should be varied if one wants to take advantage of his or her trip. On a sunny afternoon in August, in the middle of a hectic kitsch market, while doves are fed and photos taken, it may be no surprise if the basilica of *San Marco* does not appeal as it would if it was encountered on a silent morning in February. So, if one is after a contemplative dialogue with masterpieces of classical architecture, one might want to get back early in the morning (if not in the winter). Of course, it could all end up differently:

A traveler reaching *San Marco* could, in the end, feel more seduced by the kitschy, colorful imitations of it, which are sold outside of the basilica - the sirens on the way to the real destination.

Between the aforementioned ways of approaching the city, its changing seasons and times of the day, the relevant art historical resources which the visitor has in use while confronting the cultural heritage in question, her aesthetic attitude and the interpretational strategies chosen, there is something we tend to forget: Traffic and other ways of movement play a key role in how we perceive cities. The heights from which we surpass buildings, the speed used and, in focus here, our directions and ways of arriving in the city are significant factors in the aesthetics of a city.

In this paper Venice and, through this particular example, all urban environments, are discussed through these less-than-obvious traits of the aesthetics of the built environment, although I wish that the remarks here could also have a wider application. Contrary to Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili*,^[2] where a rather fictitious Marco Polo tells stories to the Great Khan about the cities or towns (the Italian word *città* refers to both) which he has seen on his voyages, and where the only city of his memories which is not mentioned -- Venice -- is after all reflected in all the others, I hope that my paper can, through Venice, illuminate something more or less universal about movement and traffic in all cities, or, to stress what is in focus here, the role that arrivals have in our experience of a city.

To discuss the aesthetics of urban arrivals, I will use, besides my own personal notes, a helpful literary source. A variety of splendid painters from Canaletto to J. M. W. Turner have enriched our conceptions of how Venice should or could look, and scholars and essayists - John Ruskin is *the* pioneer in this field - have debated extensively on the nature of this extraordinary city and how its changes, as well as ways of appreciating it, should be conducted. Moreover, writers from Joseph Brodsky to Donna Leon have described ways of moving in Venice extensively; but considering arrivals, the most illuminating literary work around is without doubt Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*.

My aim is to show how the city as an aesthetic whole relies partly on how one can or should arrive, and how significant aesthetic changes may occur following the development of traffic, and its effects on the arrival.

2. Changing Façade

The city of Venice was founded in medieval times, but the inhabiting of the Venetian lagoon has a history extending into antiquity. When the building of Venice began, there were over one hundred small islands in the area. The islands have been put to use as a base for building, which is often forgotten, as the fact that Venice also partly stands on pinewood piles which have been driven deep into the solid clay found in the bottom of the swampy lagoon makes for a more poetical story. The islands were initially inhabited only fragmentarily but, as the story goes, when the Goths, on their way to Rome, hit the region now known as Veneto, some of the mainland

inhabitants moved to the islands, where a city built according to Roman ideals soon emerged. Venice was already recognizable as a city in the 6th century, when Cassiodorus, secretary of Theodoric the Great, the King of the East Goths, wrote in his epistle of A.D. 523, "to the Venetians of the Lagoons as to a people who had already achieved a certain amount of unity and self-government," as Horatio Brown puts it in his History of Venice.^[3] It was practically finished already in renaissance times. Modern styles and techniques of building have not changed its map significantly. Changes have been hard to work out because of the sensitive methods of building used in the city.

The history of Venice is of a rather peculiar nature, and there have been a variety of political and cultural changes which have affected its cultural life. In medieval and renaissance times it became one of the sea powers of the Mediterranean, but it also became an international center for art, and for a long time the Venetians ruled large territories with their famously original political system, led by the Doge. In early modern times the city had already lost its centrality. It was soon just a marginal player in European politics and cultural life, even more so as Napoleon's France, and later the Austrians, ruled the city, which then, later in the 1860s, became a part of the evolving national state of Italy.

In a marginalized role, following its days of glory, Venice became a forgotten city. During the romantic era it gained attention once again, but as a scene of decadence, a literally sinking ruin of the old world. This silent monument was elevated as a poetic object by British poets, like Lord Byron. Byron even wanted to be buried on Lido, which at that time, before becoming a role model of beach life, and reinforced by the foggy view it offered to Venice proper, may have been as uncanny as a haunted mansion.

Through the emergence of modern tourism, the city became the site it is now recognized as being, something by nature close to a theme-park, where classical works of architecture and fine arts are surrounded by an aggressive selling of kitsch, which is more disturbing in Venice than in many other historical cities, since in Venice one finds no car, motorcycle, bus traffic or other disturbances. And in Venice, as in many other historical cities, it may be hard to differentiate everyday life from the aesthetically pleasing traditions kept alive for the tourists, like the Gondolas or the Carnival.

