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Preservation institutions and starchitecture in Venice: the approval process behind Constitution Bridge and the Fondaco dei Tedeschi

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Abstract

This article examines the role of preservation institutions in shaping ‘starchitect’ projects in Venice through a comparative analysis of the approval processes for Santiago Calatrava’s Constitution Bridge (1996–2008) and OMA’s adaptive reuse of Fondaco dei Tedeschi as a luxury retail complex (2009–2016). The methodology combined archival research (primarily drawing on the files of the Superintendency of Venice and Its Lagoon), press analysis, bibliographical review, field observations, and interviews. Using the lens of assemblage thinking, four key dynamics were identified: (1) preservation officials’ discretionary power operated within multiscalar assemblages in multidirectional geographies of power; (2) core material agencies were highly relevant elements but were subject to the political stakes of each project; (3) local firms served as mediators between preservation bodies and starchitects, while assemblage expanders added further complexity; and (4) international actors globalised the assemblages, but approval processes remained within local and national boundaries. The case of Constitution Bridge demonstrated how powerful political drivers can coopt local preservation bodies, leading to acquiescence and fast-tracked approvals that bypass rigorous oversight. In contrast, the Fondaco case shows how assertive intervention by national institutions can enforce conservation principles against private economic pressure, leading to a materially different, negotiated outcome.

Keywords Heritage governance, Venice, Starchitecture, Fondaco dei Tedeschi, Constitution Bridge, World Heritage

1 Introduction

Within the purposeful scope of transnational architecture in territorial and spatial heritage-led regeneration schemes, interest in the building of outstanding architectural works in historic centres, especially those produced by starchitects—firms of worldwide-renowned architects with celebrity status—has been fully embraced as an economic development and recovery tool, as noted by Ponzini and Nastasi (2016) and Ponzini (2020).

The integration of conservation into wider urban governance in Europe, as primarily perceived by Pendlebury (2013), coupled with the growing economic role of heritage since the rise of entrepreneurial governance in the 1970s (Pendlebury et al. 2020; Pendlebury and Veldpaus 2023), has led urban authorities to use highly symbolic ‘prestige projects’ to rebrand and promote their cities.

This global phenomenon is particularly evident in Italy. There, the convergence of strengthened mayoral authority (Cacciari 2008) and a trend towards privatising public assets since the 1990s (Mossetto 1997; Palumbo 2006; Ponzini 2010) created fertile ground for transnational architectural projects. This was especially true for art cities such as Venice, where its status as a ‘short-term city’ dominated by tourism (Salerno and Russo 2020)

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intensified the pressure for prestigious development. However, the development of transnational projects frequently clashes with the priorities of conservation authorities, who are mandated to ensure the respectful integration of new structures within historic urban landscapes (Gravari-Barbas 2016).

The mediating role of heritage preservation institutions, regulatory agencies, and legal frameworks fundamentally shapes this relationship. While these entities significantly influence outcomes, their decision-making processes remain largely opaque, as do their relationships with other relevant actors.

This topic has been further explored within recent scholarship regarding governance in World Heritage cities. The Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, for instance, advocates an integrated view of heritage management that considers the dynamic nature of the urban environment (Pereira Roders and Bandarin 2019). However, as studies of European cities show, the implementation of such approaches often reveals a gap between international recommendations and local bureaucratic practices (Cunha Ferreira et al. 2023). In this sense, the function of preservation institutions in the face of prestige projects proposed by architects extends beyond mere technical or administrative compliance, encompassing complex sociopolitical arrangements that warrant closer examination.

While the figure of the superintendency dominates the Italian panorama because of the national regularity framework, the term ‘preservation institutions’ encompasses the multiplicity of governmental and nongovernmental bodies that deal with preservation across the multiscalar governance system. In the case of Venice, the primary regulatory authority is exercised by the Superintendency for Venice and Its Lagoon under Legislative Decree No. 42 of 2004. This framework was significantly shaped by the 1973 Special Law in Venice, which established a unique governance model and a dedicated funding stream for preserving the city, as well as the Safeguarding Commission (Regione del Veneto 2023). The Veneto regional government has competencies in urban planning and territorial management, and the local Comune di Venezia (City of Venice) is responsible for administration and infrastructure. The territory is also under UNESCO agencies’ advisory eye, as the city became a World Heritage Site in 1987, and civil society groups, such as Italia Nostra.

