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Watermarks of architecture

Engaging Joseph Brodsky's compelling novella *Watermark* (1992) — a wintertime account of Venice — this paper unpacks embodied experiences in a place of paramount cultural and historical heritage. The literary language captures the city's emotional character — portraying how it affects our consciousness and subsequent behaviours — by describing affective atmospheres that emerge on the threshold of architecture and its embodied perception. The seasonal narration, moreover, allows for a unique glimpse into the city's architectural heritage, which is most commonly appreciated by visitors and tourists during spring or summer. With architectural discourse nowadays embracing the importance of atmospheres and narratives for the understanding of place and culture, *Watermark* tangibly advocates for the city's affective emotional power as a unique heritage to preserve. By doing so, it guides architects towards a design sensitivity open to the ephemerality of spatial moods. Distinct moments of encounter between the city's urban design and water, Venice's architecture and its humidity, as well as the place's imposing materiality in the cold, provide an understanding of how a place of memory like Venice is produced and experienced.

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Introduction

Architectural theoretician Alberto Pérez-Gómez, in his work *Attunement* (2016), makes a plea for the overlooked linguistic dimension of architecture. He brings to our attention the suggestive power of literary language, its capacity to engender unique architectural opportunities, and its potentiality to provide attunement with the world around us. Architects and designers today usually bypass literary language and its respective narratives, he posits, as their poetic nature is 'considered imprecise and subjective, incapable of unambiguously guiding the hand of the creator from conception to realisation'.[1] Opposed to such approaches, he reminds us that in architecture 'the subject is not necessarily the building, but rather the meaningful event made present: life itself'.[2] Literature, through its narratives and stories, can connect us with the life architecture is meant to make present, as it abounds with rich and evocative representations of this very life. Philosophical voices from the field of phenomenological hermeneutics have argued in favour of such views a long time now. Hans-George Gadamer in his work *Reason in the*

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Age of Science (1976) asserts that what has traditionally been the role of philosophy — meaning the study of the fundamental nature of life as people's reality and existence — has in recent centuries been undertaken by literature: 'The great novels of the nineteenth and twentieth century are closer to the old tasks of philosophy and we should look upon them as the custodians of philosophy's great heritage.'[3] Martin Heidegger, moreover, points out that the literary language is not conveyance of pure interiority, but a world shared. It is neither a subjective nor an objective phenomenon, but both together — thus a valuable source of knowledge regarding people's experiences and perceptions, and not a mere aesthetic object whose only purpose is to move or inspire us.[4] Tonino Griffero most recently also asserts that what every good novel exemplifies extensively is that our lived experience is segmented in feelings poured out into the surrounding space, felt by the felt-body before any analytical distinction.[5] This is why the literary language of good and great novels can be a unique means of capturing, communicating, and studying the life architecture presupposes, and the feelings felt and experienced by its users.

Situations of life and site-specific atmospheres can emerge from the pages of novels, particularly when these novels focus on place or architecture and how people live them. Such literary works, when studied carefully, can transmit the elusive, short-lived, but situated elements of a place's unique character — revealing aspects of this place not usually included in historical or scientific descriptions. Unlike history and science that focus mainly on quantitative and measurable data, literary works can deal with the emotional quality of a given *lived space*.[6] From an architectural perspective, looking into literary works to grasp the atmospheric qualities and life of a given place — before we even begin to design — promises to enrich our understanding of such place and leads to properly attuned interventions that can respond to it meaningfully. Understanding the importance of literary language for architecture entails, fundamentally, grasping the crucial importance of narrative forms to disclose the nature of given places with all their cultural complexities, essential for an ethical and poetic practice of architecture and urban design.[7] When the place under examination is all the more a site of cultural heritage, literary descriptions can ensure that our understanding goes beyond strict historical or dry monument-preservation accounts. They can offer instead an alternative perspective to established interpretations regarding cultural heritage and open the discussion on what needs to be considered heritage, what needs to be studied and maybe preserved. As literature is both a category and an expression of cultural heritage, it is undoubtedly a valid and concrete expression of it. In short, affective atmospheres and embodied experiences described in literature should become part of a conversation regarding cultural heritage in order for this conversation to be as inclusive as possible.

With these in mind, this paper dives into the muddy canals and foggy alleys of Venice — a UNESCO world heritage site since 1987[8] — through the words of Joseph Brodsky's masterpiece, the novella *Watermark* (1992).[9] This work, written with absolute command in English by the Russian Nobel Prize winning author, unearths and unpacks excerpts that disclose elements of the city's

emotional character and atmospheres, portraying how they both affect one's consciousness and subsequent behaviours.[10] Brodsky pens descriptions of urban atmospheres that emerge on the threshold of architecture and its embodied perception — offering unique glimpses into the city. As Griffero explains in his article 'The atmospheric "skin" of a city', the atmospheres of an urban environment supervene on its materiality, in the same way as the scent of a rose supervenes on the materiality of the flower. He argues that urban atmospheres can prevail over architecture's physical presence due to an enormous constellation of factors such as geographical-climatic situations, historical and socio-economic conditions, value expressiveness, and language.[11] Based on this thesis, my position is that by preserving buildings, streets and monuments alone, Venice itself will not be fully preserved. We should rather pay attention to the contingency and historicity of the heritage site, that is, its precarity, which is precisely why questions of 'preservation' are significant. What needs to be studied and understood are the spatial experiences and atmospheres that this city can offer — ones that have fascinated and keep fascinating countless residents, travellers, authors, and artists from all over the world.

