

# TOPICS AND ISSUES OF THE PRESERVATION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL AND LANDSCAPE HERITAGE

## VENICE AS A CASE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*Venice is an extraordinary context, formed in ten centuries of history. The fact that it is unique and universal at the same time means it can inspire the discussion of themes of great interest for other cities. The link is the dialogue between ancient heritage, historical preservation and the effects of tourism. The topics covered are: 1. Monoculture tourism/economic diversification; 2. Changes to the city's physical and commercial structure; 3. The residential issue; 4. Universities and student population; 5. Cultural production; 6. Innovation for accessibility; 7. The lagoon environment.*

Though the case of Venice refers to an exceptional and extraordinary context determined by the uniqueness of the historic city, it inspires some considerations of interest for other art cities. We can draw an analogy with other historic cities in which the ancient heritage is clearly predominant, raising the urgent issue of its protection and preservation from both a historical-artistic-architectural perspective and the point of view of the landscape.

One of the tools adopted by specialist studies regards the definition of possible scenarios for these cities and, in our case study, for Venice. Some of the reference data in this paper are to be found in *Progetto Metis* published by CORILA (Consortium for Research on the Lagoon of

Venice), while updated information comes from surveys carried out by COSES (Consortium for Research and Training) of Venice.

The scenario construction methodology can be useful and significant since it represents the presence of cultural characteristics of which the community is aware and at the same time is based on the possibility of a different, reasonably realistic future that must be identified and pursued. A public opinion that is «aware» of the issue can be presented with reasonable and possible prospects rather than pre-determined and therefore rigid plans for the future. This level has been termed the «perspective level».

Possible scenarios draw on cultural, economic, professional and political sectors that, given their position and/or role, can be considered to be informed of events taking place in town. What they know can give some indication of ideas about the future of this urban context.

From this viewpoint we can define some topics representing focal points or fundamental inputs of possible scenarios.

## 1. MONOCULTURE TOURISM / ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

The great increase in the number of visitors to the historic city of Venice, from around 5 million in the 1990s to the current figure of 20 million, raises the issue of monoculture tourism. We can foresee that tourist presence will continue to grow year after year. New markets are opening up, while Venice continues to be a major international attraction. The uniqueness of this art city, its unparalleled historical and artistic heritage, the «events» of varying nature and quality (exhibitions, the Carnival, historic processions, the Venice Biennial, the Vogalonga, etc.) make it a must, a destination that brings together «habitual visitors», who come back to Venice several times and on various occasions, occasional tourists who come just for one very quick visit, resident tourists and commuters. Though we do not have exact data in this connection, it would seem that the first group of tourists is dwindling, while the second is continually fuelled by new markets, such as Eastern Europe, India and China.

Analysts of this phenomenon have pointed out that in the specific case of Venice visitors are not only attracted by the abundance of artistic and historical treasures, but above all by the city's uniqueness and authenticity. With regard to its uniqueness there is little more to add, while it should be stressed that the authenticity factor translates into the perception of a living, dynamic city and not a prevalently tourist destination. If this authenticity is an element of attraction we must observe that the growth of tourism puts it at risk, since it generates changes that deeply affect the permanence of the historic city's urban features. Compared to an «ideal load capacity» of 22,000 visitors per day, it has been calculated that the average number currently exceeds 30,000 (around one third more) and on peak days – no longer a rare event – amounts to as much as 100-150,000.

The above phenomenon gives rise to certain consequences and marked urban changes. The growth of tourism, in terms of preservation of the heritage, affects the city's raw material – the authenticity of Venice tends to decline because its economic and social structure is simplified, to the detriment of urban vitality.

The city presents two faces: the glittering face of events and tourist flows, the other more neglected one, not up to the standards of the first, where urban maintenance tends to end up.

For example, business activities almost exclusively consist in products on offer to tourists; the concentration of tourists in certain areas gives rise to considerable impact issues, that is a physical consumption of the more widely-visited places, while the presence of residents in tourist areas drops.

However, the fact that the tourist industry is one of the most important economic activities in Italy cannot be denied, nor should it be demonised. Yet neither can we accept the condition of «exploitation of tourist resources», as if they were inexhaustible. The relation between artistic value and tourist exploitation is still considered in «primitive» terms, while on the contrary it is fundamental to combine the concepts of tourism and preservation with tools and methods for their real integration in order to draw up proper urban sustainability plans.

At the same time fundamental principles such as the free fruition of the city and its heritage by visitors of all types cannot be denied

while, for example, instruments for an economic contribution should be perfected by those categories who profit constantly and increasingly from the tourist trade.

