

THE STORY OF THE VENETIAN GHETTO IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. A VIRTUAL HERITAGE DIGITALLY REVEALED

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INTRODUCTION

March 29th 2016 saw the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the foundation of the world's first ghetto, the Jewish Ghetto in Venice. This date was the starting point for a large number of events staged in Venice and round the world throughout the year just passed¹. The exhibition entitled *Venice, the Jews and Europe 1516-2016* provided another occasion for identifying and pursuing a few avenues of research into the story of the Venetian Ghetto. Among these was a study of the Ghetto from an urban perspective, from the opening of its gates ordered in 1797 by Napoleonic decree.

The public visiting the exhibition was treated to a run-through of the history of the Ghetto, its development within a changing perimeter, and a reading of the transformations between the situation before segregation and that after its end. With the help of digital technologies and multimedia display devices, it was possible to make research results available to view. In particular, a touch screen monitor was installed in the room devoted to «Napoleon, the opening of the gates and assimilation» to recount the story of the Ghetto after 1797. The telling of this story was split between two different narrative devices: the first introduced the theme of the actual throwing open of the gates with a

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¹ See the website <www.veniceghetto500.org>. [Accessed on 02/04/2017]. Translated by John Francis Philimore.

video loop, while the second allowed the visitor to choose interactively between alternative pathways to follow through the urban history of the Ghetto after its opening².

The aim of our research, conducted along philological lines, was to track down and analyse primarily first-hand accounts, with a view to fleshing out the two storytelling approaches. In the first, the voices, the words, of the main players of those crucial days were the key to putting together a video that would involve the emotions of the visitor and create an empathy between him or her and the show. For the second, the surveys and drawings from the «Building Projects» section of Venice's Municipal Archive provided day-to-day reports of collapses, demolitions and remodellings, that afforded, with close reading, a view of the changing aspect of the Ghetto over time. For this latter approach three interactive channels were set up: the first covering the urban history of the Ghetto as a whole; the others on the two different areas of the Ghetto Nuovo and the Ghetto Vecchio. Different language registers were adopted for the two foci. The first more emotional — with images and sound effects, like the fire consuming a frame which we take to be the Ghetto enclosure going up in flames — brings history home to us immediately through the senses; while the second, also more technical in content, foregrounds a Ghetto that no longer exists, the Ghetto as it was, or how it must have seemed to the eyes of the early 19th-century observer (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Some frames from the video *After the Ghetto*. ©Ferrighi, Studio Azzurro, Pellizzari

² FERRIGHI, 2016a.

AFTER THE GHETTO

Today's Ghetto, while still notionally contained within a perimeter setting it apart from the rest of the city, is profoundly different from how it would have been when lived in by the Jews from its foundation in 1516 to its abolition in 1797 (Fig. 2). Over these centuries and decades, it was expanded beyond the initial settlement known (already) as the Ghetto Nuovo, with the addition in 1541 of a considerable area towards the Cannaregio canal, being the Ghetto Vecchio, and in 1633 with a final extension eastwards over the Rio di Ghetto, called the Ghetto Novissimo³ (Fig. 3). Each expansion meant a new closing off point, with doors hung on hinges driven into the uprights of the entrance portal, which would be opened during the day and locked for the hours of darkness. The daily lives of the Jews, confined within the Ghetto precinct, involved their residences, places of worship and assembly, such as the synagogues and the *Scuole*, or the pawnshops and kosher stores, remodelling and transforming the existing buildings, although these were not their own property. On top of which it is worth emphasising that the number of Ghetto residents continued to grow over time⁴, this too leading to the internal fragmentation of housing, constant adding of floors and expansion outwards with the building of porticoes and *liagò* (oriels).

