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Introduction

A HOUSE OF LAYERS

PALAZZO ROTA IVANCICH

*Peter Dupont,
journalist*

Some palaces in Venice insist on being seen. Their façades rise along the Grand Canal like theatrical declarations – stone designed for spectacle, for the gaze of anyone passing on the water. Palazzo Rota Ivancich does not belong to that category. It hides in the interior of the city, folded into a dense fabric of narrow streets where architecture rarely announces itself. Yet the house persists in cultural memory for a reason that has little to do with architecture.

Search online for the palazzo and another name will appear almost immediately: Ernest Hemingway. In the late 1940s, the writer spent time in Venice and encountered the young Venetian aristocrat Adriana Ivancich, a teenager whose family lived in the palazzo near Calle del Remedio. Their meeting would later become part of the mythology surrounding Hemingway's final years. He was an ageing and world-famous literary giant, fascinated by a young woman who had barely entered adulthood. She was 18; he was 50.

The story has been repeated so often that it now precedes the house itself. Photographs show Adriana beside the writer: walking along canals, sitting at tables, listening while he speaks. Rarely alone. Rarely speaking in her own voice. The word most frequently attached to her name is 'muse' – a term that gives the relationship a classical elegance while quietly reducing her presence to a role in someone else's narrative.

The house has suffered a similar fate. Palazzo Rota Ivancich is mentioned because of Hemingway, yet the building itself remains obscure. Unlike the palaces that face the lagoon, it does not present itself as spectacle. It sits quietly within the city, its façade barely distinguishable from the surrounding buildings.

The forgotten palace and the half-forgotten woman share a peculiar parallel. Both exist clearly enough in history, yet both survive largely through the mythology attached to another name.





ONE DAY TO UNDERSTAND A HOUSE

My visit had a practical purpose. Koen Vanmechelen had chosen Palazzo Rota Ivancich as the location for his exhibition *We Thought We Were Alone*, presented during the Venice Biennale. I wanted to understand why – not simply why an artist might choose a Venetian palazzo, as that often happens every two years, but why this particular one.

To answer that question meant seeing the house itself and speaking with someone who still carries its history. I had arranged to meet Irina Ivancich, a descendant of the family who had lived in the palazzo for generations. The trip had to happen in a single day. I left home in Genk, Belgium, before dawn when the streets were still empty. By ten in the morning I was on a plane leaving Charleroi. Two hours later we started our descent into Treviso Airport. The lagoon looked pale and fragmented from above: a landscape of water, mudflats and thin strips of land. A bus took me to Venice. I needed to reach the palazzo at around half past one, spend two hours there, and return the same evening. In a city that rewards slow wandering, I had only a few hours to understand a house.

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ENTERING VENICE

Venice never reveals itself immediately. Arriving from the mainland, you first encounter Piazzale Roma – a chaotic threshold of buses, taxis, fumes and concrete where visitors are dropped before entering the city proper. It is the least Venetian place imaginable, a strange purgatory before the spectacle begins.

From there I boarded a vaporetto to San Marco. Gradually, the city returned: façades leaning over canals, bridges arching across narrow waterways, laundry hanging above the water. When I stepped off near Piazza San Marco, the square was full of masked figures. It was Carnival. Costumes moved through the pale winter light – elaborate masks and long cloaks, with photographers circling around them. Venice itself was performing. But my destination lay behind that spectacle.

Leaving the monumental stage of San Marco, the city quickly tightens. Wide perspectives collapse into narrow *calli* where the crowds thin out and the noise drops away in stages; first the music, then the voices, then almost everything. I passed the Giardini Reali and slipped into the streets leading to Calle del Remedio. No masks here. Just walls, water, and the occasional sound of a shutter closing somewhere above.

Nothing announces the palazzo. The entrance appears as a simple doorway in a wall that offers little hint of what lies behind it. There was no bell, so I called out. After a moment, two of Irina Ivancich's assistants opened the door and invited me inside. The noise of the street vanished immediately.

Beyond the threshold, at the far end of the room, a courtyard opened up, unexpectedly large and quiet. Brick walls surrounded a small garden. Arcades ran along one side of the space, their surfaces worn by centuries of weather and salt air. Above them, Gothic windows looked down over the courtyard with the calm indifference of architecture that has seen generations pass.

In Venice, these hidden gardens always feel improbable. Space is rare in the city. When one appears, it feels as though the city has briefly loosened its grip.

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THE SMALL WARM ROOM

The first floor was cold. Large rooms opened into one another, their emptiness amplified by the absence of furniture. Marble door frames, terrazzo floors, high ceilings. The building felt vast and silent.

But in one small room near the entrance, there was warmth. A portable heater hummed quietly beside a modest table. And there sat Irina Ivancich. All around us stretched a palace of large, empty rooms, yet the heart of the house had contracted to this single heated space. We greeted each other and began talking before starting the tour. Irina Ivancich knows the building intimately. She moves through the rooms with quiet certainty, turning into corridors that would confuse a stranger, climbing staircases that connect different wings of the house. At one point, she stopped in a large empty room and said, simply: “Every generation changed something. That is why it still stands.”