The change which brought the city to its contemporary state was partly due to the development of traffic. Besides the introduction of motorized water traffic, an important event in this sense was the building of the railroad. Rome and Florence, two other cities that, like Venice, held an important role in the classical Grand Tours of Northern European noblemen, acquired an advantage in relation to Venice when modern tourist culture started to evolve during the 19th century, at least partly because Venice was so hard to reach. One had to go there by water until the approximately two-mile-long railroad connection to the mainland and thereafter to the nearby town of Vicenza was established in 1846. As the rail connection was extended to Milan in 1857, so that tourists could come all the way from this modern metropolis without

having to change trains to get to Venice, people not just from Northern Italy but also from Germany, France and England could more easily visit Venice. In the 1870s, the masses of tourists in Venice had become a cliché in the travel literature.[\[4\]](#)

When Thomas Mann came to Venice in 1911, settled in the *Hotel Les Bains* at Lido and started to write his *Der Tod in Venedig*, the railway had already reinforced its role as *the* way to arrive in the city. Historical means of reaching the city, though, had not yet been forgotten. From *Les Bains* one can only see the Adriatic Sea, but from the western bank of Lido, which hosts the Vaporetto (water bus) stops, one can see the historical façade of the city. It might be here where Mann, while waiting for his connection, could have developed his interest in allowing the protagonist of his short story to praise the city. In his now classical story, which came out in 1912, an old writer, Gustav von Aschenbach, arrives in Venice because he is fed up with the tourist life of the German-speaking beach society at Trieste, a city close to the Veneto region. He chooses to come to Venice via the Adriatic Sea on a small boat taking in tourists via the seaside. Was it already then a nostalgic route? Mann writes:

"Thus it was that he saw it once more, the most astonishing of all landing-places, that dazzling composition of fantastic architecture which the Republic presented to the admiring gaze of approaching seafarers: the unburdened splendor of the Ducal Palace, the Bridge of Sighs, the lion and the saint on their two columns at the water's edge, the magnificently projecting side wing of the fabulous basilica, the vista beyond it of the gate tower and the Giant's Clock; and as he contemplated it all he reflected that to arrive in Venice by land, at the station, was like entering a palace by a back door: that only as he was now doing, only by ship, over the high sea, should one come to this most extraordinary of cities."[\[5\]](#)

In this way the railway did not just change the nature of the city by bringing in tourists, but also by changing its façade. Nowadays most people come to Venice through the railway station if they do not happen to drive to the city, or come by taxi; but in that case they also will end up close to the same end of the city as the trains arrive. The once hard-to-pass lagoon with its uncanny sights, such as houses near the mainland which are half-way built into the sea as if they are anticipating the forthcoming city of wonders and the small islands featuring inspiring ruins, is now reachable in just a few minutes in a static, high-speed blur. When only the main features of the landscape are seen, all details lose form, in the end giving just an impression of speed, an experience appraised by the Futurists (a well-known example they used was sitting in a bus). In their hatred of kitschy worship of cultural history, the Futurists were hungry to destroy the whole city of Venice in their 1910 *Contro Venezia passatista*, a flyer they threw down from the clock tower of San Marco.[\[6\]](#)

And the first building one sees from the stairs of the railway station is a small church with a high cupola, *San Simeone Piccolo*, situated on *Fondamenta San Piccolo*, the waterfront which is on the other side of the canal. It has now arbitrarily become one of the landmarks of Venice, with its façade offered

to tourists as their first impression of the city.

If the visitor will not stay at Cannareggio, but does the common one-day trip favored by relatively many travelers because of the extraordinary high prices of the city, s/he takes a walk, which begins from a bridge close to the railway, which is well remembered by most visitors, but likewise never recalled by its name, *Ponte dei Scalzi*. In fact one has to walk through the whole city before getting to *San Marco*. There is, of course, another way to get there, using the Vaporetto, but in such a case one still cannot reach *San Marco* from the direction Mann appraises. This is even more important to remember if we recall that the map of the city has not changed very much during the last centuries. It is traffic alone which here has changed its aesthetic nature.^[7]

3. Aesthetics of Arriving in a City

The changes described above are common for nearly all cities. Modern bridges, motorways and harbors present them in new ways. Foreign tourists no longer arrive in New York by boat, welcomed by the Statue of Liberty (still a popular scene in romantic, historical movies), but by plane, to its backyard -- often New Jersey. European travelers used to see the Manhattan skyline and the Statue of Liberty as their first sights upon arrival in the New World, and the shifting away from that welcoming façade must have changed the experience of the city.

Modern bridges, motorways and harbors, routes to the airport, underground stations and shuttle buses that take us from airports, railway stations, highways and suburbia on the way to the city center are all different beginnings for the personal narrative of the visitor and his or her dialogue with the city. But how much and in what way do they frame our encounter with it? To what extent do arrivals dominate the aesthetics of cities?

