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POSITIONS

# The Traveling Scholar and Harbors of Urban Aesthetics: Discovering the Ambiguities of Site-Specificity in Venice and Marseille

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the discovery of site-specific qualities in contemporary Venice and Marseille. Both Venice and Marseille are classic harbor cities, but their links to tourism are increasing in the age of cultural planning and consumption. Two series of results stand out. Venice proves to be site-specific at all levels of the frontstage city, as well as in the offstage of its industrious areas. Instead of rejecting the latter as alien to Venice, one should recognize the harbor zones as a reservoir of urban site-specificity. If these areas become truly public, they may in turn add a modern relief to the conventional staging of Venice. The observations of site-specificity in Marseille delve into a particular place in a critical situation: the collective bus shelter in the Vieux Port during a torrential shower. Here, sensory and reflective processes contribute to the researcher's appreciation of site-specific qualities. Present on site, the researcher is affected by sensory impressions and socio-cultural exchanges. This reciprocity between human presence and the environment transforms urban space from cool objectivity into a matter of lived life. Critically reconsidered, such experiences may strengthen the urban-cultural reflections on site-specificity as a realm of ambiguous contributions to urban aesthetics.

KEYWORDS

Site-specificity, Harbor cities, Venice, Marseille, Siegfried Kracauer

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> In this way the person leaving the harbor loses his sense of the measures of life, a life that lies behind him. It falls apart in nothing but single parts with which he may improvise the fragments of another life.
>
> Siegfried Kracauer[1]

## Foreword

When "site-specificity" becomes a central focus in urban aesthetics, it soon proves necessary to address the ways in which scholars and professionals actually come to determine site-specific qualities in urban fabrics and social life. How are certain traits and habits singled out as 'site-specific'? May they also serve as elements in a refashioning of harbor areas to the benefit of urban culture? Or do issues of urban aesthetics go beyond the realm of design and normativity?

The present study provides answers to such questions of urbanity and aesthetics by means of observations from two South-European cities. In both cities site-specificity and harbor areas are closely related with matters of aesthetic experience in general and with urban aesthetics in particular. For centuries, Venice and Marseille have forged long-term and intimate symbolic relationships between surrounding waters and diverse harbor functions. Today, encounters with such urban spaces and practices invite the visiting researchers to single out particular and even unexpected aspects in urban fabric and contemporary life. Thanks to site-specific features, self-reflexive approaches to harbor transformation and to urban aesthetics at large may develop.

The situation of Venice – a city located in a lagoon – implies a rich variety of site-specific qualities. Some of these fit neatly into the image of frontstage and authentic Venice. Others belong to an industrial and modern layer of city reality, and they should not be underestimated. In this way, a broader conception of site-specificity comes to the fore, and it may foster a less nostalgic representation of Venice as well as provide other values in contemporary harbor transformation than those of cruise tourism.

Historically, Marseille is a Mediterranean harbor city *per se*. After modernization and dislocation of its harbor territories in the early 20th century already, this city is currently taking important steps from industrial urbanism into cultural planning. This transformation allows for new and unprogrammed experiences of site-specificity, even in the traditional harbor settings. Considered with a bit of conceptual care, such situations may also teach us what it means to "appreciate site-specific qualities"

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1 "So verliert der aus dem Hafen Scheidende den Sinn für die Maße des Lebens, das hinter ihm liegt. Es zerfällt ihm in lauter einzelne Teile, aus denen er die Bruchstücke eines anderes Lebens improvisieren mag." Siegfried Kracauer, "Stehbars im Süden" (1926), in S. Kracauer, *Straßen in Berlin und anderswo* (Berlin: Das Arsenal, 1987 [1964]), p. 51, trans. Henrik Reeh.

– and how one may be attentive to site-specificity in those experiential processes which underlie urban aesthetics.

Altogether, Venice and Marseille not only provide observations of site-specificity but also spark reflections on the ways in which site-specific qualities are appreciated, and raise contemporary questions of urbanity and aesthetics.

## I. Encountering Venice – Determining Site-Specificities

> Venice is a port, a huge port, in constant activity. Shuttles, *vaporetti*, taxi boats, yachts, sailboats, patrol boats, barges, canoos, tugboats, very big cruise ships. You can live constantly on water, and return home, garden and terrace.
>
> Philippe Sollers[2]

### 1. The view from above – heightened by XXL cruise ships

There is no doubt in the mind of the airline passenger; this is indeed Venice that one sees down there. Sitting at the window in the right side of the airplane on its way to the Marco Polo Airport, one clearly observes the site-specific structure of Venice with its two or three major areas united around the inverted S-shape of Canal Grande. This unity distinguishes itself from the muddy waters and swampy islets of the lagoon. Once inside the city labyrinth, one will never encounter such a strikingly simple image of Venice, not even on a map.

The reality effect of the structure is enhanced by three gigantic cruise ships which are anchored at strategic places that the pedestrian city tourist rarely comes across, and certainly will not perceive in the same sculptural and scale-revealing way as provided by the oblique view from the airplane. This experience may last just for a minute, but the contrasted coexistence of traditional Venice around Canal Grande and the extra-large bodies of contemporary cruise ships will reoccur in the following observations on site-specific harbor qualities in Venice.

