

The Portent of Pisa

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Two items of cheer for the new year: The leaning tower of Pisa did not lean any farther in 1977, and Venice has apparently stopped sinking. Pisa's perilously inclined bell tower will not crash to the ground—a collapse the world has been waiting for since the thirteenth century—and Venice will not disappear beneath the sea. At least not in 1978. Rejoice at a micrometer less movement toward disaster, a miraculous escape from a watery death.

Fate, rather than man, has been the instrument of salvation. The city fathers of Pisa, measuring and watching, held an international competition for ways to shore up the monument, a project that has proceeded at about the same rate as the tower's tilting. An international

rescue committee sounded the Venetian alarms; proposed solutions have ranged from an underwater rubber dam at the mouth of the lagoon to a ban on development in the neighboring Mestre.

Pisa and Venice have in recent years been the arenas of a cultural spectator sport: How long can the doomed works of art survive? Countless visitors have been fascinated by the defiance of gravity, the slow slide into the sea. Pisa's arcaded tower, like some mad baker's confection, is now 17 feet out of plumb. Flood waters still sweep across the Piazzetta with Whistlerian beauty and intimations of doom. But the land is rising in Venice and the angle is fixed in Pisa. Triumph is measured in millimeters. Could these be portents for 1978?

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