

Venice reflected

The observations and impressions of Lawrence Halprin

Barbara Boifava

Università Iuav di Venezia

Venice plays a privileged role in the reflections of the American landscape architect Lawrence Halprin (1916-2009), and it becomes the dramatic setting within which he practices a profound exploration of the urban dimension, starting with an attentive awareness of the city's unique and dazzling *heritage*. At the beginning of the 1960's, Halprin's original view of public space was translated into a precise urban taxonomy compiled in his book entitled *Cities*,¹ in which the essential characteristic of the city as an art form is recognized for its unique kinds of choreography generated by the movements through its open spaces and by the participation of its inhabitants. The recurring theme in this publication is enhanced by a rich array of photographic illustrations through which the author sought to give new meaning to immediate urban questions by establishing their relationships to city forms of the past. In the unprecedented definition of a new functional aesthetic in the urban landscape, the images of the projects by the Lawrence Halprin & Associates studio are compared and combined with a recognized European urban aesthetic canon and an Italian-based vocabulary. This established a visual approach to the urban landscape and its heritage as concrete tools of project-design while also confirming their importance as the distinctively visible features of many Italian cities. Alongside the models of Milan, Rome, Florence and other smaller urban centers, the lesson of Venice, in particular, was recognized by Halprin as *the* urban experience par excellence:

I remember with great clarity the greatest urban experience I have ever had. It was in Venice in winter. In front of the church of San Marco, the great square, which Napoleon called the most beautiful drawing room in Europe, was empty. [...] The tide was in, and the black and white stones of the intricately laid pavement were covered with a thin film of water. There was no sound-no automobile exhausts, no buses. Absolute quiet in the very heart of a great city. [...] All of a sudden the air become dark with birds, the square filled with the beating of thousands of wings, the noise increased and increased until it was deafening, and the deserted square became absolutely filled with pigeons. The noise was incredible-even frightening. They had come to feed, and when they had finished, they left just as quickly, and the great square was empty and quiet again.²

The series of photographs that Halprin produced during his first visit in February 1958, recalled a cold and foggy Venice that he defined 'the most everything city I've ever been',³ while they also depicted a surprising view of the city, elevated from atop the bell tower of Saint Mark. The value of this portrait of the lagoon city seen from above – already depicted in the sixteenth century in the famous panoramic view by Jacopo de' Barbari, lending to many others that followed in later centuries by attentive traveler – observers of the Venetian urban scene⁴ – allowed for a synthetic yet dynamic perception of the city in its hierarchical dimension, made up of bell towers, domes and other prominent architectural forms. The aerial vision of the public square below also highlighted the true value of the architectural void, rendered perfectly, and made evident by the compact buildings of the Square's Procuracies. The 'urban charisma'⁵ that Halprin captures, bringing back the Venetian image as a visual experience of the city's great plaza and its monumental architectural void, almost seems to echo the interpretation of enclosed space as suggested by Bruno



Piazza San Marco, drawing by Lawrence Halprin from his notebooks, July 15th, 1961. © Lawrence Halprin Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. Halprin's comment: 'The sense of people in the square is very important'.

Zevi in *Architecture as Space. How to look at Architecture*.⁶ This further demonstrates how voids in the city can become true protagonists of architecture and renew that portrait left by George Simmel at the beginning of the last century of a Venice capable of rendering 'a duality of life'.⁷ Even the unique Greek-style motif of the public pavement in Istrian stone contributed to enhancing the value of the monumental open space, thus generating a specific type of urban landscape, the *floorscape*, which, mindful of the insightful lesson of Gordon Cullen,⁸ is perceived by Halprin as a completing key component of the urban scene.

The square of San Marco, – as the landscape architect noted in describing *The floor of the city* in his book dedicated to cities – like all the great urban spaces of the world, has beautiful pavings, elaborately designed, to make walking an aesthetic experience.⁹

The very design of the Square's public pavement hence confers a distinct measure to the space and places it at scale with human footsteps; and in this sense, the urban landscape at ground level is not a simple synonym of public space paving, but rather a newly coined expression linked to the perception and collective use of the city according to new aesthetic and compositional values. It is for this very reason, Halprin continued to write,



Piazzetta San Marco and view of San Giorgio's church, drawing by Lawrence Halprin from his notebooks, July 14th, 1961. © Lawrence Halprin Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. Halprin's comment: 'The movement out of and crisscross the square is important'.

