



# THE HISTORICAL JEWISH GHETTOS OF VENICE

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The city of Venice, established well over a millennium ago, represents one of the most unique historic cities of the world today. Its preeminence as the foremost maritime power of its era is a reflection of its favorable geographical setting, where it functioned as a nexus of trade and culture between the Eastern and Western worlds. Part of the fabric of Venice's multicultural composition are the Jewish settlements centered in a relatively small district within the confines of the city that the Venetians dubbed *Ghetto Nuovo*, *Ghetto Vecchio*, and *Ghetto Nuovissimo*. The purpose of this paper is to examine the Jewish Ghetto within the Venetian urban context, to detail its sociological and economic aspects, and, in so doing, establish the historical and cultural significance of its built heritage. An emphasis will be given to the synagogues within the Ghetto, in particular, the *Scuola Grande Tedesca* and *Levantina*, which represent most succinctly the unique character of the Ghetto. To conclude, we examine some of the problems which are specific to the architecture of Venice, and the measures taken to preserve the historical structures in the Ghetto enclave.

Venice is an aggregate of small islands situated within a lagoon in the Adriatic Sea off the coast of northeastern Italy. The lagoon is approximately 40 kilometers long and varies in breadth from 5 to 10 kilometers. Several narrow barrier is-

lands act as protective buffers from the action of the coastal waters of the open sea, with three major openings that allow the flow of tides in and out of the estuary. The island's history dates back as far as 330 AD, where it served as an outpost of trade between the Eastern and Western spheres of the divided Roman Empire. The "... original community of fishermen and salt makers gradually became a colony of traders; their skills at shipbuilding and navigation grew, and Venice became a self-sufficient outpost at the far reaches of the Byzantine Empire. By the time Charlemagne consolidated Gothic Europe and was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Venice was a trading and diplomatic intermediary between different civilizations."

The first acknowledgement of Jews in Venice dates back to the late tenth century, where documents described Venetian ship captains refusing to accept Jews onboard their ships. By the fourteenth century, Jews as individuals were allowed to settle in Venice, although *La Serinissima* (the Venetian government) would not allow them to reside *en masse*. Restricted to Mestre, a community on the mainland, a *condotta* or charter was negotiated by the Jews that would allow them to flee to Venice should they come under attack. In 1508, Venice was threatened by an allied force of Papal states known as the League of Cambrai. Venetians and Jewish refugees on the mainland, including Jewish moneylenders who held valuable loan pledges from Christians, fled across the lagoon to Venice. With the resolution of the conflict and Venice recovering their mainland territories, the Venetian government's original intent was to have the Jews return to Mestre. However, due to the precarious state of the Venetian economy, they realized that the presence of Jewish moneylenders and pawnbrokers would serve two functions: "... they could be required to provide the hard pressed treasury with substantial annual payments, and second, permitting them to engage in moneylending, as pawnbrokers, in the city itself would be convenient for the needy, whose numbers had been swelled by the war."

While the Venetian government tolerated the growing in-

fluence of the Jews, the Catholic Church openly resented their encroachment. The Venetian senate accepted on March 29, 1516 a proposal by the scholar Zaccaria Dolfin, which asserted that the Jews should no longer be able live throughout the city as they pleased, and should be required to limit their domiciles to the small island within the city environs known as *Ghetto Nuovo* (New Ghetto). Gates were installed on the bridges that lead off the island, and were locked between sunset and sunrise, confining the Jewish residents within. Any Jew caught outside of the Ghetto during those hours was subject to punishment and fines.

The term Ghetto has an ambiguous etymology. The plot of land in Venice was called *el getto*, which in Venetian parlance translates as foundry. In a fourteenth century account by Tassini in his *Curiosità Veneziane*, “ [it] was called *el getto* because there were over twelve furnaces and bronze was cast there.” Other less accepted yet documented accounts of its origin see its derivation from the Talmudic term *get*, which translates as reject card, or the German term *gehegt*, meaning enclosed, and also the Italian term *borgetto*, meaning district.