In what follows, I will discuss why *Watermark*, through the particularities of the season it describes, is *par excellence* a novella to prove such an argument. I will unpack distinctive moments of encounter between the city's urban design and the water, Venice's architecture and its humidity, and the historic city's materiality in the cold. These latter three topics will not be discussed in the same length as the relevant material embedded in the novella varies in quantity or detail. Nonetheless, they all provide an understanding of how a place of heritage like Venice is produced and experienced. Most importantly they can guide architects and urban planners alike on how to intervene in a context as monumental as Venice.

A Venetian world

Watermark indeed advocates tangibly for the city's emotional power as unique heritage and by doing so it sheds light towards a design sensitivity open to the ephemerality of spatial moods, as I will demonstrate. The work was finished in November of 1989; it collects the author's impressions of the city during numerous visits over the years.[12] The author and the narrator are the same person, and the novella is autobiographical. Joseph Brodsky, a Russian poet teaching in an American University at the time, was returning to the city 'or recurring in it' for seventeen years.[13] As he informs the reader, his accounts of Venice have 'to do with the eye rather than with convictions', and are based on his truly 'observant' nature.[14] 'Scanning this city's face for seventeen winters, I should by now be capable', he states, 'of pulling a credible Poussin-like job: of painting this place's likeness, if not at four seasons, then at four times of day.'[15] Indeed, his accounts of the city are all of a particular period, the winter time between December and early January, when his University is closed for Christmas break.

His impression of being 'in the heart of civilisation'[16] — as he calls Venice — is comforted by the fact that in the seventeen years he has 'frequented this city very

little has changed'.[17] 'Apart from the moon landing, this century' he explains, referring to the twentieth century, 'may be best remembered by leaving this place intact, by just letting it be.'[18] This fact renders the novella a wonderful log of long-standing, prevalent atmospheres and moods of its main protagonist: Venice. *Watermark* is indeed paradigmatic for a study of a place approached through a phenomenological perspective. In the narrative, inhabitants and urban environment are not understood as separate entities. Brodsky's literary language eliminates the boundaries between the author, as a subject, and the city, as an object (or vice-versa); it portrays in an exemplary way how experience of place, urban atmospheres, and meaning co-emerge in the city; and it demonstrates how the urban environment influences actions and decisions, as well as the consciousness of the people who live in it. Moreover, it portrays how experience is never an isolated process, and it always involves reference to the world, 'meaning not just the physical environment but the social and cultural world, which may even include things that do not exist in a physical way', as Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahani reminds us in *The Phenomenological Mind*.[19] Based on these observations, this paper examines moments of encounter between the city and its inhabitants, specifically when elusive and hard-to-grasp atmospheric moments appear, instilling the place with particular and unique meaning. Atmosphere in this sense is not understood as a generic concept, merely limited to sensory experience, but as a specific spatial notion that is primary in perceptual experience, always intertwined with place and thus setting the tone for cognition, action, and thought.[20] Brodsky's literary language captures such atmospheres with a remarkable vivacity. In the narrative under examination, where one is part of the city and the city is part of oneself, language compellingly presents its 'good old suggestive power', which is 'this legendary ability of words to imply more than reality can provide'.[21] Brodsky works with similitudes and metaphors to describe the city, while also captures along with many visual impressions, sounds, textures, temperatures, and feelings in the urban context.[22]

The wintertime elements

Before exploring the atmospheres that reveal the above-mentioned aspects of the city, it is worth keeping in mind that (as already discussed) the narrative offers only winter descriptions of Venice, or as Brodsky himself more suggestively says, 'a story […] "at the wrong time of the year"'.[23] While this may at a first glance appear as a limitation for a conversation on architecture and cultural heritage, I actually believe that a careful look *particularly* at the 'wrong time of the year' can ensure a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the place. Winter is a season usually overlooked, as architects tend to imagine their work under the bright sunny sky (particularly in the Mediterranean), thinking of their buildings full with people, activities, and life. Though architecture — whether heritage architecture or new architecture — exists in all four seasons, and exists even when not many people visit or interact with it. During this particular season — when tourists do not overwhelm the narrow streets or impressive piazzas, when gondolas carry few newlyweds

across the canals — the place returns to a different daily rhythm. It is a rhythm well known to its permanent inhabitants, but surprising for the ones who seem to know Venice through photographs, social media posts, or tourist accounts alone. While heritage monuments belong to the world's population, they do also belong to the actual inhabitants of a place, who seem to lose access to these monuments when their cities are crowded by visitors. It is for this reason that the winter availability of the city offered by the novel becomes even more valuable for a thoughtful discussion regarding design and heritage architecture, a discussion that addresses more than just the tourists and summer visitors. Two natural elements beautifully depicted by the novella, the winter light and the occasional winter floods, assist in this regard.

