

# LEARNING FROM SOTO AQUA

Letter from the director

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El presente trabajo ha contado con una ayuda del Programa de Redes de investigación en docencia universitaria del Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación de la Universidad de Alicante (convocatoria 2021-22).  
Ref.: 5424 UNIVERSITY of Universities.

Citation: Sanchez Merina, J. (2022). "Learning from Soto Aqua" UOU scientific journal #03, 6-15.  
ISSN: 2697-1518. <https://doi.org/10.14198/UOU.2022.1.01>  
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Surely you have also seen him. In the last months, I will have crossed him several times at the airports. He is unique, a very curious character. But, I mean it literally: he is always staring at things, how people behave, continuously taking notes, observing new creations... for a long time I was convinced he was an architect!

Finally, I could not hesitate anymore and approached him. I was at Schiphol airport for five hours, waiting for the connecting flight to Wrocław, where we will celebrate the first summer workshop of UNIVERSITY of Universities: "ProtoLAB design & build 2022", at the end of July and beginning of August.

<http://protolab.archi/>

It will be an intense experience, to enjoy a first face-to-face meeting with colleagues who have been collaborating with us on-line for the last two years. But let's go back to our man. He was sitting in front of me,

intrigued by the fun clock at the international terminal. "Real time" it is called, a video installation in which a worker can be seen painting the time, minute by minute. It was then when I took advantage of the stillness of the moment to introduce myself. He was friendly and it was easy to establish a conversation. My first doubt was quickly clarified: he was not an architect but the Honorific President of a Cultural and Rowing Association in Venice called SOTO AQUA. In the Venetian dialect, it means UNDER WATER.

Right from the first moment, I became hypnotized with the story of his position. Basically, his role in the Association consists of travelling around the world, looking for good ideas to bring them back to Venice. His aim, as he likes to say, is to make the association SOTO AQUA more important. I was fascinated with such a basic idea: instead of being enclosed in an office solving trivial problems, his

presidency was based on the conviction to learn along with others and think big. I wonder if this shouldn't be the real role of any of our leaders, no matter if one is a president of a country, an association, or even the director of one of our schools of architecture! The Honorific President explained that he had already been travelling for a complete year, without any fixed idea of what he would find in each destination. He is working with the Unknown, always pursuing the same ambition; that is, to find a good idea in each culture, to send it by post, and to apply in his beloved Venice. The more information he gave me on his project, the more I identified with it. Starting from an intuition, sometimes even from a naïve joke, the Honorific President has built, step by step, a way of thinking, a methodology, of how a collaborative project with the participation of different cultures redefines the role of a leader.

## ICELAND

Reykjavik was his first destiny, as a form of fulfilling his childhood dream. For many years, from his window in the Venetian Ghetto, looking at the canal *rio della Misericordia* – in Cannaregio District, where SOTO AQUA is also located coincidentally – he could imagine fantastic animals swimming along the gondolas.

Now, being an adult with a task, but without any specific indication, his first impulse was to travel to Iceland... to learn about the living conditions of whales. Would it be possible to have a young whale swimming up and down *rio della Misericordia*?