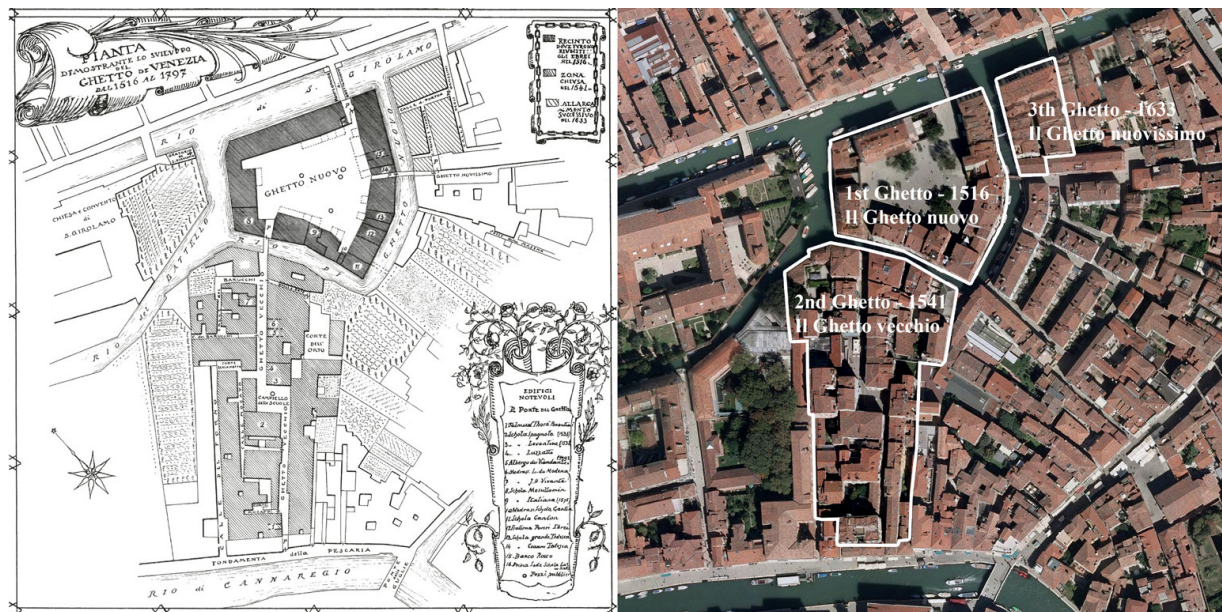


Fig. 2 (left). The Ghetto of Venice at the fall of the Republic by Guido Sullam, *Pianta del Ghetto di Venezia alla caduta della Repubblica*, 1930. In OTTOLENGHI, 1930. «La Rassegna mensile di Israel»

Fig. 3 (right). Aerial view of the three Ghettos

A real world within a world took shape around the needs and requirements of the different national communities inhabiting the Ghetto, a world which began to dissolve

³ CALIMANI, 2001; CALABI, 2016a.

⁴ CALIMANI, 2001: 169.

quite quickly as early as the closing years of the 18th century after the fall of the Republic, a process which accelerated in the first half of the 19th century for a variety of reasons. Among these were the abandonment of many habitations, already begun in the preceding century⁵ with a consequent lack of maintenance; a failure to keep track of the final owners of buildings, let and sublet to Jews under the *Jus gazaka*⁶, which meant that by the beginning of the 19th century it was in many cases impossible for the municipal authorities to identify them. These factors led to many demolitions and rebuildings of whole housing blocks, effectively transforming the aspect of this unique area, enclosed by the city of Venice, but at the same time separate from it. It was on the basis of these considerations that it became clear we would have to work backwards through the whole of the 19th century to arrive at a virtual reconstruction of the Ghetto's buildings and urban spaces shortly before its opening. Only in fact by piecing together the history of individual buildings, however fragmentarily, and of the modifications to the physical disposition of the three ghettos, was it possible to reach their 1797 configuration.

THE OPENING OF THE GHETTO

The fall of the Venetian Republic occurred in the spring of 1797. It was followed by a very brief first French occupation, lasting from May 12th, the day on which the Great Council abdicated and handed over power to a democratic Commission, to October 17th, and the signing of the Treaty of Campoformio, under which Venice was ceded by Napoleon to Austria⁷. These few months saw the promulgation of a series of decrees aimed at the renovation of Venice, which Napoleon hoped to transform into a modern city, importing many changes to its civil, religious and social arrangements. Notable among these are: the reduction in the number of parishes and the suppression of the religious orders, the equality of all citizens before the law, the abolition of noble titles and an end to the segregation of the Jews in the Ghetto. A Municipal decree dated July 7, 1797 (or 19 Messidor, according to the French Republican Calendar) declares as item 1 that three «Jewish Citizen Deputies» should be elected, and as item 5 that «The gates of the Ghetto should be removed forthwith, so that there be no separation between these and the other citizens of this city»⁸. On July 9th, an assembly of all the Jewish citizens resident in the Ghetto gather in the Spanish Synagogue⁹. Isaac Greco is nominated president of the electoral commission, with Jacob Cracovia, Samuel Morpurgo, Jacob Maimon Vivante and Vita Polacco as secretaries. The assembly closes with a great shout of «Long

⁵ CARLETTO, 1981.

