



LETTER FROM VENICE

The ten-year bid to rebuild the world's first opera house

At the San Cassiano theatre in the heart of Venice's red-light district the world 'went crazy for opera'. Paul Atkin, an ex-accountant, wants to bring it back



The theatre was near the Rialto bridge

ALAMY

Tom Kington, Venice

Friday January 23 2026, 10.30am GMT, The Times

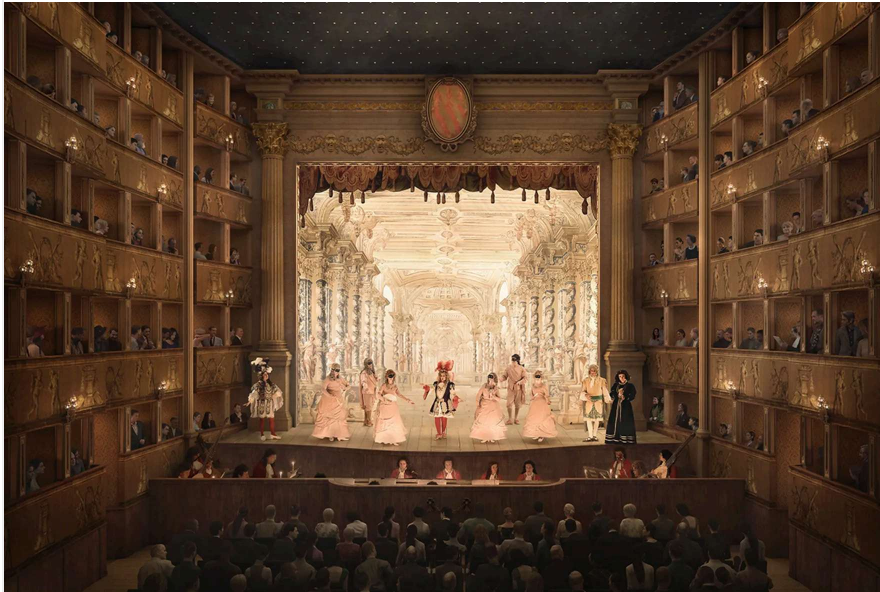
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Along a narrow alley in Venice that ends at a canal, Paul Atkin pointed to the remains of an ancient metal fixture embedded in the wall.

One evening in 1637, he said, the bracket held a flaming torch that guided Venetians as they got out of their gondolas and walked along the alley to the opening night at the world's first public opera house.

That evening, the San Cassiano theatre debuted a performance of *Andromeda*, an opera by Francesco Manelli, which featured a singer descending from the heavens on pulleys, drawing gasps from the crowd below.



Visualisation of how the San Cassiano theatre would have looked

“That was the moment the world went crazy for opera,” said Atkin, 62, a former London accountant who has dedicated a decade to rebuilding the San Cassiano.

It was the perfect place in [Venice](#) for a theatre, he said, in the middle of what was then the red-light district of the San Polo neighbourhood, across the Rialto bridge and well away from the Doge’s Palace. “The family who owned the theatre saw opera as a loss leader and made their profit selling wine and food and hosting gambling and prostitution — some of the singers may have themselves been prostitutes,” he said.

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The theatre was on the site of an earlier comedy venue, which had closed in 1585. “The city had given instructions that the

wood from the building was to be used for moral purposes,” Atkin said.



Graphic by The Times and Sunday Times

A few yards from the site is the Bridge of Breasts, where local prostitutes once stripped off to attract business. The early operas in Venice were steamy affairs, including Claudio Monteverdi's 1643 *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in which the emperor Nero reaches some very high notes during an orgasm.