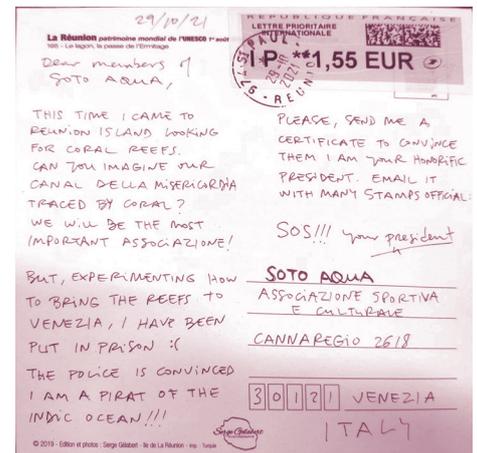
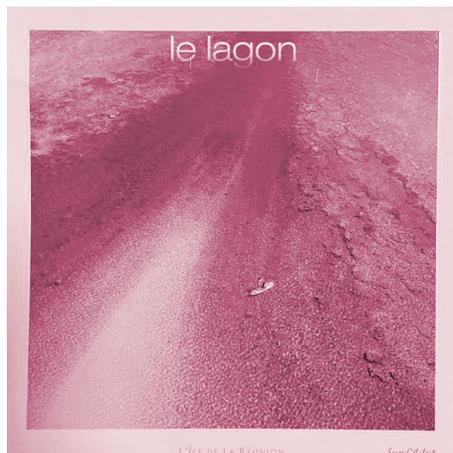
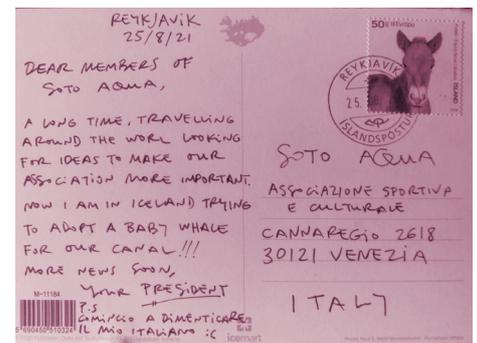
## LA REUNION

All the Icelandic fishermen in Húsavík, a town on the north coast and on the shores of Skjálfandi where whales of different species frequently enter the bay, explained to him that the whale calf would suffocate in the warm waters of Venice.

After this unsuccessful trip to Iceland the Honorable President decided to change strategy, and he travelled to the other side of the Globe: Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean!

Attracted by its beautiful Coral Reefs, our President explained how he had just been collecting small pieces of coral that one can find on the Hermitage beach, mixed with the white sand. This time, he would not try to take back with him some fantastic creatures like butterfly fish, three-banded damselfish, or Picasso triggerfish. His new project would consist of covering the banks *della Mirericordia* with white coral. The idea was stunning!

But, he did not realize that it is forbidden to collect coral, even from the sand. Consequently, he was taken to prison unable to convince the French police of his noble cause.



## ASSOCIAZIONE SPORTIVA E CULTURALE SOTO AQUA

Commissariat Central  
La Reunion

OBJECT: RELEASE OUR HONORIFIC PRESIDENT!

Dear La Reunion Police department,

We know that you put in prison our Honorable President!  
We are officially asking you to release him as soon as possible!

As you probably know we are living hard times in Venice with high tide, covid19 and overtourism...our Honorable President is the only one who can save us!

We still don't know exactly how he reached your island but we know that it was to save Venice!

Can you imagine living in a place that goes underwater?  
When you look around you find yourself in the middle of a green/grey lagoon with no bright colours!

Please, share some of your corals (please, choose the colourful ones!) with our Fondamenta and send us back our President!

Best regards,

Soto Aqua

Venice, 17.11.2021

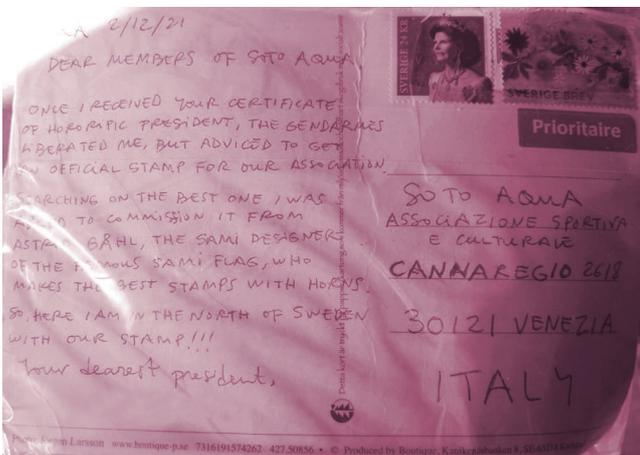




Those were difficult days for the President. He was not liberated until the gendarmerie received an email from SOTO AQUA with a document certifying that our friend was their Honoric President with a vital mission for the city of Venice.

