**CRASH 2 “Setting Tre Oci of Venice”**

Venice fragments \ Venice Traces \ Venice imprints

September 1986, 6:00 am.

Venice.

Church bells ringing in the background.

The morning mist is just starting to lift as seagulls soar over the Canal Grande, revealing the Chiesa dei Santi Simeone e Giuda.

This was the first sight that greeted my eyes that exhilarating morning as I stepped out of the Santa Lucia station with a suitcase containing all my belongings, ready to set out on a new adventure.

A drizzle outside, while inside nervousness and excitement at the unknown were building.

The tears welling up in my eyes mingled with the raindrops.

Is it a dream, or could it be real?

My mind was swarming with thoughts about the coming year that I would spend in the city of canals, mystery, and magic.

The present article opens a window onto that distant period in 1986–7 during which I attended an extraordinary studio course at the IUAV “Scuola di Venezia” architecture school, led by guest lecturer architect Peter Eisenman.

Besides my own personal interest in the subject, the importance of this description lies in its dual, retrospective point of view at that unique studio which, thirty-five years ago, represented the tectonic movements and the resulting “crash” taking place in the architectural discourse inside and outside academia at the time. Very few texts focus in detail with students’ academic study experience in the field of architecture and its repercussions on their future, both from the professional and the personal perspectives.

In 1985, as a fourth-year student in the Environmental Design Department at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem, Israel[[1]](#endnote-1). I was awarded a scholarship that enabled me to spend a year abroad studying at the architecture school in Venice. Bezalel's collaborations with overseas academy's exposed the students to the theoretical and professional discourse, the various trends that took place at that era, including the emergence of architects as stars, the global rise of “Starchitects".

In the end of 1984, I participated in a summer course in Venice, which “planted the seed” that would blossom into my choice to travel to this location two years later.

The celebrated architect Peter Eisenman, who was the architectural facilitator of the studio act as a central and significant figure in these events.

Outside-In: Dislocation

The rumor that Peter Eisenman was coming to teach at the architecture school in Venice travelled by word of mouth and generated quite a buzz of excitement and anticipation among the students and the university staff. The fact that Eisenman, the famous and distinguished American architect, was coming to conduct a studio workshop was further proof of the school’s new and ever-rising status. The feeling was that we, as students, were lucky to have the opportunity to take part in this one-time experience.

In the mid-eighties, Eisenman was already a recognized and ground-breaking architect, known as one of the "New York Five" thanks to a series of early private house projects he had planned, and his significant involvement in multiple publications. Even though, up until that point, he had been associated with a relatively small number of architectural projects of a limited scale, their impact on conceptual thought in the field of architecture was substantial and clear.

Few weeks later the rumor became a fact. The main lecture hall Aula Magna at Tolentini was full to the brim when Eisenman showed up to share his thoughts on the work he would do with the students over the upcoming semester. Despite being received like a rock star, Eisenman showed great curiosity and interest in meeting Italian students and learning how they work, think, and create, as well as how they would react to his ideas. It is an understatement to say that the curiosity was mutual. As expected, the demand to participate in Eisenman’s studio was high even though, from the beginning, the requirements he had set were not in line with what was customary for similar courses in Italy. In order to get accepted into the studio, we were asked to complete a selection task based on which Eisenman and his two assistants picked the group with whom they would work over the semester. Only 25 students made the cut.

His demand to work with a small group of students all working together and separately in a specific place—the studio—and on a tight schedule was a central factor that shaped the culture atmosphere of this particular studio. Together with the fact that the group was composed of local and foreign students all speaking different languages and coming from different background, created an inimitable, perhaps even a timeless experience.

In a retrospectively point of view, it created social and intellectual bonds that remain intact to this very day. The intensity of the experience from that period was so unique that many of the participants have preserved it.