The *Ghetto Nuovo*, encircled by water, is located where the parishes of San Geremia and Santi Ermagora and Fortunato meet (*fig. 1*). Access to the island at that time was by two draw-bridges; one located towards the San Girolamo embankment, the other towards the *Ghetto Vecchio* (Old Ghetto). Passageways through buildings adjacent to the bridges, called *sotopórtegos* (*fig. 2*), lead into the open *campo* (*fig. 3*) of the Ghetto Nuovo. Jews that circulated outside of the ghetto during the day were required to wear identifying emblems, known as *siman*, a system of identification that had been instituted by Pope Innocent III during the early thirteenth century.

The largest segment of the Ghetto Nuovo in the first half of the sixteenth century was comprised of Jews that were *Ashkenazim*, from the Hebrew *Ashkenazi*, meaning “German.” They were formerly situated in the Rhineland valley and neighboring France before migrating to parts of Central and Eastern Europe. Between the thirteenth and fourteenth cen-

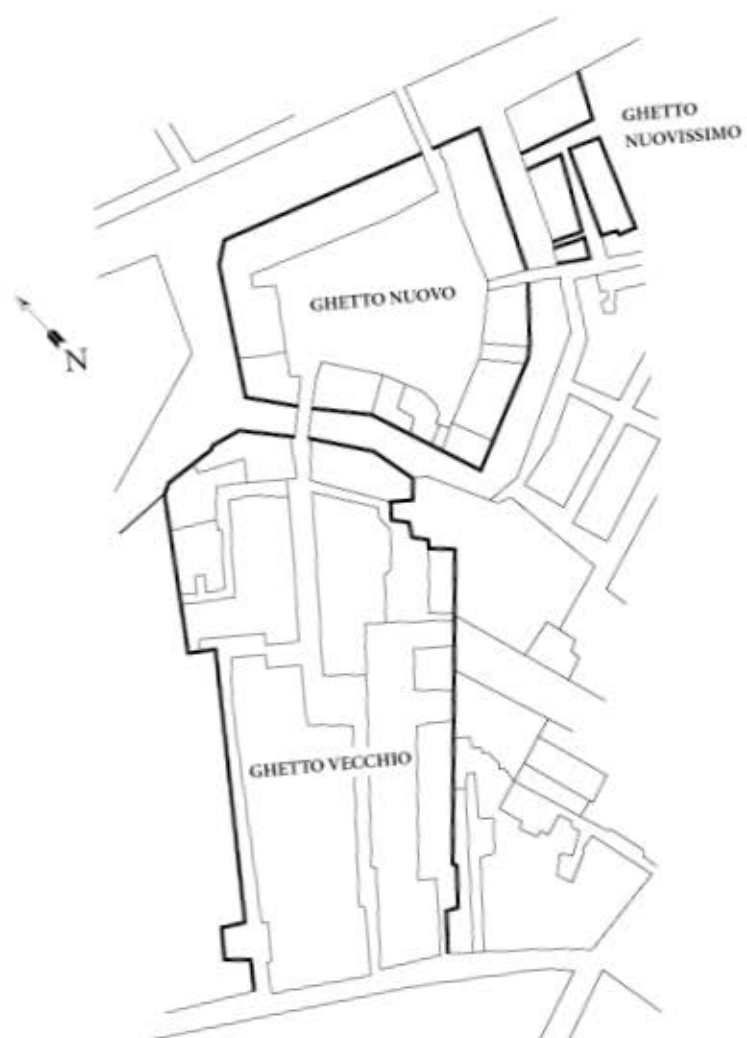
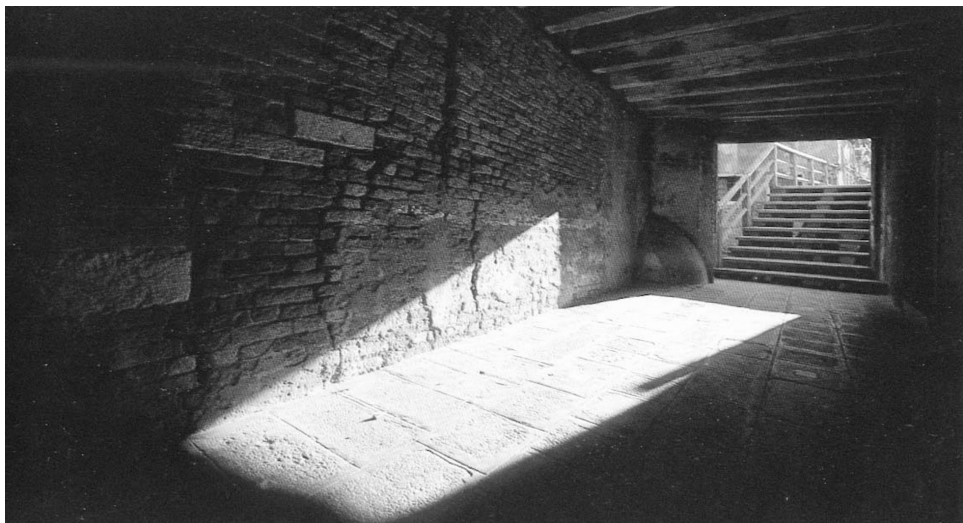