Through case study analysis, this article aims to detail approval processes and elucidate how these complexities have shaped transnational architecture in Venice. This research investigated two case studies: Santiago Calatrava’s Constitution Bridge (1996–2008) and the OMA/

Rem Koolhaas’s Fondaco dei Tedeschi intervention (2009–2016).¹

These projects offered a pertinent comparison on the basis of their contrasting commissioning models: Constitution Bridge was a publicly led infrastructure project spearheaded by Mayor Massimo Cacciari, whereas the Fondaco dei Tedeschi reuse was a private intervention commissioned by the Benetton Group following the building’s purchase. In addition, their typological and geographic differences are revealing. The bridge is located at the margin of the historic urban fabric, between the Santa Lucia railway station and Piazzale Roma, the main access to the historic city. In stark contrast, the Fondaco is a highly valuable landmark adjacent to the Rialto Bridge (see Fig. 1).

Assemblage thinking (Deleuze and Guattari 1976, 1987; Farias and Bender 2012) frames this analysis, a lens particularly apt for examining the dynamic and often contested nature of urban heritage governance (Pendlebury 2013), while it is also particularly useful for reviewing the fluid attributes of urban materiality and historical ‘depth’ of buildings as infrastructures (Edensor 2011). As a framework rather than a methodology, it specifically leverages assemblage thinking’s descriptive capacity to examine the relationship between history and potential (where the power of any single agent is contingent on the specific political, bureaucratic, and spatial conjuncture), as well as its distributive concept of agency across both social and material elements, as McFarlane (2011) conceives of it.

This lens guides the comparative analysis between the two case studies, focusing on four key identified dynamics between preservation actors and other human and nonhuman agents in determining project approval assemblages for architecture in Venice: (1) governance and politics, concerned with the shaping of different geographies of power between leading actors in multiscalar dynamics; (2) material and contextual agency, concerned with the influence of nonhuman actors; (3) mediation and expansion, concerned with supporting actors who establish specific mediation dynamics; and (4) the global–local nexus, concerned with the actual/possible role of international actors (architects and UNESCO agencies).

This paper contributes to the existing body of work on heritage governance by offering a detailed and descriptive gaze into the approval processes as mediated and filed mainly by the Superintendency of Venice, exploring how

¹ This research was conducted as part of the TUPACH project—Transnational Urban Projects Assembled within Cultural Heritage Sites—of the Polytechnic University of Milan, the University Iuav of Venice, and the Federico II University of Naples.



Fig. 1 The location of Constitution Bridge and the Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venice (Source: the author 2025)

heritage governance is negotiated through the machinery of bureaucracy (Hjemdahl 2022) in the context of starchitecture projects in World Heritage Sites.

This study is critically important for the governance of World Heritage Sites such as Venice because it moves beyond a static, rule-based view of preservation to a dynamic, strategic approach that aligns with the HUL agenda. By showing that the agency of preservation bodies varies according to the assertiveness of individuals and the specific sociomaterial assemblages surrounding each project, it offers realistic insight into heritage governance for implementing transnational architecture within historic sites.

For policy-makers and heritage practitioners, this analysis provides an experimental instrument to identify key points of leverage and vulnerability within approval processes. Recognition of how multiscale geographies of power influence outcomes, the agency of the site itself, and the roles of key actors enables more proactive and effective governance and an understanding of how transnational architecture can be managed strategically instead of being passively accepted.

The methodological approach is primarily based on archival research, complemented by press reviews, unstructured observations, and interviews with the involved agents. The archival investigation mainly relied on materials from the archives of Venice and Its Lagoon Superintendency, which were collected between March and July 2024 for both cases. The inquiry revealed a

rich collection including official letters, project copies, records produced by the superintendency, and various materials exchanged between the city government, other public agencies, and private individuals. Newspaper clippings, printed email exchanges, official correspondence, draft annotations, and reviewed project files formed an extensive archive, which was systematically organised and analysed to reconstruct the political-administrative framework behind the evaluation and execution of these projects.

This documentary assessment was supplemented by a systematic press review of the major local newspapers, particularly *La Nuova Venezia* and *Il Corriere del Veneto*, as well as *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Gazzettino*, and *VeneziaToday*, using the projects' names as keywords. Articles were sourced from online newspaper databases, physical clippings in the superintendency archives, and the *Fondazione Querini Stampalia* collection. For Constitution Bridge, 211 entries were identified that covered the period from 1998 to 2024. For the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, the press review (2010–2024) yielded 197 relevant articles.

