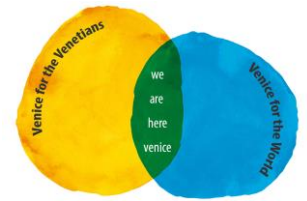


## Culture beyond tourism: Aide-memoire

*Theatrum Mundi in collaboration with weareherevenice*

*12-13 July 2016, Venice*



We live in an era of planetary tourism. Tourism accounts for 9% of global GDP and is climbing. One out of every eleven jobs on the planet is related to the tourist economy.<sup>i</sup> Despite associations between economic development and an ever growing tourist economy, this workshop attempted to articulate some of the problems associated with mass tourism, and specifically in relation to cultural production and display in cities. The workshop asked, are sites of cultural production and display seeing a change of priority and growing competition for the shifting attention spans of an exploding tourism market? And if so, what alternatives are there to the now cemented narrative of “culture-led” regeneration? Drawing on invited case studies from across Europe, the workshop discussions aimed to develop a new language of value that goes beyond the cultural industries’ one-dimensional framework of measuring visitor numbers and economic output.

The first part of the workshop was chaired by Liza Fior of *muf architecture/art*. Throughout this session, place based case-studies were presented. Jane de Mosto, *weareherevenice*, started by quoting Robert Bevan: ‘people are only people in places’.<sup>ii</sup> People in Venice seem to have lost the sense of place through the presence of incredulous tourists who perceive Venice as a ‘theme park’ and its inhabitants as ‘dinosaurs.’ Jane called attention to the revitalisation of the Arsenale and argued for a set of programmes that would stimulate the development of Venice by providing non-tourism related jobs, together with new opportunities for culturally relevant productive activities. The dangers of cruise ships for the sustainability of the city were also addressed, as well as the presence of an institutional weaknesses that results in private businesses usually having priority in gaining access to cultural spaces. Given tourists will always be a dominant presence in Venice, it was suggested that the onus is on developing a form of culture, or cultural space, in which value can be captured from brief and fleeting encounters between spectator and producer. Taken wider, the tourist could be seen as a temporary citizen with an active role to play in

civic life, even if briefly, rather than a visitor with no responsibility to the city. To do so requires attention to the way visitors are invited in, perhaps through the city's self-presentation. This issue appeared again as we moved to Barcelona – Argentinian architect Zaida Muxi. Zaida spoke about the way the city re-creates its own history for consumption by tourists, often smoothing over more political aspects. Similarly, public spaces that were hard-won through civic activism are now capitalised upon through the introduction of private, leisure modes of transport, and through cleansing processes that prevent them from being used by the homeless and others with vulnerable claims to space. Tourist accommodation burdens housing issues and ignites processes of gentrification. “Real life” is presented as an attraction even whilst its sustainability is threatened: locals want to share customs, but with whom and how many? Zaida focused on urban solutions presented by the local government, including how the city's new left-wing government developed a new location-based plan for hotels, limiting how many could open in different parts of the city. Discussions noted that the differences between Venice and Barcelona lie in their morphology: Venice lacks the possibility of expansion and the buffer zone of ‘normality’ provided by the less touristic suburbs that are present in Barcelona, and Venice suffers from a shrinking population, while Barcelona's continues to grow.

The second session zoomed in from city-wide issues to individual institutions. Assemble's Amica Dall discussed the Chapter Arts Centre in Canton, Cardiff. The evolution of the space from a thoroughly improvised organisation occupying an empty school to a commercially successful organization was a way to question relationships between a space, its neighbours, the wider city and the community of practicing artists. Initially Chapter saw itself as “not being *for* Canton but *in it*”. In time, by becoming *for* a wider public it has become more normative spatially in its presentation of work in a ‘white cube’, more insurable, and more international. What has been gained through this process and what has been lost? Visitor numbers, profit, and accessibility are all increased, but the roles of artistic production, informality, and possibly even culture itself are challenged by its use as a social space. Does the nostalgia for the rough and ready artist-run space imply a loss of cultural value? This case allowed the workshop to reflect more closely on the shifts in value which take place through the evolution of space and processes of institutionalisation: from the use value of the arts centre as a place to make to its symbolic value as a pretext for other kinds of gathering. Dr. Marta Ajmar, Deputy Director of the V&A Research Institute

