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Let us consider two species of media architecture: one new and one old. And for the sake of orientation and comparison, let us focus on a single city—say, Venice, Italy. Our first stop, as it would be if we were visiting in the flesh, is Venice Marco Polo Airport (VCE), the fifth busiest airport in the country. Originally opened in 1960, the airport introduced in 2002 a new passenger terminal, designed by locals Giampaolo and Giovanna Mar, which nods subtly to Aldo Rossi in its geometric form and masonry construction. Its canopies resemble those of the Gaggiandre in the old shipyards in Venice’s Arsenale. Inside, we encounter exposed wooden trusses, plenty of glass and natural light—and the typical tempest of traveler tips and tutelage: wayfinding signage and flight status monitors, touch-screens and security instructions. Mixed in with the logistical communications are TV screens, bookshops, cell-phone charging stations, and WiFi to serve our entertainment and business needs.

1. Venice has another airport, Treviso, which focuses on low-cost carriers, leaving VCE to handle flights to major European cities and some international destinations in North America, Africa, and the Middle East.

Fig. 1
Aerial view of Venice Marco Polo Airport, situated on the mainland outside Venice.

Fig. 2
Venice Marco Polo Airport, designed by Studio Architetto Mar (2002).

Furnishing Intelligence
Named after a thirteenth-century merchant-traveler who emblematizes a distant age of geopolitics, Marco Polo Airport, like all airports, encompasses a variety of spatial ontologies: security zones, international zones, spaces of legal exception and suspended national sovereignty, logistical spaces, restricted spaces, wormhole-like portals for staff that traverse a variety of terrains, and so forth. The boundaries between those zones are typically demarcated by architectural barriers—different floors, locked doors, bollards, cones, fences or, more commonly in public areas, transparent walls—as well as mediated markers and data-imbued thresholds. As geographers Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge explain, air travel requires the transversal of a constellation of “code/spaces,” and “the decision as to whether people and luggage can progress from one code/space to the next is more than ever before taken by systems that operate in an automated, autonomous, and automatic way.”

Boarding passes, barcodes, bag tags, and passports grant us, and our stuff, the right of passage. Illustrated signage tells us how to pack our liquids and gels, and how to disassemble ourselves at the security check, so that our bodies and carry-ons, too, can pass scrutiny. All this screening and scanning of codes and anatomies makes for an integral *rite* of passage in what Rachel Hall, in *The Transparent Traveler*, calls the “cultural performance of risk management.” We’ve learned the script: passports open to the photo page, shoes off, laptops out.


Opened shortly after September 11 shook the global travel industry and raised the stakes for airline security, VCE was “equipped with the most up-to-date technological systems for data-management and communication, an avant-garde security system, and suitable commercial areas” to serve 6.5 million passengers.\(^4\) In 2015, as the airport began work on another expansion, it also linked to other European airports through the EUROCONTROL “airport collaborative decision-making” process. This involves sharing flight data throughout the European system, thus consolidating all phases of a flight—“from the flight plan to airport operations, from take-off to en-route to landing, with the corresponding turn-around”—into a “single process” that ties geographically disparate runways and terminals together into a holistic aerospace.\(^5\) So, while the airport-as-architecture is growing on the ground, the airport-as-aerial-jurisdiction, as code-space, is expanding in the air and through networked databases.

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4. Studio Architetti Mar, “Marco Polo Terminal Venezia.”


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Contemporary airport architecture materializes this logic of continuity and connection, suggesting a correspondence between its administrative and material spaces. Transparency, as manifested in VCE’s glass walls and glowing screens, has become the obligatory trope of international travel. Evoking Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky’s distinction between “literal” and “phenomenal” transparency (that is, the difference between actually transparent materials, like glass, and the perception of multiple, simultaneous spatial conditions), Hall suggests that transparency is the “aesthetic of choice” for risk management, particularly in airports, because it simultaneously exteriorizes and incorporates. It “reveals what it enfolds.”\(^6\) Glass walls and open floor plans, emblems of the modernist paradigm, here evoke unfettered freedom, openness, adventure—ideals befitting a tourist airport like VCE—while also accommodating surveillance. Our bodies freely traverse endless corridors and expansive food courts, while our coded subjectivities are constantly scanned and registered.