Outside-In: Scuola di Venezia

Founded in Venice in 1926, the IUAV is considered one of the first architecture schools in Italy. More than anything, the school is associated with the city of Venice and its architectural, as well as artistic treasures. Like many universities in Italy, Venice’s university buildings are located in an urban tissue, spread throughout its various locations. Architecture studies took place mainly at the Tolentini Complex located near Piazzale Roma and close to the train station, which was the school’s Headquarters.

The Tolentini Complex was a converted convent that featured a paved, square courtyard enclosed by arcades, which connected several buildings and functioned, among other things, as a locus for student gatherings. The entrance to the campus was through the iconic gate designed by the Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa. The entire complex functioned as an inseparable part of the city’s fabric. One felt that the city and its rhythms were an inherent part of student life.

In 1978 Eisenman was invited by IUAV and the Municipality of Venice to participate in the Cannaregio Town Square competition. It can be considered as a turning point in his activity on the international scale, outside the United States, one that would engender the theoretical foundations for future competitions and later projects such as Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, the Parc de la Villette in Paris, the Biocenter for the Frankfurt University and more.

Inside-Out: STARDA NOVISSIMA

With the opening of the first Venice Biennale of Architecture as a separate and independent exhibition in 1980, under the title “Strada Novissima, the Presence of the Past”, the importance of Venice as a contemporary architectural capital increased.

The third architecture Biennale curated by the architect Aldo Rossi in 1985, titled *"Progetto Venezia*". Eisenman was invited to participate in the exhibition. He presented the Romeo and Juliette Project for the city of Verona for which he received the Lion Stone Prize.

The IUAV thus received an endorsement as an international academic and cultural center. It attracted important architects from all over the world.

Inside-Out: Superposition

When Eisenman arrived in Venice, it was clear to us all that he was bringing with him something new, something different. He tried to act in a spirit familiar to him from the architecture schools in the United States. He wanted to create an intimate learning environment that functioned as one tight unit and was capable of exploring and finding ways to break through boundaries in a way that was reflective of his worldview as an architect and as a teacher of architecture.

He asked the university to provide a designated space that would allow his students to assemble and to work as a group and as a team in the studio. The university rented a space for the purpose on the island of Giudecca south of Venice that was considered peripheral to the city’s center. The island contains mainly residential buildings and a promenade along the canal. It was accessible, as is common in Venice, by boat alone—one could not get there on foot. The outlying location of the studio endowed it with a symbolic dimension of distance, both in the physical and intellectual sense, as a space that was disconnected from the beating heart of the university and a structure operating outside of the frame, belonging and yet not belonging to it at the same time. As such, it inherently beckoned the students to seek out the subversive and the avant-garde.

The warehouse that served as the studio was situated between two churches designed by the architect Andrea Palladio: the San Giorgio Maggiore Chiesa (1566 -1610), and the Chiesa del Santissimo Redentore (1576–1592). The location of the studio between two iconic buildings emblematic of the illustrious history of Renaissance architecture in Italy underlined the prevailing zeitgeist that leaned toward integration with and acting in the interest of historical continuity, despite the challenge and motivation of creating new architecture. Unbeknownst to most, this was a kind of homecoming for Eisenman who had come here on a grand tour with his tutor Colin Rowe in 1961 to study, among other architectural projects, the Palladio buildings, including these two churches. Unlike Palladio’s opulent churches, the warehouse we were allotted was anything but glamorous, but in our eyes, as students, the place represented that singular moment of change and of a “crash” in the historical sequence that was simultaneously trying to move away from the familiar and the conventional and to reinvent things from scratch. Eisenman pushed us to experiment with new design language while applying his method of mixing the personal with the general, the subjective with the objective, including the use of grids and layers. A kind of blend of artificial archeology and architecture.