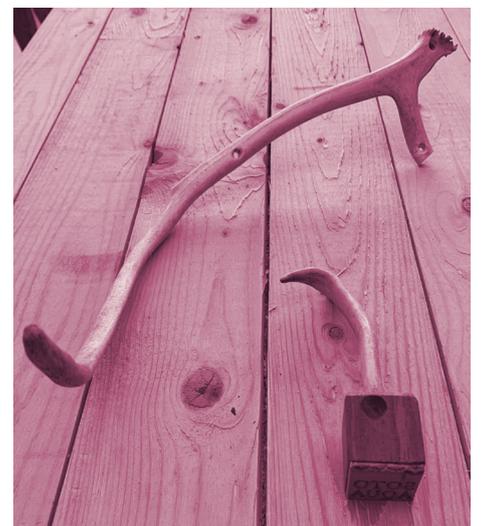
The gendarmes were sympathetic toward his mission and allowed the President to take with him some samples of coral, just a few, as a precious memory. At the same time, they advised him to carry with him an official stamp for future certificates.

### LAPLAND



Understandably, to get an official stamp for the Association, became the next mission for the President. He investigated who should be the designer of SOTO AQUA's stamp. Without any doubt, Astrid Båhl, was the best candidate: the prestigious Sámi artist who designed the flag of the Laplanders and works with stamps made from horns of reindeers and moose.

And this was the result from the President's trip to the North of Sweden: Astrid produced a stamp with few lines that are full of meaning. As the president explained to me, the members of the Association in particular, and all the Venetians in general, feel very identified with it; the battlement of Venice defending the city from the rising water level.



## THE BLACK FOREST

Instead of a destiny, the next venture was a trip-in-itself. It was the moment, when he defined his role as the Marco Polo of the 21st Century:

The Honoric President TheHonorificPresident@sotoaqua.net  
NEWS FROM THE FRONT!  
18 de enero de 2022, 13:03  
sotoaquavenezia@gmail.com

The Black Forest, 17/01/2022

Dear **SOTO AQUA** members,

I am writing to you, on my way down to the South, crossing the frozen Schwarzwald.

Wherever I have travelled for the last months, people have crowded around me, truly amazed, when explaining our project. How can it be possible that no one has ever thought that the real task of a perfect President is to travel around the world looking for the best ideas to bring back home?

Of course, for us, this is natural and spontaneous since we, the Venetians, have this quality in our blood. Presidents of different associations, governments... even neighbour communities, should all dedicate their entire time to travel with their eyes wide open and learn from the unknown.

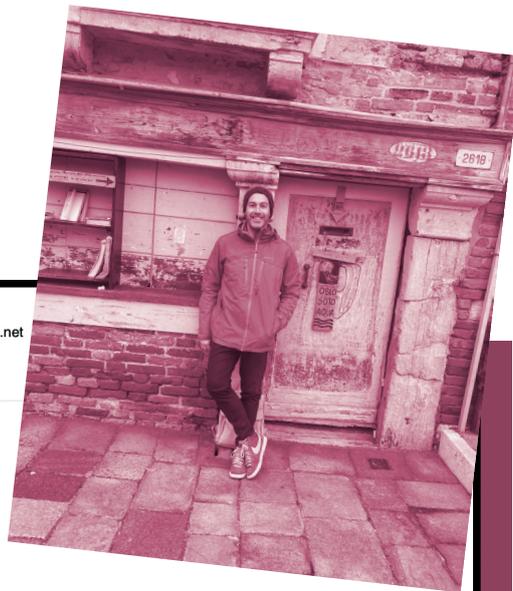
Indeed, many times, I consider myself to be the **21st Century Marco Polo!!!**

Even more, many of the listeners I have met want to visit our Association eager to learn from us. Let's open our hearts to them, let's take them for a rowing session, and let's infect them with the Myth of the perfect President. This would be one of our glorious missions: to create a Collective Project where all of them will be considered as a limb of the Honoric President. I will ask the members of this international network, [sotoaqua.net](http://sotoaqua.net), to send us photos of their visit. Below I attach the first one: prof. Miguel Luengo, an intellectual from Madrid eager to serve our cause. Let's refer to him as HP/1.

Lastly, going to down to earth questions and to make our dearest association more important, we do need more finance. For that reason, the new aim is to focus my next searches on finding ideas for our **Mercatino**. More news soon!

