

## **Studying Cultural Heritage at San Marco Square for the 58<sup>th</sup> Art Biennale**

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### **Abstract**

The study of cultural heritage was central to the CRAFT international workshop held at the Art Biennale in Venice in 2019 for students of architecture, engineering, art history and philosophy. For some of the students, the focus was on the cultural heritage at San Marco Square. This essay is a short reflection about the outcome of this workshop in regard to using cultural heritage in the teaching of contemporary students.

**Keywords:** Cultural heritage, San Marco Square, Venice Art Biennale, Student Workshop.

### **Introduction**

Cultural heritage is omnipresent. It is written in the objects we surround ourselves with and in the spaces, we inhabit. It is materialised in the great works, customs and traditions that are central to our nations, religions and cultures. Cultural heritage is revealed to us from the way we engage with these artefacts, in the way we are affected by them and in the way, we understand them and ourselves. This short essay is a reflection about the outcome of a workshop dealing with this understanding of cultural heritage. The workshop was an experimental approach to studying the cultural heritage related to the San Marco Square of Venice, with the aim of

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exploring its relevance for a contemporary audience. The workshop was attended by a group of international architecture, engineering, art history and philosophy students from a workshop under the auspices of CRAFT: an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership.<sup>1</sup> The workshop took place during a session at the 58<sup>th</sup> Art Biennale in Venice in 2019, with the theme ‘May you live in Interesting Times’.<sup>2</sup>

### **San Marco Square**

The story of the republic of Venice is a magnificent tale of war, trade, seafarer, religion, art, and eventually the breaking down of a Republic<sup>3</sup>. San Marco Square was central to several of these stories, as it was both the political and the religious centre of the republic. San Marco (Fig. 1) is made up of two slightly trapezoidal squares: The Piazza, the main square, and the Piazzetta, the smaller side square connected to the waterfront. The squares are spatially defined by the San Marco Church, the Ducal Palace, The Merciana Library by Sansovino, the Campanile, the new and old Procuratie, and the clock tower by Codussi. Each of these structures tells a grand story of its making, the people they served and the times they were made. The square has been the main stage for numerous narratives, fictive or real, and through the years it has first-hand witnessed the ups and downs of the city. The square has been the scenery for executions of both leaders and the people, it has witnessed the devastating consequences of the plague, and sometimes it has been the scenery for festive gatherings. This cultural heritage is preserved, as claimed by Ruskin, in “the stones”.<sup>4</sup> The square still plays a central role for the people of Venice today, albeit, mass tourism from the abundance of cruise ships and the never-ending battle between photographers and pigeons has taken its firm grip on the spirit of San Marco Square. The cultural heritage of San Marco Square is thus diverse, layered, complex and entangled.



Fig. 1. The San Marco Square. Google Earth.

That San Marco Square is an architectural and artistic treasure, has been accepted for centuries. Camillo Sitte claimed that ‘...the exceptional effect of this assembly of marvels is due largely to skilful arrangements’<sup>5</sup>, and the making of San Marco Square has been called an assemblage art, communal art, or ensemble art, which builds on ‘...a talent for organising unrelated objects into a new and unified whole.’<sup>6</sup> As Venetians were notorious seafarers in the Adriatic Sea, and often returned with stolen artefacts from their many raids in foreign cities, this skill was utilized as they skilfully placed their trophies around the San Marco Square. Probably the most famous example of this trophy re-use is the integration of the Quadriga, the four horses, on top of the San Marco Church, stolen from Constantinople in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Beside their obvious expression of triumph and victory, the quadriga placed on top of the Basilica, to the ordinary Cristian at the time, would be a symbol of the four evangelists, including St. Mark, the patron of Venice. This example reveals that one of the impressive achievements of the people who shaped San Marco Square, builds on the ability to understand the cultural heritage, in order to re-frame it in a new assemblage.