fig. 1



*Fig. 2*



*Fig. 3*

turies, they migrated westward into the northern regions of the Italian peninsula, “. . . scattered from Trieste to Lombardy, but mainly occupying inland towns in the Veneto region, such as Bassano, Treviso and Ceneda, across to the lagoon district, to Mestre in particular, whence they fled to seek refuge in Venice.”

The Jews that migrated from Spain and Portugal were known as *Sefardim* (from the Hebrew *Sefarad*). They had resided in the Iberian peninsula since the Middle Ages, and had initially fled in response to the relentless religious persecutions and expulsions in the fifteenth century, arriving in Northern Africa and the Ottoman Empire, and later, in portions of France, Holland, England, and Italy. Sefardis are comprised of Levantines and Ponentines. The Levantines, although originally from the Iberian peninsula, having resided in the Levant region (the eastern end of the Mediterranean) for many generations, are more closely associated with their Eastern heritage. Thus, Levantines that resided in Venice enjoyed some measure of protection, many being citizens of the Ottoman Empire. The Ponentines (a euphemistic term for west), also referred to as *marrani*, were Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal who were forced to convert to Christianity. Many had fled the Iberian Peninsula and settled in the Venetian Ghetto, some resuming their Jewish faith, others remaining Christian but choosing to live amongst their Levantine brethren.

Jews of Italian heritage also resided in the Ghetto. They came from southern and central Italy and also Rome, where they had lived for centuries. Their migration to Venice wasn't in large waves such as the Ashkenazim and Sephardim, but in small groups, as a result of thirteenth century anti-Semitic campaigns taking place in southern and central Italy. “Differing from the Germans in their rituals, the Italian Jews in Venice never constituted an independent ‘nation,’ and were always lumped together with the Ashkenazim, sharing their conditions and situations, occupations and professions, but

always remaining inferior in number and wealth, though not in cultural quality or religious distinction.”

The Levantines occupied the upper strata of the economic hierarchy in the Ghetto. They accrued considerable wealth and prestige as a result of their extensive network of international trade in spices, raw silk, hides and currants that were brought to market in the quays of Venice. Their mode of dress was the most exotic of the ethnic classes in the Ghetto, and reflects the influence of their association with the Ottomans and Syrians. The men were dressed in what was termed the “Syrian manner”, while the women were given to displays of layers of silk and brocade, shawls of fine linen, pearls, and colored leather slippers. The Levantines’ ascendancy within the Ghetto community was recognized by the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*, the official body that regulated mercantile trade in Venice, who benefited from the Levantines’ domination of international trade within the Venetian sphere. In 1541, the Venetian senate, in response to the Levantines’ petitioning for their own quarter within the Ghetto, granted them a plot of land, the *Ghetto Vecchio* (fig.4), adjacent to the *Ghetto Nuovo* as their own distinct settlement.

The *Ghetto Nuovissimo* is the smallest enclave in the Venetian Ghetto. In 1633, the *Cinque Savi* allocated this luxurious quarter to attract a wealthier class of Jewish merchants. Some of the edifices within the *Ghetto Nuovissimo*, such as the residence of the dei Treves (fig.5), one of the richest banking families in the history of the Ghetto, resemble the grand edifices in the wealthiest districts of Venice. However, the *Ghetto Nuovissimo* was somewhat like a gilded cage. What appeared as a luxurious setting was still ultimately defined by segregation, “. . . a kind of ‘seraglio’ scarred by the same marks of discrimination that have characterized every Italian ghetto.”