### 2. Horizontal waterscapes and vertical *briccole*

As soon as one sets foot on the ground, horizontality takes over. The *Alilaguna* boat line goes straight through the lagoon from the airport to the city, and during this trip, lasting about an hour, one experiences the linear

2 "Venise est un port, un grand port, à l'activité incessante. Navettes, vaporetti, motoscafi, yachts, voiliers, vedettes, péniches, barges, canots, remorqueurs, containers, très gros paquebots. On peut y vivre constamment sur l'eau, et rentrer chez soi, jardin et terrasse." Philippe Sollers, *Dictionnaire amoureux de Venise* (Paris: Plon, 2004), p. 89, trans. Henrik Reeh.

aquatic highway as a realm of speed and waves. The powerful engines of varnished taxi boats turn the fairway into a whirlpool. Meanwhile, the traveler registers the velocity of the trip via the accelerated rhythm of passing *briccole*, scultural posts of barked treetrunks which are planted at regular distances in the water and numbered for the sake of order. (Fig. 1) Delineating the fairway, these pilings provide site-specific components in the lagoon of Venice, as well as in the inner canals of the city.[3]

FIG. 1 Pilings framing the fairway between Venice and the Marco Polo Airport. Source: Photo by the author.

## 3. Heterogeneous sailing practices

The journey of the arriving traveler ends at one of the *vaporetto* stops in Canal Grande, next to the Rialto Bridge with its monumental staircase and two rows of shops. The boat traffic on the canal is intense, and one hardly understands how *vaporetti*, taxiboats, police and ambulance vessels, along with utilitarian motor boats and ritual gondolas for tourists, are capable of coexisting without ever colliding. Although the omnipresence of flashing cameras and smartphones may recall the pejorative judgment of Venice as an urban themepark, one cannot blame the (other) tourists who feel compelled to react and therefore try to eternalize this amazing urban spectacle by way of photographs and videos. Boats of all sizes, people of various nations and cultures, and the Venetian urban stage form a scenery which hardly has its equivalent in the entire world. Isn't this another example of site-specificity?[4]

3 On the overlooked yet foundational Venice phenomenon of piling, see Henrik Reeh, *The Pilings of Venice* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2023).

4 A photographic exploration of the view from the Rialto Bridge overlooking Canal Grande but also of the other visitors on the outer staircase (facing South) is provided in Max Farina, *Rivus Altus* (Milan: Studio Farina Zerozero, 2016).

FIG. 2 Venice, a city for pedestrian practices – on bridges, too.
Source: Photo by the author.

## 4. Sailing and walking – goods and human beings

Inside the so-called *sestiere* (sixths), i.e. the neighbourhoods of Venice, a structural division prevails between the transportation of goods and products which takes place by boat on canals, and the movements of human beings who depend on pedestrian practices in the alleys (*calle*), or across squares (*campi*) and numerous bridges.

It is as if human work cannot be hidden as in other cities; here, all sorts of deliveries are done by hand. The fact that open boats are operated by human beings makes Venice appear as a living and working city, and not only as a tourist setting. How can such a complex city be serviced that smoothly by modest-sized boats only?

On the other hand, the city is a place for pedestrians; the many bridges make bicycling irrelevant, and, instead, people are simply walking along complex itineraries, either in their own neighbourhoods or to destinations in distant parts of the city. (Fig. 2) Taking a *vaporetto* may sometimes help, but such vessels sail in the lagoon and in the Grand Canal only.

Altogether, Venice is a low-tech and body-animated cityscape, and one soon forgets about automobile traffic. The absence of cars is just another site-specific quality among the many that make Venice an extraordinary place to live.

## 5. Cruise ships in the urban lagoon

Given the importance of the human scale in Venice urban space, it is an astonishing moment when ten- or fifteen-storey cruise ships appear in the lagoon, passing in front of the Doge's Palace and all the way through the Bacino di San Marco towards the exits into the Adriatic Sea. The visual contrasts are even more shocking when perceived from the inside of the

urban fabric; suddenly the perspectives of the lagoon are interrupted while over-sized ships slowly sail by in what seems to be a montage of incompatible scales.

FIG. 3 A cruise ship leaving Venice, guided by pilot ships, around 6 pm., October 2016. Source: Photo by the author.

On the other hand, the cruise ships leaving also put the city into relief. The ritual departures used to take place every day before sunset. Pilot boats pull the cruise liners which are simply too big to sail on their own, through the delicate fairways of the Giudecca Canal and further toward the strip of the Lido. (Fig. 3) The man-made infrastructures – some fairways are about 15 meters deep – are considered responsible for the frequent and increasing floodings of Venice. To the non-informed and naive observer, however, the cruise ships themselves are amongst the site-specificities of Venice – a city which has always been a port for international commerce as well as for migration in and out of Europe. During the daily departure of cruise ships, the Venice lagoon reappeared as a harbor basin of global traveling and migration.

After many years of criticism and public debate, the travelers' ritual of leaving Venice on a cruise ship sailing by the Piazza San Marco seems to be a thing of the past. Still, I vividly recall the performance of pilot boats on Monday June 3, 2019, redoing their own moves from the day before, when a gigantic cruise ship went out of control and crashed into a tour ship moored along the Zattere quay in the Dorsoduro neigborhood of Venice.

## 6. When the locals are leaving

The name of *Zattere* applies to the southern shore or quay where tree trunks used to arrive by waterway to Venice from the woods on the mainland. Today Zattere is a privileged place for watching the heterogeneous traffic of boats and ships on the large Giudecca Canal. From wooden platforms built in and above the water, little restaurants and ice cream

terraces make you feel a gentle breeze and invite you to watch the setting sun and the fading light.

After sunset, the question arises how to return home at the other end of historic Venice. *Vaporetti* are parting in all directions; but the most efficient solution seems to be a particular express line (*linea 2*) which makes a detour by the Santa Lucia train station but, later on, has only one stop in the Canal Grande before arriving at the Rialto Bridge.