⁶ CALIMANI, 2001: 154; CONCINA, 1991: 51.

⁷ LANE, 1991: 506-507; PRETO, 2004: 47-50.

⁸ *Raccolta di carte pubbliche...*, 1797: 69.

⁹ OTTOLENGHI, 1930: 12.

live Fraternity, Democracy and the Italian Nation»¹⁰ after a day has been named for the pulling down of the gates of the Ghetto, the gates that for over two and a half centuries have kept the Jews separate.

The day fixed for the permanent opening of the gates is that following the meeting, July 10th 1797 (22 Messidor), which will definitively mark the end of the Ghetto, in the sense of a compulsory place of residence for the Jews of Venice. The festive atmosphere, the joint participation of all the citizens, Jewish and Venetian, and the symbolic enactment of the end of the ghetto are described in several contemporary accounts: in the «Gazzetta Urbana Veneta» for July 12th which carried an article over three columns headed «Celebrations in the Ghetto for its liberation from the slavery imposed by the Aristocracy»¹¹; in the report of the chief officer of the National Guard recorded in the minutes of the 13th July sitting of the provisional administration¹²; and in the speech of Citizen Raffaele Vivante delivered in the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo on the day of the event, subsequently published by Giovanni Zatta¹³ (Fig. 4). And it is Vivante's speech, honed for delivery during the celebrations, that gives us an insight into the separation of the Jews from their fellow citizens as lived day by day:

*That vast abyss, that separated from the other Nations has been utterly removed, and here we have flung down before us the terrible doors that kept our Nation as if locked in a prison, and which were reinforced with a thousand bars of iron devised by the most odious of tyrannies. Yes, my brethren, those very men who earlier looked down on us, oppressed and despairing, with indifference, now hold out to us the means to rise up and be enlightened, to improve ourselves, inviting us to love them and no longer see them in the loathsome guise of our persecutors*¹⁴.

Published under the auspices of the Society for Public Education, of which Vivante was himself a member, it speaks at length of the oppression and injustices endured, but at the same time of openness and forgiveness towards those who for centuries were responsible for as much, deciding and implementing the machinery of segregation (Fig. 4).

And if we have acted so, when everything should have inflamed our indignation and our revenge, from the time when we were driven from the places which had witnessed our birth and were afflicted with insults and miseries, will we not now open our arms to those who so guilelessly seek to make good the injuries they have

¹⁰ OTTOLENGHI, 1930: 14.

¹¹ *Feste del Ghetto...*, 1797.

¹² ALBERTI & CESSI, 1928: 243-248.

¹³ VIVANTE, 1797.

¹⁴ VIVANTE, 1797: 3-4.

*visited on us, and who yearn to bury the hatreds, the wrongs, the vengefulness and the oppression, in a fraternal embrace of cordial reconciliation*¹⁵.

The orchestration of this long-awaited event, set for July 10th, was for security reasons, planned down to the smallest detail over the preceding days.

Picture a hot summer afternoon, with the sun still high in the sky, just after nine o'clock, according to the reckoning of that period (about six o'clock in the afternoon). Here is the chief of the National Guard in full uniform, accompanied by three deputised citizens from the Jewish community, and here they are arriving from the Fondamenta di S. Gerolamo (now degli Ormesini), making a formal entrance into the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo and forming up into «a soldierly cordon of fine aspect with their matching uniforms»¹⁶. We can hear the sound of the band's trumpets, the thump of dancing feet, the happy voices of the people flocking to the spot. In the midst of this, all the gates that had separated and physically cut off the Jewish community from the Christian are lifted from their hinges and taken down, carried to the centre of the *campo* to the middle of the human circle that was quickly forming, and symbolically burnt after being «hewn with axes, riven and shattered»¹⁷. A tree of liberty is planted and speeches heard, first from citizen Vivante, who scrambles up onto one of the *campo*'s well-heads the better to be heard, followed by a priest and then another citizen, one Isacco Grego.