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There are of course grave consequences for mistaking the perceived transparency, the seeming unfetteredness, of the airport for actual borderless abandon. An alarm will readily alert us if we’ve accidentally passed into restricted territory. A team of armed security guards might magically appear if we speak too freely (there are certain words we should not say in a security queue!) or pack too liberally. Given the stakes of underestimating the limitations of the airport’s transparency, we often look for mediated markers, like the green light on the body scanner, and other spatial cues, including architectural fixtures and furnishings, to direct our actions.

The airport’s signature furnishings—baggage carousels, ticket counters, customs stations, turnstiles, body scanners, even lounge chairs at the gate—inhabit liminal zones between different kinds of space. And the frictions and frustrations we inevitably face in our encounters with each of these furnishings (they’re never *comfortable experiences*) remind us that, as we pass through various borders defined by geopolitics and logistics and biometric data, we simultaneously traverse different spatial orders. Those furnishings, however un-ergonomic and uncomfortable they might be, function as both logistical and epistemic gateways that help to mediate the transitions between these zones. And, in some cases, they provide our only clues that those transition zones even exist.

The baggage carousel signals our proximity to freedom and fresh air. We retrieve our luggage, pass through the automated sliding doors, exit into the sunshine, and head toward the water taxis on the lagoon. We soon find ourselves standing before the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, a Renaissance marvel on the iconic Piazza San Marco—both named in honor of Saint Mark, the city’s patron saint. Noted architect and sculptor Jacopo Sansovino designed the library and oversaw its construction between 1537 and 1553. Yet the idea for the library, and the gathering of its collection, began much earlier. In 1362 Francesco Petrarca—Petrarch of the eponymous sonnet—bequeathed his personal library to the city, provided it kept the collection intact and secure and made it available for use by nobles and scholar-citizens in what would have been among the first public, or common, libraries (as opposed to private scholarly or family libraries) in western Europe. Yet Petrarch’s books and manuscripts never arrived. A century later, in 1468, humanist scholar and collector Cardinal Bessarion gifted 750 Greek and Latin codices, 250 manuscripts, and several *incunabula* (early printed books) to the city, but even this bequest didn’t find a permanent home for decades—not until Doge Andrea Gritti commissioned Sansovino.8

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7. When Sansovino passed away in 1570, Vincenzo Scamozzi oversaw the addition of five additional bays, which extended the library down to the embankment.

8. For more on the library collection’s evolution, as well as its organization and how it was catalogued and made available for public access, see Dorit Raines, “Book Museum or Scholarly Library? The ‘Libreria di San Marco’ in a Republican Context,” *Ateneo Veneto: Atti e Memorie Dell’ateneo Veneto*, vol. 2 (2010): 31–50.

Fig. 5
The monumental façade of the sixteenth-century Biblioteca Marciana, designed by architects Jacopo Sansovino and Vincenzo Scamozzi. It is one of the oldest public manuscript archives in the world.
Arriving at the airport for a departing flight, we either crawl in through its subterranean transit station, lumber in from its parking garage, or stumble from a cab onto a chaotic curb. The spacious Piazza San Marco, by contrast, offers ample room to behold Sansovino’s masterpiece: a classical two-story, twenty-one-bay columned structure with copious ornamentation: angels, garlands, lion heads, and rooftop statues and obelisks. His design fulfilled the Senate’s 1515 decree that the library should “emulate the ancients” in its classicism, yet it represented a distinctively Venetian take on Vitruvian principles.9 As architectural historian Deborah Howard explains, “florid skylines,” like those at the library, were “a distinctive feature of the Venetian town-scape,” as were elaborate stone facades and liberal use of glass.10


Inside, its walls and ceilings feature paintings by the likes of Titian, Veronese, and Tintoretto and statuary representing philosophy, classical mythology, and other allegorical figures of wisdom and virtue. Originally, the library’s books were chained to walnut lecterns, as was the case in many early modern libraries seeking to protect their precious collections. But sixteenth-century Venice, home to more than 450 printers, publishers, and booksellers, was a center of European print production; among its creations, according to art historian Bronwen Wilson, were myriad maps, atlases, travel chronicles, and guidebooks, reflecting Venice’s position as a mercantile center and a departure point for travelers. Many of those publications made their way into the library’s collection thanks to a 1603 law that established the Biblioteca Marciana as a local “library of deposit,” obligating all those Venetian printers to file copies of each of their publications. Donations and legacy bequests, acquisitions from monasteries, and purchases further added to the collection, which, by the end of the seventeenth century, had been unchained and moved to cabinets lining the walls. By the early twentieth century, the library had to expand next door into Sansovino’s Pallazzo della Zecca, the former state mint.

13. Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana Venezia, “Storia.” Today, the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale serves as Italy’s library of deposit (just as the Library of Congress does in the US, and the British Library in the UK). And government agencies are often required to submit their data assets to a central repository, where many data sets are made publicly accessible.
Today, the library holds approximately one million printed books. The full collection offers a particularly rich representation of Venetian print history, but its scope is famously cosmopolitan, and that worldliness is reflected particularly well in its extensive assortment of cartographic objects. At the center of the Sansovino salon we find two massive, seventeenth-century Vincenzo Coronelli globes, one terrestrial and the other celestial. Marco Polo’s will and testament is here, too. Yet Fra Mauro’s ca. 1450 map of the world, exhibited at the top of Sansovino’s staircase, is among the library’s most notable holdings. Curator Nat Williams describes the cartographer-monk’s large-scale (2.2 square meter), densely inscribed work as a unique integration of “three predominant medieval map forms—the portolan chart, the mappamundi and the Ptolemaic atlas—with knowledge drawn from the latest maritime exploration to create what was, in effect, a compendium of current knowledge about the world.”

14. “Patrimonio Librario,” Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana Venezie, accessed August 18, 2016. Other notable items in the collection include 24,000 cinquecente, or works published in the sixteenth century, and historical musical works by Venetian composers.

15. Other holdings include the woodblocks used to print the Haji Ahmed’s 1559 A Complete and Perfect Map Describing the Whole World (which, notably, depicts a land-bridge between Siberia and Alaska); and Jacopo de Barbari’s 1500 View of Venice, an extraordinarily detailed woodcut of the city that fancifully depicts Mercury in the sky and Neptune in the harbor.

While the library’s collection might promote fluid inquiry across disciplines and languages and forms of expression and documentation, while it might provide the conditions for “emulating the ancients” in the pursuit of classical humanist values, while its global literatures and travel collections and cartographic materials might inspire wonder at the world’s breadth and humanity’s dreams of exploration, this heterotopic realm of possibility and phenomenal transparency is far from literally transparent. Yes, Sansovino generously fenestrated his library, and the new reading room in the old mint courtyard is topped with a grid of skylights. But the institution’s interior spaces are rigidly demarcated, their boundaries made seemingly impenetrable by opaque materials, opulent ornamentation, and furnishings of containment: columns, balustrades, statues, cabinets, vitrines, long wooden tables, heavy drapery, thick frames. Such were the epistemological architectures of the Renaissance, before the age of steel frames, glass walls, and open plans.

While Marco Polo’s final papers live alongside Fra Mauro’s famous medieval map, the Mappamondo, a reincarnation of the explorer’s enterprising, adventuresome spirit lives on eight miles away at his namesake airport. Despite their widely disparate architectural languages, these two sites—both stuffed with media in their historically appropriate forms—can be read, like the mappamundi, as compendia of their own ages’ “current knowledge about the world.” Both are institutions mediating between security and access, between private and public. Both reflect the epistemologies and politics of knowledge characteristic of their eras, and their architectures reinforce and reflect these values. The library’s media are regarded as invaluable artifacts of cultural heritage worth preserving for posterity, and the library building that houses them is emblematic of that heritage. Meanwhile, the airport’s media—its flight data and magazines, passenger biometrics and security-camera footage—are valued primarily for their timeliness: their immediate use for logistical and security purposes or their ephemeral entertainment value. If the airport’s data flows and fleeting media content are captured and preserved, it’s likely for the purposes of tracking airline or vendor performance or for conducting forensic investigations in the case of malfunction or disaster. Unlike those books on the library’s shelves, or those manuscripts that we can cautiously peruse only after donning white gloves, the airport’s preservation-worthy information is typically “black-boxed,” both literally (as with an airplane’s flight data recorder) and phenomenally. The data worth saving are seen only by those with the highest levels of security clearance. For the rest of us, we see only a transient architecture that reflects the transience of its occupants—human, machinic, mediated.

This movement also manifests, on a larger institutional scale, as an array of phenomenal and political approaches to exploration and globalism. Marco Polo and Saint Mark, fellow travelers, both lend their names to Venetian institutions that manifest the legacies of colonialism and mercantilism, as well as the timeless struggle between knowledge and faith (faith in a messiah, faith in a ship captain or a map, faith in airline security or air traffic control). Their fifteenth- and twenty-first-century infrastructures reflect how these perennial concerns are materialized in different political-economic, technological, and cultural ages.