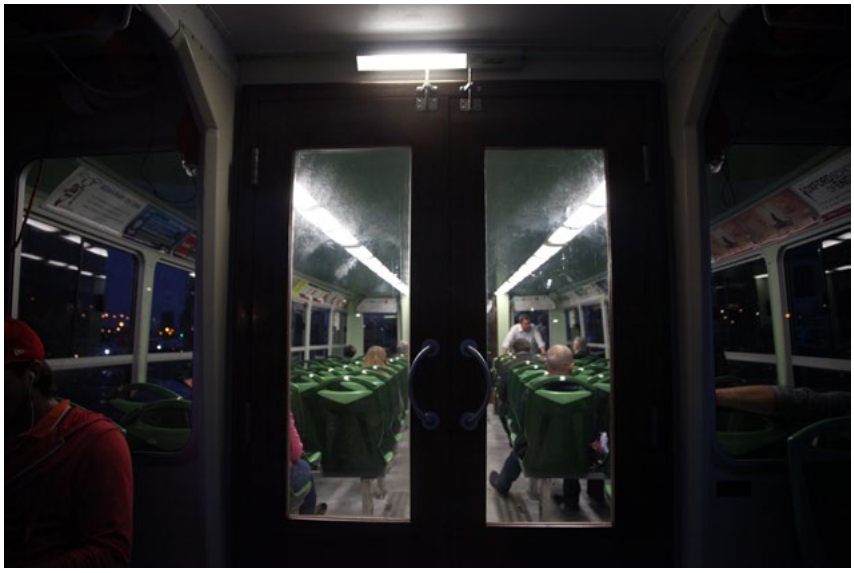

FIG. 4 A *vaporetto* harbor bus in the evening darkness, after having left its suburban passengers at the Venice train station. Source: Photo by the author.

In the early evening, the *vaporetti* passengers are different. Whereas tourists and visitors are dominant during the daytime and make the *vaporetti* appear as leisure boats, the local crowds of employees are leaving Venice after finishing work in shops and other services. At 6:30 or 7 in the evening, certain *vaporetto* lines function as mass transit to the mainland where the suburbia of Venice is located.

All of a sudden, Venice looks like a working city like others, with daily routines and social layerings which extend the urban territories to the Terraferma in Mestre and beyond. Only a few passengers leave the *vaporetto* at the social housing blocks of the Giudecca island inside Venice. Many more get off at the Tronchetto stop with its huge parking lot, but also at Piazzale Roma where buses are leaving, or at Ferrovia, the train station, which has been connecting Venice to the rest of Europe for more than a century and a half. (Fig. 4)

The romantic view of vernacular Venice is slightly altered by a sense of social reality which reveals Venice as a working city with ordinary people, embedded in modern urban and suburban materialities. Traveling on this *vaporetto* line at night makes Venice stand out as a mysterious and extensive urban harborscape, permeated by a profound darkness with sparse electric illuminations only. Isn't this another site-specific feature worthwhile being noted?

## 7. Hidden harbor basins

The distance between stops allows the *vaporetti* to adopt a regular and faster speed than in the Canal Grande where *vaporetti* as a means of transportation are also platforms for the tranquil contemplation of life and façades. Between Zattere and the railway station, one gets an intense feeling of sailing as a continuous movement on water. On the other hand, the quays are quite far away, and it is difficult to get a detailed impression of life and spaces there. Yet the difference from the historic Venice in the traditional *sestiere* is striking; the *vaporetto* lines to the train station pass through quasi-industrial zones where all sorts of utilitarian boats for maintenance or for garbage are moored at night, next to long lines of boats belonging to the police or to other public authorities.

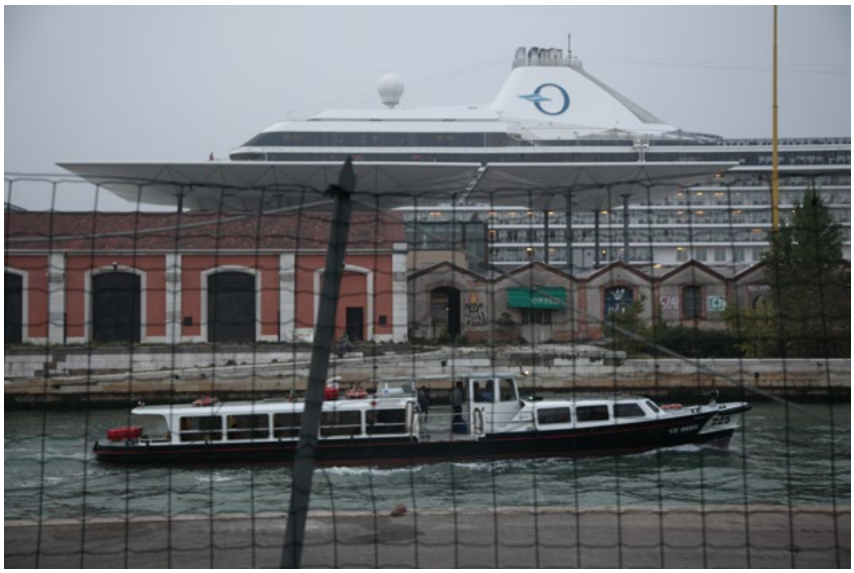

FIG. 5 A *vaporetto* harbor bus on its way to the train station of Venice, passing in front of cruise ships in a remote position, but still part of the Venice cityscape and its distinctive urban reality. Source: Photo by the author.

In addition, this *vaporetto* itinerary provides encounters with enormous cruise ships which stay in Venice overnight. (Fig. 5) Typically, three or four boats lie along the quays of Venice, starting at inaccessible areas prolonging the Zattere, which is the place for relatively modest boats. Real ocean liners are resting either in the Canale Colombuola (in passing, one only gets a glimpse of the back of a huge cruise shop) or in the Bacino delle Stazione Marittima. The *vaporetto* passes through the latter harbor bassin and confronts its passengers, not only with the immensity of cruise ships but also with harbor landscapes which look radically different from pre-modern Venetian islands and islets. Underneath the bridges linking Venice to the mainland, uncanny feelings may even occur.