The floor underfoot is a very immediate and personal kind of experience for pedestrians, but unfortunately, modern city builders have forgotten the visual and tactile qualities possible through the floor.¹⁰

In the summer of 1961 Halprin returned to Venice accompanied by his daughter Daria,¹¹ and it was on this fruitful occasion of a European journey that he again succeeded, even more effectively, in registering the magic of Venice's urban voids, like a *Grand Tourist* attentive to their knowledge of places – as if inspired by the ecstatic emotion of Ruskin's memory – and to the prospects of projects at an urban scale. So, through a series of quick sketches with vibrant and evocative colours, looking almost like Louis Kahn's Italian architectural sketches of the early 1950's,¹² Halprin concentrated his gaze once again on Venice's San Marco Square, and in a conference some years later, he stated:

the dominant impact is the space itself, created by the long, anonymous facades to right and left, the splayed shape of the ground plane, the cramped turn to the piazzeta, the change in pace between the simplicity of the piazza in contrast to the complexity of the piazzeta opposite the Doges palace and then the explosion out into the space of the water between the two fluted columns forming a visual gate the sea.¹³

Through his drawings, Halprin's travelling gaze on Venice reflects the landscape architect's interest in open space as an element capable of taking shape and becoming a place of real social evolution, and he was motivated by a project idea designed to facilitate the collective events of a metropolis as dynamic rituals of society. For this we can see how the profound sense of place suggested by the lagoon's native landscape, by the dense cultural past of the city, by the history of its buildings and by the skilful design of the open spaces in constant communication with the lapping of water, all became the matrix for many of Halprin's later projects, and particularly for the monumental and sculptural forms of the *Open Space Sequence* civic fountains in Portland, Oregon.¹⁴

The pulsating sense of movement that Halprin perceived in the Venetian Public Square and that he translated into sketches, acts as testimony to how 'the sense of people in the square is very important'.¹⁵ At the same time, he was convinced that the distinctive feature of this space, aimed at communicating a sense of measure, time and place, was certainly dictated not only by its delicate physical beauty and usefulness, but also by an unusual audible component of sound:

to be in the center of a great city but quiet enough to hear people talk – to hear their footsteps echoing on the pavement – to hear young people singing as they walked across the square.¹⁶

Halprin's words seem almost to be inspired by the unprecedented sound qualities of a film entitled *Film Venise*, which Le Corbusier had attempted to arrange some years earlier using a montage of overlapping instantaneous images and sounds from the city including the singing of the gondoliers.¹⁷ The 1950's and 60's were in fact the years in which Venice started to be considered a museum city par excellence, and the Charter of Venice (1964) was also enacted, having a profound impact on the conservation of monuments and historical sites.¹⁸ And it was in this same period that Le Corbusier argued that Venice, as a sacred city (*ville sacrée*), should find a balance between respect for tradition and the logic of trade, between conservation and recovery of its heritage, between elite and popular tourism.¹⁹ However, if Le Corbusier's expression 'I call Venice as a witness'²⁰ was ultimately translated into the image of a radiant theme park made up of picturesque canals and eminent 'stairways to the heavens'²¹ Halprin's reflections on the Venetian urban experience, very differently, tended to capture a more deliberated sense of imagination in this city of water, sky and silence. He recognized in Venice a 'fantasy environment' of great intensity, as the evocation of inner worlds made visible and translated into a new urban dimension in which what emerges is a

recurrent theme of participation – of art (and fantasy as part of the process) as something we do... as part and parcel of our own lives not as consumers but as active participants.²²

The Venetian paradigm was also adopted as a model in another text in which Halprin stated: 'Our collective experience of cities depends on their landscape of open spaces'.²³ The opening words of this text clearly imply a strong interest towards an in-depth exploration of models, as well as representations and the constituting

elements of the city, combined with the sense of belonging experienced by a city's inhabitants. Praise for a city, intended as a three-dimensional experience, and as a tangible sign of the idea of 'imageability',²⁴ as suggested by Kevin Lynch, legitimizes the choice of the Venetian urban canon alongside other examples that verify their ability to take on almost anthropomorphic characteristics. The 'choreography of pedestrian dreams' of New York recalls the anomalous and fascinating dimension of the 'architectural forest' of Hong Kong, which is in turn confirmed in San Francisco's 'reflection of its landscape', to also include Jerusalem, where 'the city has always represented a portrait of its inhabitants [...] perhaps of all of us', Halprin therefore seems to invite in-depth observations of our own city and to 'examine it closely for those qualities which make it a creative environment for living [...] which allow you to see yourself reflected in the mirror of your own city'.²⁵ And if the image of Venice reflected that emerges does not meet our expectations, we have only to modify and enhance it by virtue of a deep-rooted cultural matrix and a collective experience of urban spaces, architecture, places, and with the life that animates them.