Starting with the winter light, it is worth noting that it has a particular brightness. It 'carries no warmth or energy'; it has shed both of them 'behind somewhere in the universe' and its 'only ambition is to reach an object and make it, big or small, visible'.[24] As Brodsky believes, the winter light is a private light, 'the light of Giorgione or Bellini' and 'not the light of Tiepolo or Tintoretto' and 'the city lingers in it, savoring its touch, the caress of the infinity whence it came'.[25] Because of the city's loving reaction to such light, the light 'has the extraordinary property', as Brodsky believes, 'of enhancing your eye's power of resolution to the point of microscopic precision' under the brisk blue sky.[26] To this regard, the perceptions acquired during such winter time are more precise and more powerful than ever. As it broaches one's windowpanes in the mornings, the winter light seems to command:

> 'Depict! Depict!' […] because it doesn't trust your retina's ability to retain what it makes available, not to mention your brain's capacity to absorb it. […] At any rate, you obey the command and grab your camera, supplementing both your brain cells and your pupil. Should this city ever be short of cash, it can go straight to Kodak for assistance — or else tax its products savagely. By the same token, as long as this place exists, as long as winter light shines upon it, Kodak shares are the best investment.[27]

This capacity of the winter light to reveal all the city's details and particularities is not something that goes away even later in the day. In the evening time, when the sun is about to set, 'reliefs become suppler, columns more round, capitals curlier, cornices more resolute, spires starker, niches deeper, disciples more draped'.[28] It is in this light that Venice emerges, which the novel captures uniquely, at a time of the year when noise is also minimal and the city enjoys a relief from its more touristy persona.[29]

The second natural element that appears in the wintertime, influencing Venice's pace, habits, and activities, is the occasional flood, when 'the sea […] fills every canal to the brim like a bathtub, and at times overflows them'.[30] During these days, 'the city stands ankle-deep in water', boats are 'hitched like animals to the walls', 'human traffic subsides', 'streets empty', and 'stores, bars, restaurants and trattorias close'.[31] The only proof of their existence is their still burning signs, the reflections of which appear on the waters of the flooded streets and get multiplied by the slight ripples caused due to the occasional raindrops. The only public buildings that remain open,

as Brodsky informs us, are the churches, but this should come as no surprise since 'treading upon water is no news to either clergy or parishioners'.[32]

Venice's fight with the winter floods is not a new or unusual fact. The concerns for the city's sinking have been accompanying its existence for years, becoming lately even more pressing given the raising awareness on climate change. According to the calculations, Venice has indeed 'sagged twenty-three centimetres' during the twentieth century alone.[33] Brodsky commits: 'So what appears spectacular to the tourist is […] an increasing apprehension, not to say fear, that what lies in store for the city is the fate of Atlantis.'[34] This fear, which is caused not only by the 'high winter tides' and 'the deterioration of the city's own clogged canals' but also 'the mainland's industry and agriculture silting the laguna with their chemical wastes' that threatens to erase a place, the uniqueness of which 'amounts to a civilisation of its own'.[35] It is thus not surprising that the novella itself is titled *Watermark*, meaning a mark that indicates the height to which water has risen. But the word has another definition, namely a way of marking paper that only becomes visible when the paper is held up to light. In this sense, it is not surprising that through the novella we can discover elements of the city that are not easily identified as they are hidden, elusive, or ephemeral.

The city's urban design and the water

On a daily basis, and from a practical point of view, the winter flood is not an alarming occurrence for the city's permanent inhabitants, the true Venetians. It is a reality closely connected to the city's very existence, with which they are familiar, since Venice is truly a 'city sprung from water'.[36] The urban design indeed reveals this water birth. The novella touches on the embodied experience of place and provides two wonderful similitudes to describe how 'on the map this city looks like two grilled fish sharing a plate, or perhaps like two nearly overlapping lobster claws'.[37] The author insists that despite the cardinal directions depicted on maps and drawings, in reality, the city has 'no north, south, or west; the only direction it has is sideways. It surrounds you like frozen seaweed, and the more you dart and dash about trying to get your bearings, the more you get lost'.[38] Getting lost in the city is actually very much part of its urban experience, caused both by the unique design — one hundred and eighteen islands connected through over four hundred bridges, and the omnipresent water: 'No matter what you set out for as you leave the house here, you are bound to get lost in these long, coiling lanes and passageways that beguile you to see them through, to follow them to their elusive end, which usually hits water'.[39] This description of the place's obscuring power on the inhabitants or visitors is by far more significant than the measurable dimensions of the city. Although an urban setting of 'barely eight miles in circumference' — that one can cross by foot in any direction, in about an hour 'provided, of course, that' they 'know the way' — the water seduces you and distracts your peregrinations.[40]