Outside-In: Scaling

The studio gate on the promenade, next to The Casa dei Tre Oci (three eyes in Venetian), was like an entryway into an inner world that belonged to no one but us. A kind of “world within a world.” A narrow stone path led one into the inner courtyard, a kind of patio, shaded by a few trees. A glass-window front welcomed newcomers and let light into the space. The rectangular structure that, in the past, had served as a warehouse, suddenly took on a new meaning for us a group of students and became a kind of second home for the duration of one semester.

The separation from the city and the long hours spent working in the studio created a very cohesive and tight-knit group that gradually established its own daily routine. Thus, for instance, around noon, we took a break and walk along the island’s main promenade, which faced Venice and overlooked the famous Piazza San Marco from afar. We were inside and out, close but far, steeped in a mix of sensations and situations that were taking on new meanings.

Eisenman chose to work with us students on a project he had worked on himself two years earlier, designing an art museum in the town of Rovereto[[2]](#endnote-2), north Italy. Metaphorically even though he actually finished the work on the project, he continued the process, and the research through us students. The studio was a laboratory through which the research that began few years ago on the project would continue.

Eisenman’s work process on the project became the method we followed in the studio. He encouraged us to combine the personal with the general, to look for grids and images, and to work through the superposition of the rational with the spontaneous. For him, this was the only way to deconstruct and then rebuild the place and to invent and create new spaces, based on primary foundations thus allowing for new interpretations. As students, we had never seen anything like it. The consideration of function came only later, once the form had come together. The tectonic action stemming from the internal and external forces of taking apart and putting back together, and most importantly scaling, was central.

Scaling as an idea, as a metaphor was realized through working with the Xerox device, which forced us students to think about scale changes at the same time that we could also play and use it as a tool for planning. It should be note that our studio existed before the computer era, we worked "low-tech". The Xerox machine allowed us to change the scale of images and sketches, and we still had points of reference – footholds or anchoring points that were always there to make sure we did not lose our orientation in and consideration of the space with which we were working. Our initial work consisted of studying the place, its history, its grids, its layers, its focal and reference points. Eisenman encourage us to forget for a moment everything we know about the way architecture and architectural products are made. He “pushed” us into the unknown, beyond the safety zone, where we could question and doubt. He created an upheaval that set us off on an adventure, both individually and as a group.

Eisenman would come in once a month for a limited period of two-to-three days of intensive work, while working simultaneously on a few new projects in Europe. For example, In the Biocenter for the Frankfurt University, a design competition, he Suggested a new unknown architectural syntax composed of images of the DNA, double helix in various sizes using the scaling technique while superposing urban grids. The rational act of placing one layer on top of another and in this way discovering new, unexplored situations gave rise to a new context. This process in itself became a design concept that allowed new interpretations to keep emerging from familiar foundations.

When Eisenman arrived in the studio, meetings with him started in the late morning hours. These meetings took the shape of presentations that preceded by thorough preparations, including tidying, cleaning, and organizing the studio space since it also functioned as a workshop. Then, we would await Eisenman’s arrival, always accompanied by one or two of his assistants. The knowledge that soon the professional master would step into the studio was always cause for great excitement and anticipation.

As mentioned earlier, most of the time, the class proceeded in the form of a presentation of sorts, with one of the student pairs plucking up the courage to present their work. In his comments on the presentations, He shared with us details from his travels in Italy or Europe, the progress of the projects he dealt with and stories from working meetings. Eisenman weaved reading recommendations, such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*[[3]](#endnote-3), for example, in order to get us to better understand the idea behind the process of breaking and putting back together again and the importance of the associative element in the design process, all while urging us to reread (and reinterpret) the history of architecture. One of the milestones that Eisenman would go back to repeatedly was the Basilica di Sant Andrea in Mantua by Leon Battista Alberti (1472–94). Eisenman saw Alberti’s treatment of the building’s façade as a turning point in architecture. He identified Alberti’s use of the façade as going beyond fulfilling the function of separating the interior from the exterior, and instead acting as a mediator and generator of the building’s interior. Throughout the lessons, Eisenman expounded on ideas of time, place, and scale that he had articulated together with the philosopher Jacques Derrida in designing the Parc de la Villette, and which later appeared in their book *Chora L Works*[[4]](#endnote-4). In these instances, too, the emphasis was always on the grid and on the signs and clues given by the space. In the case of la Villette, this was a question of the city wall, structures, and the urban fabric. Alongside to his devotion for the architecture of Borromini and Piranesi he shared with us the passion for soccer and the azurra team of Paolo Rossi.

