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Practicing Cautionary Placemaking: Urbanism and the Venetian Ghetto

BY CHUCK WOLFE



At first glance: A tasteful and compact, new urbanist venue?

The urban scene above is where “small-g” ghettos come from, the *Ghetto* in the Cannareggio section of Venice. This small island, with seven-story “high-rises” dictated by necessity, became the namesake of overcrowded and segregated urban neighborhoods around the world.

Yet, at the same time, from its roots in the 16th century to the present, the Ghetto has featured the compact, dense, walkable core—the type is fancied as the antidote to sprawl—with qualities central to mainstream urban reinvention today.

Are there risks of a “one size fits all” approach to reshaping our cities, and making new, sustainable places? Many have asked before—from those who accuse the “new urbanist” movement of an overly nostalgic “*historic amnesia*” to earlier, social engineering-based critics of the “*neighborhood unit*” theory. However, few if any provided such a direct and ironic photographic illustration of an undesired land use and societal outcome.

These ironic photographs are not so much a tool to criticize goals, but to frame a cautionary essay, an illustration to assure we remain mindful of the task at hand—to provide more livable cities, and more sustainable forms of development. An overemphasis on spatial outcomes and descriptors, without more, risks only polemic debates of urban v. suburban choice, and the virtues of urban alleys v. sprawl and cul-de-sacs.



Proportional height to streetscape with tasteful simplicity or verticality by necessity?

Australian urban designer Ruth Durack suggested earlier in the decade (with a passing reference to the Venetian Ghetto) that the urban village is dictated by a rigid form and function which *clashes with fundamental principles of sustainability*. She argued for a more free-form of planning that recognizes multiple, interactive systems which cannot be dictated by static physical models, premised on the “cultures” of green (e.g., agri-, perma- and aqua-). She provided a pragmatic focus by stressing commencement of sustainable community planning with a specific strategic act or project, such as a housing start, rather than imposition of a village plan.

The strategic act, she notes, should feature dynamic citizen input, and accept the unpredictability and discontinuities of American urban evolution. Durack’s emphasis was a careful undressing of “new urbanism”: without an awareness of urban ecology and a strategic input, the urban village may be little more than a dangerous sinecure.

Nonetheless, we need guiding “live-work” principles of the compact, walkable, transit-based communities which frame emerging urban policy. But we also need to keep a contextual eye on the prize. Integration of local values and preferences is a central aspect of the public process and is critical to the creation of unique communities.

For instance, as we concluded in a recent study of barriers to transit-oriented development in Washington State, silo-specific orientations often fail to discern the wide variety of investments, regulations, policies, financing mechanisms, and public outreach needed for developing alternatives to conventional auto-centric development.



After 1516, Christian curfew guards (paid for by Jewish residents) assured that island inhabitants were secured at night by locked gates at the bridge

The point: Track context over catchwords. In another place at another time, the virtues of compact, walkable and dense were the very isolation we now abhor.

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Centuries of Jewish Culture Fill a Tiny Ghetto Corner of Venice Offers Hidden Synagogues, Rich History

By MARYGAY KLEIN
Staff Writer

TUCKED AWAY AMONG the lacework of canals, narrow alleyways and florid architecture that makes up the ancient grid of this city is a little-visited corner laden with history. The Jewish ghetto, the world's oldest, remains intact and is still marked by dark porticos, peeling paint, laundry hung out to dry, and windows placed so close above one another that your back aches just thinking about the low ceilings. The area is beginning to show new signs of life as a bohemian neighborhood inhabited by artists and students, while the most precarious buildings, and one synagogue, are finally being restored.

Behind the neighborhood's cracked exterior lies a melting pot of Jewish culture that only Venice, the trade center that brought together East and West, could have attracted. In the Middle Ages, the Rialto commercial center in Venice was dependent on Jewish merchants and, in particular, on Jewish money lenders who financed ship captains, as Shakespeare vividly recounts in "The Merchant of Venice." Jews were sometimes persecuted and expelled, but despite the proximity of the often inhuman Venetian prison next to home, Venice brought together Jews from all over the world in its tiny ghetto, which became a center for Jewish culture and study.