In some cases the way to the city is nearly forgotten because of the extraordinary nature of the port/arrival itself. Take, for example, Paris. I cannot remember anything about the dull train ride to the city from Charles de Gaulle Airport, as the airport itself is such a beautiful architectonic riddle.

In some cases what we see on the way, and during the arrival, has a long-lasting effect on how we experience the city, to the extent that it becomes a must for visitors to arrive in a particular way. I have never visited Las Vegas, but it is hard to find a single text on approaching it that does not include a description of the rise of the neon lights from the desert, from the middle of nothing, and then the entrance into its famous Las Vegas Strip and the first neon advertisements. Even Hunter S. Thompson, who seemed to have missed most of his real-world trips because of his gonzo-journalist drug use (and its poetic descriptions), was keen to explain how Las Vegas popped up from the desert, the experience of arriving in this extraordinary 'city.'^[8]

In most cases, still, we feel free to build the experience ourselves from the beginning. And the arrival can even seem to be an obstacle. You also just have to arrive in some cities and work yourself into their historical hearts. Arriving in Rome,

Milan or Berlin from the airport (whatever airport is used) is anything but a thrill. And there may even exist a conscious choice to start experiencing - enjoying, being curious, gazing at the environment - only when you have reached the center, when you are where you want to go. John Urry neatly describes the experience of being a stranger in an environment used for leisure, even if his ideas can also be used to convey the experience of someone just taking the first walk in a strange city while on a business trip. Talking about "breaking with established routines and practices of everyday life and allowing one's senses to engage with a set of stimuli that contrast with the everyday and the mundane,"^[9] Urry is insightful to hint that it is quite craving to meet a new city or whatever aesthetic whole (this applies of course also to art), and one just cannot engage with the environment in the described way all the time. After visiting Paris or Rome we are exhausted, with good reason.

In this way, the aesthetic experience of many typical tourist cities resembles the experience of visiting art museums. Even if cities are enjoyed more holistically than museums, where singular works of art crave for individual attention, we do, in the same way, actively take the role of experiencing it all. We open ourselves up for stimulation and fresh influences. We let ourselves be seduced. Of course there are also powerfully appealing sites that seduce us to take up this attitude even against our will, and Venice definitely is full of them, being one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Museums also feature noteworthy architectural welcoming ceremonies, as, for example, the enigmatic Pei glass pyramid at the Louvre or the authoritarian stairs of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. But in fact many museums are still, for one reason or another, kept visually quite neutral, maybe to leave room for the works of art to flourish. And even if the building is visually stimulating, like the New York Guggenheim, you save your communicative energy to meet the works of art inside the building. When you arrive in a city, the arrival and the gateway used are not often consciously differentiated from inner-city experiences.

The question of arrival could also be seen as analogous to other fields, e.g., how we begin our encounters in a new love affair, how we start reading a book or how the author of the book seduces us into continuing to read, and so on. Some texts are more closed than others and do entail only one possible beginning. For example, books cannot be read from a new direction, if new interpretations are not taken into consideration. Cities can be interpreted in new ways and we can prepare ourselves in new ways for meeting the city (already Byron claimed that he knew Venice by heart just by being so familiar with reproductions of it), and it is important to have a realistic picture about what to expect. It might not be too much to expect a lot from cities like Buffalo, Kassel or Lahti. But cities can also be approached in various ways geographically, through new ways of using traffic, and by entering them in different times of the year, or at daytime or night. They even change architectonically and through new town planning. The case of Venice is illuminating for the way in which traffic changes the aesthetic nature of a city, since it is quite the same as before the invention of modern traffic

vehicles. Indeed, most cities have been rebuilt in many ways in order to accommodate this revolutionary mode of transportation.

Every new visit adds something to our conception, interpretation and (lived) experience of a city, more than reading a book or visiting an art museum ever could, as the latter ones are not rich enough in possibilities or just always the same. In cities there is always something new to explore, and they always show some new face of their own. [\[10\]](#) While this is a commonplace in works of art, which cities too often are regarded as being, cities make a difference to art by being, as other environments, wholes without frames and boundaries, the texture of which we consider natural for changes and development to occur, which is unseen in our relation to artworks, the integrity of which we fight for.

Changes in a city or new ways of approaching it, though, do not change our relation to it totally. For my own part, I inaugurated my love-hate relationship with Venice by arriving first at its railway station, but during one later trip and after reading Mann's work, I once took the boat back to Venice proper after enjoying a beautiful day at Lido, and got the point of von Aschenbach's thoughts quoted earlier in this text, and through that experience my idea of approaching and entering Venice, and thinking about its façade, changed not just intellectually but also in its lived experience. It was a thrill! But the new perspective did not destroy the old one. Now two types of arrival oscillate in my experience of Venice, as also does the art-historical Venice I seek and the way it is served to tourists, without forgetting my lived experience and the experiences of Venice, which have been made a part of my *Lebenswelt* through literature and arts.