Eisenman shared with us insights he gleaned from the unavoidable comparison between his students in the United States and us, as students working in such a rich and loaded context. Most of the time, we saw these as attempts to motivate us to act and to accept this different, radical, interpretative approach.

Language, which was one of Eisenman’s preoccupations as attested by his collaborations with the linguist Noam Chomsky, turned out to be a key obstacle. Eisenman did not speak Italian, and some of the students spoke no English at all. His assistants therefore stepped in as mediators and interpreters, translating Eisenman’s words to the students and their remarks back to Eisenman. Sometimes we got the impression that Eisenman understood Italian, despite having chosen to conduct the course in English.

He tried to link his personal stories and the ideas of the presenting workgroups to historical milestones. He wished to “hone” and sharpen our ideas while developing a personal work process that always strives to uncover and reveal the unknown or unfamiliar and to highlight the novelty of the thing. His comments on projects were almost always on the conceptual level alone, rarely touching on technical details. His published works[[5]](#endnote-5) were an inspiration for a way of action, including the manner in which one might go about constructing models and drafting architectural documents. As it quoted few years later:

Peter Eisenman: “My work is a constant process of uncovering. Do not forget, there is no new history. The architects I am going back to are all still there. They do not move. I move"[[6]](#endnote-6).

Eisenman kept somewhat of a distance between himself and us, his students, even though he gave the impression of wanting us to come together as a group. As is the custom in Italy, the students addressed him in the third person as a sign of respect and appreciation. He did not remember most of the students’ names, even though, during the time he spent among us, he regularly engaged in casual conversations that touched on matters outside studio business.

Inside-Out: Imprints

Parallel to the work in the Giudecca studio, Eisenman exposed us to the projects he was designing at the time, including Long Beach California (1986), the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio (1983–9), IBA Social Housing in Berlin (1981–5), and others. It is appropriate to point out that these projects represented a significant milestone in Eisenman’s career in terms of his success in implementing his theoretical ideas and executing them as part of large-scale public projects. Theory became practice and, conversely, the architectural creation became a concrete formulation of theory. These ideas also guided his method of pedagogy and guidance in the studio.

Unlike his American projects, where Eisenman was required to create his own historical layers, in the Berlin project next to Checkpoint Charlie, the historical context was unavoidable. The concepts and ideas that fascinated him, in this case, were memory and anti-memory, place and non-place, and the notion of artificial excavation[[7]](#endnote-7), which were manifested already in the early stages of planning. The process of design was preceded by diligent research that included scouring archives for maps, images, and local lore. The archeological dimension that Eisenman Led us on a path to tell the story of the place stemmed from processes of superposition and scaling of various grids, both local and global. With the combination of images and figures that were translated into design actions such as detraction and addition, erasure and invention that expressed the physical intervention, we tried to find a new meaning in the *place****.*** The common element to all of Eisenman’s projects is the creation of a new multilayered, personal, and at the same time general architectural language that reveals the hidden layers of the place and creates a new definition of space. Eisenman’s language was innovative back then and has remained so to this day. Despite efforts by historians and theoreticians of architecture to fit it into molds, his work process and its products broke down boundaries.