One can of course also experience the city by water, on the vaporettos or boats that cross its major canals, and the gondolas that penetrate its less wide water passages, transporting you from one point to another. It is then that 'on both sides, knee-deep in water', you are amazed by 'the enormous carved chests of dark palazzi filled with unfathomable treasures — most likely gold, judging from the low-intensity yellow electric glow emerging now and then from cracks in the shutters'.[41] With this golden-infused glow and the beauty of the city's architecture embracing you, another very unique embodied experience of your encounter with the saturated place arises. While travelling on water, even for short distances, your feet 'feel odd acting as an organ of sense'.[42]

> No matter how solid its substitute — the deck — under your feet, on water you are somehow more alert than ashore, your faculties are more poised. On water, for instance, you never get absentminded the way you do in the street: your legs keep you and your wits in constant check, as if you were some kind of compass.[43]

The constant presence of the water, a mirror that 'reflects and refracts everything, including itself', renders this city into a 'narcissistic' presence that has the power 'to turn your mind into an amalgam, unburdening it of its depths'.[44] Indeed, as Brodsky states, the city influences your decisions and your actions, particularly in winter when reflections abound and one feels to be constantly on display due to the lack of crowds. This is the reason why so many impulsive and unnecessary purchases take place in the Venetian commercial shops:

> Bipeds go ape about shopping and dressing up in Venice for reasons not exactly practical; they do so because the city, as it were, challenges them. […] What one sees in this city at every step, turn, perspective, and dead-end worsens one's complexes and insecurities. That's why one — a woman especially, but a man also — hits the stores as soon as one arrives here, and with a vengeance. The surrounding beauty is such that one instantly conceives of an incoherent animal desire to match it, to be on par. This has nothing to do with vanity or with the natural surplus of mirrors here, the main one being the very water. It is simply that the city offers bipeds a notion of visual superiority absent in their natural lairs, in their habitual surroundings. That's why furs fly here, as do suede, silk, linen, wool, and every other kind of fabric.[45]

Brodsky's description of the city's power to make one indulge in luxurious shopping, points strongly to the allure of commodities as related to the experience of the city itself; it is a setting for display that provokes sensuality and attracts the attention of women and men alike. Shopping, an important financial activity particularly during the touristy season, keeps the place alive and vibrant, even more, as one could claim, than the monuments themselves. Not all the city's monumental buildings are visited by as many people as the clothing stores are. This fact raises the question whether specific aspects of the city's commercial side, is also an element to be carefully considered in a discussion of cultural heritage.

Brodsky's description is also a strong account on how the staging of atmospheres can be connected to emotional design. As Griffero reminds us, 'even the

humblest shop-assistant knows that shopping areas should not address their customers on a logical-rational level, but rather emotionally involve them in a subliminal way'.[46] In order to do so, the architect or planner of a shop aims towards the staging of an atmosphere, and it is this 'atmospheric finality that induces [them] to wonder from the very start, for instance, what lightings would be the most efficacious, […] what reflections [they] wish to produce over the objects, etc.'[47] This true compulsion to design, to the 'conscious production of atmospheres, the *mise-en-scène* of materials and by means of materials, today affects every place', as the philosopher observes.[48]

The city's water presence and reflective nature inspire and impose a need of improving one's appearance. They also evoke the very basic human instinct to comment on other people's appearance, presence, and actions, in short: to gossip. 'No sooner do you cross the threshold of your apartment, especially in winter, than you fall prey to every conceivable surmise, fantasy, rumour' notes Brodsky.[49] The water and its infinite reflections produce and proliferate rumours since in this city you are meant to be seen. Brodsky actually claims that 'insinuation as a principle of city planning is better than any modern grid and in tune with the local canals, taking their cue from water, which, like the chatter behind you, never ends'.[50]

Indeed, insinuation as principle of urban planning seems to suggest specific design possibilities. The modern urban grids, working often with long straight lines, are usually designed and implemented without careful consideration of place and local conditions. They are meant to provide clear unobstructed views of the city while enabling easier control over the city's inhabitants. Saint Peterburg for example, Brodsky's native city and also known as the Venice of the North, is built on a modern grid, which was implemented *ex nihilo* on swamps by Peter the Great.[51] Urban elements and people are meant to be seen clearly across the distance and nothing is really implied. In Venice on the other hand, insinuation seems more *attuned* with the city's natural geological conditions. Working always in subtle, indirect, or covert ways, as the definition of the word reminds us, insinuation follows closely the edges of the canals, rejects straight lines, and favours the countless small streets with their turns and corners, implying unexpected possibilities and innumerable potential routes. The city does not manifest all its beauty to the walker right away, but rather provides for moments where this beauty is suggested and slowly made present while crossing its many bridges, allies, and squares.