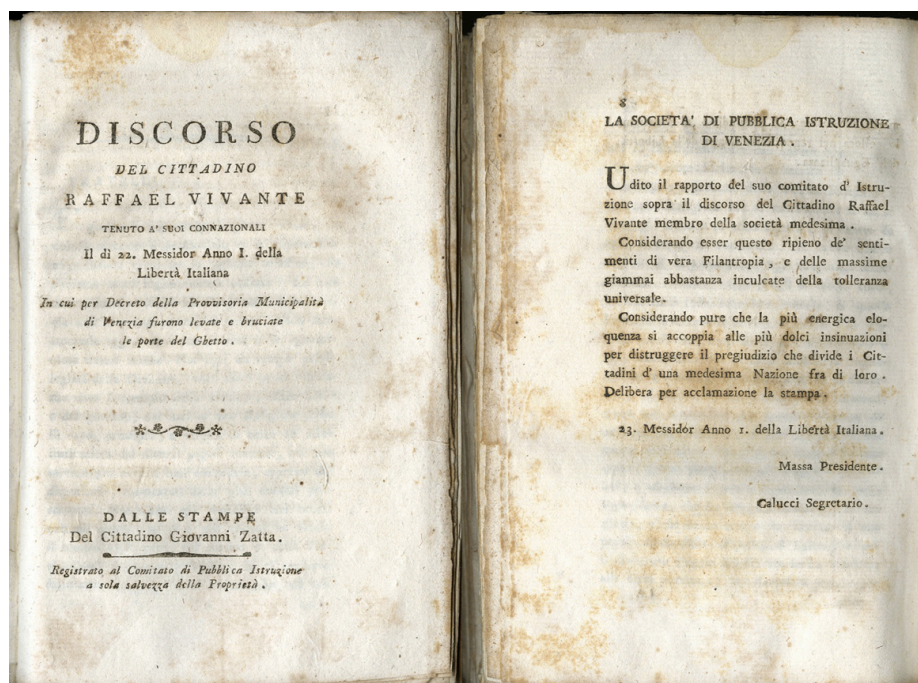


Fig. 4. Title page (left) and page 8 (right) of *Discorso del cittadino Raffael Vivante tenuto a' suoi connazionali il dì 22 Messidor Anno I della Libertà Italiana*. 1797

¹⁵ VIVANTE, 1797: 5.

¹⁶ *Feste del Ghetto...*, 1797: 440.

¹⁷ *Feste del Ghetto...*, 1797: 440.

The day concludes with a party at the Vivante residence. Over the days following, a number of accounts of the events will go to press, and so ends once and for all the segregation of the Jewish people in Venice begun in far-off 1516. The Venetian Jews will now be able to participate fully in civic life, opt to live elsewhere in the city or on the mainland, and own property, all these measures being introduced in the early decades of the 19th century¹⁸.

URBAN CHANGES IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY

For the whole of the first half of the 19th century Venice underwent continual structural changes. Bonaparte was a great innovator and he foresaw a new destiny for the city, involving public gardens, tree-lined boulevards, new building complexes and a great port¹⁹. And in fact the large body of laws and executive decrees promulgated during the second French occupation (1806-1814) bear witness to a process that would usher in considerable transformations. Among these was a 'Decree containing various provisions for the future of the city of Venice' (n.º 261, 7 December 1807), whose provisions included a reduction in the number of parishes from 68 to 39 over the ensuing years and their consequent geographical reorganisation²⁰.

The extent of urban change can be readily taken in from a quick comparison of the land-registry maps of the time, not least in that part of the Cannaregio area containing the Ghetto (Fig. 5). Among the many possible case-histories belonging to the first half of the nineteenth century, we chose the more representative examples from the huge corpus of archive documentation and those lending themselves best to virtual presentation via multimedia video display²¹.

Comparing the 1808 census map with that from 1838, for example, we see immediately the large gaps left by the demolition of buildings facing onto the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo. The whole side backing onto the Rio di S. Gerolamo has been razed to the ground, many of the porticos demolished and the house abutting the Scuola Canton, on the Rio della Macina (now Rio del Batelo), also knocked down. The same occurs, a few years later, in the Corte Barucchi area of the Ghetto Vecchio, not far from the Campiello delle Scuole (the Levantine and Spanish *Scuole*), where several large buildings were completely demolished. The empty expanses created by these operations would become new buildings or public spaces.

¹⁸ CALABI, 2016a: 141-156.

¹⁹ ROMANELLI, 1988.

²⁰ *Bollettino...*, 1807: 1195; TONIZZI *et al.*, 2013; FERRIGHI, 2016c.

²¹ FERRIGHI & BORIN, 2016.