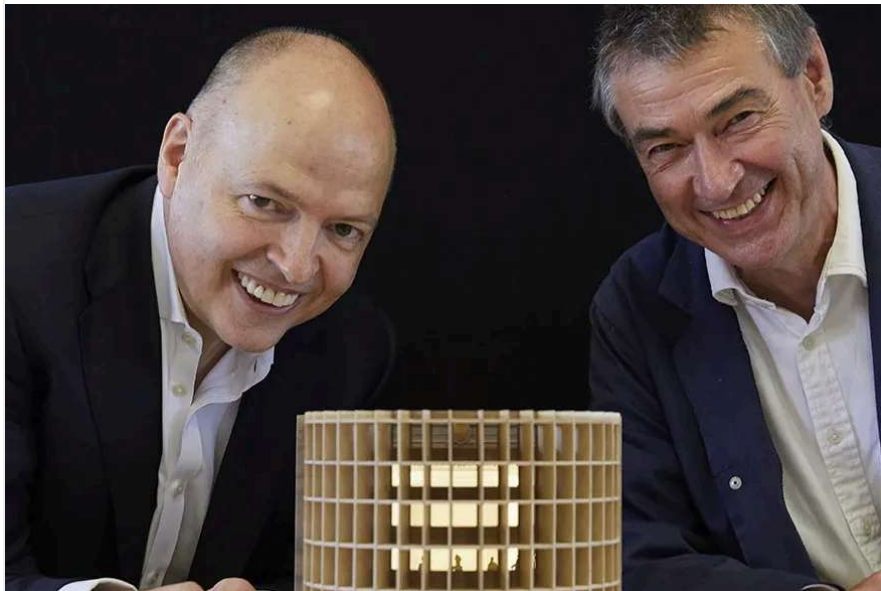


A model of the San Cassiano theatre

SECCHI SMITH

“The public were having sex, the musicians were trying really hard to keep their attention with great music, the scenery builders were trying to be as Hollywood as possible and the authorities were trying to shut it all down. That’s why opera from the time is so good,” Atkin said.

The San Cassiano ushered in the era of public opera, after the art form was invented in Florence at the end of the 16th century. Atkin is determined to bring it back to a small venue like the ones Monteverdi and other pioneers wrote for, sinking £6 million of his own money into the plan and looking for backers to rebuild the theatre.



Paul Atkin and the architect Jon Greenfield with a model of the San Cassiano theatre

JANIE AIREY

He will not be able to recreate the theatre exactly where it was. Today a high wall conceals a garden where the theatre was located until it was demolished by Napoleon’s occupying army in 1812.

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“I tried to buy the site for three years but the owner would not sell,” he said.

Navigating the labyrinthine alleys of the San Polo area where he lives, Atkin led the way to Palazzo Donà Balbi, a large building overlooking the Grand Canal, which is plan B and perhaps better suited to hosting opera, since it is easily walkable from the station and has a water bus stop right outside.



The entrance to the original site of the theatre

Atkin was close to buying the unused, city-owned property in 2020 when the city’s heritage chief blocked the plan. “A backer who was ready with €20 million slammed the phone down on me and walked away. A new heritage chief then approved the project, but the city decided to use it for a tax office, only to change its mind, so it is now a candidate again,” Atkin said.

He has been backed by Simone Venturini, the city’s tourism chief and a rising star of city politics. They are waiting for a new mayor to be elected in May to restart talks, but time is tight and backers are needed.

“It will take £15 million to buy the building with a total of £60 million needed to build the theatre in space behind it, and I have funding left for another two years,” he said.

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Walking round to the façade of the palazzo overlooking the canal, Atkin explained how he planned to open restaurants inside so audiences can eat between acts. “Where they once used prostitution to make opera viable business, we will have hospitality,” he said.

Looking up at the wall of the palazzo, he added: “That’s where we will put our flaming torches.”

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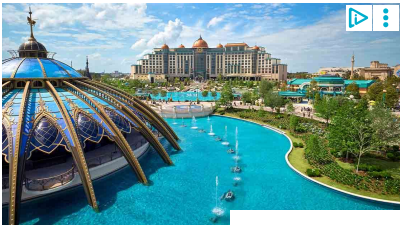
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Paul Atkin



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Good news at last.

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Well, I mean it's not really a lot of news since the last one. It's just one of those stories that are continually rehashed every few years.

<https://www.thetimes.com/culture/theatre-dance/article/british-opera-lover-on-brink-of-fulfilling-venice-theatre-dream-p0r8fhxxn>



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Monteverdi is buried in the Basilica Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in nearby Dorsoduro, along with Canova and Titian. Well worth a visit, if only for Titian's greatest work, his Assumption of the Virgin over the main altar.

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R McKechnie

1 DAY AGO

As long as only the opera loving and rich pay



AJ Pryer

22 HOURS AGO



Great project. This was not the earliest theatre used for opera (some princely and ducal venues did that earlier), but San Cassiano 1637 was the first public opera house where citizens and visitors could buy tickets. So it was public, rather than courtly - but public only in the sense that the Ritz...

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marina gratsos

10 HOURS AGO



Bravo Paul - it's been a long haul and a while since we met on a train coming back from a Joyce DiDonato's opera (Semiramide/Munich, I believe?) and you told me all about it.

I've been following with admiration your passion and pursuit of such a noble goal in the face of the usual bureaucratic obs...

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