Your Truly Honoric President,

Ps. I am not sure what my destiny will be since I have no pocket money left. I just managed to pay for a bus ticket to the Mediterranean and let's see when and where I must get off.

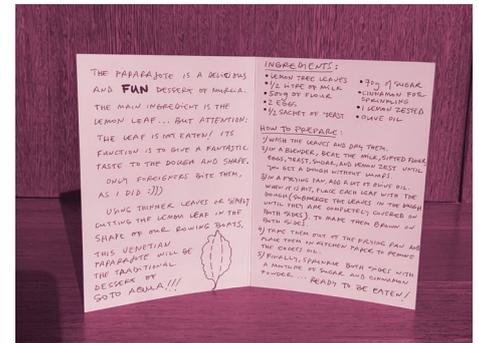


## SOMEWHERE IN SOUTH-EASTERN SPAIN

It seems that our Venetian friend also suffered from the cold temperature in Lapland, so he decided to move to the South, looking for the Mediterranean. His bus journey came to an end somewhere in south-eastern Spain, he did not have any money left. Murcia was the name of a city surrounded by orange and lemon trees... and, of course, as soon as he landed, he started looking for an idea to send to Venice.

It is often said that many times a foreigner gives more value to an everyday product than the locals. That was the case with the typical *Murcian* dessert called *Paparajote*. *Paparajotes* consist of lemon leaves which give taste and shape to the dough that covers it. The President found the *Paparajote* to be a perfect design, and as he explained, it is also a joke: the locals make fun of visitors when they offer it. People who don't know it take a big bite... eating the hard lemon leaf, which provokes a mighty laugh among the locals.

It was a surprise for our President to realize that kiosks in Murcia have not a single postcard of this magic product. So, the first thing he had to do, was to propose the prestigious SANAR editorial to produce and commercialize the postcard. The next step was to share the recipe with SOTO AQUA: it would be great to create a new typical dessert, the Venetian *Paparajote*, but with, of course, to use a leaf in the shape of a gondola!



### LISBON

Still I had time to follow the generous explanations of the President. He introduced the important element of financing the project. At this point in time, the President considered it important to obtain funding for the association. It was crucial to maintain its position and its aims.

That was the reason for him investing the money he got from

selling the *Paparajote* postcards, amongst other products to be sold in the *Mercatino* of SOTO AQUA's web:

<https://www.sotoaqua.org/mesmerize/mercatino/>

A result of that conviction, which by then had become obsessive, was to contact VICARTE in Lisbon, the most significant international research centre of glass and ceramic for the

arts. His commission consisted in asking VICARTE to produce a new material, and with it a new design, that represents the values of SOTO AQUA: transparency, brightness, and plasticity ... 'just like our dear free-swimming jellyfish!' - he said.

The result of the research was an incredible textured glass that continuously changes colour. It was applied precisely to a jellyfish-form as beautiful earrings.



## CAPRI

Eager to learn from the others, and proposing collaborating projects, has been crucial. The Honorable President has been making many friends in every destination.