Systematic field visits were conducted between March and December 2024 to generate unstructured observation reports that captured the use of public spaces without researcher intervention. Additionally, seven semistructured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in the projects: two designers from OMA and Torsello Architettura (TA), who worked on the

Fondaco project; an official from the superintendency; two former municipal administrators involved in the case of Constitution Bridge; and two journalists who extensively covered both projects. Santiago Calatrava's studio declined interview requests, preventing insights from the architect and his team.

2 Case study 1: Constitution Bridge

Constitution Bridge, designed by Santiago Calatrava, originated from a 1996 urban plan for Venice by Leonardo Benevolo. His concept for a 'bipolar city' included a mechanised pedestrian pathway between Piazzale Roma and the Santa Lucia railway station (Benevolo 1996, 60), which later became the site for the fourth bridge over the Grand Canal (see Fig. 2).

The concept of a mechanised pathway evolved into a bridge as Santiago Calatrava began liaising with municipal agents in 1995 during his exhibition *Construir el Movimiento* at the Masieri Foundation. After being invited to develop a pre-design by them (former municipality employee, 'Interview', 29 May 2024), Calatrava presented a proposal on his own initiative in March 1996 (Corte dei Conti Sezione Veneto 2015, 04).

Calatrava developed the bridge without a direct commissioner or prior consultation with preservation agents. He relied heavily on his own architectural language,



Fig. 2 Constitution Bridge (Source: the author 2024)

intending to create a work of great artistic value for the city, where aesthetic objectives were paramount (Santiago Calatrava SA 2001, 06).

Calatrava's reflections extended little beyond declaring the bridge a 'necessary link' between Piazzale Roma and the Santa Lucia railway station. Apart from this declared conciseness, few material elements were justified by the environment. A later exception was the choice of 'Venetian red' for the structure (Santiago Calatrava SA 2001, 10).

In 1996, the City Council of Venice accepted the donation of the feasibility study for the bridge and forwarded it to the Commission for the Safeguarding of Venice for a preliminary opinion (Corte dei Conti Sezione Veneto 2015, 04). The commission struggled to assess its potential impact on the canal because the graphic content was vague. The situation was made more complicated by the framework of decisions to be taken at once, reflecting not only the building of the bridge from a heritage preservation perspective but also the practicability of issuing a preliminary opinion on a draft project, in addition to the discussion about the urban and legal viability of the connection between the Santa Lucia station and Piazzale Roma itself.

The preliminary opinion, which was favourable to the proposal, nonetheless stated that the project remained incomplete and that an intervention of that magnitude should be analysed through images, drawings, and simulations that could clarify in detail the environmental, visual, and landscape impact in all its aspects concerning visualisation and the definition of the volume in relation to the entire context (Commissione per la Salvaguardia di Venezia 1996, 03).

Between 1996 and 1999, the project implementation initiative was led by the mayor of Venice, Massimo Cacciari. Cacciari and the city administration, as well as Calatrava, envisioned the bridge as a work with the potential to 'positively influence and boost the development of Venice for the future' (Santiago Calatrava SA 2000, 02). Calatrava's career and experience in bridge design were often cited as justifications. The presentation of the project at the *Venezia: la Nuova Architettura* exhibition in 1999 produced a favourable consensus towards Calatrava's design (Bucci 2001). However, criticism of Cacciari for supposedly favouring 'transgressive architecture by foreign architects' levied by Benevolo (Fazio 1999).

From an urban planning point of view, efforts to include the bridge in the variant to the PRG (general regulatory plan) in 1999, as discussed by the city council, were justified by the high pedestrian flow between Santa Lucia station and Piazzale Roma, which would significantly increase with work on the future Citadel of Justice (Direzione Centrale Sviluppo del Territorio e Mobilità

– Ufficio Urbanistica 2000). On the other hand, from a political point of view, the decision to secure this inclusion may have been motivated by Cacciari's candidacy for the presidency of the Veneto Region (Pellicani 1999; Tanucci 1999).

In 1999, the city council approved the preproject, citing that the Safeguarding Commission had given a favourable opinion in principle on procedures for the design of the structure (Consiglio Comunale del Comune di Venezia 1999, 84). However, there is no mention of a new evaluation process that complied with the 1996 stipulation that such an appraisal required robust graphic materials to accurately assess the bridge's impact on the Grand Canal.

Civil society groups such as Italia Nostra and Accademia del Paesaggio e del Giardino presso l'Università Popolare di Venezia expressed negative opinions about the bridge and the integrity of the process, succeeding in reverberating the case in the local media.