In 2015, another traveling merchant, New Zealand–born artist Simon Denny, secured the patronage of prime ministers and private collectors and ventured to Venice to throw those epochal regimes into juxtaposition. In the thirteen years that had passed since VCE opened, social media, digital cartography, new rising global superpowers, and a host of other emerging forces had transformed the world’s geopolitical and techno-cultural landscapes. Pundits who had only a decade earlier proclaimed the ascendance of a flat, post-national global order, were now, in the age of ISIS and nationalist cyberbattles, reconsidering the relevance of the nation-state. Denny had been chosen to represent New Zealand at the 2015 Venice Biennale, a global art gathering that, since 1907, has used the nation, and national exhibition territories, as its primary organizational structure—a model that has elicited much criticism in recent years for its anachronism and Occidentalism.\(^{18}\) While roughly sixty nations maintain their own permanent pavilions, others rent temporary spaces. New Zealand is among the itinerant, so Denny chose to stage his work, *Secret Power*, across two sites: the Biblioteca Marciana and Venice Marco Polo Airport, each representing different ages and forms of nationalism, globalism, and intelligence.\(^{19}\) By productively *mis*placing the two sites’ media and media-furnishings he hoped to highlight the institutions’—and their respective eras’—material and visual codes of intelligence and to examine how those codes flow through, or fracture between, different spatial ontologies.\(^{20}\)

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20. Much of my description of Denny’s installation is drawn from *New Zealand at Venice*, “Secret Power.”

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**Ground Floor, Non-Schengen-Zone Passenger Entrance**

Fig. 11
Ceiling Paintings, Grand Sala

Fig. 12

Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana

Vestibule

Fig. 13
Into the library’s monumental rooms, with their massive globes and masterful paintings, Denny inserted another room of a very different character: a server room with a modified Herman Miller office workstation at one end (perhaps a metaphor for the chained lecterns that formerly occupied the library?). His modified (“modded”) glass-fronted, LED–lit server racks—which contained servers and cables—doubled as vitrines for an installation exploring the visual culture and graphic identity of the US National Security Administration (NSA) and Five Eyes–era geopolitics. Curator Robert Leonard called it a “server-room-cum-wunderkammer,” evoking yet another historical architecture for pedagogical presentation.\(^{21}\) The didactic materials on display took stylistic inspiration from two unlikely sources: the PowerPoint slide decks released by Edward Snowden, an NSA contractor who leaked classified information in 2013; and the work of David Darchicourt, former NSA creative director and exhibition designer for the National Cryptologic Museum, Maryland, whom Simon commissioned to create new illustrations for Venice (without informing Darchicourt how those illustrations would be used—another secret!).\(^{22}\) Denny found that the graphic and textual language in these documents, while comically garish (art critic Chris Kraus describes it as “heavy-metal infused gamer-cartooning”), revealed a subtle political sensibility, with slight visual variations cueing different degrees of confidentiality.\(^{23}\) In these modded monumental rooms, PowerPoint slides were the new manuscripts; network diagrams, the new portolan charts; hackers, the new merchant-explorers. “The effect,” reported *ArtAsiaPacific*, “was a humorous yet chilling rendition of mass surveillance’s bureaucratization, and offered today’s achievements as a sad culmination of the Enlightenment’s quest for knowledge.”\(^{24}\)


22. See Linda Herrick, “Venice Biennale: Creepy Take on Power,” *New Zealand Herald*, May 7, 2015. Denny said: “Darchicourt is a very playful image-maker. … He makes cartoon-based imagery to summarize things that are very complicated or boring and make them more attractive to people working within that institution.”


Fig. 14

Fig. 15
In his room-within-a-room, a site of phenomenal transparency, Denny juxtaposed disparate architectures; disparate furnishings and fixtures for storage and display (ornate, built-in wooden cabinetry and austere metal shelves, gilded frames and hacked vitrines, wall labels and metadata); and disparate means of manifesting and aestheticizing knowledge (corny corporate iconography and data visualizations of bureaucratic communication, and artifactual and gilded art-historical language of maps and allegorical paintings). Despite their stylistic differences, all the work in this room—whether classical painting or comic-book illustration, whether born during the age of exploration or the age of ubiquitous surveillance—grappled with geopolitical power. And through their juxtaposition, those artifacts, and those nested spaces, posed ontological and political questions about the nature of our media, our institutions, and our forms of intelligence. By inciting friction between the old and the new, Denny explains, *Secret Power* asked us to consider "how the world is mapped and imagined today, at a time when wide-ranging surveillance of global information exchange is normal."26