## The Biennale Workshop

The basic idea for the assignment in the workshop was to reinvigorate this talent, with a twist, in order to engage with the cultural heritage of San Marco Square. Instead of stolen trophies, the students were asked to include the white plastic Monobloc chair as the new element to be re-used. The chair as an archetype is a recurrent theme in CRAFT, and as an object the Monobloc chair can symbolize the removal of style, the loss of tactility, optimized production, or equality among all people, themes relevant in regards to contemporary society. By making the students consider the Monobloc chair along the cultural heritage of San Marco Square, they were urged to consider cultural heritage in relation to contemporary society, and perhaps from this juxtaposition get a deeper understanding of both. The assignment was described to the students accordingly (Fig. 2).



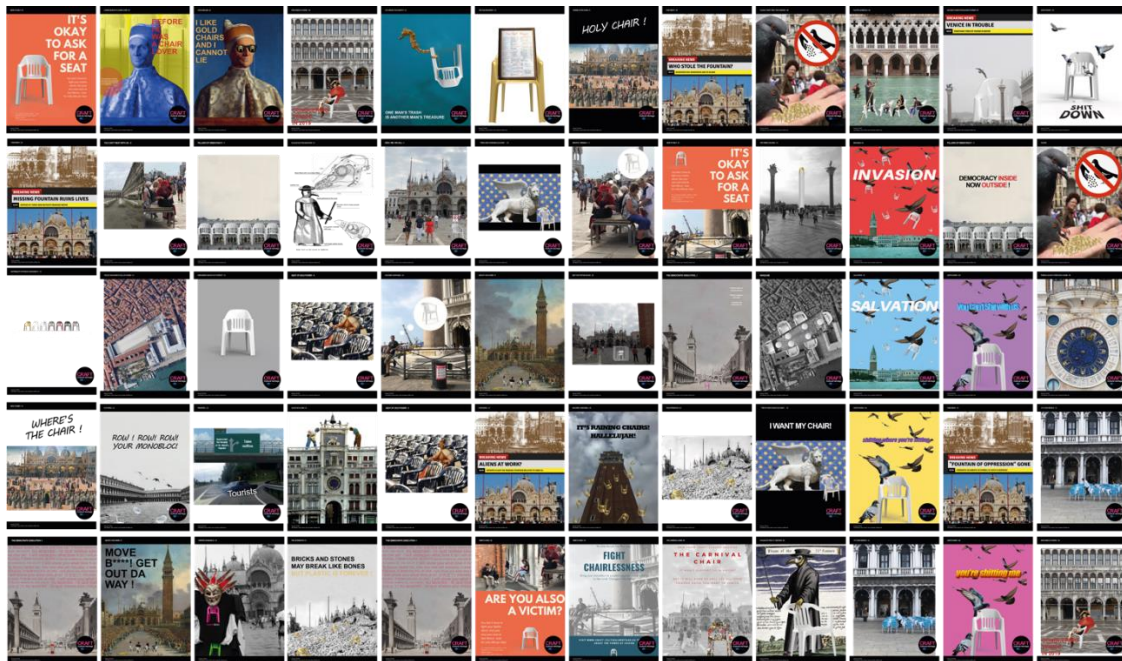
Fig. 2. The assignment for the students. Elias Melvin Christiansen



In practice, the students were asked to develop posters combining pictures or drawings of San Marco Square and the Monobloc chair in a collage. The students thus had to explore the cultural heritage of San Marco Square, and the commercial, optimization or equality symbolism in the Monobloc chair in order to explore which perspectives on the interesting times that we are living in could be expressed through this juxtaposition.

## Posters

The result of the student's work is shown below (Fig. 3). Across the posters we find comments on the role of the historical Doges, tourism, the plague, different interpretations of the San Marco Square, the venetian lion, or the sustainable crisis of our time. In the following section, we will take a closer look at some of the posters,



**Fig. 3.** Posters developed by the students 2019. João Martins, Hana Ceferin, Sara Tacchella, Zhi Min Goh.



Fig. 4. *The Third Column* 2019. João Martins, Hana Ceferin, Sara Tacchella, Zhi Min Goh.

