Dana E. Katz, *The Jewish Ghetto and the Visual Imagination of Early Modern Venice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. xiii + 188.

by Nicholas Terpstra

This book occupies that ambiguous ground where hard edges and soft tissue meet. On one level, the Venetian ghetto was all about walls and bodies, and the surveillance state that was early modern Venice had deep experience in raising the former in order to separate, sequester, and discipline the latter. Yet as Dana Katz reminds us, the softest tissue of all is inside the head. Venetian fears and anxieties made the edges of its ghetto harder than some other local enclosures, heightening walls, bricking up windows, and raising drawbridges at nightfall. Yet Venetian needs, curiosity, fascination, and dreams – about soft tissue above all – introduced cracks in those same walls and windows, which allowed for some more fluid exchanges.

Katz begins building her analysis with the most basic empirical facts. The ghetto space authorized in 1516 remained fixed for two-and-a-half decades. Even the expansions of the *Ghetto Vecchio* in 1541 and the *Ghetto Nuovissimo* of 1633 were not enough to accommodate the hundreds of people who kept pushing into a space defined by ever firmer walls. With no ownership possible which might have generated more imaginative housing solutions, the existing buildings had floors added haphazardly one on top of the other, putting ever greater pressure on foundations that were shaky both architecturally and socially. And so the very Jewish presence which the Venetian Senate had aimed to contain and curtail began to edge up above surrounding buildings and claim the kind of visual attention that few structures other than church bell towers normally commanded. The fact that this particular island on the northwestern margin of the city had been chosen at least in part because it had no church or bell tower only made the irony more delicate and awkward. An island's bell tower never marked its locale passively, but sent sonic and visual messages out into surrounding neighborhoods and across the city. But Jews had no license to look or speak, either explicitly or implicitly, and so as the platform of the ghetto inched ever higher, the anxieties grew about what the Jews might be seeing and saying. Moreover, the social logic of enclosure increased the economic value of those higher floors that enjoyed more expansive views and rooftop terraces (*altane*) and belvederes. So the Jews who were seeing and seen were not the marginalized poor and social subordinates who occupied attics across Europe, but the wealthier and more articulate members of the Jewish community. The

most immediate solution was to blind the buildings by sealing up those windows that faced outwards and to silence the squares and terraces with curfews. The 1541 expansion of the *Ghetto Vecchio* forbade balconies that might provide points of visual, oral, and social exchange, and in 1560 Venetian officials took the logic a step further and ordered all external-facing windows, doors, and balconies to be bricked over or removed.

Venetian authorities would continue pursuing these kinds of reactive responses over the coming centuries, adapting what they assumed was the elegantly simple and eminently practical model of the ghetto to local realities in ways that proved increasingly problematic and unworkable. Like generals fighting the last war, these authorities had begun down the road of enclosing Jews in 1516 by taking the models to hand of convents, brothels, merchants' quarters, and pest houses – the Venetians were past masters at segregating, enclosing, and exploiting social groups of one kind or another. Their actions suggest that they initially assumed that the Jews would pose a challenge of scale, but not of kind for a city that had long managed to balance openness to trade, labor, and capital with strict limits on civic engagement and ownership. Yet apparent parallels broke down in the realities of attempting to sequester an entire community, and the improvised reactions of the following decades only compounded the problems.

Katz moves systematically through four dimensions of this unfolding dynamic: the urban margins as the location for this experiment; the enclosure as the form of it; the physical openings that might mediate or undermine it; and the temporal quality given to walls and boundaries when they were open at some times of day and closed at others. As an architectural historian, she approaches the ghetto less through its historical development than through the place it occupied in the Venetian imaginary thanks to how it emerged, grew, and developed. In the process, Katz engages with histories of the senses, of emotions, and of space, though more often through theoretical than archival means.

At a certain level, the ghetto represented a shifting horizon of expectations over its almost four centuries of existence, not least because Venetians do not seem to have expected that it would be different in kind from their other enclosures. They hadn't looked over that horizon, and when it moved closer to them they weren't certain how to deal with it. The *Fondaco dei Tedeschi* had operated as a merchants' hostel-warehouse since 1228, and the expanded structure built from 1505-1508 still functioned as the heart of the itinerant German merchant community when the swelling tide of traders washed into surrounding hostels.

The pest houses of the *Lazzaretto Vecchio* (ca. 1400) and the *Lazzaretto Nuovo* (1468) similarly served to quarantine those whose bodies and goods were only passing through; their island location may have made walls redundant, but brick and water together gave a comforting security. Brothel workers and clients were equally transient, and in their case walls kept a necessary evil from infiltrating neighboring streets and squares. By contrast, convents were the permanent homes of their residents. Yet they were so deeply integrated into family strategies and kinship networks, so widely diffused across the city, so central to its religious identity, and so well outfitted with functioning doors and windows that they were fully part of the fabric of Venetian society, and their walls and gates seem hardly to have registered as barriers. As Katz notes, unlike Venice's other enclosures, convent walls were meant to protect those inside from external influences, not the other way around. Their ineffectiveness at separating inside and outside was certainly a growing complaint of church reformers in the sixteenth century, and a signal achievement of the Council of Trent that resonated locally was the tightening of convent enclosures – though here too, the walls remained strategically porous.