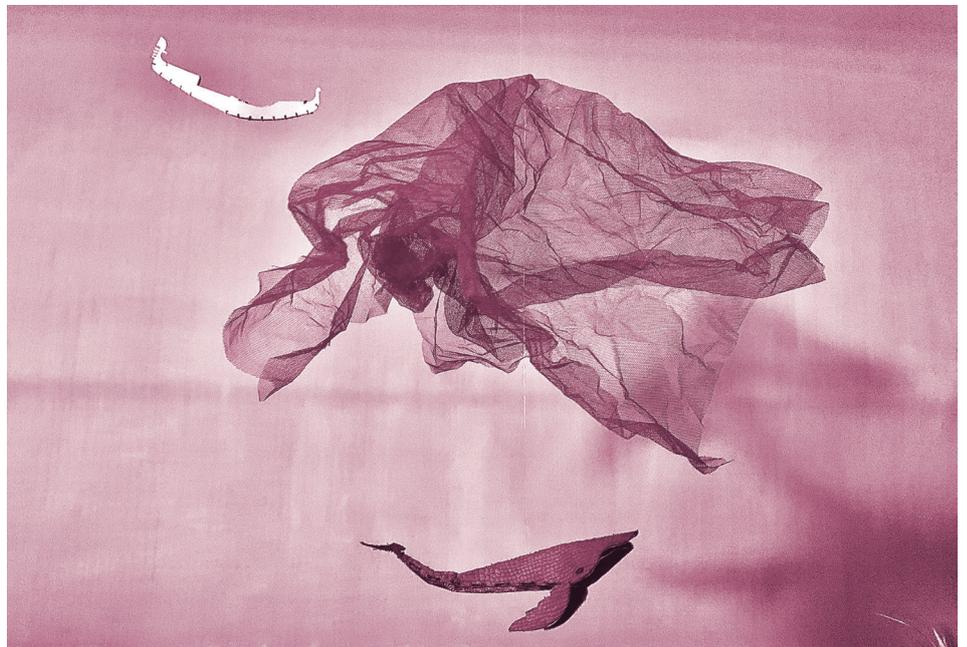
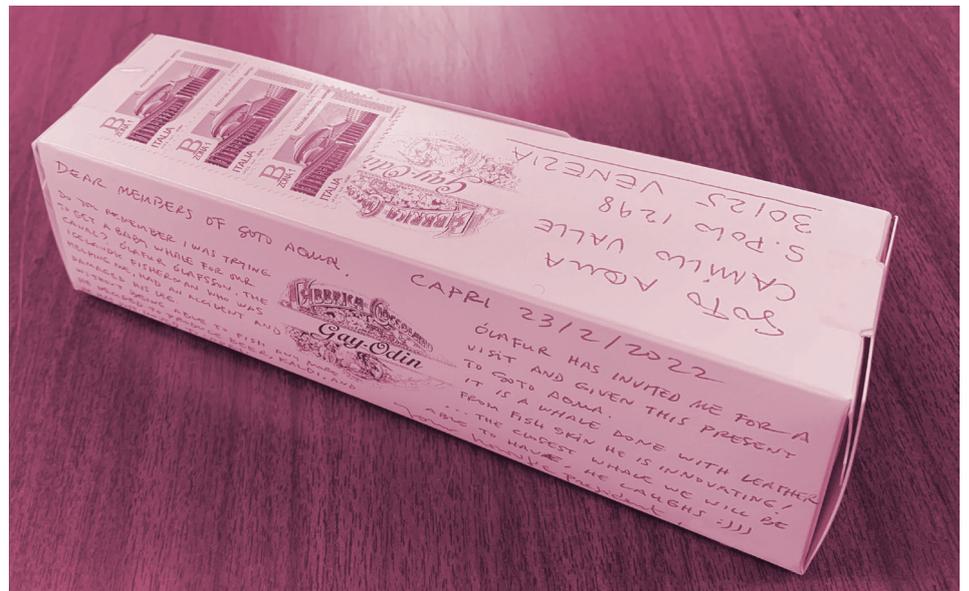
For example, Ólafur Ólafsson, one of the Icelandic fishermen who helped him try to catch a young whale. He had an accident at sea and injured his knee, which forced him to give up fishing. They remained in close contact during the following months. Ólafur told him how at that moment everything went black, he was lost and without a future. In their conversations, the President asked the retired fisherman what else he liked other than the sea. He liked beer, so learnt how to produce beer, and in that way, Ólafur managed to stand again on his own feet. From the tap of his own house ran the pure Icelandic water, so he only needed to buy sacks of barley from the Czech Republic and he opened a microbrewery. Now, he produces the incredible beer KALDI, and with the profits he has managed to move to a milder location, better for his knee, but, of course, always by the sea: the island of Capri in the calm Tyrrhenian Sea.

It was nice to hear that Ólafur invited the President for a visit to his villa in Capri, where he gave a present to the Association. It was inside a box of Gay Odin log of chocolate in sheets, a baby whale done with real leather from a fish skin Ólafur is innovating... 'the closest to a whale that SOTO AQUA would be able to have', he laughed!

For our President, it was a touching moment, seeing in the mobile so many moments of his life.

## ANKARA

His meeting with Ólafur in Capri marked the turning point for the new evolution of his project.