Analyzing arrivals takes us just one step further in a philosophical swamp where all attempts to understand cities and to sketch contours for experiencing them seem to be just adding confusion. But this confusion can also be seen as positive by confronting the endless aesthetic resources of cities and the fact that they do not match any of our needs to control or define the scope of our object of interaction, which is a commonplace in aesthetic discourse on fine arts and popular culture, where pieces also have unchangeable and clear boundaries, as well as signifying contexts which one can easily relate to. Aesthetically rich cities, like natural resources at their best, offer us enjoyable possibilities to lose control and to be surprised and seduced endlessly in new ways. If this article can in any way add to our consciousness of this dimension of aesthetic experience and our relation to cities, Venice or any other, writing it has been fully justified. [\[11\]](#)

Endnotes

[\[1\]](#) For miniature copies of Venice, see the great pictures on the nearly natural size Las Vegas, Rimini and Shenzhen franchises in the August-September 1999 issue of *Colors*, edited by Oliviero Toscani, pp. 4-7 and pp. 18-19. For smaller miniatures, with no possibilities to move around in the scenery, see, for example, the Euro Theme Park in Belgium and the Toichigi Venice in Japan, pp. 14-17.

[\[2\]](#) Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili* (Milano: Mondadori, 1972).

[3] Horatio Brown, *Studies in the History of Venice*, Vol. I (London: John Murray, 1907).

[4] John Pemble, *Venice Rediscovered* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 15.

[5] The quote is from the following translated edition of Mann's work: Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 213.

[6] One description of the event is found in Pemble, *Venice Rediscovered*, p. 159.

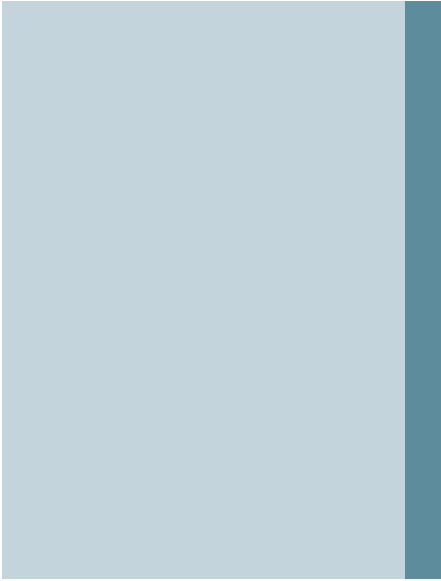
[7] Of course we do not actively think about the view offered from the railway station in Venice as a façade, because it is quite obvious that we pop up in the middle of a part of the city which has not been planned to be shown off in any way; but it still functions as a façade, without doubt, as the city is met by stepping out of the station. This is reinforced by the fact that one does not see suburbia when arriving to Venice, just water and the backside of the station -- nothing that would prepare the visitor by representing the first outskirts of the city. For my own part, I did not have a conception of a façade for Venice until I discovered Mann's book, which appraised the face of the city built to impress the seafarers.

[8] Hunter S. Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time* (London: Picador, 1980), from p. 561 onwards.

[9] John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, second edition (London, New Delhi: Sage, 2002), p. 2.

[10] For scholarly work on the many-faced aesthetic nature of cities, see, e.g., Walter Benjamin's *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire* (1939), which deals philosophically with moving in cities and also discusses in breadth the effects traffic has had on experiencing them (now found in the *Gesammelte Schriften I-2*, pp. 605-653). For more contemporary approaches, see, for example, *The City as Cultural Metaphor*, Arto Haapala, ed. (Lahti: International Institute of Applied Aesthetics, 1998), which gives a rich picture of cities and ways of dealing with them. The most enriching, wittily written and heuristically illustrated introduction to the cityscape of Venice is without doubt Ebbe Sadolin's *Vandring i Venedig* (København: Carit Andersens Forlag, 1956). Most books on this city have narrowed their scope of interest to objects of classical architecture or curiosities from the Gondola to the building of the canals, forgetting the city's nature as a living urban whole rich in details.

[11] Besides my gratitude for a wide range of literature from Joseph Brodsky's *Watermark* to Casanova's semi-fictional adventures, as well as to scholarly writings, from Arnold Berleant's phenomenologically sensitive descriptions of the urban environment to M. Christine Boyer's profound studies on the modernization of cities, which I have had no space to include in this article, I want to express my gratitude for those who have given me valuable comments on earlier sketches of this text or on some of its oral performances. Besides my own interdisciplinary research group funded by the Academy of Finland and its companion in dialogue, a group funded by the



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