Traveling by *vaporetto* in the early evenings, one sometimes gets the impression to discover a functional and social 'backstage' or 'offstage' of the city. This industrial and ordinary zone seems to defy or even criticize the authority of 'frontstage' Venice. Yet the harbor zones also contribute to making the city's frontstage – historic Venice of the *sestiere* – appear

possible and, thus, easier to understand. Venice is more than a fairy tale which has turned real.

As everywhere else in the world, one shouldn't substitute the tourist landscape of Venice for the city (let alone the city region) as a whole. After all, the labourious harbor zones represent a more dynamic and complex socio-cultural reality than the city of tourism usually makes us believe.

## 8. Terrains vagues and wrapped up cars

Venice's cityscapes of industrial and functional routines are neither easy to find nor to access. Unless pedestrians really decide to explore these areas by foot, and know how to get there, they would never come across the large-scale territories of the city. Walking around next to the cruise port feels like leaving the city, although this is still Venice-in-the-lagoon, yet in a peripheral version that features train tracks and car parks.

While every single square meter counts in historic Venice, these external areas display huge parking lots which look like genuine terrains vagues; one feels that once upon a time something else has been going on here, and that new functions could soon be added. In fact, a competition was organized and a project by Italian architect Marco Galantino has been selected, just before the global financial crisis in 2008. In the mid-2010s, however, an extensive and little occupied parking field is all you see. (Fig. 6) Framed by a highway, it is traversed by an elevated monorail people mover which runs back and forth between the Venice railway station and two strategic places in the harbor zones where tourists and commuters arrive in or leave the city.

FIG. 6 Car parking in a car free city: wrapped up or ready to drive.
Source: Photo by the author.

Below the people mover on stilts, grass and wild trees are growing, thus adding a romantic and natural touch to the industrial leftover. A road lined by two rows of trees recalls a traditional road to the cruise harbor. Now it

serves as a running path for a few joggers. On fenced off parking lots next to it, cars are dressed up in protective canvas covers which turn them into exhibition objects. Or the cars may simply have been parked on a long-term basis, unless they are soon to be shipped to remote destinations. For the visiting pedestrian, this road is a *cul-de-sac*: a museum of out-dated territories and signs of fading industrialism.

## 9. Industrial archaeology

This is indeed offstage Venice, a part of the city where a few automobiles are passing, and trains may still be running, while the warehouses along the tracks look like industrial ruins. Pedestrians venturing into this urban zone whose infrastructure is disconnected from the rest of Venice, discover an industrial canal which at first looks private and sealed off, just as the quays are inaccessible. Construction materials are stored there, ready to be loaded on larger boats which are moored along the quay. An old military tank behind a barbed wire fence is bearing testimony to a previous stage of industrial modernity. (Fig. 7)

FIG. 7 Site-specificity with urban potentials? Just as parts of the Venice Arsenale remain inaccessible military areas, an old tank testifies to the fenced off sections of canals and basins which link spectacular Venice to the city of utilitarian infrastructures. Source: Photo by the author.

To the traveler, this outskirt territory of Venice is an unexpected and exotic place which provides an everyday commentary to frontstage Venice. However, behind the old serial warehouses on the other side of the canal, tall and elegant cruise terminals are already complete, built during recent decades in order to update the conditions of cruise tourism. Nearly two million visitors are arriving and leaving Venice by cruise ship every year (2012), and in the 21st century the economic role of such harbor activities is increasing rapidly, as Wolfgang Scheppe and students have

documented in *Migropolis: Venice – Atlas of a Global Situation*.[5] But why should this commercial way of using Venetian land remain undisputed? Wide *terrains vagues* are still waiting to be reinterpreted in an urban-cultural perspective.

## 10. Authentic vs. industrial Venice: Negotiating the remains of modernity

The full autonomy of Venice is a history limited to a pre-modern past. Having lost its political independence with Napoleon's occupation in 1797, Venice was attached to the mainland by way of infrastructures such as train lines in the mid-19th century and, in the fascist 1930s, by a car bridge, later named *Ponte della Libertà*. In economic and human terms, Venice is linked to the Terraferma, and to the world beyond the Lagoon.

Yet, cars (as well as trains) still look alien in Venice. They are only present in the harbor areas, next to the cruise ships. Many of these areas are the property of institutional investors, primarily the *Porto di Venezia*, the local port authority. Just as the harbor territories are part of the functional and economic totality of the city, it would be worthwhile asking to what extent they also constitute a layer of modern and industrial site-specificity in Venice. Does the local industrial heritage have a contribution to make to the self-consciousness of contemporary Venice? Considered as supplementary elements of urban reality, the harbor zones might promote a less iconic and clichéd image of Venice as a whole. (Fig. 8)


FIG. 8 Architectural heritage of industrialism, behind barbed wire. Source: Photo by the author.

5 Wolfgang Scheppe, ed., *Migropolis: Venice – Atlas of a Global Situation* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009), 210-331.

## 11. A dialogue between offstage Venice and the frontstage city

Instead of being used solely as a territory for cruise tourism, or for temporary parking lots, the harbor zones may some day become part of the public city. Just as the Venetian military area of the *Arsenale* is being integrated into the accessible city (from which it was excluded), the industrial harbor areas at the opposite end of Venice may eventually become publicly accessible.

If they were joining urban public space instead of being isolated from it, the hitherto monocultural harbor areas of Venice might benefit from the site-specific qualities they already possess. In reality, Venice is a multi-layered urban reality to be experienced on site, but it is also integrated into a global system of cultural and economic tourism. This system is both maintaining and transforming Venice, not simply elimininating and neutralizing it. In this context, the site-specific qualities of modern industrial territories constitute an archive which may inform and strengthen the site-specific spatial and cultural vocabulary of Venice in the 21st century.