In 1999, a competition was held for the development of the final design, of which there is little documentation, based on Calatrava's own predesign and directly addressed to him (former municipality employee, 'Interview,' 29 May 2024). Following this, Calatrava was entrusted with the design process up to the development of an executive plan (Jodidio 2015, 339). Subsequent construction management, on the other hand, was handled internally by the city's Public Works Department, with the work awarded to the highest bidder through a competitive bidding process, thereby preventing Calatrava from maintaining control over execution (Cacciari 2008, 124).

Over the next two years, the superintendency responded in a relatively restrained manner, limiting itself to affirming that the object would not affect its environmental context (Soprintendenza per l'Archeologia, le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio per il Comune di Venezia e Laguna 2001). The superintendent at the time was known to be supportive of the project. In

2001, the Safeguarding Commission issued a new final opinion, on the basis of the requests submitted by the superintendency, finally approving the bridge (Commissione per la Salvaguardia di Venezia 2001).

Once more, the bridge's design did not cause considerable stir, and it was mostly considered discrete. As the architect Vittorio Gregotti noted, in addition to its design being 'less aggressive and contained,' the bridge would be part of an 'inner periphery' context that could perhaps be 'ennobled by the footbridge' (Bucci 2001).

The works began in 2003 under the direction of Cignoni S.r.l. The architect Calatrava suggested calling it the 'bridge of angels,' referring to a series of sculptures on buildings in Venice and proposed the insertion of stylised angel sculptures designed by him into the heads of the bridge. The insertion of the sculptures was rejected by the new superintendent, who justified this by stating that the design of the sculptures was an incongruous element, in contrast with the linearity of the bridge and with the architectural context defined by the Palazzo Compartimentale (Soprintendenza per l'Archeologia, le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio per il Comune di Venezia e Laguna 2007) (see Fig. 3).

Although the construction of the bridge was highly publicised, the World Heritage Centre was only informed of the project and the construction of the bridge in 2008, following a formal request from the Italian Directorate General of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage at the World Heritage Committee meeting that year (DGOIF – Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali 2008). Until that moment, in any case, the WHC had not forwarded any formal request to the Italian Commission in this regard, and no recorded repercussions were found. However, the suggestion of a drastic move by UNESCO to block the bridge was widely publicised as highly probable in local newspapers and by nongovernmental institutions and civil society groups.



Fig. 3 Sketch for angel sculpture to be placed into the bridge heads made by Calatrava and rejected by the superintendency in 2007 (Source: Santiago Calatrava SA (2007), photographed by the author 2024)

3 Case study 2: Fondaco dei Tedeschi

The Fondaco dei Tedeschi, initially built in the thirteenth century and rebuilt in the sixteenth century after a fire, served as a trading post and residence for German merchants under the administration of the Venetian Republic. In the early twentieth century, extensive restoration stripped the building of much of its historic material and formal integrity (Ufficio Centrale per i Beni Architettonici, Archeologici, Artistici e Storici 2000, 3). The building served as the post office headquarters from the 1930s until the first decade of the 2000s.

The building was sold to Edizione S.r.l. (part of the Benetton Group) in 2008 (Benetton 2016, 10) and subsequently commissioned to OMA in 2009 after Massimo Cacciari's suggestion (Edizione S.r.l. 2012). Although businessman Gilberto Benetton's initial idea was to turn it into a hotel (Koolhaas and Pestellini Laparelli 2016, 113), contact with Koolhaas led to the decision to transform it into a department store (OMA 2011, 02). Commercial use was widely advertised as a 'return to the original function,' on the basis of the idea of bringing together various local productions and offering the public a hub of Venetian artisanal excellence (see Fig. 4).

Koolhaas's design exercise departed from the reorganisation of internal flows in the use of the central courtyard as a square and the addition of retractable escalators that crossed the central void, culminating in a rooftop inserted by removing half of the existing gables and elevating the courtyard roof, forming a new floor. His study considered the building's profoundly altered state, believing its materiality to be unoriginal and therefore amenable to radical change.

The project debuted publicly at Venice Biennale on August 29, 2010 (Etherington 2010). Mayor Giorgio Orsoni specifically criticised OMA's invasive design and insisted that any change to the building's function

required clear municipal compensation (De Rossi 2010). The media reported successive meetings between the Benetton owner and Orsoni during 2011, but no agreement was reached. By resolution in December 2011, the city council nonetheless agreed with Edizione to secure a derogatory building permit, waiving public standards to allow commercial use of the building.