Once the Icelandic fisherman had decided to move for good to the Gulf of Naples, his house, right in the centre of Reykjavik, was put up for sale ... an opportunity for our President "to extend the Association around the world".

That was the beginning of his new passion, the opening of "SOTO AQUA Embassies" around the world to transmit the principles of Transparency, Brightness and Plasticity for peace in the world.

Convinced and full of enthusiasm, the President told me about his trip to Ankara, where he went to speak to president Erdogan about his mission. With

that journey he wanted to test himself, to see whether he would be capable of convincing any other president, no matter how different the ideas they held... and indeed he managed: The Turkish leader was happy to contribute by providing the Association with students, as many as needed, to research for new creations. Indeed, at that moment, 5 candidates were offered to the Association, ready and waiting for instructions: Senem, Dilara, Emire, Eda and Alper.

Asking the President about their talents and strengths, one of the students gave him this peg. It was a promising beginning:



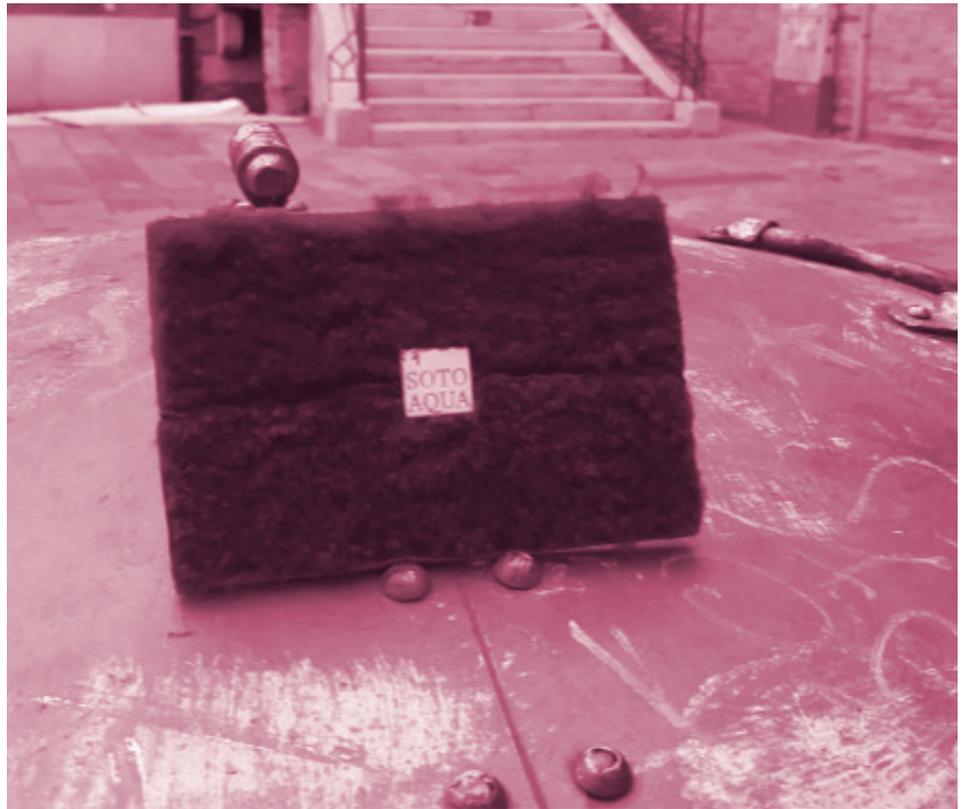
## LAPLAND

Convinced of the need for embassies, the President went back to Lapland, this time to commission Astrid Bähl for the design of a flag for the embassies.

At that moment, Astrid wondered if the President should not need ambassadors before embassies.

And yes, two new projects started from that moment:

1. To elaborate the list of ideal candidates to transmit their values around the world, each of them would be awarded with the badge designed by Astrid, made with dust of reindeer horns.
2. That insignia of the association would be granted by taking an oath, so he needed to start thinking about the statement of promise.



## BUDAPEST

It seems to me, and he agrees, that the President jumps from one destination to another without a fixed plan. The project is fed by itself, so every new step leads him into the exercise that follows next.