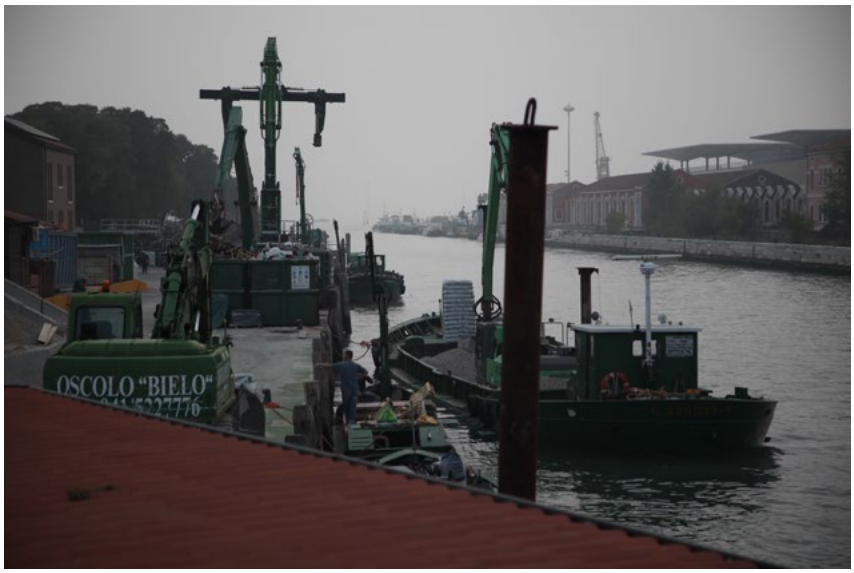


FIG. 9 Backstage Venice, a working city. Source: Photo by the author.

## 12. Concluding remarks: Site-specific qualities in generic reality

Site-specificity is present at all levels of the traveler's encounter with Venice, be it in the view from above, when the typical form of urban space is first revealed, or in the experience of everyday practices during prolonged sailing in the lagoon and in the Canal Grande. The essential role of walking in the urban districts, and the fact that cargo is transported by boat into the local canals, also constitute site-specific features – just as the cruise ships' previous, ritual departure from the city in the late afternoon may be considered one.

Similarly, the *vaporetto* express lines with important stops at the peripheral parking lots, as well as at the bus and train stations, reveal the social and cultural reality of people who do work in Venice but reside on the mainland, in Mestre or elsewhere. Such *vaporetto* lines are primarily used by local citizens and employees but also allow the urban visitors to encounter certain concealed zones of Venice where industrial dimensions and functional modernity are present, sometimes as a leftover, at other times in recently updated shapes. Compared to the apparently authentic frontstage of tourism and culture, this is backstage or offstage Venice. (Fig. 9) In a certain sense, however, industrial harbor zones are site-specific, too; it would certainly be hard to understand frontstage Venice without taking them into account.

The Venetian situation of urban site-specificity may be summarized as follows:

1° The everyday coexistence of 'authentic' and 'modern' Venice challenges the opposition between a local and site-specific city on the one hand side, and a generic and destructive reality, related to cruise ships, on the other. Front stage and off stage Venice are – and might be recognized as – reciprocal.

2° The role of hidden and peripheral harbor zones and parking areas is central in the ongoing development of Venice. These zones – as well as the city as a whole – might gain from being treated, not as sealed off territories but as public and civic space.

3° Just as site-specific qualities stand out at many levels of the historic city, industrial Venice is waiting to be explored. After all, the 'modern' elements in the 'offstage' city allow Venice to counter the nostalgic dominance of its own 'authentic' and 'frontstage' image. In this way, harbor areas may inform a process of urban anamnesis and promote Venice as a city in which a dynamic memory of modernity takes place.

## Notes of transition

The observations from Venice teach us how site-specificity is experienced at many scales and in unexpected areas of the actual cityscape. A visit in renovated Marseille, after the city's performance as Cultural Capital of Europe 2013, may allow us to elaborate on the following question: "What does it mean to *appreciate* site-specific qualities?"

Basically, the verb "appreciate" indicates a positive approach to reality. Such an appreciative judgment may imply qualitative as well as quantitative components. As we shall see, aesthetic, experiential, self reflexive but also economic factors become relevant, depending on the situation in which the object of attention is perceived and interpreted. Do these factors add up to a coherent human experience? In fact, observations from Marseille suggest how a sensory encounter with a place may eventually promote a dynamic determination of site-specificity.

## II. Encountering Marseille – Appreciating Site-Specific Qualities

> Marseilles, a dazzling amphitheater, rises around the rectangle of the old harbor. The three shores of the square paved with sea, whose depth cuts into the city, are lined with rows of façades, each one like the next. [...] The churches point to the square as the vanishing point of all perspectives, and the still-virgin hills face it as well. Rarely has such an audience ever been assembled around an arena.
>
> Siegfried Kracauer [6]

## En route for site-specific harbor transformation by way of design

Along the Mediterranean, things don't always happen as one expects them to do. Heading for Marseille, the traveler's primary destinations are the cultural cathedrals erected for 2013 when the city was European Capital of Europe, as well as the Euromed 1 and 2 harbor development zones north of Marseille's Vieux Port (Old Port). Even though the visitor wishes to take a look at central Marseille, there will only be time to do so be in passing.

FIG. 10 Despite the roof above, the rain enters below. Source: Photo by the author.

6 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Bay" (1926), trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in S. Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 37. Translated from: "Marseille, ein blendendes Amphitheater, baut sich um das Rechteck des Alten Hafens auf. Den meergepflasterten Platz, der mit seiner Tiefe in die Stadt einschneidet, säumen auf den drei Uferseiten Fassadenbänder gleichförmig ein. [...] Auf ihn, als den Fluchtort aller Perspektiven, sind die Kirchen ausgerichtet, ihm die noch unbedeckten Hügel zugewandt. Ein solches Publikum ist kaum je um eine Arena versammelt gewesen." Siegfried Kracauer, "Die Bai" (1926), in S. Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963), 11.