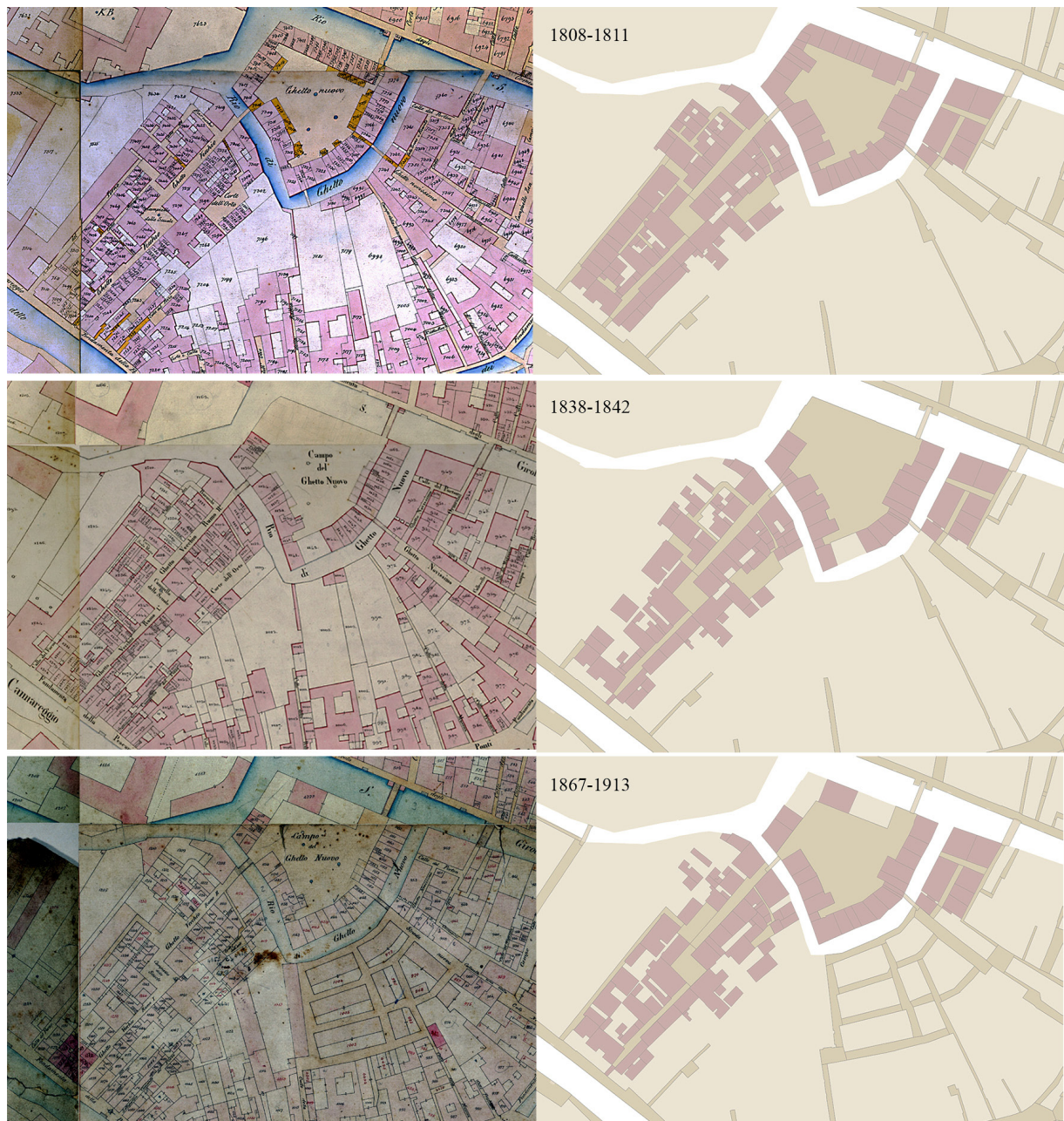


Fig. 5. The Ghetto in time. Redrawn corresponding to the land-registry maps of 1808-1811, 1838-1842 and 1867-1913. ©Ferrighi

How did the resident population of the Ghetto react to these changes? The opening of the gates provided many Jews with the opportunity to find other lodgings and leave the Ghetto altogether. A contemporary snapshot of the Ghetto's existing residents at the end of 1797 is provided by a census conducted by Saul Levi Mortera²², which gives us family by family a cross-section of the trades and origins of the 1626 inhabitants of the precinct, foreigners included, comprising 421 family units²³. Certainly a notable figure,

²² ASV — *Anagrafi degli abitanti del Ghetto, o contrada della Riunione, fatta da me Saul Levi Mortera, 1797.*

²³ LUZZATTO, 1956; BERENGO, 1989.

but indicative of a density more than matched elsewhere in the city²⁴. In any case, the abandonment of the Ghetto was not a sudden phenomenon²⁵, and was besides linked to a number of factors, such as the absence of a proper maintenance regime for the housing, owing to its occupation by renters rather than owners, and the neglected state of a number of units, as recorded by the 1713, 1739 and 1771 censuses²⁶, which duly led to a series of collapses. There were also many houses left uninhabited and storerooms unused, whose owners were receiving no rent or even whose owners' identities were unknown.

