

A Critical Analysis of Catherine Bennett's "Let Venice Sink"

Roxie Aronson, April 17th, 2025

In her essay "Let Venice Sink," Catherine Bennett advocates that instead of focusing architectural conservation efforts on saving heritage sites from impending ruination caused by the environment, we should take a more transformative perspective, allowing buildings and places to enter new phases of existence – whether they be habitable existences or not. Throughout her article, Bennett uses the example of Venice to illustrate the need for such change in ideation and values, arguing that Venice should be allowed to sink. Overall, while it would be challenging to take the action Bennett claims is necessary, her argument is mostly sound, with some room for improvement.

Catherine Bennett's argument begins with a series of quotes from Jan Morris, who in 1971 stated that her "own solution for the problem of Venice is to let her sink." Bennett discusses how Morris' predictions about the slowly creeping doom of Venice has been disproven – because it is actually happening much faster. Bennett notes that scientists have predicted that "in a worst-case scenario, Venice could be underwater by 2100." This is where she first directly states her position, saying, "[We] need to adapt." She goes on to talk about why the nature of her thesis is opposed by "[t]he heritage sector," according to professor Caitlin DeSilvey. Bennett points to DeSilvey's testimony, "when you talk about managing that kind of change, and you talk about ruination, that's perceived to be a failure," to support and set up her continuing argument that "we need to change the way we think about that loss and redefine our notion of failure."

Bennett's tone in the first few paragraphs is confusing to the reader, which takes away from the piece overall. The way she describes Morris' position comes across as if she has a negative opinion of it. That is contradicting though, because Bennett's piece is actually in harmony with Morris' statement. After all, Bennett's own piece is titled "Let Venice Sink," an echo of Morris' words. So readers would expect more positive language choices when referring to Morris.

In her fifth paragraph, Bennett emphasizes the gravity of the situation surrounding Venice's rising sea levels, describing it as a disaster. The paragraph, when examined in relation to the

following paragraph, seems to allude to the hopelessness of the city and its inevitable submersion. She brings that up because it helps convince readers that Venice (in the form it is in now) is without saving, and that her solution is the best option.

Next, Bennett turns our attention to the sheer expense of the newly implemented \$6.9 billion MOSE flood barriers, and the cost of maintaining their effectiveness. As the waters rise, the barriers must be raised, but Bennett informs us that the cost of doing that is “€200,000 each time.” Therefore, she proposes that such money could be better spent in the relocation of Venice's inhabitants. Even with a population of less than 50,000 (as of 2025) a relocation project of that magnitude would be extraordinarily complex and hugely expensive – but so was the MOSE system, and that appears to be Bennett's point. Leaving out the facts about the population of Venice until the end of her article hindered the argument; she should have discussed the population while she was proposing their relocation so that readers are able to believe that Bennett had considered her own solution thoroughly, and could defend it. But she only mentions the population of Venice far later in the article, to note that they would likely be upset to be displaced from their homes – neglecting to provide an estimate on how much money that kind of project would take. Still, the population of Venice has been falling, so Bennett's solution may be becoming even more favourable than prolonging the islands' demise.

I believe that Bennett's argument in paragraph six is weaker than it seems, even though it is a strong paragraph where she convinces readers that the MOSE barriers are too expensive to save Venice. She mentions that “its new MOSE flood barriers do an excellent job of protecting it.” But an improved argument could have discussed the inherent *flaws* the MOSE barriers have. It would have been more powerful and persuasive to point out how the city's sewage system could be disrupted when the barriers are raised for prolonged periods, and the environmental impacts that disturbing the flow of the tide could have on the underwater biome of Venice's lagoon (Chandler, 2023). Such points would add to the argument and prove even more insurmountable than the fiscal feasibility of saving Venice.

Bennet also makes an appeal to emotions, saying that we will not lose our connection to a historical site just because its state of being has shifted. But again, complex questions remain,

how do you relocate nearly 50,000 people – even if they all went happily? Would the displaced people be like refugees without homes? Where would they all be sent? If the ocean persists to swallow Venice, isn't there no other choice but to move while they've still got some control over how they do it? And are there any other ways of saving Venice – so that it doesn't have to be abandoned? These are some of the questions that Bennett's argument opens itself to. She could have attacked them more directly to defend her thesis, but didn't. And in some cases – such as finding other ways to save Venice – Bennet doesn't give much thought to other solutions at all. Two solutions that she never acknowledges involve pumping either water or liquid cement into or under the compressing ground, raising the city back up (Versed, 2022).

If we make the assumption that such an exodus could and should happen, Bennett argues that the flooded city would still maintain its value as a “rich cultural and artistic” site, and could serve as a “warning” about the consequences of global warming (like a martyr?). Bennett's “idea of ‘transformative continuity’” is developed further, and backed by the example of the Gardens of Ninfa, a ruin that has found new life and value in its new form as host to a diverse ecosystem. Bennet goes on to mention the transformation of harbors and other structures that have developed into “unintended habitats for marine wildlife.” She uses such examples to enforce another angle of her piece: the idea that structural transformation isn't a loss but instead a hard change. But there is a big difference between letting a *harbour* fall into the ocean's clutches, and letting the sea consume a *city*. The environmental effects of the two could be very different. Bennet tactfully addresses that concern quickly, though. She details the amount of work that would go into preparing Venice to be lost, digitally salvaging its historical value, and ensuring that the site would not “become dangerous.”

Then, she circles back to the point that people continue to fear letting structures make the transition from in-use and livable, to ruined and sunk – a fear she and DeSilvey find outdated and in need of challenging. Heritage is resilient according to Bennett, and changing the way we explore and enjoy heritage is how history should move forward and continue to be appreciated. Bennett challenges the very terminology we use to refer to heritage sites, explaining that calling somewhere “endangered” instantly puts that place at the top of peoples' bucket lists. In turn, tourism skyrockets, and the general mental outlook on the situation is primed to be negative and

defensive against change. Bennet's thoughts about the dangers of turning the island into something to be saved instead of celebrated and assisted, are a solid addition to her argument.

Paragraph 13 serves as a self-aware disclaimer, where the author recognizes and acknowledges some of the ways her proposition to "let Venice sink" would be opposed. Bennett's final blow illuminates the bigger picture and greater need for heritage officials across the globe to adopt her "transformative way of thinking" so that they can maintain some level of control over heritage sites in the next century, especially as global warming continues to threaten the existence of such sites.

Not only does Bennett skillfully defend her position with logic and clarity, but Bennett cites a number of relevant peers throughout the piece, supporting her thesis. Even though Bennett thinks it's best to let Venice sink, she unfortunately doesn't go into much detail about how the residents could be relocated. Her main focus is on the fact that they *should be*, because the island will sink eventually. But she seems to act like there is no other proposed means of saving Venice besides the MOSE barriers which are flawed and expensive. So although a strong argument, due to oversights like these, Catherine Bennet's piece is nearly, but not *completely* successful. There are a few weaknesses.

Versed. (2022, September 10). *How Venice plans to save itself from sinking* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mCpeyCh8jU>

Chandler, N. (2023, August 15). *How the Venice Tide Barrier Project Works*. HowStuffWorks.

<https://science.howstuffworks.com/engineering/civil/how-the-venice-tide-barrier-project-works.htm#:~:text=Those%20suspicions%20weren't%20alleviated,effect%20could%20actually%20be%20intensified.>