The city's architecture and the humidity

Zooming in from urban design to buildings and architectural landmarks, the city appears as a backdrop of 'dark silhouettes of church cupolas and rooftops' with its numerous bridges, described by Brodsky as huge marble parentheses, arching over black curves of bodies of water.[52] Although a reader might expect elaborate and impressive descriptions of St. Mark's Basilica or square, the Bridge of Sighs, or the Rialto, the novella instead provides a unique glimpse of some of these landmarks under the overpowering presence of the water's

humidity and the emerging fog. The presence of the fog is a temporal, fleeting, short-lived, but a characteristic condition in the city during winter that strongly changes the place and its perception. It is most probably the *par excellence* case study for 'an atmospheric phenomenology' in the urban environment — which Griffero defines as 'nothing more but a special declination of a more general philosophy of situations'[53] — since the fog is an atmosphere of its own. It not only creates a very specific atmosphere in Venice but also is an atmosphere in itself. If we look at the word's etymology, we are reminded that 'atmosphere' comes from the Greek *atmos*, meaning vapour, and fog indeed appears when water vapour condenses. Approached less literally, fog can also be seen as a condition that makes the monumentality of Venice disappear momentarily into a cloud of mist. During these moments, particularly when the fog is dense and thick, the historicity of the place, while still present around you, is neither perceived nor quite experienced. Yet, the fog can be a monumental embodied experience in itself, as it can pierce you to the bone and powerfully change your impression of a place.

Indeed, when fog starts falling on the bigger expanses of the city, like on some of its famous squares, their characteristics seem to change dramatically. Saint Mark's square, for example, with its 'four hundred rounded windows […] running in their usual maddening order, like idealized waves', begins to get engulfed.[54] Brodsky describes the appearance of the fog as 'a quiet invasion, but an invasion nonetheless'.[55] It moves 'silently but very fast, from the direction of the *laguna* […] appearing from around the corner in all his cumulus glory', and making the place feel 'altogether elsewhere'.[56] The only way to navigate in the square after that is through the few smooth windows of the surrounding bars, which if 'reasonably well lit and not covered with a board' gleam 'through the patches of fog'.[57]

The most dramatic architectural change brought along by the fog is the very elimination of the city's presence: 'In winter, […] the local fog, the famous *nebbia*', obliterates not 'only reflections but everything that has a shape: buildings, people, colonnades, bridges, statues'.[58] Stores are closed and 'airplanes neither arrive nor take off for weeks'. [59] It is 'a time for self-oblivion, induced by a city that has ceased to be seen'.[60] The narrow streets become another architectural characteristic that disappears all along. The fog's presence renders their boundaries invisible and walking through them becomes a different experience, one that questions the basic laws of navigation as 'left, right, up and down swap places, and you can find your way around only if you are a native or were given a cicerone. The fog is thick, blinding, and immobile'.[61]

Such strong presence of the heavy fog — fog that feels like you can touch it, blinds you to your surroundings, and lurks more permanent in place becoming an obstacle — creates alternative ways of navigation in Venice. If you need to go for a short errand, 'to get a pack of cigarettes', for example, 'you can find your way back via the tunnel your body has burrowed in the fog', as 'the tunnel is likely to stay open for half an hour'.[62] This poetic image is an incredibly strong reminder of one of the winter city's most mesmerising characteristics: short-lived tunnels, formed in the shape of the city's different inhabitants, replace

the narrow streets, create new paths, connect places, and disappear after half an hour. Creating your own personally built path in the thick, immobile, and masking fog is a very intimate appropriation of the city.

The city's materiality and the cold

The last element I wish to discuss in this paper, through the novella's literary language, is the materiality of the place in relation to the cold. 'Winter is an abstract season' and materials appear less vibrant in their immediate appearance, as everything is 'low on colours […] and big on the imperatives of cold and brief daylight', as Brodsky observes.[63] To deal with the cold, which makes people 'shiver and go to bed with woollen socks on', the city relies on gas.[64] The need for heat has created 'magnificent, trumpet-like chimneys' that resemble 'medieval turrets in the backdrop of every Madonna and Crucifixion'.[65] These impressive brick creatures 'idle and gradually crumble away from the local skyline', as the smell of the cold canal water fills the air.[66] The surfaces of the canals themselves appear like 'black oilcloth' and the water looks at times 'blue, at times grey or brown; invariably it is cold and not potable'.[67] The city could best be described as a 'mesh caught in frozen seaweed', which Brodsky seems to believe is 'a better metaphor' to capture the materiality of the place in the low winter temperatures.[68]

In terms of materiality, the first thing that the narrator believes a traveller will notice when arriving in Venice — and while waiting for the vaporetto in the station — is the 'varicose marble' under one's feet.[69] This line appears on the very first page of the novella. The description of a material so dominant in the city as varicose — a condition of the legs associated with age that causes the swelling and tortuous lengthening of veins — offers a unique poetic image, a spectacular metaphor, connecting the body of the traveller with the materiality of the city instantly. It is as if the veins of the weary traveller's legs are reflected on the marble floor surfaces. Brodsky personifies the marble to intensify the winter, felt even colder with age. In such a winter setting, more materials seem to have such a kind of kindred presence. The materiality of the various locomotives that cross the water of the canals, for instance, appears through a 'dull smell elicited on cold winter nights by the locomotive's cast iron'.[70]

