

# Fulcrum

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## an unspoken rule set for living in venice.

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To live in a city is to abide by its habits. These habits aren't explicitly stated, there are no signposts, but rather, they form part of a spectrum of unspoken rules only learnt by trial and error.

The daily schedule of putting out rubbish in Venice (*Rule 01*) is a complex ritual: you are required to segregate your refuse into small bags according to their contents, which is fairly normal — however it is not at all easy to know whether it is collection day for paper, glass, compost, cans, and/or general waste. These little bags can only be left outside between the hours of 07:00 and 08:00 (Monday to Saturday), directly in front of your apartment building. Failure to comply engenders disapproval from your neighbours, or fines for mistiming.

Walking in Venice (*Rule 02*) is much like driving in other cities: traffic peaks during commuter hours, and it moves forward on the right, either in single file, or two-lane speed zones. Overtaking is not permitted, and this is enforced by the citizens themselves, who will insult or purposefully collide with anyone breaking the flow. If something catches your eye and you fancy a look in a shop window or a consultation with your map, pull in, removing yourself from the stream of traffic, as you would if you were at the wheel of a car.

Note (*Rule 03*), Italian men do not go bare-chested and both genders tend to cover themselves up quite modestly, revealing only forearms and calves at most. Fines for scantily-clad tourists were introduced in 2007, so watch your fashion sense while perusing the city or you will be denied entry to monuments.

Don't pack a packed lunch (*Rule 04*) as public picnicking is forbidden, and in any case discouraged by this city's incredible lack of public seating.

If you attempt to perch and picnic, whatever you do, don't feed the pigeon population (*Rule 05*). With the exception of Saint Mark's Square (where it

is illogically encouraged) it is totally banned. After your day of absorbing the sites, on return to your rented apartment, ensure to remove footwear (*Rule 06*). Anything heavier than the Venetian soft thick-soled slippers will bring you into conflict with your over-sensitive neighbours. Further, to avoid a knock at the door from a disgruntled neighbour, ensure you tiptoe quietly around as you carry out your domestic rituals. The residents of Venice dwell in old apartments and narrow streets, a perfect environment for eavesdropping. You can mostly hear the activities of your neighbours through the walls, ceilings and floors.

**In November, the height of the Acqua Alta season, flooding in the city occurs on an almost daily basis. Its coming is announced by the 7am flood siren, which awakens the population with a score of whistles (whose quantity and pitch indicate the height of the tide).**

Be sure to be ready, (*Rule 07*) to take appropriate precautions to protect your belongings and wear your wellingtons!

This rule set keeps the population on the same schedule of movement and thought in living; everyone follows the same conveyor belt of routines. There is a sense of belonging to a larger team, which these rules, like family home rules, mean that everyone strives for the same wish, which is *decorum* — this being an appropriateness of behaviour or conduct in the city. To raise awareness and support this, Venice has a "decorum week" with a parade of boats down the Grand Canal. For Venice, restricted by space and maze-like in nature, the sounds and habits of its people have to be managed to maintain harmony and order. Its dual purpose is to maintain the upkeep of its Disney-like scenery and façades in order to bring in the flocks of tourists with their pockets full of money.

To live in a city is to preferentially choose its rule set, over other cities.

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## abode, abide.

editors

*To live in a city is to abide by its habits... to live in a city is to preferentially choose its rule set, over other cities.*

While this statement is ostensibly true, it does not, in fact, reveal the full complexity of the relationship between preference and desire.

At the very heart of the Declaration of Universal Human Rights lies an awkward and uncomfortable contradiction. How might we, on the one hand, construct a global rule set (and not just for urban life), while at the same time impose that rule set in a way that is both realistic, pluralist, and culturally sensitive? Critics of the Declaration often cite its Western origins as being somehow biased towards the moral assumptions of a particular sociocultural ideology (originating in the Eurocentric Renaissance).

Take polygamy, for example — a practise prohibited throughout the Western world. Although polygamy is not expressly forbidden by any international instrument, it is implicitly forbidden because it discriminates against women and often contravenes other rights of women contained in those treaties. Nonetheless, fraternal polygamy is traditionally practiced among nomadic Tibetans in Nepal, parts of China, and northern India, in which two or more brothers are married to the same wife, with the wife having equal 'sexual access' to both of them. This practise is believed to be more likely in societies with scarce environmental resources, as it limits population growth and enhances child survival. Polygamy also still exists in many parts of Africa; South Africa's President Zuma has in fact himself four wives.

The problematic weighting of cultural norms against both national standards and international treaties continues to produce fault-lines of conflict, especially as globalisation progresses and migration continues to rise. The issue is essentially one of what happens when an unstoppable force strikes an immovable object: how are we to adapt the absolutism

of our own beliefs to a local condition, especially when that condition is itself presented absolutely? The successive waves of late-twentieth century deregulation, free-trade agreements, and even political union (as with the EU) transformed the way people lived and drove hundreds of millions of people from the countryside into cities.

**The single most important factor that determines where, how, and why we live today is financial opportunity — and this often takes precedence over how we think our basic Human Rights will be upheld in a nation's cities.**

The most striking example of this is undoubtedly Saudi Arabia — the elephant in the room successive Western governments refuse to condemn for economic reasons.

Leaving aside their atrocious human rights record, a Draconian (medieval) legal system, and an undemocratic paternalist political hierarchy, the practise of employers confiscating their low-paid workers' passports results in large numbers of employees being treated much like modern-day slaves. Rizana Nafeek was a Sri Lankan maid beheaded last week for the death of a child in her care (who allegedly choked on a bottle of milk). She had entered the country illegally in 2006, concealing the fact she was a minor, in order to earn money to send back to her family (whose livelihood had been destroyed by the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami).

It is hard to imagine the pressures that would force parents to send their daughter thousands of miles to work as a maid; even harder to imagine the servility and desperation required to accept the conditions of employment within Saudi Arabia.

When it comes to abiding by the law in the place you abode, the quality of preference is directly linked to how easy it is to reject the city's rule set. This raises fundamental questions about political liberty and freedom of passage (i.e. to leave). For most people, financial limitations restrict their city of residence to a single, somewhat Orwellian, preference...