In response to all this came a measure from the French authorities in 1806 regulating the maintenance of buildings overlooking public thoroughfares. The «Regulations for construction, alteration and conservation of the streets», promulgated on May 20th as n.º 79 (Heading V. Street Policy) states, article 33:

*In cases where a building is in perilous condition, the Municipality may order its repair, and the owner is required to effect such forthwith; work will otherwise be carried out ex officio, at the owner's expense. Should the owner prefer to demolish the dilapidated structure, he must do so immediately, or it will otherwise be done ex officio at the expense of the same*²⁷.

In 1816 the municipal Council of the incoming Austrian government establishes a «Civic Commission for dilapidated housing» with a view to preserving «the decency of this City with the conservation of its buildings»²⁸. The Council is invested with the power to fine or even imprison owners who demolish their houses, notwithstanding their perilous structural state. In the Ghetto, however, an alternative procedure had to be adopted. In the majority of cases, as we have said, it was not possible to trace the true owners of the houses in the Ghetto, the tenants continuing to live in them without paying rent. Entire buildings were in fact demolished *ex officio* for reasons of public safety. These were the measures that would lead to the empty spaces within the Ghetto, that would begin to appear in the 1820s, under the still operative 1806 regulations.

²⁴ BELTRAMI, 1954.

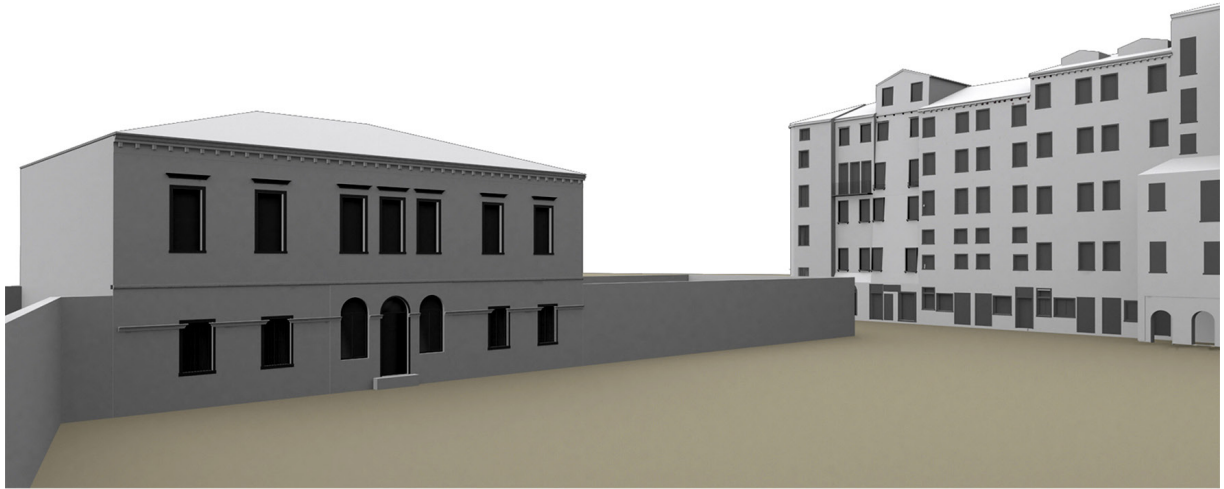
²⁵ BERENGO, 1989; CALABI, 2016a: 141-156.

²⁶ CARLETTO, 1981.