Another cast iron presence is made sonorously audible in wintertime: 'In winter you wake up in this city, especially on Sundays, to the chiming of its innumerable bells, as though behind your gauze curtains a gigantic china tea set was vibrating on a silver tray in the pearl-gray sky'.[71] As the Sunday bells fill the air of Venice, Brodsky observes: 'On days like this, the city indeed acquires a porcelain aspect, what with all its zinc-covered cupolas resembling teapots or upturned cups, and the tilted profile of campaniles clinking like abandoned spoons and melting in the sky'.[72] In such conditions, the prevailing materiality of the city seems to be that of porcelain, a material so delicate, so fragile that can break into a thousand pieces in seconds. The Sunday morning atmosphere is fragile, as well, dissolving in the air just a few

seconds after the bells stop ringing and the last chime ripples, disappearing into the expanses. This temporary acoustic materiality though, for as long as it lasts, influences even the haze and the fog of the city, that now appear 'peal-laden', and as Brodsky pens are 'part damp oxygen, part coffee and prayers'.[73]

The cold also affects the city's facades. As crisp winds and frosty air currents touch them, the facades give the impression that 'some raw hand' has turned the 'enfilades inside out and wrapped the lining around the city'.[74] The wooden materiality of the buildings' doors dissolves, and the city seems covered by a delicate lining, a material usually covering the inside surface of an object in order to protect it. This impression influences the experience of walking into the cold winter streets. The streets look 'like wardrobe racks: all the clothes are of dark, peeling fabric, but the lining is ruby and shimmering gold'.[75] The presence of a precious and luminous layer under or behind the facades makes the 'narrow stony gennels', as Brodsky describes the Venetian alleys, revealing lights of sparkle amidst the greyness of the season.[76] The author provides us with yet another metaphor for the alleys, which can appear also as 'passages between the bookshelves of some immense, forgotten library, and equally quiet'.[77] The lack of any activity in the streets because of the cold makes these city-scale books appear to be 'shut tight, and you guess what they are about only by the names on their spines, under the doorbell'.[78] The city is closed. It needs to be opened as a book and read, offering its secrets to those who care to take the time and stroll observantly through its alleys, willing to be surprised by the unexpected manifestations of its materiality, *attuned* with the cold winter.

Literary language and architectural heritage

How can doors made of ruby golden lining, the smell of cast iron, varicose marble, tunnels carved in the thick fog, or insinuation as a principle of city planning be of value in heritage design? One might ask: why in the discourse of cultural heritage should we bother with questions regarding atmospheres of place and site-specific embodied experiences — conditions so fragile, fleeting, and temporary that cannot easily be studied, captured, or registered? How can literary language, Brodsky's evocative descriptions, insightful observations and playful metaphors or similitudes cultivate a design sensitivity open to the ephemerality of spatial moods for architects and designers? None of these spatial descriptions specific to Venice's architecture and history, and unique in their depictions of place, process the strong and unquestionable presence of brick and mortar, elements strongly connected with what architecture is usually considered to be, elements that we can measure, count on, and know for sure they will be there every time we visit the world heritage city. Griffero's philosophical work offers the most convincing answer to such concerns. He reminds us that 'a person is much more recognisable from his motor or gestural behaviour, the tone of his voice, and the quality of his look'.[79] In short, a person is recognised and remembered from their 'shadowy and impalpable tertiary qualities', and not their measurable physical characteristics like their weight, height, and

eye colour.[80] In the same way, Griffero continues, a given place is more recognisable from similar tertiary characteristics, such as its atmospheric qualities and not its physical dimensions or spatial design. These atmospheres can be antagonistic, so we may resist them or surrender to them; or they can be supportive in which case we welcome them.[81] In *Watermark*, Brodsky's perception of the city's atmospheres appear as primordially supportive, welcomed by the narrator on every step of his interaction with the place. Such an attitude supports the philosophical claim that perception is 'affective and merging participation', which Hermann Schmitz brought to the fore as the first philosopher to have systematically introduced the term *atmosphere* into philosophy.[82] Gernot Böhme, elaborating on Schmitz's line of thought, posits that atmospheres are 'moving emotional powers, spatial carriers of moods'.[83] And moods, as philosopher Hubert Dreyfus posits, are beyond the control of any one person and draw us in like a raindrop into a hurricane.[84] Immersed in such spatial carriers of Venetian moods in wintertime, the author reveals — through the evocative power of literary language — aspects of the city so specific and so exceptional that one could argue these perceptions are what actually constitute Venice's winter presence.

