

“Venice must learn how to creatively construct its own destiny”

Salvatore Settis (October 27, 2016)



We are delighted to publish an excerpted from "If Venice Dies" by Salvatore Settis, archeologist and art historian, former Director of the Getty Research Institute of Los Angeles and the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa.

Speaking of high-quality architecture, a new building could certainly bring some kind of civic capital to a city and could even be desirable, although it should not be taken for granted that it will. Mario



Botta, one of the great architects of our times, gave us a fantastic example of how this can be achieved with his design for the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto in northern Italy, which was perfectly inserted into the historic urban fabric, not only increasing the numbers of tourists and visitors, but also injecting new lifeblood into Rovereto’s culture, its ambition for the future, and its civic identity. Yet the very same architect also designed a two hundred-foot-tall residential tower in Sarzana, near Pisa, which did in fact produce some civic capital: it sparked protests by a local citizens association and the comment from anthropologist Franco La Cecla that “cubic meters by famous architects don’t make a city.”

The purely economic way in which the formula of creative destruction is used becomes all too clear when the destruction is wreaked by natural causes, and yet the creators of new cubes cheerfully rush to the scene of the disaster to deploy their creativity. This is exactly what happened to L’Aquila in central Italy in the wake of the 2009 earthquake when the picturesque fortress city was reduced to ruins; or what happened in the Emilia-Romagna region where, after the government had allowed belfries and towers to collapse out of negligence soon after another earthquake, a restoration conference held in Ferrara in 2013 launched a rebuilding initiative under the slogan “Where it was, but not how it was.” Some of the proposed models included a tower festooned with enormous red lips, or a tower built entirely out of wheels of Parmesan cheese... examples of destructive destruction.

Instead, when St. Mark’s Campanile collapsed on July 14, 1902, it was decided that an exact replica of the bell tower would be built in exactly the same place. The same went for the Santa Trinita Bridge in Florence and the Palazzo dell’Archiginnasio of Bologna after they were destroyed by aerial bombardments during WWII. It’s difficult to imagine how those cities would look today if this hadn’t happened. In Venice, the Campanile is affectionately referred to as *el paròn de casa* by the locals—the man of the house—because its presence and imposing height (almost 300 feet) towers over the square and the city. Venice might seem to some like a good place where one could experiment with real estate projects and acts of destruction that are more or less creative, and crush the present in the name of the futuristic. Indeed, if it continues to lose its inhabitants in the way that it has, it may well become such a laboratory, until it finally transforms into a city without a people.

On the other hand, Venice could maintain its unrivaled *forma urbis* if it learns how to interpret the paradox of conservation through the prism of its own DNA; if it will learn to employ a poetics of reutilization that doesn’t limit itself to mass tourism. If it doesn’t stick to the unsuccessful model of an embalmed city, but instead slowly ponders each and every change, ensures that all new structures are both delicate and well thought out, given how even the slightest move might alter its precious fabric. Venice will be able to respect itself only if, in the words of Plutarch, it realizes it can still be “like a living thing ... a united and continuous whole [which] does not cease to be itself as it changes in growing older, nor becomes one thing after another with the lapse of time.” If it will remain “at one with its former self in feeling and identity and must take all blame or credit for what it does or has done in its public character” so that “the community, which is held together by operational links, retains its unity.” And let us add a final condition: Venice must know how to creatively construct its own destiny, tailoring each change it makes according to the best possible future for its citizens, and not what the tourists or real estate agencies want.

Salvatore Settis will give a lecture at three different venues in New York next week:

Monday, October 31 @ [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [2]

Tuesday, November 1 @ [92nd Street Y](#) [3]

Wednesday, November @ [Bard Graduate Center](#) [4]

*Salvatore Settis: He is chairman of the Louvre Museum’s Scientific Council. Settis, considered the conscience of Italy for his role in spotlighting neglect of its national cultural heritage, has been



mentioned frequently for the post of minister of culture and Italian president. He is the author of several books on art history as well as a regular contributor to major Italian newspapers and magazines.

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