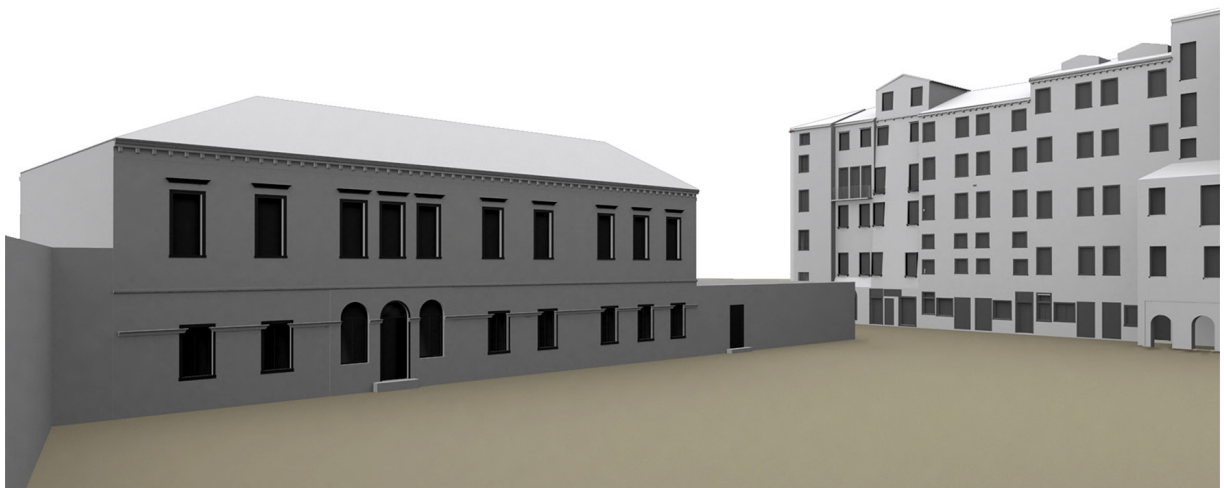
²⁷ *Bollettino...*, 1806: 515.

²⁸ AMV — *Fabbricati in pericolo*, 1816.

about 1845



after 1867



after 1939

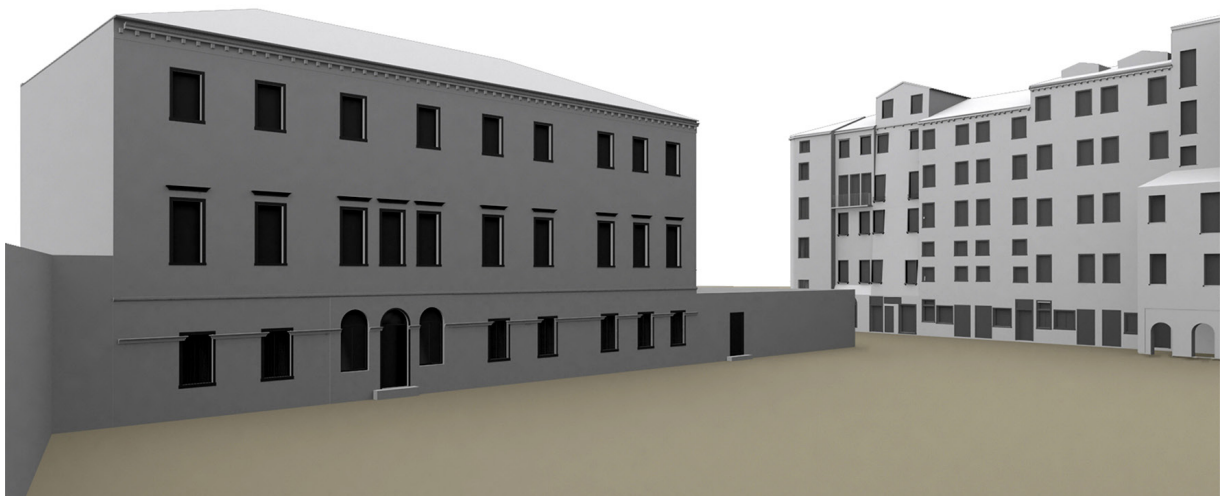


Fig. 6. Transformation of buildings in the Ghetto Nuovo (©Borin, Ferrighi, Friso, Panarotto)

In the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo, plots 7377 to 7410 of the 1808 census map²⁹ were the subject of serpentine bureaucratic proceeding from 1829 onwards. The offices of the city council found themselves involved in a never-ending search for the identities of the owners so as to induce them to put in train repairs to their buildings — repairs that acquired increasing urgency with the passage of years, to the extent that the city itself had to effect provisional emergency work in the first instance, and subsequently wholesale demolition. The contractors hired for the work ended up having to carry the costs of the work for many years before being reimbursed by the council. By the end of proceedings a great hole was left in the urban fabric, following the loss of all the buildings that had closed off the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo on the Rio di S. Gerolamo side. Only much later on, in 1857, did the Jewish Relief Committee request the free concession of the now public land with a view to building a Rest Home³⁰. As a consequence a two-floor building was erected on the site, with an adjacent brick-walled courtyard, as an Old People's Home for the Jewish community. Subsequently the edifice would be enlarged and a floor added (Fig. 6).