And yet the question remains: How can we approach the elusive language of literature to guide our design creations and decisions? In her article 'Architecture Drawn Out of Bruno Schulz's Poetic Prose', architect and educator Anca Matyiku discusses possible ways of employing literary language for architectural drawing, specifically in a design-studio educational setting. More than the particularities about individual examples though, what is even more valuable in her writing is the reminder that 'among the trickiest and most difficult aspects of the architect's task' is to create 'something tangible that adequately responds to particular cultural undercurrents such as shared values and histories; things that are assumed, implied, or tactfully omitted; the stories and myths that are continuously retold'.[85] To achieve this careful tuning of moods and atmospheric conditions is necessary as atmospheres can 'contribute to architectural interventions' cultural appropriateness, yet they are almost as elusive as "culture" itself'.[86] She insists that literature 'is a more agile instrument than drawing when it comes to tackling these complex and delicate aspects of architectural design'.[87]

Departing from such a premise, one can look into *Watermark* as an architectural tool from which atmospheric architectural representations can emerge, initially as a way to study and understand the place. By creating drawings that capture the atmospheres and embodied experiences revealed by the book, or concept models that bring to the fore the fragile and ephemeral spatial qualities that literature describes, a different approach to the understanding of place can be established, other than that put forward by orthographic projections, diagrams, or maps. Contrary to what these measurable and precise means of representation can offer, the more suggestive architectural representations open a path to acknowledge and study the emotional physiognomy of the city. While it can be an elusive physiognomy, or multiple different physiognomies at the same time, it is nonetheless an aspect incredibly

dominant, influencing how we experience heritage architecture and the urban environment in general. Following such initial exercises, in an educational setting or in architectural practice, different decisions on heritage design can emerge to include aspects of the atmospheres communicated through literature. Understanding how a monument will be experienced and perceived not only in bright day light, but during humid or foggy nights for example, helps the architect to reconsider placement, maintenance, and inclusion in the city in ways that envision multiple, diverse, and more imaginative scenarios — scenarios better *attuned* to the Venetian reality. Drawings and models interpreting the language of the novella, or analysis of its spatial descriptions during the design process, can shed also a more sensitive light on questions of materiality, for instance, when it comes to new interventions related to the existing monuments. Imagining how the city can either engulf architectural elements and materials, or enlarge their presence under specific light conditions — 'reliefs become suppler, columns more round, capitals curlier, cornices more resolute, spires starker, niches deeper, disciples more draped'[88] — can guide decisions related both with structure and material culture, fine-tuning the new architectural additions to the embodied presence of the world heritage city.

It is for such reasons that literary language, as a means to articulate the intersubjective experiences of heritage sites, can prove of immense value to the discussion regarding cultural heritage, meaning-making in place, and atmospheres of the urban environment. Literature through insightful descriptions of the material world exposes us to the deep-rooted intimate particularities of a place that only years of experience and observation can disclose. It connects us tangibly with the peoples' (inhabitants or travellers) experience and perception of the place, reminding us that it is for people that we design after all. And by touching on many tertiary elements of places and architecture, and on their material constitution at the same time, literary language reveals aspects that may pass by unnoticed, as well as their capacity to affect and influence us. Literature captures the richness of *lived* space with all the minute details that form an impression on our perception, going beyond the rational and touching us in an emotive level. Brodsky admits to the above in the most beautiful way: 'One never knows what engenders what: an experience a language, or a language an experience. Both are capable of generating quite a lot',[89] and both are capable of making 'the meaningful event present: life itself', as Pérez-Gómez insists is the objective of architecture. The study of architectural atmospheres through a literary language that captures embodied interactions with a place becomes thus crucial: 'Such atmospheres, never merely about sensuous pleasure or consumable novelty, could function as the contemporary alternative to the sacred, paradigmatic architectural space of world cultural traditions and heritage'.[90]

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes and references

1. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning After the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 179.
2. Ibid., p. 180.
3. Hans-George Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. by Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 146.
4. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State of New York Press, 2010), pp. 155–61. This is a line of though further developed by Hans-George Gadamer. Gadamer's interest, carrying on Heidegger's path, arose from a philosophical desire for a more adequate account of how a work of art embodies truths. For more, see Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. edn (London and New York, NY: Continuum, 2006), pp. 77–87. For more on Heidegger and language, also see Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, *Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1969), pp. 124–39.
5. Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, trans. by Sarah de Sanctis (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), p. 10.
6. Lived space is a concept discussed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* which was first published in 1945. According to the philosopher: '[B]eyond the physical or geometrical distance existing between me and all things, a lived distance links me to things that count and exist for me, and links them to each other'. This lived distance measures the scope of one's life and defines the lived space which is always a *situational* space. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Donald A. Landes (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), p. 299. The notion of lived space has been henceforth elaborated by many other philosophers henceforth. Tonino Griffero, for example, opposes *lived space* to geometric space, because as he argues: '[G]eometry is incapable of justifying the (not only metaphorical) volume of a Sunday silence or the narrowness of a living room (perhaps metrically identical to another which is yet perceived as more spacious); the different length of a journey for someone who strolls casually and someone with a precise destination in mind, but also banally, for those who leave and those who return. This very extradimensional and non-epistemic sense of space brings a fundamental contraposition to light. While physical space, made of places and measurable distances, enjoys an abstract uniformity (isotropy and Euclidian three-dimensionality), "lived" space claims to have an absoluteness and an irreversibility tied to the felt-body (above/below, right/left, up/down) and to our actions'. See Griffero, *Atmospheres*, pp. 36–7. This idea echoes Otto Friedrich Bollnow's early discussions of lived vs. geometric space in his 1963 work *Human space*, translated into English only in 2011.
7. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, 'Narrative Language, Architecture and City', *in_bo*, 11.15 (2020), 8–15 (p. 14).
8. 'Venice and its Lagoon', United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), n.d. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/394/> [accessed 30 November 2020].
9. Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), p. 135. Excerpts throughout the article from *Watermark* by Joseph Brodsky (copyright © 1992 by Joseph Brodsky) are reprinted with permission from Farrar, Straus and Giroux (all rights reserved).
10. Brodsky was awarded the Nobel prize in 1987. 'The Nobel Prize in Literature in 1987', The Nobel Prize <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1987/summary/> [accessed 29 December 2020].

