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The Public Interest

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Organized by
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On the morning of 14 July 1902 the Campanile di San Marco vanished from Venice’s skyline. Collapsing due to land subsidence, the bell tower resisted as a symbol of the city’s main public space for almost 1000 years. Immediately after its collapse, the city council vowed to rebuild it *com’era, dov’era* – as it was, where it was. No hesitations. No doubts. No disagreements. Within 10 years, the job was done, despite the protests of those who thought the square looked better without it.

The reconstruction of Venice’s Campanile as a societal practice, like many others before and after it, took place in the public interest. But what is the public interest? It is an ethical and moral concept that has historically underlay claims to inclusion, justice and the notion of a shared, common good. Yet it is also a concept used through various mechanisms and to different ends by a vast set of diverse actors. Multiple concrete engagements thus result. Inaugurated on April 25 1912, the new Campanile di San Marco reverberated a certain notion of the public interest throughout a transformed Venice.

Set under the auspices of UC Berkeley’s own Campanile (a replica of the replica), this multidisciplinary conference seeks to create an opportunity for discussing the public interest both as an operating logic for practice as well as an ethical claim linked to particular political imaginaries. It maps different ways in which meanings and objectives of the public interest are constantly redefined and reappropriated by exploring techniques, procedures and technologies deploying its idiom; analyzing contentions, participations and mobilizations of its diverse aspirations; and examining norms, normalizations and informalities in its constitution. It does so because the repercussions of how the public interest is defined and which actors are able to (re)define it have critical consequences for both conceptions and practices of government, democracy, development and social justice.

*Monica Guerra and Ricardo Cardoso*