A similar fate overtook the blocks enclosing the Calle di Ghetto Vecchio down to the point where it opened out into the Campiello delle Scuole. All the buildings identified as lots 7437 to 7448 in the 1808 census map were the subject of repeated demolition operations carried out by the city council. An illustration from 1842 shows fragments of the cornice of a demolished building off the Calle di Ghetto Vecchio³¹. The document accompanying the drawing mentions a site inspection carried out by the surveyors to establish which parts of the block could be saved from demolition. Many of the units were without window-frames or access stairs, and were in a state of long-term abandon. The survey concluded that «a general conservation [was] not possible without a general rebuilding»³². Once again the outcome was vacant lots. The line of buildings that ended with the passageway to Corte Barucchi acquired a new frontage, while the remainder of the space was partly filled some decades later by a new nursery school (Fig. 7).

²⁹ ASV — *Catasto napoleonico*, 1808-1811.

³⁰ AMV — *Instrumento di cessione fatto dal Municipio di Venezia...*, 1857.

³¹ AMV — *Piante, alzati e spaccati dello stabile in Ghetto...*, 1842.

³² AMV — *Protocollo verbale*, 1842.



Fig. 7. Transformation of buildings in the Ghetto Vecchio and in the area of Corte Barucchi
©Borin, Ferrighi, Friso, Panarotto

The work of repairing facades, consolidating walls and carrying out demolitions was nearly always at the municipality's expense, which in some cases became the default proprietor of the buildings in the Ghetto, to the considerable detriment of the public purse. «Ultimately it must be recognised that the better-off families now live outside the Ghetto, and the value of the properties there is collapsing as a consequence», noted

Angelo Artico, the chief engineer of the works department, in 1856³³. Nor was this the end of demolition and reconstruction elsewhere in the Ghetto, changing its outward aspect and transforming it into an urban area altogether different in character to that inhabited by the Jews down to the opening of the gates.

CONCLUSIONS AND THANKS

The multimedia displays installed in the exhibition, thanks to the storytelling approach detailed above and the navigation options provided, were able to offer the public an opportunity to appreciate the reopening of the ghetto and its 19th-century transformations presented in a contemporary language. The differing focus on the changes in the urban fabric afforded by the interactive channels left visitors free to dedicate as much time as their curiosity allowed to deeper investigation.

The historical research underpinning the drafting of the narratives was conducted by the present writer for the exhibition *Venice, the Jews and Europe 1516-2016*³⁴. For the research project into the story of the Ghetto in the 19th century, I used as far as possible the tools and methods adopted in *Visualizing Venice*, now tried and tested after years of trialling and application to a variety of case studies³⁵. For the making of the *After the Ghetto* video, I assembled a research team composed of Paolo Borin, PhD student at Iuav University in Venice, Federico Panarotto, researcher from Padua University, and Isabella Friso, adjunct Professor at Milan University, all veterans of the VV group led by Prof. Andrea Giordano from Padua University. On the basis of an interdisciplinary collaboration we produced a series of graphic re-elaborations of the 19th-century elevations, working from archival sources and analyses deriving from them. A rigorously philological reconstruction of the facades, buildings and open spaces permitted the visualisation of the various phases of transformation. The Milan Studio Azzurro³⁶ worked alongside the researchers preparing the exhibition. Specifically, my team enjoyed the support of Leonardo Sangiorgi as artistic director, Olivia Demuro, project coordinator, and Silvia Pellizzari for the video editing. It was with their help that we were able to design and produce the multimedia videos accessed via the touch screen installed at the show. My warmest thanks to them all for their not always easy teamwork. Finally, a special thank you to Donatella Calabi, who believed from the beginning to the end, when others faltered, in the value of investigating in depth and virtually displaying the urban history presented in *The Ghetto after the Ghetto*.

³³ AMV — *Alla congregazione municipale*, 1856.

³⁴ See *Visualizing Venice* (VV). Available at <www.visualizingvenice.org>. [Accessed on 06/04/2017].

³⁵ FERRIGHI, 2015; FERRIGHI, 2016b.

³⁶ See *Studio Azzurro*. Available at <http://www.studioazzurro.com/index.php?com_works=&view=detail&work_id=143&option=com_works&Itemid=22&lang=it>. [Accessed on 06/04/2017].

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