11. Tonino Griffero, 'The atmospheric "skin" of the city', *Ambiances*, Varia (2013), 1–16 (p. 2) <https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.399>.
12. Brodsky, *Watermark*, p. 135.
13. Ibid., p. 19.
14. Ibid., p. 20.
15. Ibid., p. 21.
16. Ibid., p. 12.
17. Ibid., p. 112.
18. Ibid., p. 115.
19. Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahani, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 3rd edn (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), p. 8.
20. Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement*, p. 27.
21. Brodsky, *Watermark*, p. 75.
22. One could claim that the final effect of the novella's descriptions is atmospheric because the city itself has this character, not because of Brodsky's literary language. This claim though disregards the capacity of great authors to capture or sense what most people cannot; their cultivated sensitivity towards the world and their ability to express it through language. Literary language can present a whole new world while disclosing the *alitheia* of the world we live in, helping us to grasp it and understand it deeper. For more on this, see Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre: The Poem, the Poetic Revolution, Poetry and History*, trans. by Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), p. 37.
23. Brodsky, *Watermark*, p. 21.
24. Ibid., p. 81.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p. 79.
27. Ibid., pp. 79–80.
28. Ibid., p. 80.
29. Ibid., p. 46.
30. Ibid., p. 92.
31. Ibid., pp. 92–3.
32. Ibid., p. 93.
33. Ibid., p. 20.
34. Ibid., p. 98.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., p. 82.
37. Ibid., p. 45.
38. Ibid., pp. 45–6.
39. Ibid., p. 45.
40. Ibid., pp, 113, 131.
41. Ibid., pp. 12–3.
42. Ibid., p. 14.
43. Ibid., pp. 14–5.
44. Ibid., pp. 21–2.
45. Ibid., pp. 25–6.
46. Griffero, *Atmospheres*, p. 79.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Brodsky, *Watermark*, p. 47.
50. Ibid.

51. Tsar Peter the Great, with the help of the French architect Jean-Baptiste Alexandre Le Blond, plotted Petersburg with ruler in hand designing broad, straight pershpektivy, a word deriving from the Latin *pro-specto*, which means to look into the distance. The intention behind such a design choice was that the streets could offer clear unobstructed views into the distance and the city would present a clear geometrical pattern. See Solomon Volkov, *St. Petersburg: A Cultural History*, trans. by Antonina W. Bouis (New York, NY: Free Press, 1995), pp. 10–1.
52. Brodsky, *Watermark*, pp. 7, 14.
53. Griffero, *Atmospheres*, p. 31.
54. Brodsky, *Watermark*, p. 132.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., pp. 58–9.
59. Ibid., pp. 59–60.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., p. 23.
64. Ibid., p. 117.
65. Ibid., p. 116.
66. Ibid., pp. 116–7.
67. Ibid., p. 7.
68. Ibid., p. 46.
69. Ibid., p. 3.
70. Ibid., pp. 3–4.
71. Ibid., p. 28.
72. Ibid., p. 29.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid., p. 59.
75. Ibid., p. 104.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Griffero, *Atmospheres*, p. 49.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. As quoted in Gernot Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*, ed. and trans. by A.-Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 2.
83. Ibid.
84. Hubert L. Dreyfus, 'Why the Mood *in* a Room and the Mood *of* a Room Should be Important to Architects', in *From The Things Themselves; Architecture and Phenomenology*, ed. by Benoit Jacquet and Vincent Giraud (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2013), p. 27.
85. Anca Matiyku, 'Architecture Drawn Out of Bruno Schulz's Poetic Prose', in *Reading Architecture: Literary Imagination and Architectural Experience*, ed. by Angeliki Sioli and Yoonchun Jung (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), p. 114.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.

88. Brodsky, *Watermark*, p. 80.
89. Ibid., p. 77.
90. Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement*, pp. 232–3.