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Notes

1. L. Halprin, *Cities*, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, New York, 1963. See B. Boifava, 'Cities: la percezione collettiva di Lawrence Halprin', in M. Pretelli, I. Tolic & R. Tamborrino eds., *La città globale – La condizione urbana come fenomeno pervasivo – The global city – The urban condition as pervasive phenomenon*, vol. III, AISU, Torino, 2020, pp. 298-309.
2. L. Halprin, *Cities*, op. cit., p. 9.
3. L. Halprin, postcard send from Venice on February 6th, 1958 and addressed to the team at the studio Lawrence Halprin & Associates of San Francisco, Lawrence Halprin Collection, Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, 014.I.B.2459.
4. R. Dubbini, *Geografie dello sguardo. Visione e paesaggio in età moderna*, Einaudi, Torino, 1994, p. 43.
5. L. Halprin, *Cities*, op. cit.
6. B. Zevi, *Architecture as Space. How to look at Architecture*, Horizon Press, New York, 1957, tr. B. Zevi, *Saper vedere l'architettura. Saggio sull'interpretazione spaziale dell'architettura*, Einaudi, Torino, 1948, p. 22. Zevi's book included a critical page layout of images dedicated to San Marco's Square. There are documented and repeated contacts between Halprin and Zevi and Italian architectural theorist became a fervid promoter of Halprin through a volume he dedicated to the American landscape architect in a series of books on architecture that Zevi directed. See J. Burns, *Lawrence Halprin paesaggista*, Edizioni Dedalo, Bari, 1982.
7. G. Simmel, *Zur Philosophie der Kunst: philosophische und kunstphilosophische Aufsätze*, Kiepenheuer, Potsdam, 1922, p. 72; partial Italian translation in G. Simmel, 'Roma, Firenze e Venezia', in M. Cacciari, *Metropolis*, Officina, Roma, 1973, p. 196. Simmel specifies: 'Double is the sensation these squares give, where the lack of cars and the narrowness of the paths that lead to them make them seem like rooms'.
8. G. Cullen, *Townscape*, The Architectural Press, London, 1961.
9. L. Halprin, *Cities*, op. cit. p. 92.
10. Ibid.
11. Daria Halprin, only a few years later, starred in the film *Zabriskie Point* (1970) by Michelangelo Antonioni, representing a 'real America' in the middle of the Californian desert.
12. P. Potié, 'Louis Kahn. Ce commencement...', in P. Potié, *Le voyage de l'architecte*, Parenthèse, Marseille, 2018, pp. 68-79.

13. L. Halprin, conference presented to the Student Association of Landscape Architects, University of Wisconsin, 7 May 1965, p. 4, Lawrence Halprin Collection, Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, 014.I.A.6161.
14. A.B. Hirsch, 'Lawrence Halprin's Public Spaces: Design, Experience, and Recovery. Three Case Studies', *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, vol. 26, no. 1, January-March 2006, pp. 1-97.
15. Lawrence Halprin's comment in the drawing of Piazza San Marco, 15 July 1961 Halprin's notebooks, Lawrence Halprin Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.
16. L. Halprin, conference presented to the Student Association of Landscape Architects, University of Wisconsin, 7 May 1965, p. 3, Lawrence Halprin Collection, Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, 014.I.A.6161.
17. S. Von Moos, *Alla Veneziana. Le Corbusier, il turismo e la crisi dell'utopia*, in M. Talamona ed., *L'Italia di Le Corbusier*, Fondazione MAXXI, Mondadori Electa, Milano, 2012, p. 215.
18. See also F. Choay, *L'allégorie du patrimoine*, Seuil, Paris 1992, p. 96.
19. Le Corbusier's letter to the mayor of Venice Giovanni Favaretto Fisca, 3 October 1962, Fondation Le Corbusier Paris, 12(20) 70-73. Le Corbusier was invited by the mayor of Venice to participate in an international conference on conservation and restoration entitled: *Il problema di Venezia* (The problem of Venice) which was programmed for October of 1962, but he ultimately declined the invitation.
20. Le Corbusier, 'Je prends venise à témoin', in Le Corbusier, *La Ville Radieuse. Éléments d'une doctrine d'urbanisme pour l'équipement de la civilisation machiniste*, Éditions de L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui, Collection de l'équipement de la civilisation machiniste, Boulogne-sur-Seine, 1935; 2nd edn, Éditions Vincent Frel & Cie, Paris, 1964, p. 268.
21. Le Corbusier used this meaning to define the Venetian bridges in the conference entitled *A propos de Venise*, Cà Giustinian, Venezia, 27 September 1952. S. Von Moos, *Alla Veneziana. Le Corbusier, il turismo e la crisi dell'utopia*, op. cit., p. 202.
22. L. Halprin, *Fantasy environments*, type-written text, p. 21. Lawrence Halprin Collection, Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, 014.I.B.2032. This is taken from an unpublished manuscript by L. Halprin, *The Environment as Art Experience*, 1974. See also L. Halprin, *Take Part: A Report on New Ways in Which People Can Participate in Planning Their Own Environments*, Lawrence Halprin & Associates, San Francisco -New York, 1972.
23. L. Halprin, 'The Collective Perception of Cities', in *Urban Open Spaces*, Academy Editions, London, 1979, p. 4.
24. See K. Lynch, *The Images of the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1960. Lynch shared with Halprin the desire to bring attention to the aesthetic dimension of the city, focusing on the dimension of the urban experience and concentrating on the image of the city as perceived by its inhabitants.
25. L. Halprin, *The Collective Perception of Cities*, op. cit., pp. 5-19.