The era of confinement within the Ghetto ended with the invasion of Italy by Napoleon’s troops in 1797. Steeped in liberty, equality, and fraternity, they tore down the gates that had restricted the Jews within their enclaves for so many years. In 1866, when Venetian Jews were accorded equal status, many



*Fig. 4*





*Fig. 5*

of their wealthier members chose to relocate to other areas of the city. Between the two World Wars, there was further migration of Jews from Venice in response to rising political tensions. During the early years of Mussolini's regime, the Jewish presence in Italy was tolerated, but as a result of his alliance with Germany, their situation became perilous. Between November 9, 1943 and August 7, 1944, 205 people were deported from Venetian Ghetto to the concentration camps. After World War II, the Ghetto's population had diminished significantly. Today, between five and seven hundred people remain—a quiet community that had at one time “. . . echoed with thousands of voices. Under the porticos, hawkers cried in hoarse dialects and women chatted as they washed and darned bits of used clothing for resale in the shops; merchants haggled over the prices of leather and silk from east and west, while Christian priests and Jewish rabbis debated the relative merits of their two faiths with similar avidity and zeal.”

Among the many significant individual properties in the Venetian Ghetto, the *scuolas* (synagogues) most clearly define the unique character of its various communities. The *scuolas* are of considerable historical value, and represent perhaps most succinctly, the vital linkage of the Venetian Ghetto and its people to their past. A *scuola's* beauty is deceptive; its exterior façade, generally plain and utilitarian, often conceal an extraordinarily ornate interior. At one time, there were as many as nine *scuolas* in the Ghetto. Today, only five remain. Three of the *scuolas* are located within the *Ghetto Nuovo*. They are the *Scuola Grande Tedesca*, the *Scuola Canton* and the *Scuola Italiana*. The remaining two *scuolas*, the *Scuola Grande Spagnola* and *Scuola Levantina*, are located within the Ghetto Vecchio. Two of these *scuolas*, the *Grande Tedesca* and *Levantina* will be examined in closer detail.

The term *scuola* (from the Greek *scholē*) translates as ‘school’ and indicates the specialized function of the synagogue. Not only are the *scuolas* a place for public prayer, they also are *bayeth midrash* (study houses), where members of the congregation gather to study the *Torah* and the *Talmud*, What

is of particular interest is the manner in which each community within the Ghetto established its own unique identity through its architecture. The scuola was a tangible symbol of *qehilah* (community) . . . a spirit determined to maintain distinct customs by an appropriate administrative organization, which could only take shape within the synagogue.”

The first (and oldest) scuola within the Ghetto Nuovo was the *Scuola Grande Tedesca* (fig. 6). Built in 1529, the exterior of the edifice is a unique synthesis of architectural vernaculars, blending central European building traditions with elements of Venetian design. Its Istrian stone exterior is essentially unadorned save for a few small embellishments to its façade and cornice-work. Its distinguishing elements are its five arched windows in addition to a Hebrew inscription below its cornice. This *scuola*’s location on the uppermost floor of the structure is an interesting adaptation of an existing structure and is in keeping with the Jewish tradition of having synagogues placed in the highest part of a city, with only Heaven being directly above.

Access to the interior of the *Grande Tedesca* is by way of a set of stairs leading up from the ground floor to the prayer hall. The floor plan is unusual, being trapezoidal in shape. Directly above the prayer hall is an elongated, oval-shaped gallery (fig. 7), (added when the scuola was significantly altered in 1733), that cleverly resolves the interior’s odd spatial configuration, creating the illusion of a symmetrical space. The *bimah* (fig. 8), a raised platform where scriptures are read from, originally located in the center of the floor plan was moved to the short side of the structure in the late nineteenth-century, thus eliminating the last vestige of the *scuola*’s original Ashkenazic arrangement, to a bi-focal arrangement that is consistent with the other *scuolas* in the Ghetto. The interior décor of the *Grande Tedesca* has evolved significantly over the years to its present state, and evidences the same stylistic hybridization as its exterior. However, the transition from the plain, utilitarian appearance of the campo setting, into the ornate, gilded interior of the *Grande Tedesca* creates a remarkable