(VARI), presented the case of V&A East within Stratford's new Cultural and Educational Quarter. The underlining context is how this cultural institution will be inscribed in an area recently hit by fast-paced gentrification, where many of the local communities and businesses are being displaced and where attracting many visitors might be challenging. In terms of the role of cultural space, similar questions were asked as in the case of Chapter Arts. What is the balance between local responsibility and global prestige? Can making, or “back of house”, be made visible and become a draw for visitors whilst still allowing it to have a use value for cultural production? VARI's aim is to prototype a laboratory condition to be built into V&A East, where experimental work bridges the museum, university, local communities and creative industries. Making physical collections available to wider audiences and re-defining the museum as a site of inspiration where skill-sets can be exchanged were both seen as attempts to break with traditional perceptions of such institutions. The focus at V&A East will be on conserving *skills* rather than *objects*, with the latter as the focus for modes of *doing*. Visitors bring spending power that allows programmes like this to happen, but places demands on the visibility of the collection that challenges its use value.

Crossovers between these cases were discussed. Could the museum as laboratory be adapted to other contexts discussed in the workshop? How could visitor numbers as the Arsenale underwrite skilled research and production? Are they mutually beneficial? What kind of spatial design would support the needs of both? Between Barcelona and Chapter Arts, it is clear that the desire to invite in a wide audience leads to the use of the space for ‘hedonism’ – sociability, drinking and so on – and challenges its use value, whether that be for artists or residents.

The second part of the workshop was chaired by Adam Kaasa, Theatrum Mundi. Theoretical discourses around alternative languages of capturing value were presented by Dr Cecilia Dinardi, City University, on the creative cities discourse and Dr Arnaud Esquerre, CNRS Paris, on theory of *enrichissement*. Cecilia introduced the creative cities framework and highlighted the possible modes of integration of culture in urban planning through creative districts, cultural strategies and incubation programs, as well as key lessons and challenges. To break with traditional definitions of cultural value which are problematically tied to political will – civil society groups have often taken things in their

own hands in order to further cultural processes. Arnaud discussed his work with Luc Boltanski, which brought a theoretical perspective to the issue of measuring value. Traditional notions of the value of an object link it to scarcity, but several other notions were suggested. In the case of luxury goods a kind of prestige is built through a relatively abundant product through a cultural overlay. In another case, a very mundane object can be given 'collection value' by being presented in the form of a cultural history, giving it symbolic weight above its usability. An asset form of value derives from usefulness. This led to a discussion of the terms in which we should value a city like Venice, which is simultaneously a collection and an asset, for example.

Towards the end of the workshop participants suggested crossovers and overarching ideas:

- A touristic collective imaging of the future does not happen by accident
- We need to identify where the lines of consumption and preservation for future living cross in order to prevent the loss of intrinsic or cultural value in cities
- Politics, political will, and administrative boundaries: institutions are tricky actors that can lead to loss or unwanted redefinitions of space
- Can we tell an alternative, social history of the city beyond its value as a tourist attraction? A photographic project on Venice workers
- An arts installation/performative interventions to ridicule the new transport artefacts for tourist consumption that we saw emerging in different cities, which are alien to city dwellers yet become part of the daily landscape of the city as a theme park (i.e. trolleys, kayaks, skateboards, gigantic cruises, etc.)
- We are here Venice prepares and submits a formal proposal to UNESCO's Creative Cities Network in the next round for the city to be considered 'City of Crafts' to gather further institutional support by an international organisation
- Scale - what problem to solve first and what do people listen to?
- Finding ways not to eliminate a living element from the historic fabric
- Lack of productive diversity, deepening wrong ecological attitude to the city
- Alternative itineraries to the city
- V&A Summer school in Venice - addressing the underbelly of Venice

Proposal: Apply for funding to explore a comparative case-study in more depth.

Possibilities include:

- Research Council networking grants to bring together institutions and academics to develop a question and frame towards a larger bid (up to £30k)
- Leverhulme grant for full research project (£500k)
- H2020 cultural heritage grant

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<sup>i</sup> All statistics from *UNWTO Tourism Highlights 2015 Edition* accessed online 3 May 2016:  
<http://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284416899>

<sup>ii</sup> Bevan, R. 2007. *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, Reaktion Books