In 1988, the “Deconstructivist Architecture” exhibition at the MoMA in New York included the products of the competition for the design of the Biocenter for the Frankfurt University on which Eisenman had worked. The exhibition’s curators, Philip Johnson and Marc Wigley, wrote about Eisenman’s work;

…"The project becomes a complex exchange between solid void and Transparency Architecture of disruption, dislocation, deflection, deviation and distortion… from the familiar to the unfamiliar”…[[8]](#endnote-8)

His work, as well as the content of his studio lessons, showed Eisenman summoning a “crash” between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between the old and historical and the new, between the covert and the overt, between the active and the passive, between the subjective and the objective. Eisenman works from both sides of the divide, from the inside and from the outside. He searches for the foundations of architectures with the aim of reinventing and reformulating them. As students, the encounter with his methods was no less than a shock. The confusion, unease, and lack of solid ground were palpable throughout the semester. With each session, the question marks multiplied and left us looking for and creating alternatives. We saw ourselves as wondering in the darkness, trying to find points of reference we could lean on without the certainty that they existed.

Eisenman during the meetings, illuminated and encouraged more and more possibilities beyond the alternatives we have already brought up. Sometimes he seemed to see things we could not see at the same time and sometimes we got the impression that he was preserving the darkness as a way of action in order for the search to continue unabated.

Compositions that were composed of different combinations of lines, images and repetitive actions, revealed a kind of "open method" that gives significant space for the spontaneity and personal interpretation of each and every one of the students. Actions of subtraction and addition and especially changes of scale, were part of what can be understood in retrospect as a method. It must be said that during the process itself we as students did not really understand and see the method, the diverse actions that became a kind of method, at least not as we experienced in previous studies. Eisenman's charismatic character instilled confidence and trust, which allowed us to continue to operate in the "Chora" space. Although we sometimes did not understand the purpose of the actions, the method we tried to interpret what he said, and sometimes we even observe and analyzed pictures of projects of his[[9]](#endnote-9), to mimic some of the actions and design language he was identified with him. The big surprise was the discovery of the unexpected when meanings began to come together from the juxtaposition of layers and strata, some of them preexisting, some new and added on.

Another aspect of working in the studio was the social dimension. Since things were new for us and especially very challenging, we found ourselves more than once with mixed feelings of frustration and stress. The ability to act in darkness in its essence creates unease. One of the bright spots that stood out pretty quickly in the studio was the cohesive and supportive group. After the meetings with Eisenman and especially in the period between the meetings, we found ourselves supporting each other in our attempts to decipher the criticisms. These conversations allowed us to release the pressures that some came from working in the studio and some from outside. The social situation created a very significant role in motivating the studio, a motivating to keep on going, sometimes intriguing and sometimes competitive. The creation work was uninterrupted, sometimes into the small hours of the night. Even though the tools at our disposal were few, the Xerox device, a saw for cutting wood and especially the traditional tools; Sketch papers and pencils. Nevertheless, the process was rich and very intense which focused on the endless production of alternatives and allowed each and every one of us to discover something about ourselves and at the same time about how architecture could be produced. Despite the crises and the pressure, there was a sense that we were involved in something new, something that could not have happened in any other time or place, certainly not without the presence and guidance of Eisenman.

**Crash**

Traces

With the vantage of time, thirty-five years later, the impact of having learned and worked in the presence of Eisenman as a mentor is truly telling. We, the students, may have all gone our separate ways, back to our own world, but it is clear to all of us that we were sharing a one-time experience. An experience that shook us as much as it built us. Despite the strong group bond, only a few remain in touch. In certain respects, each of us has had to recalculate their trajectory following that potent period in the studio in Venice. Bidding farewell to Eisenman as a mentor at the time had been similar to the psychological process known as “separation-individuation.” Only in retrospect we can understand what had happened and Implications from the experience. The great chasm that loomed before us as the semester came to a close is best described by the Aramaic expression *me’igra rama le’beira amikta* (“from a high roof to a deep pit”). In other words, we found ourselves struggling to come to terms with the meaning of what we had experienced and with the conditions each of us would have to face in the academic and professional worlds.

The big question was: what’s next? What do we do with it all? How do we leverage the work we have done with Eisenman?