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A VENETIAN GROWTH HOUSE

The rooms are almost entirely empty, yet the architecture itself tells the story. One room opens directly into another, forming long interior perspectives. Stand in one doorway and you see a sequence of openings extending as far as distant windows. Light travels slowly through the building from the canals and the courtyard. The layout feels unpredictable. Corridors lead to unexpected chambers. Doors align in ways that make the interior seem larger than the exterior suggests.

This is not a Florentine Renaissance palace built according to strict symmetry. Palazzo Rota Ivancich is something else: a Venetian growth house. Like the city itself, it expanded gradually. Rooms were added, corridors redirected, walls opened and closed as generations adapted the building to new needs. On a floor plan the structure appears almost organic: a central sequence of rooms with branches extending towards canals, alleys and neighbouring buildings. The house grew the way Venice grew: by accumulation.





ACROSS THE ADRIATIC

The Ivancich family arrived in Venice from across the Adriatic, from Dalmatia, today part of Croatia. For centuries Venice maintained close ties with the eastern Adriatic coast. Merchants, sailors and administrators travelled constantly between those territories and the lagoon city. Families moved with them. Some remained.

The Ivancich family gradually became part of Venetian society and established its residence in this palazzo near San Marco. At the same time the family operated the Grand Hotel Venezia, a prestigious hotel along the Grand Canal that welcomed travellers from across Europe: Ingrid Bergman, Cary Grant, Luigi Pirandello, Richard Strauss, Benito Mussolini, Tyrone Power, Adolf Hitler. The contrast is striking: a public hotel facing the grand waterway of Venice, and a private family house hidden in the interior of the city. What the world could see, and what remained out of sight.

THE SHADOW OF HEMINGWAY

In 1948 Ernest Hemingway arrived in Venice and encountered Adriana Ivancich. Their relationship – admiration, fascination, emotional tension between a world-famous writer and a very young woman – has been described many times.

What gets described less often is Adriana's own work. She drew and wrote, and her illustrations accompanied Hemingway's novel *Across the River and Into the Trees* – not as decoration, but as a distinct visual presence alongside his prose. That work has largely disappeared behind the story of the relationship itself. Over time she became known primarily as 'Hemingway's muse', a term that preserved her name while quietly retiring everything else about her.

The same mythology preserved the name of the house. Through Hemingway the palazzo slipped into global literary memory, yet the irony is obvious: the story that made the house famous also obscured the life that had taken place inside it.

WHY THIS HOUSE

Walking through the empty rooms with Irina Ivancich, the reason for Vanmechelen's choice slowly becomes legible. A family that crossed the Adriatic and took root in a new city. A building that grew room by room, wall by wall, without a plan. A woman who drew and wrote and was remembered as someone else's inspiration. None of this needed to be constructed or imposed. It was simply what had happened here, over centuries, in these specific rooms.









Vanmechelen has long worked with what remains after a cross-breeding. What a family carries and what it leaves behind. What a body remembers of another place. He usually poses those questions through living matter like eggs, birds or cells. Here he poses them through a building. Through rooms that others built and inhabited and that now stand empty, but are not.

The exhibition that unfolds inside these walls begins with the uncertainty of birth and approaches something harder to name. Identity under pressure. Life shaped by control, by domestication, by the cages we build for what we fear or desire – and the discovery that we are often the ones inside. Vanmechelen calls the alternative ‘rewilding’: not a return to some imagined nature, but a reckoning with the limits of control and the conditions of coexistence.

Palazzo Rota Ivancich is not a neutral container for that question. It is a place where a family was absorbed into a city, where a city was absorbed into mythology, where a woman’s own voice was absorbed into someone else’s story. Those absorptions left marks – in the architecture, in the silences, in what the family chose to keep and what they lost without choosing.

Vanmechelen has so much to respect and start from here. The material is already present. In the walls, in the floor plan, in the name the house carries and the name it has lost.

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LEAVING THE HOUSE

After several hours we returned to the small warm room where the heater was still humming quietly. Soon I would have to retrace my path through Venice, take the vaporetto back to the mainland, catch the evening flight and return home long after midnight.

I had spent only a few hours inside the palazzo. Yet by the time I stepped back into the narrow *calle*, the house no longer felt obscure. It had revealed itself slowly – through rooms, corridors and stories that could not be understood from the outside.

I left the house without a full answer. Only on the flight home, scrolling through the works that would soon inhabit the palazzo, did the connection begin to make sense. Adriana Ivancich, I thought, might also be there – in the mirrored face of one of the Three Graces, reflecting whoever stands before her, never quite herself.

Like the house itself, Adriana Ivancich had remained in view all along, and still not been fully seen.

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