Still, the President insists he never forgets the Water; except for accidentally landing in Murcia, and the meeting with Erdogan, his trips are always to harbour cities.

He describes how throughout history the element Water has been crucial to make the Venetians the people they are: tireless travellers, eager to learn from different cultures, and with sensitivity to come back and design the most beautiful city on Earth.

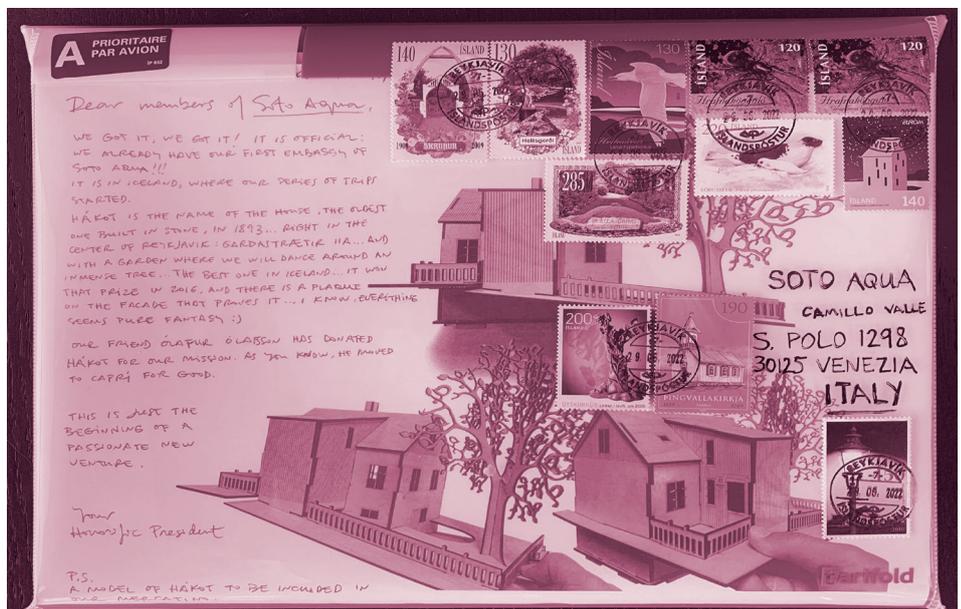
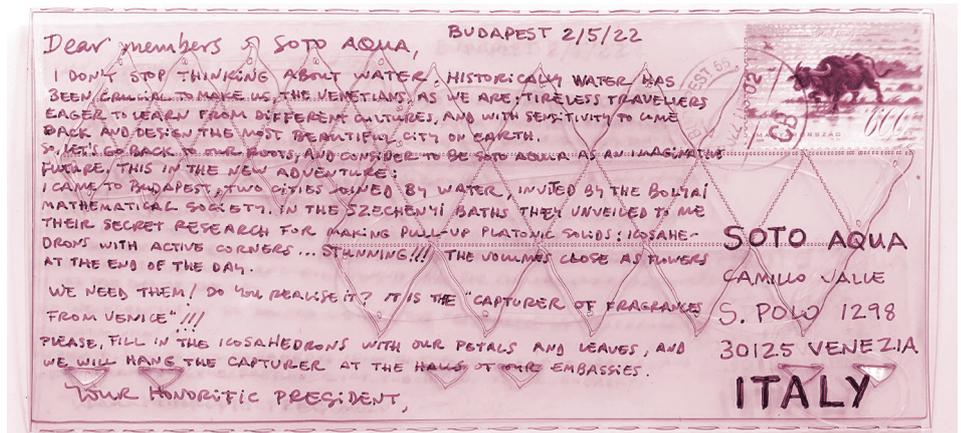
This was the way he began his new adventure; to consider the *UNDER WATER* condition to be an imaginative future. Invited by the *Bolyai Mathematical Society*, he went to Budapest, the two cities that were separated, and now joined, by water. Precisely, in the immense Szechenyi Baths, they unveiled their secret research for making pull-up Platonic solids: the Icosahedrons with Active Corners. As if they were animated, these volumes close in the same way that some flowers do at the end of the day.