*“I remember really having to collect myself… How can I preserve my Italian experience”?* (Excerpt from a personal diary)

At the end of the semester in Venice, I stayed in Italy for another year working in an architectural firm. A year later, in 1988, I returned to Israel moved to the city Haifa, and completed my studies in the Architecture faculty at the Technion Israel Institute of Technology, where I teach as a staff member today.

Very quickly, I realized that I had to form my own professional identity, that I could not keep “doing Eisenman” (because there was only one of him) or work and teach using the same conceptual world.

The work process and methodology I had acquired in Venice were not suitable “as is,” but the openness, the search, and the historical and cultural contexts that go into creating and building a place served as a basis for my personal style as well.

Memories of my time at the Giudecca studio and the work I had done under the guidance of Peter Eisenman surface quite often, especially in conversations with my students. This time, Eisenman is mentioned alongside the great Renaissance artists and architects – Palladio, Alberti, Bramante, and others – as someone who has built a bridge toward a deeper understanding of the architectural art. The reliance on historical precedents and the search to create original architecture that converses with and even grows out of them, without fear of crossing genres or transgressing boundaries, drive me to this day.

On the other hand, I experience the “crash” in its full intensity because, as someone who works in two different arenas – professional architectural practice and academia, I feel the need to confront my students with the complexities of professional reality.

The composition of the present article has brought back to the surface the “crash” I have experienced for thirty-five years, ever since that studio experience. The intellectual shadow cast by Eisenman follows me to this day. My attempts to enjoy it collide with attempts to get away from it. It is a complex and charged experience, between dream and reality. Eisenman opened a window onto a rich, free, and creative intellectual world, driven by big, fundamental questions that seem to have all but vanished from contemporary discourse. On the other hand, the conditions imposed by reality do not always allow us to act freely and demand unequivocal answers.

At the same time, the experience of traveling and living in Italy, amplifies the central motif developed throughout the article, which is the movement from the inside out, and conversely, from the outside in. Venice in particular, have penetrated my inside and settled there like a second home.

That trip to Italy all those years ago, the discovery of a new and foreign place, the encounter with new people have made me develop a more complex vision and learn about myself and my own identity. Like a journey of discovery. The beauty of Venice, its charm and mystery, and their unique combination with Eisenman and the group of students in his studio have given my vision another dimension, which has allowed me to form as a person and a professional.

The experience in Eisenman’s studio lasted only one semester, a relatively short span of time, and even though I have already (to my mind) grown distant from it in many respects, the traces of the events and their implications accompany and move me to this very day. I wonder how such a powerfully intense experience has managed to remain fresh, and could it have happened in any other meld of circumstances?

1. Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design Jerusalem is Israel's oldest academic institution and the leader in the fields of art, design and architecture. Founded in 1906, Bezalel Academy has been a place of learning and inspiration, and has become part of the cultural fabric of the country, Bezalel offers Undergraduate Degree Programs and Graduate Degree Programs. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Progetto Roverto- "La metafora urbana" 1985. Eisenman Peter, *LA Fine Del Classico*, CLUVA Editrice, Venezia, 1987. P 195-196 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Joyce James, *Ulysses,* the Gabler edition, Random House, New York, 1986 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Derrida Jacques, Eisenman Peter, *Chora L Works,* The Monacelli Press*,* New York,1997 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Such as the articles and images in the book: . Eisenman Peter, *LA Fine Del Classico*, CLUVA Editrice, Venezia, 1987 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Dushkes, S. Laura, *The Architect says*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2012. P. 152 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Eisenman Peter, *Cities of Artificial Excavation*, Eisenman Peter, *Palladio Virtuel,* Preface, Yale University Press, 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Johanson Philip and Wigly Mark, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art New York, New York, 1988. P.17-20 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. We researched the works in publications in professional magazines such as: Casabella, Domus, Oppositions, Architectural Design and others. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)