## 2. CHANGES TO THE CITY'S PHYSICAL AND COMMERCIAL STRUCTURE

The great visibility of a city such as Venice determines the prevalence of an economic logic in the deep changes to the commercial chain: the conscious decision to serve tourists rather than residents, since the former are more numerous and present an expenditure focussed on a reduced number of goods. The process of transformation has basically evolved, and will continue to do so, along three guidelines: the abnormal increase of souvenirs on offer (often passed off as locally made); the polarisation of the offer, that is, a high concentration of designer shops on one hand and low-quality goods on the other; the drastic reduction of goods requested by the resident population.

In terms of protection and preservation of the city this issue also has its positive aspects. For example, restoration work of the type required by major commercial brands is, more often than is pointed out, of high quality given the huge economic investment required to communicate the image of a designer brand. Available space at ground floor level can be «enhanced» by interventions of a high architectural quality, giving rise to the regeneration and enhancement of areas adjacent to the more prestigious ones. On the basis of this data, it does not seem possible to narrow down the field to «investments» largely determined by the resident population. We cannot ignore the fact that Venice has a very high number of elderly residents who do not represent a lively and active business sector, nor can we underestimate the effect of the liberalisation of commercial licenses, the well-known result of the application of the national legislation.

### 3. THE RESIDENTIAL ISSUE

The registered population residing in Venice and the islands amounts to around 90,000 inhabitants. Yet in 2008 «equivalent» inhabitants in the same area totalled 184,000, considering as «equivalent» inhabitants persons who live and work in the city permanently for at least 5 days a week.

We should also overcome the clichés that lead us to believe in the possibility of keeping the resident population in a certain area. In Venice many residents, seeing their houses increase in value, have decided to sell them since the proceeds enable them to buy more than one building unit on the mainland for their family members. Nor can one apply the tool of newly constructed buildings to be sold to residents at agreed and/or controlled prices. In this case, one should integrate the availability of housing with the obligation of residence for a period far longer than the 5 years applied so far. What's more, it should be said that the modern comforts offered by new buildings, the use of cars and the presence of shopping malls are crucial factors in the move to the mainland. New possibilities may be introduced by co-housing projects in which the determination of those who decide to live in the historic town gives rise to initiatives within the city. These projects could involve both the restoration of the existing built heritage and the regeneration of neglected areas. In this case too, initiatives aimed at maintaining the restored houses as the property of residents are necessary, that is the above built heritage should only be sold to residents. For this purpose, the examples provided by the autonomous region of Alto Adige could be a starting point.

In terms of residence protection, the experience of the Monuments and Fine Arts Office of Venice shows that inhabitants, whether they are registered or not, who choose to live in the historic city collaborate actively in local protection actions. On the contrary, those who perceive a better quality of life elsewhere are very bad in collaborating with protection action and even contribute to the deterioration of certain areas of the city. It should be pointed out that the high mobility of these last years and the attraction determined by the quality of life in a given city (in 2009 Venice was fourteenth in the ranking list) change far more rap-

idly than in the past and that, in this case too, it does not seem possible to place substantial restrictions on inhabitant residency.

#### 4. UNIVERSITIES AND STUDENT POPULATION

The presence of three universities (IUAV, Ca' Foscari and Marcianum) is a major contribution towards protection and preservation. University premises have the capacity to bolster and revitalise parts of the historic city's outskirts (Santa Marta, San Giobbe) because of the use of public funds and by virtue of their institutional activity.

Some 30,000 students «live» in Venice. The topic of student residency will undoubtedly be one of the crucial issues to be tackled in the immediate future. The issue involves at least two fronts: (a) a greater opening of the university institutions to the city; (b) the regeneration, even at a low cost, of «poor» or neglected areas to house teachers, students and university activities.

In terms of conservation, several important «virtuous» interventions have been carried out in Venice: two university residences at San Giobbe; a student house at the Gesuiti still under construction; a student house at Murano which is almost completed, for a total of 6 major university building projects on which work has begun or which are under construction. In this sector it is essential for the various institutions to collaborate with each other since this permits the exercise of pre-emptive rights on large complexes put up for sale by the state, religious bodies and local authorities. Moreover, it should be pointed out that areas which are «less desirable» for other social classes attract the younger population who appreciate their positive aspects.

#### 5. CULTURAL PRODUCTION

The city's most important cultural institutions (La Biennale, Fondazione Musei Civici, Fondazione Querini, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Fondazione di Venezia) have very different histories with regard to their

origin and development. With due respect for their cultural and scientific autonomy, a historical tendency to a sort of isolation can be noted. Given that the cultural importance of the city itself must be the common denominator of all cultural institutes and that cultural purposes are not always in harmony with the preservation of buildings, we must aim for «horizontal» coordination – by which we mean concrete collaboration and appropriate coordination between the various bodies, optimising the management aspects of properties under their control, as well as restoration and maintenance action. On the contrary, as a rule the foundations tend to be totally autonomous and do not facilitate the networking of their services, which leads to a waste of resources.

