

---

**House & Home**

## A higher level of restoration

JUNE 29, 2007 by: Emily Backus

There is a sand-castle beauty about Venice: the light lacy arabesques of its Venetian Gothic windows, the palazzos strutted by rows of slim, elegant columns. The irregular repetitions of architectural elements – the little piazzas, cobblestone footpaths and footbridges arching over watery lanes – seem more the fruit of artistic imagination than pragmatic evolution of a mercantile maritime power.

Venice is also continually shifting, ceding, seeming to fall apart like a sand castle. Floors sag at even the finest addresses, including the Doge's palace. Walls tilt and bulge, doors assume rhomboid shapes. The tower of Santo Stefano is visibly askew. Brick arches brace walls to prevent them colliding into each other overhead. Gigantic steel rods staple together splitting brick walls. Elegant patrician porticos have sunk permanently under water. Everywhere plaster façades are crumbling on to the cobblestones.

The semblance of structural decay is not all it seems. The elasticity of traditional Venetian construction is precisely the reason its buildings have endured centuries of tides, habitation and settling in the mud, says Claudio Menichelli, architect for Venice's Soprintendenza Dei Beni Culturali, the state office in charge of monitoring protected historic structures.

There is no bedrock under Venice's foundations: only a dense forest of poles impaled in wet sediment. These poles mostly, but not always, reach down to a stratum of clay. Buildings are lightweight: structural walls grow thinner as they rise and partition walls are plaster-covered wooden slats. Traditional floors are paved with a lime-based amalgam that doesn't crack but rather undulates with the pull of settling walls.

The capacity of Venetian homes to mask their real condition is both a source of fascination and frustration for homeowners. Remove a false ceiling and you might discover centuries-old decorative motifs – but you could also find the ruinous labyrinths of termite burrows. Remove paint and plaster and you might reveal an old fresco or, perhaps, decayed bricks that need expensive, individual replacement.

"If you touch one thing, you find everything needs work. When you get an estimate, it might be half of what the actual costs will be ... nothing is up to code," says Manolitas Vigo, a 33-year-old clerk at the Paolo Olbi stationery store in the St Mark's quarter. Vigo is one of thousands of native Venetians who have thrown in the towel and emigrated to the mainland. "You can buy a place in Mestre that is three times as large and drive a car to your front door."

In the past 50 years Venice's historic centre has changed from a place people live into a place people visit, shrinking from nearly 160,000 residents to just over 60,000, yet hosting ever growing flocks of tourists – an estimated 18m last year.

Challenging maintenance, complex logistics and ever-rising market values have narrowed the spectrum of property buyers to an increasingly wealthy, international set who fall not only for Venice's charms but also for its return on investment.

Property values rise an average of 10-15 per cent per year and prices have nearly doubled since 2002, according to Franco Bombasei, vice-president of Venice Real Estate. Renovated apartments go for €6,000 to €8,000 per square metre in most of the historic centre. In prime spots, such as along the Grand Canal, properties are worth up to €15,000 per sq metre. Unrenovated homes sell for 40 per cent less but, he cautions, they typically cost €1,500 - €2,000 per sq metre to restore, plus long, painstaking, professional effort.

Roughly 10 per cent of homes are protected historic structures, according to the Soprintendenza Dei Beni Culturali. In such cases, the state must approve every single modification, internal or external, all the way down to the placement of electrical outlets. On the other hand, the state rewards those brave enough take on such homes by subsidising infrastructure upgrades, slashing property taxes by up to 90 per cent (breaks increase with the property's prestige), eliminating inheritance taxes and releasing the owner from local rental and sales regulations.

Luigino Rossi, who runs a luxury shoe manufacturing company, is nine months into renovating his historically protected home in a noble family's 17th-century palazzo overlooking the Grand Canal. His second-floor, 500 sq metre apartment runs from the sweeping salons of the Palazzo Curti Valmarana into an entire floor of an adjacent building. Rossi bought the apartment from Count Valmarana six years ago, after renting it for six years.

This is the second time Rossi has done large-scale restoration work on his palatial flat. He is now camping in his 120 sq metre guest apartment with his wife and three children while his architect, Magda Piscicelli, oversees work she reckons will cost at least €500,000 and continue for an indefinite number of months. Costs per square metre are about double what they were to renovate his country villa in Veneto but the waiting is what really weighs on him. His favourite spot is in the central living room, with its 5 metre-high ceilings, marble fireplace and massive white Murano glass chandelier.

"There's a kind of gallery where I put all my favourite paintings. I close the doors to the kids so that I can listen to music . . . I love to eat breakfast there, read the newspaper and look out at the Grand Canal. There's a special light."

Monica Sarti, a notary and Venetian resident, has turned renovating and decorating into a pastime. She is on her ninth home in 10 years and has completely renovated five apartments and two legal studios. "It's a creative outlet for me . . . I like to think of it as my contribution to the city."

Her current project is a 160 sq metre flat at the top of a 19th-century building she bought from a friend last August. She was attracted to its excellent condition, luminosity, generous size, rare elevator and the apparent solidity of the building.

The apartment was also in a prime location (Saint Mark's) and had a roof terrace with 270° views. She paid €2.3m for it with the full intention of stripping the walls down to the bricks and digging into the plumbing.

But trouble announced itself even before work began. Shortly after the purchase had gone through, she discovered that the neighbour downstairs had filed suit against the previous owner. Sewage from one of the bathrooms had not been sufficiently isolated during the his renovation a few years before. Waterproofing and new plumbing cost Sarti an additional €5,000 on top of her planned spend to revamp of the bathroom in a new shade of marble.

"It's a very litigious city. People are usually looking for ways to make repairs at the expense of their neighbours."

For the restoration of an 18th-century apartment of clients Duilio and Amalia Cescutti, Piscicelli installed a nylon covering on the ceilings of the downstairs neighbours to catch dust.

"The downstairs neighbours were very understanding. It was the upstairs neighbour who came down and threatened to file a complaint. Of course we had all our permits in order ... After the work the owner left thoughtful gifts on the doorsteps of all the

neighbours to thank them for their patience,” says Piscicelli. “Sometimes calming words or a nice gesture are all it takes to smooth things out.”

---

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others. © The Financial Times Ltd.

Comments have not been enabled for this article.