The agreement would grant public access at no cost to the municipality, restore one of the city's oldest buildings, and allow for integrated cultural and commercial use. However, it prioritised the full realisation of Koolhaas's design, requiring the municipality to expedite all approvals with 'maximum diligence.' A 6-million euro 'public benefit' compensation was conditional on this accelerated timeline (Giunta Comunale di Venezia 2011). Notably, the agreement fundamentally bypassed the required approval from the superintendency.

Criticism regarding the project and the agreement arose, fuelling public debate. Koolhaas's relevance to international architecture was frequently mentioned in the media by defenders of his vision (Ghio 2012), as was the case with Calatrava's project. Criticism of the intervention focused on the rooftop proposal and the central escalator design. With respect to the agreement, the mayor made multiple remarks to local newspapers, trying to downplay the criticality of the compensation clause (De Rossi 2012). The president of the Venice section of Italia Nostra, on the other hand, claimed that what the municipality had truly promised was to do everything possible to guarantee the complete execution of Edizione and Koolhaas's intentions (VeneziaToday 2012).

The project was finally sent to the superintendency for evaluation in February 2012. The heavy criticism surrounding the project, particularly the accusations made by Italia Nostra, influenced its approval even before the superintendency's decision. As early as mid-February 2012, Benetton and Orsoni indicated that the rooftop design would be toned down, and a 'soft' version, agreed upon by Koolhaas, Edizione, and the municipality, would be proposed (Fullin 2012).

At this point, the superintendent in charge became personally involved when journalists discovered she was listed as a 'preservation advisor' for the project on OMA's website. The superintendent denied any awareness of this use of her name, although she did express sympathy for the project and the input that OMA credited to her (Tantucci 2012b). Her office maintained that all contact had remained within official institutional channels during her two-year oversight of the project (Il Gazzettino 2012).

Even so, the Regional Director for the Ministry of Culture decided to send the project for the evaluation of the Comitato Tecnico-Scientifico per i Beni Architettonici e Paesaggistici dei Beni Culturali



Fig. 4 The Fondaco dei Tedeschi building (Source: the author 2025)

(Technical-Scientific Committee for Architectural and Landscape Heritage of Cultural Properties) in Rome, virtually removing the decision from the superintendent's hands (De Rossi 2012).

Despite reported disagreements, both the superintendency and the regional directorate submitted unanimously critical technical opinions to the committee. These reports highlighted the project's inadequate survey and lack of proper structural analysis or historical dating studies. The assessment cited widespread opposition to Koolhaas's proposal, particularly objecting to the demolition of multiple walls. They further criticised the rooftop for blocking natural light and reducing the spaciousness of the courtyard and condemned the escalators as 'subversive' and 'overwhelming' elements that disrupted its spatial integrity (Navarro Dina 2012b). As expected, the decision was adverse, citing the lack of historical-philological depth of the analysis and claiming that the intervention seemed oversized in relation to the ancient structures of the building (Comitato Tecnico-Scientifico per i Beni Architettonici e Paesaggistici 2012, 2).

Benetton decided to halt the preliminary conservation work in response to the negative assessment and considered contesting it legally (Tantucci 2012a). Koolhaas took a defiant tone, making strong remarks questioning the power of the superintendency and the committee (Ghio 2012). The voices of Koolhaas and Edizione were joined by those of the La Rinascente Group, which was intended to manage commercial operations, threatening to abandon the project if the rooftop and escalators proposed by Koolhaas were not approved (Navarro Dina 2012a).

In the months that followed, nonetheless, the defiant tone gave way to an intense, collaborative relationship between the OMA team and the superintendency to make significant changes that would allow the project to be approved, with the superintendent providing considerable input. On behalf of OMA, two Italian architects who worked for the firm handled the negotiations. During this period, the Torsello Architettura Studio (TA) was also called in to reintegrate the project, actively participating in the decisions that resulted in the proposed modifications.

It was through the surveys that TA had developed and the studio's expertise that many of the contested points in the project were resolved. The studio was responsible for creating a detailed survey of the building's current state. With respect to the escalators, their structural analysis of weak points and problems led to the determination of a new location away from the courtyard. For the rooftop, Torsello suggested that it be changed to an *altana* (roof terrace)—a typical Venetian element (Torsello Architettura architect, 'Interview', 12 Nov 2024) (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 The altana that replaced the rooftop proposition in the last version of the project presented in November 2012 (Source: Kasa Fue 2020, modified by the author 2025)

The revised project was resubmitted in November 2012. It received approval that December, conditional on further detailing of the design (Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici e Paesaggistici di Venezia e Laguna 2012, 2). No documents related to the WHC were found for the Fondaco dei Tedeschi project, unlike the process for Constitution Bridge, suggesting that no communication or involvement occurred.