Alas, arriving in Marseille, it is raining, heavily and steadily. The traveler's umbrella will not suffice; his or her shoes are going to be wet through after a few minutes. A flaneur's approach to the central cityscape is excluded in advance. Fortunately, the metro and a bus line are there to bring the visitor *sain et sauf* to the sites of cultural harbor transformation.

Under the intense rain, however, getting from the metro exit to the bus stop at the Vieux Port is a serious challenge. As cascades of rain start invading the metro hallway, people simply have to leave. Outside, a sizeable freestanding roof provides a refuge on the way between the metro and the bus stops. To be sure, this roof is not watertight at all. Still, this is the place which, at the end of the journey, happens to stand out as a site-specific urban quality in contemporary Marseille. Compared to the spectacular transformations in the industrial harbor areas, the traveler intuitively appreciates this collective shelter, and in the following the shelter shall exemplify the ways and stages through which we come to discover and verbalize site-specific qualities in urban space.

## Three or four ways of appreciating site-specific qualities

Under a mid-September deluge, the visitor's encounter with this particular bus shelter in Marseille actualizes several layers inhabiting the experience of *appreciating site-specific qualities*. As we shall see, the verb "appreciate" covers a series of meanings. Illustrated by experiences in the old harbor of Marseille, these semantic layers may, in turn, invite us to reflect upon the ways in which we discover everyday site-specificity.

FIG. 11 Panorama of Le Vieux Port in Marseille, photographed clockwise from the public shelter, # 1. Source: Photo by the author.

FIG. 12 Panorama of Le Vieux Port in Marseille, photographed clockwise from the public shelter, # 2. Source: Photo by the author.

FIG. 13 Panorama of Le Vieux Port in Marseille, photographed clockwise from the public shelter, # 3. Source: Photo by the author.

FIG. 14 Panorama of Le Vieux Port in Marseille, photographed clockwise from the public shelter, # 4. Source: Photo by the author.

FIG. 15 Panorama of Le Vieux Port in Marseille, photographed clockwise from the public shelter, # 5. Source: Photo by the author.

FIG. 16 Panorama of Le Vieux Port in Marseille, photographed clockwise from the public shelter, # 6. Source: Photo by the author.

FIG. 17 Panorama of Le Vieux Port in Marseille, photographed clockwise from the public shelter, # 7. Source: Photo by the author.

## 1. "To recognize" an urban harbor site: le Vieux Port

According to the definition proposed in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, "appreciate" first of all means "To recognize the quality, significance, or magnitude of" something[7]. In this way, "to appreciate" implies an act of recognition; a person appreciating something affirms the significance of the phenomenon in question. An example of such a recognition is provided by the reactions first aroused in urban citizens and visitors hiding under the roof in Marseille on that excessively rainy morning.

There you are, thirty, forty, fifty people or more under the rain which is invasive. The daylight is fading to such an extent that one can hardly see the other people present, let alone the surroundings. However, your primary occupation is to remain dry which is not an easy task.

Persons with an umbrella are safe, but only as long as the ground remains more or less dry. Soon, there is hardly a place to stand anymore; the rain traverses the modules of the ceiling. Slowly but steadily the water covers the granite slabs and runs across the area covered by the roof, looking for a way to escape. It runs towards the harbor bassin, the basin of le Vieux Port de Marseille which starts just a few meters away. The people under the roof are situated with their bodies and minds inside the framework of an urban harbor which is surrounded by large-scale walls on three sides, while the Mediterranean is accessible on the fourth.

FIG. 18 During the rain, a street vendor in the public shelter of Le Vieux Port, Marseille. Source: Photo by the author.

7 Anne H. Soukhanov, ed. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Languague* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992 [third ed.]), 90.

The experience of standing there is less a visual and contemplative one than a simultaneously tactical and tactile challenge. At a certain time, a visitor wonders whether a sound recording wouldn't be the most appropriate way to represent the intensity of the rain. Indeed, a smartphone willingly captures the soundscape of falling rain, while the wind is beating against the membrane of the built-in microphone.

## 2. "To be fully aware of or sensitive to" urban culture under a leaking roof – echoing critical theory

The second definition in *The American Heritage Dictionary* explains "to appreciate" as "To be fully aware of or sensitive to; realize".[8] More than a simple act of recognition (conscious or not), this semantic layer cites a degree of sensory and mental presence that is not necessarily shared by all the visitors during the half an hour many of them spend under the roof, before their bus lines finally arrive. During this period, people slowly move around and thus come to sense the considerable dimensions of the monumental bus shelter – about 50 by 20 meters, i.e. quite long but not very broad. Given the height of the ceiling which may be six or eight meters, all are not that well protected from the rain and the wind. (Fig. 11-17)

On the other hand, the collective shelter provides a 360-degree panorama. This urban panorama entices the photographic gazes of people waiting but only those with a light camera (or a smartphone) in the right hand and an umbrella in the left may have a chance in their clockwise *tour de force* against the elements of wind and water. Moreover, small digital cameras make reality look much brighter than it actually is. In fact, the day itself is so dark at eleven o'clock that the setting looks unnatural and recalls an exceptional eclipse of the sun, if not a local apocalypse.

Whilst remaining on the outlook for the buses that continue not to arrive on the east side of the urban pavilion, one realizes how close the harbor basin actually is on the west side of the shelter. As a matter of fact, the dark ceiling of the pavilion not only reflects the people standing below it but makes them reappear in inverted positions. The black reflective surface also invites the persons waiting under the roof to see parts of the water surface in the harbor basin itself.