Another aspect should be a collaboration/coordination of the «vertical» type, meaning the possibility/potential of the more structured institutions to host initiatives, offices, activities, experimentation and innovation that cannot on their own find the physical and cultural space they need in order to develop.

The repercussions in terms of protection and preservation could be interesting: a greater cultural vitality facilitating a better use of the premises throughout the year; the preparation of restoration projects with broad margins of flexibility and levels of architectural change with less impact on the existing buildings; the development of more cost-effective and sustainable projects in terms of both energy and management; greater possibilities of attracting small and medium-sized public and private funding for both restoration work and cultural initiatives.

## 6. INNOVATION FOR ACCESSIBILITY

For the last four years the Monuments and Fine Arts Office of Venice has been promoting, in collaboration with the local authorities, a permanent technical table to tackle the topic of the complete accessibility of the entire historic centre for all the inhabitants. This covers not only disabled persons, but also the large number of older residents and visitors. These studies, some of them of an experimental nature, as well as numerous interventions for the elimination of architectural barriers,

are accompanied by expressly created measures in agreement with the Public Transport Company (ACTV) and by the organisation of special landing places. In view of this Venice today can be considered an «accessible city» as regards more than 60% of its historic centre. The preservation and restoration of many historical bridges has made it possible to intervene – with minimum modifications – on the bridge ramps without reducing or changing the nature of their historical value. From the start, the project's aim is cooperation in finding sustainable solutions.

Innovation and accessibility also come together in the information sector since the Monuments and Fine Arts Office has approved and collaborated to create a Wi-Fi network, which is already operative. This tool will be further implemented by free internet access for all residents in Venice. Last but not least comes the plan drawn up with the local authorities and the port authorities for the positioning of cameras as a safety measure within the city.

On a totally different front, but of great interest for preservation action, the Monuments and Fine Arts Office of Venice is committed to realising a wide-scale computerisation programme of the Office's activities. Some results have already been achieved through the Office's website. All the forms required to apply for a permit can now be obtained via computer, while the process of computer accessibility to permits issued by the Office in the last two years has just begun.

In terms of preservation this data is of considerable importance since it means that the Office's activities can be constantly monitored and the possibility of not receiving an answer within the prescribed time is avoided. Preservation action becomes more transparent and effective, in the expectation of results that will soon be tangible.

## 7. THE LAGOON ENVIRONMENT

Landscape aspects affect the entire historic centre as well as the lagoon environment. The Venetian Lagoon, it should be remembered, is Europe's largest wetland area and as such is included in many European Community study projects.



The MOSE project to defend Venice from high waters when the tide reaches 1.20 m above sea level is now in its final stage. The project has involved and still involves a huge commitment on the part of the Monuments and Fine Arts Office to tackling and solving issues regarding the architectural integration of the installations and the study of a wide-scale landscape plan to accompany the radical changes introduced by this gigantic infrastructure. This approach was presented to and shared with the Commission of the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture. Modifying the lagoon landscape in harmony with the numerous protected nature sites to preserve the specific features of the places affected by project activities is not an easy task. However, it appears to be possible to work in at least two directions to attain a real sustainability of the interventions: from the project point of view, by directing work towards the reclamation of vast areas between the lagoon and the mainland, and from an economic and operational point of view by requiring interventions to be effectively sustainable in that their implementation must keep pace with the construction of the installations. In any case, we believe that work can begin on reclamation plans for the islands in the Lagoon and on the enhancement of the unique character of this environment. Some tourist facilities have been built, but plans to enhance the nature aspects and the flora and fauna of the lagoon environments have yet to be developed. These sites have the potential to be enhanced and appreciated by special types of visitors (for example, school children) and, above all, to feature in «integrated» enhancement plans. In other words, the development of sustainable tourism puts the physical restoration of buildings and the natural environment that determines the absolute specificity of the lagoon environment on the same level. We should bear in mind, in this connection, the important studies carried out by research institutes (University, CORILA, CNR, etc.) to discover and protect landscape values before they are modified by economic interests in the Lagoon area.

## RIASSUNTO

*Venezia rappresenta una situazione straordinaria ed eccezionale determinata dall'unicità della città storica. Per questo offre lo spunto per alcune riflessioni che riguardano anche altre città d'arte. L'analogia è con le città storiche in cui sia nettamente prevalente l'esistenza del patrimonio antico e quindi si ponga con forza il tema della sua tutela e salvaguardia sia sotto il profilo storico-artistico-architettonico che dal punto di vista paesaggistico. I temi trattati sono: 1. Monocultura turistica/diversificazione economica; 2. Modifica della struttura fisica/commerciale della città; 3. Questione della residenzialità; 4. Università e popolazione studentesca; 5. Produzione culturale; 6. Innovazione per l'accessibilità; 7. L'ambiente lagunare.*