In 2013, Italia Nostra filed an appeal with the Veneto Regional Administrative Court (TAR), challenging all the authorisations granted by the municipality, connected agencies, and the superintendency (Mantovan 2013)—ultimately rejected in 2014. The ruling reconfirmed the discretionary power of the superintendent and the regional director, while mentioning, among other factors, that the changes made in the collaborative process were also the result of Koolhaas's 'availability', which could not be ignored given the importance of a 'professional of such standing' (Tribunale Amministrativo Regionale per il Veneto 2014, 4).

The Fondaco work began at the end of May 2013. There was intense contact among the designers from OMA, Torsello Architettura, and the superintendency between 2013 and 2014, as documented in the institution's archives. At the forefront of the operation, Torsello led negotiations on a wide range of concerns on behalf of OMA. The superintendent's career as an architect and hands-on experience in other starchitect interventions in Venice were instrumental in generating consensus (former OMA employee, 'Interview', 10 Oct 2024).

In June 2015, local media reported on tensions between Koolhaas and Edizione after OMA staff were barred from the construction site, raising suspicions of unauthorised

changes to Koolhaas's design. Without oversight or an interior design contract, Koolhaas threatened to remove his name from the project. The departure of the supportive superintendent compounded these issues. The conflict stemmed from a shift in commercial strategy—replacing tenant La Rinascente with DFS—which moved the project away from OMA's urban function vision towards DFS's exclusive, luxury retail concept (Tantucci 2015). Renamed T Fondaco, the store opened to the public in September 2016 and closed its operations in June 2025 because of accumulated financial losses (see Fig. 6).

4 Preservation institutions as actors in the approval of starchitect projects in Venice: a comparative discussion through the lens of assemblage

4.1 Governance and politics

The role of preservation institutions in the two projects was unpredictable and variable. Viewed through the lens of assemblage, they were moulded by the formation of specific sociomaterial arrangements, in which the discretionary power of agents within such institutions (especially the superintendents) played a key role in shaping the final projects. From these arrangements emerged



Fig. 6 The heavily modified interior of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi is attributed to the commercial operation led by DFS since 2016 (Source: the author 2024)

complex dynamics of control, politics, governance, and material agency, ultimately negotiated through interactions with other relevant actors, namely, the municipality, enterprises, starchitects, and mayors.

First, the cases of Fondaco and Constitution Bridge establish that, beyond the purely institutional aspect, the discretionary power of preservation agents in relation to the validation of discourses established in administrative assemblages nonetheless remained dependent on political provisions. This relationship between discretionary power and politics influenced vertical and horizontal dynamics, especially between the local and national levels.

The assemblage that led to the approval of the Constitution Bridge design was characterised by a top-down political drive that systematically circumvented rigorous oversight. Mayor Massimo Cacciari was the central political force, championing the project as a symbol of modern development and expediting its inclusion in the urban plan, whereas Calatrava seized the opportunity to build momentum around his interest in carrying out iconic projects in Italian art cities. In this context, the superintendency and the Safeguarding Commission played surprisingly restrained and compliant roles.

Rather than enforcing its mandate for a thorough project evaluation, preservation bodies went along with the political momentum, issuing approvals without the robust graphic materials that were initially deemed essential and ultimately aligning their requests with the advancement of the project rather than its critical evaluation. This dynamic created a powerful alliance between political will and regulatory acquiescence, effectively neutralising formal opposition and allowing the project to proceed more on political vision than on a consensually reviewed or meticulously assessed architectural proposal.

Despite this, the superintendent's discretionary power was limited in the assemblage itself, as it was subject to the pluralisation of agents with overlapping or intersecting duties. The bridge project illustrates a horizontal overlap of responsibilities, evidenced by the change in superintendency leadership during construction. The documented interventions of the second superintendent—specifically concerning the veto of Calatrava's angel sculptures—demonstrate that each superintendent's period of influence established distinct authentication processes that extended throughout the construction work, thus reshaping the role of the superintendency within the assemblage in response to the shifting agency of its leading actors.