Immersed in this obscured place, you vaguely notice the other people around you. You may especially notice an elderly man with a cap, trying to sell nuts in little plastic bags which are displayed on a basket tray. (Fig. 18) This figure recalls another Marseille vendor and the entire spirit of urban culture depicted by cultural analyst and theoretician Siegfried Kracauer in the late 1920's.

8 *Ibid*., 90.

FIG. 19 Human presence, upside down – displayed in the polished steel ceiling of the public shelter at Le Vieux Port of Marseille. Source: Photo by the author.

The last chapter of Kracauer's autobiographical novel in German, *Ginster: Written by himself*[9] is set in Marseille (and no longer in the Germany of the First World War, as is the case of the remainder of the book). The protagonist's encounter with the Mediterranean harbor city entails an extatic dissolution of prevailing reality principles – that of architecture as wage labor in the life of Ginster, but also that of the coherent and stable urban space in Marseille.[10]

A dissolution of apparently immutable powers prefigures new realities. This way of challenging some dominant institutions is already hinted at in Kracauer's 1926-essay "Stand-Up Bars in the South", from which the first epigraph of the present text stems. In this essay, Kracauer compares urban improvisation – essential in his sole definition of urban quality[11] – to the experience of sailing away from safe harbors along the French Mediterranean, from Marseille to Nice. In the minds of intellectuals from the interwar period, such as German philosopher and urban writer Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Marseille is the quintessential city of improvisation. Like Kracauer, Benjamin is sensitive to the fragmenting practices of people. There are disruptive and creative possibilities linked to this Marseille lifestyle which appears to be both spatially alien to and, not least, qualitatively different from the Protestant or assimilated Jewish traditions of the North. Here, in the South, city and harbor merge in an intensely urban

9 Siegfried Kracauer, *Ginster. Von ihm selbst geschrieben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990 [1928]), 229-240.

10 For an analysis of Marseille in Kracauer's *Ginster*, see Henrik Reeh, *Ornaments of the Metropolis: Siegfried Kracauer and Modern Urban Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004), 73-82.

11 Henrik Reeh, "Fragmentation, Improvisation, and Urban Quality: A Heterotopian Motif in Siegfried Kracauer", in *Chora 3: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, ed. Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Stephen Parcell (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 157-177.

culture which, in those days, had deep repercussions in the writings of various intellectuals, domestic and foreign alike.

## 3. "To admire greatly": a work of urban design – a piece of signature architecture

A third layer of meaning is germinating in the verb "appreciate", since the word also signifies "To admire greatly; value".[12] Apart from recognition and sensitivity, the act of appreciating equally signalizes *admiration*.

"To recognize" and "to realize" something may thus bring us "to admire" a particular phenomenon. However, does this progression and intensification (recognize – realize – admire) make sense in the Marseille harbor? Is it true that the visitor under the shelter not only "recognizes" and becomes more "fully aware of and sensitive" to the urban qualities of the elevated roof (as suggested by the two preceding definitions of "appreciate"), but that he or she further comes to "admire" and "value" the urban shelter as an essential element of urban-cultural design? In short, does the traveler get access to the third stage of appreciation as smoothly as he or she passes from the initial recognition (while being immersed in the rain and the sound of it) to the more elaborated representation (by way of photographs and sound recordings)?

Such a rationalisation is probably too simple to be true. Indeed, people quit as soon as possible in order to visit the major sites of cultural tourism and urban architecture in the transformed parts of Marseille's industrial harbors. Sooner or later, the bus arrives and brings travelers to the cultural cathedrals, recently built in more distant harbor territories.

Yet it is possible to return to this place in the Vieux Port by way of memory and images. Once the heavy rain and the dark clouds are gone, giving way to an marvelously blue sky, one recalls the urban roof as a sympathetic and modest way of bringing a diversity of people together. (Fig. 19) But does this souvenir elevate the verb "appreciate"– meaning "To admire greatly" – into the appropriate name for a visitor's experience under the urban roof? Again, such a positive judgment is premature.

Further reflections are necessary, and they eventually occur. Retrospectively, a color image, reproduced on a free Marseille city map (offered by the Galeries Lafayette department store), makes travelers realize that their sense of sight was indeed limited during the extraordinary darkness of the torrential shower. The photograph on the map shows the harbor pavilion as it stands out under a sunny sky. Whereas the ceiling of the urban bus shelter looked like black varnish during the rain, the photograph reveals that the urban pavilion is built with one single construction material: polished stainless steel. It is as if the two images of the

12 *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, ibid.

Vieux Port refer to radically different realities. Compared to the souvenir of obscurity and rain, the sunny photograph on the map represents a reality of its own. Here, the image of a stainless steel construction is a shocking one; reflecting the human bodies standing or passing below it, the ceiling functions like a gigantic mirror which duplicates the image of your fellow citizens as well as that of you yourself.

In the absence of a caption indicating functions and authors of the shelter, one may reasonably expect this minimalist building to have been designed by local architects. In reality, it represents the contrary of vernacular urban design. A search on the Internet reveals that the architecture is due to British *starchitect* Norman Foster, a global master builder. Although it may look simple yet purified, this building constitutes the strategic piece of architecture in the general redesign and make-over of the Vieux Port by Michel Desvignes, currently one of the most *en vogue* urban landscape architects in France.

Given the role of the shelter as a local citymark but also the worldwide fame of its architect, some users probably heard about this reflective building. Local citizens and even visitors must have seen it on their way through the city. But in reality, many people haven't really noticed; their destinations and motivations lie elsewhere, and time is limited. Citizens or travelers don't necessarily appreciate or "admire" the urban bus shelter in the Vieux Port "greatly". Nonetheless this pavilion – branded as "l'*ombrière*": the shade-maker – is a centerpiece of the still ongoing modernization of urban spaces and traffic around Marseille's Vieux Port.