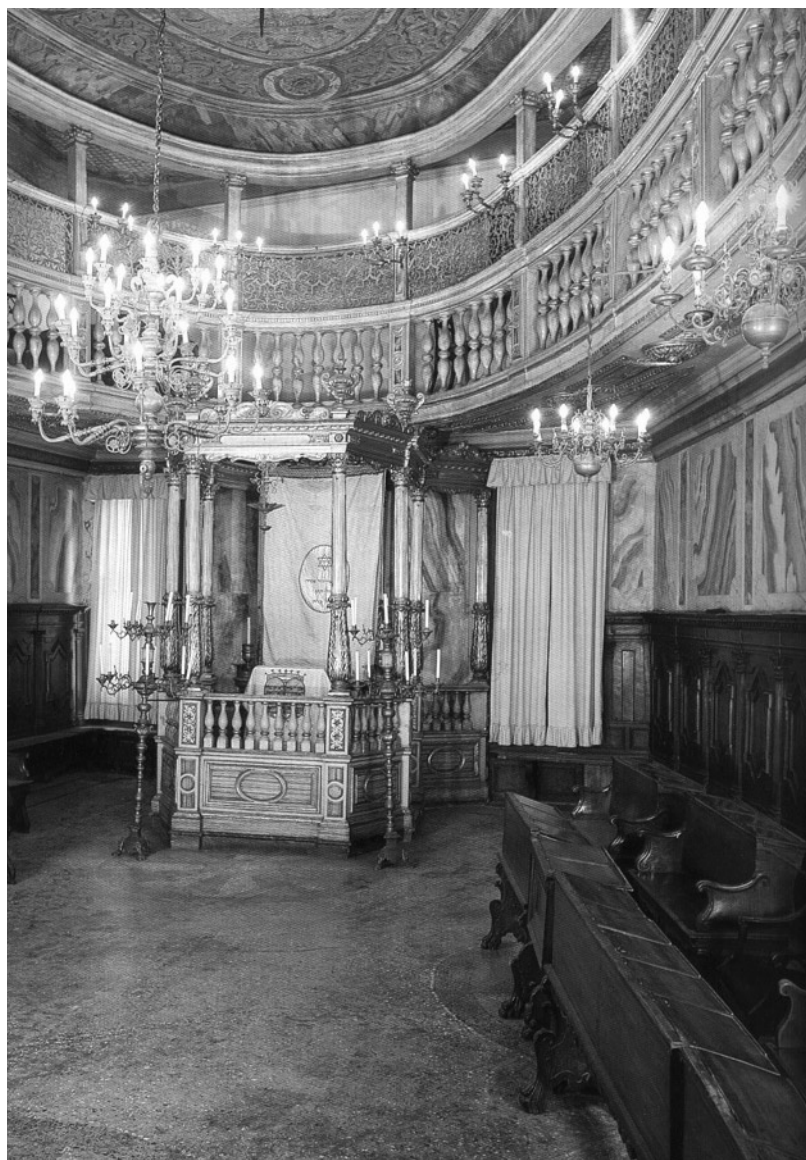
*Fig. 6*



Fig. 7

visual contrast. The interior is a rich array of material textures, contrasting the dark walnut textures of its benches and cherry wood paneling with the faux marble panels on its sidewalls, in addition to its array of intricate gilded banisters and grillwork set off by scarlet red curtain fabrics. Balance is achieved by the careful integration of these decorative elements, in particular those adorning the upper gallery structure. “The constant use of circular and rectangular motifs in its oval crown, repeated those present in the *bimah* and in the ornamental frieze of the ceiling, suggest a close web of internal echoes, establishing a deeper connection between the parts.”

Situated at the eastern end of the prayer hall (oriented towards Jerusalem) is the Ark of the Covenant, a three-part



*Fig. 8*

structure that in Hebrew is referred to as the *aaron hakodesh*. The Ark, done in the Palladian style, consists of two fluted Corinthian columns with broken tympanum, urns and cornucopias, which frame the middle section of the structure. The doors of the Ark, resembling tablets, are elegantly decorated on the outside with a tree of life motif. The architectural motifs that characterize the Ark are shared with the pediment structure at the entrance to the prayer hall and the *bimah*. The repetition of these motifs, installed in different periods during the evolution of this *scuola*'s interior, acknowledges the deliberate choices made by the *scuola*'s architects to maintain an overall aesthetic uniformity and harmony.