The airport is just such a space of surveillance and global information exchange, and Denny’s exhibition strategy there was similarly confrontational. Within this contemporary terrain of globalization, where intelligence is equated with logistics and risk management, Denny again created a heterotopia. He placed (or, as several art critics quipped, “dragged-and-dropped”) full-scale reproductions of the library’s ceiling murals onto the floors and baggage carousels in the airport’s arrival halls for both Schengen and non-Schengen Area travelers, and he posted reproductions of the library’s historic maps on the airport’s walls, where they resembled advertisements for the Sansovino exhibition.27 The maps reminded Venice’s leisure and business travelers of other ages—the days of Polo, Vespucci, Columbus—when travel not only *felt* different, but implied a different spatial epistemology: different ways of knowing about the world we lived in. The floor murals—portraying wisdom and virtue and other classical values—both physically and symbolically traversed the airport’s security borders and geopolitical zones. As Denny explained:

half [of the floor mural] is in international space (before you clear customs) and the other half is in Italy (where you pick up your baggage); each half is visible from the other. The calculated staging of opacity and transparency is crucial to the way airport architecture operates everywhere, and for me, this resonates with how online communication works.28

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27. The Schengen Area comprises twenty-six European countries with a common visa policy; there is no border control for passengers traveling between these countries.

Yet we often have similarly revelatory experiences in more mundane settings. Consider the librarian who unchains his collection of early codices, the airline security officer or passenger who acclimates to a new body scanner, the pilot who familiarizes herself with new cockpit interfaces, the cataloguer who adopts a new data-management system, the cubicle worker who moves to a newly configured workstation. All experience the friction of transition, which shines light on the habits of mind and senses of space that were so natural, so transparent in the old arrangement. When we rearrange our epistemic fixtures and furnishings, we see how those systems, those once-secret powers, give shape to thought, how they inform our own thinking, how they embody a logic of their own place and time. We recognize our architectures as mediated: not only skinned and stuffed with mediating objects, but also coded with data and modeled after the epistemic systems of their ages. And we appreciate the seeming banality of bureaucracy and logistics—book stacks and turnstiles and circulation patterns—as political infrastructures that define our access to space and information, program our subjectivity, and delimit our power to know and shape our world.
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Fig. 8 Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2008.M.51).

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All images courtesy of DIS. Graphic design by Chris James.
Perspecta 51 is indebted to a great many individuals who provided us with support and guidance over its long gestation. We would like to thank all of our professors at Yale University, especially Francesco Casetti, Peggy Deamer, Sheila de Bretteville, and Alan Plattus for their insight and counsel. Keller Easterling deserves our profound gratitude for providing us with encouragement and inspiration, particularly in the nascent stages of this project. We would also like to thank Dean Deborah Berke for inviting us to her office and offering feedback as we entered the final stages of the project. Thank you to Richard DeFlumeri and A. J. Artemel for answering all our questions and keeping us on track. Mahdi Sabbagh and Russell LeStourgeon deserve our sincerest thanks for tirelessly providing insight into the editorial process, as do all the past editors of Perspecta who helped us find our way. We are especially thankful for the exacting copy editing of Stephen Hoban, who helped unify the work of three editors and more than twenty writers. Thank you to Will Morningstar for thoroughly proofreading the final version of this journal. Keith Goddard, designer of Perspecta 11, generously shared his experience with our designers. To our contributors: thank you for your time, patience, and generosity throughout this project. The exceptional talents and remarkable conceptualization by our designers, Seokhooon Choi and Carr Chadwick, helped us clarify and strengthen the production of our own medium—thank you! Most of all, we would like to thank our families and friends for putting up with countless phone calls, Skype meetings, and Sunday editorial meetings over the three years spent creating this journal.
Perspecta 51: Medium

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Perspecta 51 would like to thank the following donors for their ongoing generosity in supporting this journal:

Marc. F. Appleton, ’72 M.Arch
Hans Baldouf, ’81 BA; ’88 M.Arch
Austin Church III, ’60 BA FamilyFund
Fred Koetter and Susie Kim
Cesar Pelli, ’08 DFHA
Robert A.M. Stern, ’65 M.Arch
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Perspecta, The Yale Architectural Journal is published in the United States of America by the Yale School of Architecture and distributed by the MIT Press.

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Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142
http://mitpress.mit.edu

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Library of Congress Control Number:
2018941584

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