Despite the limited degree of contemplation among most urbanites, the urban visitor maintains a basic sympathy via à vis the *ombrière* at the inner harbor, which – in Siegfried Kracauer's view, quoted above (in the epigraph of part II) – is constitutive of Marseille as a city. Having lost many of its functions, the Vieux Port nonetheless remains a decisive figure in the urban-cultural appreciation of Marseille. From a mainstream point of view, this harbor city may appear run-down and poor. Still, Marseille has long been recognized as a place with powerful site-specific qualities.

## 4. Appreciation and prices: "To raise in value and price, especially over time"

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, there is yet another meaning of the verb "appreciate"; this time a quantitative and economic dimension is introduced that so far has been absent from our approach to site-specific urban qualities. In this fourth context, "appreciate" is defined as "To raise in value or price, especially over time".[13] The quantitative definition is even cited as the fundamental one in the

13 Anne H. Soukhanov, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, op. cit., 90

French version of the word, "apprécier". An etymologically informed dictionary, *Le petit Robert* links "apprécier" to the basic act of "determining the price or the value of something", a usage which dates back to 1401: "Déterminer le prix, la valeur de qqch [quelquechose]".[14] Moreover, the verb is derived from "pretium" in Latin, i. e. from "price" – which is also contained in the Latin verb "appretiare", translated as "evaluate" ("évaluer"). A similar relation between "appreciate" and "price-setting" is reflected in the Danish expression "at sætte pris på" which is among the first translations of "appreciate" proposed by B. Kjærulff Nielsen's *English-Danish* dictionary.[15]

In the documents available about contemporary harbor transformation in Marseille, there are few references to the price of this '*ombrière*' which, on that torrential September morning, was a welcoming but leaking megasize umbrella in the Vieux Port. Norman Foster being the architect, the budget has barely been low. In fact, the sum I came across is so substiantial that it might also include the costs of the entirely redesigned square at the inner part of Marseille's Vieux Port.

FIG. 20 Harbor and highway in Marseille, far from Le Vieux Port of the city.Source: Photo by the author.

In retrospect, the visitor's encounter with Marseille's *ombrière* under an obscured and rainy sky nicely illustrates the fundamental layers of "appreciate" as defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary*. Soon the spontaneous recognition of the *ombrière* as an urban shelter against the rain gives way to an attention paid to the social and cultural patterns of the place, as well as to the visual and auditory qualities of the weather and the urban sourroundings. The soundscape and the visual panorama even become the objects of recording and photography. (Fig. 20)

14 Robert, Paul, and Alain Rey, *Le petit Robert: dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française* (Paris: Dictionnaire Le Robert, 1970), 77.

15 Nielsen, B. Kjærulff, *Engelsk Dansk Ordbog* (København: Gyldendal, 1980 [1964]), 49.

Little by little, recognition and attention prepare the ground for genuine admiration. Thanks to a surprising tourist map photograph, Marseille's *ombrière* is revealed as a mirroring centerpiece in the new urban layout of the Vieux Port. For those who "appreciate" and want to "put a price on" the polished and reflective *ombrière*, the financial investment testifies to the fact that Marseille has attempted to go a step further into the global economy of tourism and culture.

Still, the Marseille *ombrière* in the Vieux Port fulfills important civic functions. Its urban potential is confirmed when people are gathering there during the torrent of September 2014, as well as they did a few months later when France reacted against the terrorist massacre at Charlie Hebdo in February 2015. For the Marseille demonstration of sorrow and solidarity with the victims, people simply joined under the *ombrière* of the renovated Vieux Port. From a local and an activist point of view, the *ombrière* has thus been appropriated in practical and symbolic terms; it has obtained the status of an urban place which soon acquired site-specific significance.

## Conclusions

The present study addresses the discovery of site-specific qualities in present-day Venice and Marseille. Both are classic harbor cities, and their links to tourism are increasing in the age of cultural planning and consumption. Accordingly, the observer's viewpoint is that of a traveling visitor who is looking for site-specificity in harbor areas as a basis for urban transformation.

Two series of results have been obtained. Venice proves to be site-specific at all levels of the frontstage city, as well as in the offstage of its industrious areas. Instead of rejecting the latter as alien to Venice, the harbor zones should be recognized as a possible reservoir of urban site-specificity. If these areas become truly public, they may in turn add a modern relief to the contemporary mainstream staging of Venice.

The observations of site-specificity in Marseille focus on a particular place in a precise situation: the collective bus shelter in the Vieux Port during a torrential shower. Here, sensory and reflective processes contribute to the researcher's appreciation of site-specific qualities. Reflecting the semantic layers of the verb "appreciate", *recognition* and *sensitivity* are progressively deployed on site, testifying to the practical and socio-aesthetic qualities of the urban roof in the harbor. *Admiration*, a third semantic layer of "appreciate", results from an interpretive exploration of the Marseille *ombrière* which happens to be an all-reflective urban mirror, designed by Norman Foster and Partners in London. Altogether, this tripartite process of appreciation documents the ways in which the researcher's sensitivity co-informs the scholarly designation of site-specific features in the city.


FIG. 21 Source: Photo by the author.

The actual appreciation of site-specific qualities reflects the fact that the scholar studying Venice and Marseille is also *a traveling visitor* who transgresses the role of a distant professional. Bodily and mentally present on site, the researcher is affected by sensory impressions and socio-cultural exchanges. Irresistably, this reciprocity between human presence and the environment transforms urban space from cool objectivity into a matter of lived life, of aesthetics. (Fig. 21) As long as the visitor's brief passage on site is critically reconsidered, such impressions and experiences may strengthen the urban-cultural reflections on site-specificity – a realm of ambiguous contributions to urban aesthetics.

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