Venetians may have assumed that the Jewish ghetto would function much like the German *fondaco*, giving a secure base to mainly transient male merchants and making foreign goods and capital available to Venetians without intruding or imposing on what they considered to be permanent, distinctive and definitive in their local community. They clearly expected the numbers of Jewish merchants to be somewhat greater than the Germans, and the peripheral location assigned to the ghetto may have been as much about ensuring easier access for transshipment as about marginalizing and restricting a religiously alien presence which many Venetians considered polluting and contagious. In Rome, Bologna, Florence, and Siena, the ghetto had a central location, often adjacent to civic or ecclesiastical structures, that put Jews under closer surveillance and protection. There can be no doubt that most Venetians looked on Jews as worse than the plague, a more odious necessary evil than prostitution, and a biological, spiritual, and religious presence from which *they* wanted protection. The fact that they allowed this presence in the city at all points to their serene confidence that they could shape its form and control its impact. Yet *la Serenissima* was always backpedaling furiously to keep up appearances, and in the decades after 1516 there was desperation and improvisation of their responses as they simultaneously expanded the urban footprint while restricting the points of contact between the inside and outside of the ghetto perimeter. It suggests that the Venetians were taken aback by what developed, both in this new enclosure

and in their own psyche, once the walls and gates were up, and once whole households began moving into the moated island and making it a permanent home. Gender changed everything. Venetians began seeing this particular enclosure differently. Religion still provided the rationale, but sex provided the anxiety. As if in confirmation, when Venice opened the *Fondacco dei Turchi* in 1621 to house merchants from the Ottoman empire, it reverted to allowing space for transient male traders only.

Katz is particularly good at exploring how sexual anxiety increased the stakes in the games played around Venice's Jewish ghetto. Authorities claimed that exterior windows and balconies had to be blinded because Jews were observing Christian processions with a mocking gaze and insulting gestures; Venice could not risk what this looked like in the eyes of a wrathful God. But the ones at those windows were, as Katz notes, almost certainly primarily women. What unsettled authorities more, she suggests, was not so much what these women saw, but rather who might see them. The trope of the woman as temptress was intensified when refracted through the lens of religion and race, and Katz argues that it was the fear of Christian men being drawn to and through the window and so to perdition that had authorities reaching for a bricks and mortar solution. Katz then moves to expand further on what happened when windows became walls, and indeed when the loss of sight made it all the more important to find other forms of contact, first of all, touch. Ghetto walls proved no less porous than convent ones, and for much the same reason – too many Christian men wanted to connect socially with what was inside.

Katz notes that she is not aiming to write a history of the ghetto's construction and development. Others have done that already, and of all early modern ghettos, the one on the periphery of Venice must be among the most thoroughly studied in its historical evolution, its built and social forms, its religious and cultural life, and its commercial activities both internally and outwards, reaching for the contested margins of the Venetian and Ottoman empires. In aiming instead to apply visual and spatial theory to the ghetto, Katz works to explore what words – above all those in archival documents – seldom convey about how a space feels and acts, and how those living in it engage with each other and those alongside and outside its walls. She does this extraordinarily well, and among this book's many qualities is not simply what it states but what it suggests and what leads it triggers. This is due in part to the fact that it's relatively slim at only 115 pages. Yet these are densely argued and economically expressed pages, and they are anchored with forty images and maps and a further 70 pages of documentary

apparatus which fill out the narrative with historical and contextual detail. The even greater anchoring lies with a sophisticated theoretical framework on marginality, tactility, sexuality, visuality, and spatiality that Katz deploys with nuance and sophistication in order to account most fully for the meanings of this space.

Katz's intensely economical style sometimes renders these theoretical analyses less legible than we might wish, and some sentences and concepts elude comprehension. Beyond that, some of the theories she works with more often deal with what emerges than with the improvisations of that emergence. This gives the analysis a finished and determined quality which can let mixed intents, paradoxes, improvisations, and contradictions slip from view. Katz claims that what we learn from Venice can help us understand ghettos across Europe, but this will only be the case if we allow for those broad variations and inner contradictions. Siena and Florence located their ghettos in the city center, the former bricking its windows and the latter establishing a *cordon sanitaire* of Christian apartments around the outward-looking perimeter. Siena eventually allowed Jews to settle outside these bricked up walls, but Florence did not. Meanwhile, nearby Livorno, with no enclosed ghetto, had a Jewish community that grew to comprise over 10% of the total population. What do we make of the fact that it was here, where there were no limits on where Jews could own and build, that they constructed residences that towered over their neighbors much like those in Venice's *Ghetto Nuovo*? These three very different urbanistic forms developed under a single Tuscan political authority, yet each mortared cultural anxieties into built structures in different ways, and each generated distinct social engagements with surrounding Christian society. There was no predictability to that meeting of hard edge and soft tissue. Neither Florence, Siena, nor Livorno developed Jewish communities as intensely engaged with the worlds outside their boundaries as Venice. It's a paradox that continues to fascinate, and we need bold and probing guides like Dana Katz to help us make some sense of it.

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