The assemblage that led to the approval of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi project was defined by a decisive and interventionist national oversight that ultimately overrode local and regional political and economic interests.

Unlike the case of Constitution Bridge, where municipal drive under Cacciari prevailed with limited opposition, this process saw the Veneto Regional Directorate and Scientific Committee in Rome assert their authority to halt the initial proposal, despite the local superintendent's reported sympathetic views towards the project. This action illustrates how assemblages are dispersed or realigned through contestation and shifting power relations. By removing the evaluation from the local superintendency, the regional director effectively shielded it from political and economic pressure. The committee's subsequent rejection was not just a critique of the design but a validation of this procedural safeguard, demonstrating how higher-level administrative oversight in vertical dynamics can act as a vital counterbalance to powerful interests and ensure that heritage protection principles are upheld in the constitution of different geographies of power.

4.2 Material and contextual agency

Second, the two cases reveal how materiality and spatial context actively shaped the assemblage. The physical location of each project was a nonhuman actor with significant agency. The perception of Piazzale Roma as a peripheral area in the late 1990s may have facilitated the installation of Calatrava's work without an in-depth discussion of its impact on the Grand Canal, furthering the political agenda led by Cacciari and to the detriment of approval procedures by the superintendency and Safeguarding Commission. On the other hand, Fondaco's central location and profound historical significance prompted a stronger bureaucratic response. Similarly, the building's 'historical depth', as per Edensor's (2011) understanding, became a powerful component of the assemblage, enforcing a conservation-first logic that clashed with Koolhaas's vision, which was initially grounded in the building's altered materiality.

In both cases, one could also argue that Venice's historicity exerted some agency, challenging and reshaping the globalising forces introduced by the starchitects, albeit with divergent outcomes and across different time frames. The Fondaco project's debut at the Venice Biennale, while promoted as a radical critique of global heritage systems, ultimately saw its design adapted to comply with Italian conservation regulations from the beginning. In contrast, the narrative framing Calatrava's project as a catalyst for dragging Venice into the twenty-first century did reach a favourable consensus at the 1999 exhibition. Nevertheless, it turned against the architect when the second superintendent blocked his suggestion to insert Venetian-inspired sculptures into the bridge heads at the verge of its inauguration, as they were considered incompatible with the projected image of an ahistorical Venice.

4.3 Mediation and expansion

A third critical factor that emerged is the relationships among preservation agents, international architects, and mediating local actors. In the case of the bridge, this collaboration was limited to its technical execution. In contrast, the Fondaco case better illustrates the collaborative relationships established among architects, companies, and the superintendency.

The adverse advice from Rome in the Fondaco case forced a fundamental redesign, shifting power from the developer and architect to the State's technical bodies. However, this top-down intervention was intermediated by key local actors—the superintendent and Torsello Architettura—in close collaboration with the architects in charge of the project on behalf of OMA. The designer-led approach and cooperation were instrumental in negotiating a compromise that satisfied conservation requirements while salvaging Koolhaas's project's core vision.

Thus, the final assemblage was a hybrid: national power set nonnegotiable boundaries, but local expertise and personal diplomacy in collaborative dynamics enabled the necessary modifications, creating a project that was a product of both rigid ministerial authority and flexible adaptation with significant input from the local sphere.

This finding reinforces Yaneva's (2009) understanding of a distributed agency in which the outcome of starchitecture is not dictated by a single name-sake professional but by a studio's inner sociomaterial network. However, it also extends this reasoning, preventing the material outcome from being centred on a single governmental institution or bureaucrat (superintendent), as third parties negotiated this resolution.

Actors such as Torsello Architettura served, therefore, as mediators within the assemblage, adapting the project not only in content but also in the *modus operandi* for institutional approval, making explicit how previously established working relationships and trust between preservation institutions and local service providers manifested as agencies in the Fondaco's assemblage validation. This role can also be attributed to the Italian architects who worked at OMA's studio and served as translators on the other end.

Still noticeable, however, is the effort of other actors in the context of Venice's preservation, especially Italia Nostra, which, despite the less-than-satisfactory results of its attempts to judicialise the approval of both cases, succeeded in bringing the discussion of the legitimacy of the works to the local media, as well as journalists who recurrently reported on both. One can assume their role, even if indirectly, as expanders, as their actions led to the further complexification of the assemblages towards the general public and the judiciary system—actors who, in

turn, had limited participation in the outcomes but who stretched the assemblages' ramifications at local and regional levels.