Today's visitor can best discover what lies behind the walls by taking a tour starting at the Jewish museum in Campo del Giudeo Square. There are information-packed tours in English every hour, the first starting at 10:30 a.m. and the last at 4:30 p.m., every day except Sunday. You'll get to see three of the five synagogues, called shtetl in Venetian dialect: the Italian, Spanish and Catalan shtetl. In the summer, the Spanish shtetl is used regularly for religious services, and visitors are shown the neighboring Levantine shtetl instead, which is used for worship in winter. The Scola Grande Tedesca (German synagogue) had to be closed recently for restoration.

Rich Interiors

The synagogues, concealed behind ragged facades and not all identifiable from the outside, have remarkably rich interiors. They are often lit by intricate chandeliers and decorated with baroque columns, frescoes and stucco in opulent materials such as marble, gilt and dark woods.

Until the 16th century, Jews were allowed to come to Venice for money-lending activities, but were not allowed permanent residence permits. The first Jews were allowed to settle in Venice only in 1516, when the city was involved in a war against neighboring Genoa and needed loans from the Jewish money lenders.

But racism persisted, and in 1541 Venice's ruling council confined all the Jews to a small area not far from today's train station, where there had been wells, or fountains. The gates were locked at night, and restrictions were placed on Jewish economic activities. Jews were only allowed to operate pawn shops and lend money, trade in textiles, and practice medicine. They were allowed to leave the ghetto during the day, but were marked as Jews. Men wore a yellow circle stitched on the left shoulder of their shirts or jackets, while women wore a yellow scarf. Later on, the men's circle became a yellow beard and old ladies a red one.

VENICE

The first Jews to settle in the ghetto were the central European Ashkenazim. They built two synagogues, the Scola Grande Tedesca in 1525 and the Scola Canton in 1612. They are on the top floors of adjacent buildings above the Jewish museum and, from the outside, are not easily distinguishable from the apartments around them. The best guide explains that space was limited (women in particular were crammed into the women's galleries) and that it was important to the Jews not to build anything between the synagogue and the sky — hence their strange attic locations. The Canton synagogue was probably added to house the large number of Jews already in the ghetto.

Ark of the Covenant

In the synagogue, the focal point is the elaborate ark of the covenant where the Torah is kept behind gilded, sliding doors between two Corinthian columns. The wall behind either side of the gilded doorway between columns.

Next came the Levantine Jews, who practiced the Sephardic rite (from the Hebrew word for "Spanish"). When they got their own neighborhood, an extension of the Venetian ghetto granted in 1541, they were wealthy enough to build a synagogue on the ground, rather than in cramped top-floor apartments. The rich red and gold interior of the Levantine synagogue is particularly beautiful. If you're there in the summer and get to see it, note the intricately carved wooden Jewish, or pulpit, and the carved wooden decorations on the ceiling.

Mixed in with the poorer Ashkenazim were Italian Jews who had migrated north to Venice from central and southern Italy. In 1575, they built their own synagogue on top of some apartments in the same square as the German shtetl. The Scola Italiana has a cupola, barely visible from the square outside, and a garden with columns marking its entrance. Inside, there's another exquisitely carved wooden ark of the covenant, housing the Torah.

The Spanish Inquisition forced Jews to convert to Christianity. This led groups of "crypto-Jews" to drift toward the much more tolerant Venetians, which sometimes put commercial interests above religious ones. Finally, in 1581, the Spanish Jews were granted recognition and a place to live in the ghetto, and they, too, built a synagogue. It is just across from the Scola Levantina in the Campo della Scorta and uses a similar Sephardic rite.

Levantine and Ashkenazim, Italian and Spanish Jews all lived together in the ghetto through hard times — including the plague of 1630 — and better times, until Napoleon threw open the ghetto gates in



Illustration: Synagogue interior

1797 and recognized equal rights to the Jews of Venice. At its height, around 1650, the ghetto housed about 4,000 people in a space roughly equivalent to 2 1/2 city blocks. Before World War II there were still about 1,500 Jews in the ghetto, but 200 were deported by the Nazis and only seven returned.

TIPS

Useful phone numbers:

- Jewish Community of Venice: 39-41-715012.
- Jewish Museum: 39-41-715358.
- Attention foodies: Travelers can feast at a delicious new kosher restaurant called Gam-Gam on the Cannaregio canal at the outer confines of the ghetto vecchio. Gam-Gam Kosher Bar & Restaurant: 39-41-715294.

The story of the Ghetto, a classic urban village