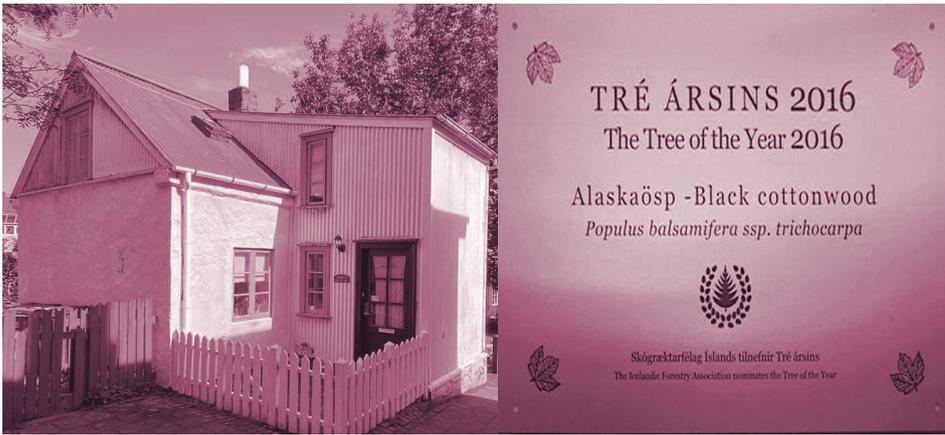
For the President, it was the closest he came to post an alive object.

He appropriated the research, naming it the "Capturer of Fragrances from Venice". His plan is to fill in the icosahedrons with petals and leaves from his Venetian Ghetto, and to hang the Capturers at the halls of the embassies.

## REYKJAVIK

At the moment of our conversation at Schiphol airport, the President revealed that he was waiting again for a flight to Reykjavik. It was already official:





they got it! – He repeated, while embracing me. The Association was going to open the first embassy of SOTO AQUA in Iceland, where this series of trips started:

HÁKOT is the name of the house, the oldest stone-built house in the country, built in 1893 with basalt ashlar “borrowed” from the construction of Iceland’s House of Parliament, Alþingi.

The President continued describing the house of their first embassy: ‘Right in the centre of Reykjavik, in Garðastræti 11a, this tiny house has a garden with a huge tree. It is immense and indeed, selected as the best one of Iceland... it won that prize in 2016, and there is a plaque on the façade that proves it!!! All of us will

dance around it...’

This story was for me too much of a fantasy, but the President started showing documents. His friend Ólafur Ólafsson had finally donated HÁKOT for his mission... and even given a model of the embassy and its tree to be included in their *Mercatino*.

### VENICE BIENNALE

Listening to the President’s stories, the long wait in the airport passed very fast. In fact, I had to run when the last call for my plane to Wroclaw woke me from his narrative. While running through the terminal, I thought that surely many of you, collaborators in the UNIVERSITY of Universities, would identify with the President. All of us have the same curiosity for

learning from others.

Undoubtedly, our learning project UOU is based on that same principle. Already sitting in the plane, I recalled that our international learning project started out of an instinct, and every collaboration opened as a new window of opportunities:

The Exchange of Workshops, the Common Crits, the Web, Moodle, the Port Talks, more workshops for the Student’s Election, the Journal, the Master, the Summer Workshop, Erasmus agreements, our Blended Classes, our dear Jerzy Łątka, Mauricio Morales Beltrán and Agata Jasiolek presenting their workshop while building new constructions to welcome Ukrainian war refugees... everything LIVE in our classroom. Has it ever happened at university?

Step by step, with more and more universities joining, 33 by now, we are building a future for the University of Europe. We have seen it and it works!

Inspired by the Honoric President, my colleague Joaquín Alvado and I believe that it would be a real contribution to his search for the future of Venice to complete our course of architecture with a new UOU workshop: VENICE IN THE METAVERSO. It is an exercise to immerse into imaginary realities, which allows to question ours.

As soon as I returned to Alicante University, we proposed this to our students. They accepted the challenge and produced a video game with the whole collection of the students’ works. You will find the projects at the end of this Journal. Having played the video game the President wants to present it in the Venice Biennale 2023.

<https://vertice.cpd.ua.es/271675>

This is our tribute to SOTO AQUA.