

# Stewart Brand

compiled the first Whole Earth Catalog twenty years ago. His current experiment is the Global Business Network, a mechanism for generating scenarios of the future.

"What questions are you asking yourself?" is one of the themes that Kevin offers. In pursuing my general question of "how do organizations learn?" the two specific questions that have been highest-yield for me the last two years are:

- How did Venice learn?
- How do buildings learn?

The Venice one refers to is the astonishing 800-year achievement of the Venetian Republic, a world-class mercantile empire run by a tiny island, not only surviving wrenching forces of history, but apparently building its success on them. Caught between the convulsions of the Holy Roman Empire, the Catholic Church, the Byzantine Empire, the forces of Islam, and later the Ottoman Empire, each of which was *flattening* everybody else, Venice danced the damndest prettiest minuet in European history. It became the strongest sea power in the world at the time, it ran its empire strictly for economic rather than religious or political ends, and when it finally fell (to Napoleon in 1797), even its old enemies mourned.

Venice invented such things as: modern diplomacy (and espionage), the production line (its Arsenal could turn out war galleys by the fleet in weeks), the modern book (Aldine press), and much of modern accounting. Withal, it was a fine place to live or visit, and its complex but highly effective political system was one of the models studied by the American founding fathers. The Doge was a carefully castrated figurehead, and *elaborate* measures were taken to prevent the corruption of high officers.

Venice was always in danger, often mortal danger, and Venice worked. My hypothesis is that it was its vulnerability which kept Venice learning so constantly and rapidly. It had time to get arrogant, and rich, but not until late in the game did it have time to get stupid.

Good references. I searched a long time for a corporate history of Venice, Inc. and found it in Frederic C. Lane's definitive *Venice: A Maritime Republic*. Another handy one, short, is



Kevin Kelly

William McNeill's *Venice: The Hinge of Europe, 1081-1797*. For visitors, the peerless *Venice* by James Morris.

The other question, which has to do with what happens to buildings after they're built, I'll talk about another time. It's an area where there's abundant genius in vernacular architecture, almost none in "high style" architecture. Anybody who has leads on either question, let me know. ■

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