Of the five *scuolas* in the Venetian Ghetto, the *Scuola Levantina* (fig. 9) is the only structure that was built specifically on its site, a 'stand alone' edifice, rather than utilizing an existing structure for adaptive re-use. The *Scuola Levantina*'s opulence underscores the differences that existed between the different 'nations' within the Ghetto—a tangible symbol of the Levantines' immersion in Venetian material culture, distinct from the insularity of the Ashekenzim in the Ghetto Nuovo. *Scuola Levantina*, stylistically reminiscent of the designs of notable Venetian architect, Baldassare Longhena, is an elegant, if somewhat eclectic edifice, its exterior markedly different from the façades of the four other *scuolas*. At the base of the structure is a narrow band of rusticated stone, with the remainder of the upper surfaces clad in smooth faced masonry. Of particular interest above its base, are the square-shaped, tiered surface projections that segment the façade into five distinct horizontal bands, adding dimension to the façade and articulating the voids between both the widow openings and floor levels. Both front and side entrances are classical arched structures with pilasters that frame ornately carved, heavy wooden doors. The arched door motif is repeated in the upper level windows, which are protected by decorative metal grillwork. Above the upper level windows are deeply recessed, lozenge shaped window openings. Projecting from the side of the structure is an *oriel* (a type of bay window). Venetians refer to



Fig. 9

this as a *liago* (sun balcony), and it served a specific function. “The *liago* is often to be found on the side walls of *palazzi*, projecting from the wall, particularly along the narrowest canals and the darkest alleyways. It helps to bring more light to the interior, and of course, also gives vitality and interest to the exterior.”

The interior of *Scuola Levantina* is richly ornamental, to such a degree that it seems to overwhelm its relatively limited space. Jewish tradition forbids the placement of statuary or images within the prayer hall; therefore, most of the interior space is filled with decorative elements and colored fabrics.



The most prominent interior structures are the *bimah* and ark. The *bimah* (fig.10) dominates the interior, perhaps excessively so, and is undoubtedly the most spectacular in the Ghetto. Its significant dimensions ( $43 \times 28$  feet /  $13.3 \times 8.5$  meters) and extraordinary ornamentation make it the focal point of the prayer hall. Although no documentation exists that verify who crafted it, it is believed to have been designed by Andrea Brustolon (1662–1732), “. . . the greatest of the cabinet makers of the Veneto during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, . . . admired for his imagination and vision, and for the extraordinary elegance of his furniture.” Carved in a late baroque style with a decidedly oriental cast, the *bimah* is laden with symbolism, in particular its spiral columns, which represent the columns that were once situated at the entrance of Solomon’s temple, and “. . . were to become for centuries, a powerful religious symbol in both Jewish and Christian art.” The canopy of the *bimah* is integrated into the *scuola*’s ceiling, creating a continuous expanse of decoration above the prayer hall. The ceiling is a complex network of cornices, es-cutcheons, and medallions in high relief, culminating in an elaborate central caisson.

The Ark in the *Scuola Levantina* is an interesting contrast to the *bimah*. Crafted in blue-gray striped marble, it appears as a more restrained counterpart to the lavishly baroque *bimah*. However, its neo-classicism is certainly not austere given the robustness of its design. It is prominently featured, situated on a four-stepped plinth that raises it above the level of the prayer hall, with a unique double architrave configuration that gives it considerable depth. Each of its Corinthian columns are surmounted by ornate apothecary jars, with the entire array of its columns reinforced by a backdrop of pilasters and an arched canopy, which establishes a thematic consistency with the exterior façade’s entrances and upper level windows. The extensive display of marble in the *Scuola Levantina* is another aspect of Levantines prominence in the Ghetto community, and to a degree, their indifference to Venetian law. Their “. . . uninhibited use of materials such as marble, in direct contraven-



*Fig. 10*

tion of the Venetian government's prohibitions, suggest that the Levantine community, even more than the Ponentine, enjoyed greater privileges than the other Jews of the Ghetto; one privilege was the uninhibited display of their worldly wealth."