This scene takes place between the Molo columns (Fig. 4), another example of trophy re-use on San Marco Square<sup>7</sup>. On top of the two columns are placed the two patrons of the republic of Venice: The Winged Lion representing San Marco, and Saint Theodore slaying a dragon, which looks like a crocodile with a dog head attached. According to a rumour, there were originally a third column, but under mysterious circumstances the ship transporting the stolen treasure sank just outside of San Marco. According to the rumour, the third column is lost, swallowed by the muddy soil on the bottom of the sea<sup>8</sup>. The students engaged with this fable and imagined the column as a tower of the Monobloc chairs, crowned with a golden edition. The collage reframes the story of this cultural heritage, while imitating, or perhaps parodying, the act of re-using trophies. This interpretation plays with our understanding of value and questioning trophy re-use.



Fig. 5. *Invasion* 2019. João Martins, Hana Ceferin, Sara Tacchella, Zhi Min Goh.

This poster illustrates the Monobloc chair being carried and dropped over the San Marco Square by pigeons (Fig. 5). On top of the illustration is the word **INVASION** written in capital letters, giving the impression of shouting. Today, pigeons are one of the most present, and to some hated, feature of the square, which sometimes can feel like an invasion. The poster expresses this feeling, but the red background colour gives a more aggressive tone to the visual effect, which re-uses the graphics from communist propaganda posters. This makes you read this as a political statement about an alleged invasion of Monobloc chairs and pigeons, perhaps inspired by some of the extreme right-wing political movements of our times?





Fig. 6. *Headline* 2019. João Martins, Hana Ceferin, Sara Tacchella, Zhi Min Goh.

In this poster, San Marco Square is shown from above, and the Piazza is transformed into a trapezoidal table with plates and cutlery (Fig. 6). Surrounding the table, are six Monobloc chairs placed on top of the surrounding buildings, representing the tourist attractions they are today. In this interpretation, the buildings are understood as waiting for a feast where the tourists are served on a plate for them. Perhaps this is a humorous comment on the state of tourism on San Marco Square today?

Together with posters from additional groups of students attending the Biennale workshop, these posters were exhibited for a session at the biennale (**Error! No se encuentra el origen de la referencia.**).





Fig. 7. Exhibition at the Biennale Session. Elias Melvin Christiansen

### Discussion

What can be learned from this experimental study experience? By understanding and re-formulating the narratives from the San Marco Square through the collages including the Monobloc chair, the students explored nuances and interpretations of cultural heritage, which otherwise probably wouldn't have revealed themselves to the students. The format allowed for a more light-hearted and humoristic perspective on the matter, which may have opened up its nuances to a wider audience. And perhaps the reflection about the cultural heritage in combination with the contemporary artefact in the Monobloc chair allowed the students, and the audience, to relate sometimes complex cultural heritage to something more familiar, and thus maybe, more accessible?

Whereas cultural heritage definitely is much more than what has been included in this workshop, the experiment is an alternative, hands-on and

accessible approach to studying cultural heritage, which easily can be transformed to other scenarios.

### Acknowledgements

*Thank you to João Martins, Hana Ceferin, Sara Tacchella, Zhi Min Goh, for participating in this workshop experiment.*

### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “Art Biennale Venice 2019” CRAFT Cultural Heritage, accessed June 7, 2020, <http://craft-culturalheritage.eu/activities/art-biennale/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Biennale Arte 2019 – 58th International Art Exhibition” La biennale, accessed June 7, 2020, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2019>.

<sup>3</sup> Dial Parrot, *The Genius of Venice: Piazza San Marco and the making of the Republic* (New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (New York: Da Capo Press. 1851/2003).

<sup>5</sup> Camillo Sitte, *The Art of Building Cities* (New York: The Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1945), 37.

<sup>6</sup> Parrot, *The Genius of Venice*, 146.

<sup>7</sup> Parrot, *The Genius of Venice*, 152.

<sup>8</sup> “St. Marks lost third column”. Atlas Obscura, accessed June 9, 2020, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/st-marks-lost-third-column>.

Received: 2020-06-12

Revised: 2020-06-24

Accepted: 2020-07-05