4.4 The global–local nexus

Finally, while the internationalisation of assemblages, driven by the presence of architects and Venice's status as a World Heritage Site, can be verified, project approval inherently remained within national borders.

The involvement of renowned architects such as Calatrava and Koolhaas indeed served to globalise the projects, generating media buzz and positioning them within a transnational architecture discourse. However, this globalisation remained a somewhat predictable exercise of architect power and branding, as seen in attempts to justify decisions based on the architects' expertise and careers, with an uneven impact on the assemblages between the two case studies.

International bodies' inaction in both Constitution Bridge and Fondaco dei Tedeschi, on the other hand, functioned as passive consent, completing a governance assemblage in which decisive local political and economic drives faced no meaningful counterbalance from international safeguarding authorities.

At this point, however, one must mention the discrepancy between the perception of the possible role—meaning the expected action—and the actual role of such agents. The expectation of a proactive international effort to block such projects was seen by organised groups as a procedural failure. However, the WHC and the WH Committee's real activity regarding World Heritage sites is part of broader networks that respond to broader transnational politics. The changes caused by Calatrava Bridge and the Fondaco dei Tedeschi did not seem to create sufficiently strong agencies to influence the socio-material assemblage of Venice WHS's preservation governance; thus, they did not prompt practical responses.

5 Conclusions

The comparative analysis of Constitution Bridge and the Fondaco dei Tedeschi revealed that the role of preservation institutions in Venice in the formation of sociomaterial assemblages was not fixed but rather a variable of agency, contingent on the assertiveness of individuals within the bureaucracy and the oversight mechanisms available to them. As the documentation reveals, the ultimate decision-making power regarding preservation was highly concentrated within the superintendency, although its role varied between the two projects. This act demonstrates that the superintendency's technical authority, even when fragmented internally, remained the crucial gateway for project legitimacy. However, the roles these actors played were defined less by a pre-given

property and more by the assemblages that they entered and constituted.

A comparison of these two projects produced some critical insights into how preservation actors responded to architect interventions in Venice, highlighting their role between architectural ambition and institutional oversight in relation to the four dynamics identified: (1) preservation officials' discretionary power operated within multiscalar governance assemblages, where local, regional, and national actors asserted competing claims through overlapping jurisdictions but depended on the establishment of vertical and horizontal geographies of power; (2) core material agencies such as geographical and historical depth were highly relevant elements in the assemblages, nevertheless subject to the political stakes involved in the projects; (3) local firms acted as mediators within the assemblages between international design ambitions and preservation restrictions, while assemblage expanders broadened and complexified them in validation processes; and (4) although architects and international agencies globalised the assemblages, approval processes remained fundamentally limited to national boundaries.

While the focused comparison of Constitution Bridge and the Fondaco dei Tedeschi provides critical initial insights, expanding this analysis to include more case studies across Venice is crucial for distinguishing unique historical contingencies from replicable action patterns. The four dynamics identified in these two cases could serve as anchors for recognising and codifying how preservation assemblages form, operate, and produce outcomes across different projects in Venice.

Specifically, future research involving a larger set of case studies could develop a standardised list of variables that includes a broader range of actor types, interaction styles, and critical junctures. The model's use could focus on core moments in a project's timeline where relationships are most flexible and the influence of preservation actors is most visibly asserted or subdued. Applying the model at these points allows verification of preservation agents' actions by analysing how the variables in each area interact to produce outcomes.

Although Venice's heritage and its political economy are distinctive, the underlying patterns of multiscalar governance and the inconsistent assertiveness of preservation institutions are likely present, although in different forms, in other World Heritage cities that are facing similar pressures. By systematically mapping these elements and their relationships, the framework can evolve from a comparative exercise into an analytical model, enabling assessments of how preservation institutions mediate transnational architecture projects differently across various regulatory and cultural contexts worldwide.

Abbreviations

HUL	Historic Urban Landscape
OMA	Office for Metropolitan Architecture
PRG	Piano Regolatore Generale
SABAP	Soprintendenza per l'Archeologia, le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio
TA	Torsello Architettura
TAR	Tribunale Amministrativo Regionale
TUPACH	Transnational Urban Projects Assembled within Cultural Heritage Sites
WH	World Heritage
WHC	World Heritage Centre
WHS	World Heritage Site
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation

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Data availability

Data will be made available on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Permissions to conduct the interviews for the purposes of this research were obtained from all respondents, who were fully informed about the purposes of this research and how their responses would be used and stored. All interviewees have been anonymised.

Consent for publication

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Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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