The edifices in the Jewish Ghetto are subject to, as is all

of the architecture in Venice, a complex set of structural degradations as a result of their location within a lagoon environment. Two major factors contribute to the accelerated decay of structures in Venice. First and foremost is the significant increase in contemporary times of *aqua alta*, or high tides, that occur in conjunction with lower atmospheric pressure and high winds. On November 4, 1966, Venice was devastated by an *aqua alta* of two meters above sea level that resulted in incalculable damage to the city's architecture and artwork. While tidal flow in and out of the Venetian estuary is a daily occurrence, the frequency of higher water levels has become a cause of great concern. The second factor is a condition known as *subsidence*, which is a continual sinking of a structure and its foundation. "The construction of buildings on the low-lying islands of Venice required the sinking of wooden piles (*fig. 11*) into the *caranto* (a compact substratum of sand and clay), upon which was built a wooden raft that served as a platform for stone foundations. This allowed Venetian buildings to 'float' in shifting geological strata. Since the piles were driven to a depth below sea level, the wood was constantly submerged and gradually mineralized in seawater. This ingenious method of construction allowed for the dynamic variation of the lagoon's substrate. However, the foundations upon which Venice is built have been compromised by the increased demands for fresh water and natural gas, brought about by the burgeoning urban and industrial complexes on the adjacent mainland. As these natural materials are drawn away from the substrate, their evacuation has caused Venice to subside at a rate of five millimeters per year. Other factors, such as the increased wave action of commercial boat traffic and airborne pollutants, which coat the exteriors of buildings and become acidic when wet, severely compromise the integrity of Venetian architecture. Fortunately, UNESCO has been actively involved in the preservation of Venice since the disastrous flood of 1966, in addition to the World Monument Fund, Venice in Peril and Save Venice,



Fig. 11

working in collaboration with the Italian and Venetian governments

The *Scuola Grande Tedesca* has undergone two major restorations in the last quarter of the twentieth century that have incorporated modern technologies and materials in the overall consolidation of the structure. What was implemented was a restoration process called “undo-redo,” which involves removing earlier, faulty restorations that proved deleterious to the structure’s integrity. The first restoration in 1975 focused primarily on the interior of the structure, which was in a precarious state, with badly sagging floors and decaying roof beams. Repair was carried out upon the staircases and landings. Plastering was redone, utilizing traditional techniques, and the ground floor masonry was repaired. Repair was per-

formed on door and window frames, and the women's gallery was reinforced and repaired. The wood paneling and pews were repaired and given preservative treatments.

The most recent restoration of the *Scuola Grande Tedeseca* was in 1998, with extensive repairs being made to its roof and exterior masonry. Thorough research and surveys were undertaken to assess the building's structure, construction techniques and specific material usage. Electronic monitoring of the wall structures revealed the degree of subsidence that the structure has experienced, and the amount of cracking and lateral shifting of its masonry. Under the supervision of Venice's Superintendency of Environmental and Architectural Heritage, the complicated process of stabilizing the building exterior structure was completed, in addition to the replacement of portions of its brickwork, which necessitated the insertion of a protective moisture barrier to protect the brick from the invasive decay of humidity and salts from the canal side of the structure. The floor required additional reinforcement, and tie-rods were added to insure further stability. The final phase of the restoration involved the cleaning of the decorative Istrian stone elements on the canal and campo façades, and a complete renewal of the structure's exterior.

Similar measures have been enacted to restore the other *scuolas* in the Ghetto, in addition to a thorough restoration of the Jewish Cemetery on nearby Lido Island. The combined efforts of the various agencies that fund these restorations call attention to the Venetian Ghetto's historical significance, not only as an important architectural complex within the confines of Venice, but also its worth internationally. It remains a viable, functioning historic urban ensemble, and perhaps of greater import, its structures are resonantly symbolic—representing a community's resolute will to survive and prosper in what was an exceedingly hostile social environment. The Venetian Ghetto is a study of “. . . violent contrasts; luxury and poverty, freedom and segregation—a microcosm in fact of the condition of mankind.”

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