

ROME: THE INEVITABLE DECLINE OF A CENTRE WITH NO RULES

Paolo Berdini

Town Planner Roma

paolo.berdini@inwind.it

ABSTRACT

The historic centres of cities are inherently delicate organisms: if a reasonable number of tourists is exceeded, a likely result could be a serious threat to the historic identity of the place. The most admirable elements of that slow process of stratification that has shaped the built environment are prey to a relentless deterioration. The old centres are likely to sink into a decline incompatible with the daily life of an increasingly scarce population, and it is certainly true that the cities have lost the complexity that made them viable in the previous centuries. It was the balance among the social classes which ensured wealth of relationships and beauty. Today the historic centres have expelled the lower classes to ever more distant suburbs. In Rome, which has one of the most beautiful historic centres of the world and an extraordinary artistic heritage, we can measure more than in any other city the effects of changes induced by tourism without rules.

1. DAMAGING TOURIST CITIES

There are many cities in the world that are part of the international tourist circuit. Cities like Venice for instance, where a large proportion of employment opportunities for residents that derive from the induced activities revolve around tourism: hotels, restaurants, businesses and many other manufacturing sectors. The strength of this market is so great that, as noted above, there are some places that are home to seasonal tourist flows which, although limited in time, only four or five months, are sufficient to support a part of the local economy.

But if an exception is made for seasonal tourism, tourist flows are directed toward the historic city centres or, in cases where these have

been altered significantly in more recent historical periods, toward the artistic heritage preserved in museums. The historic centres of cities are inherently delicate organisms: if a reasonable number of tourists is exceeded, a likely result could be a serious threat to the historic identity of the place. The most admirable elements of that slow process of stratification that has shaped the built environment are prey to a relentless deterioration. The commercial framework that until two decades ago still allowed to distinguish a city is now more and more standardized. The most beautiful places are subject to unsustainable human pressure. The cities of art are an object of consumption and are invaded by millions of people. In Rome every year 30 million people stay in hotels, in Florence 16 million, and Venice has more than 10 million hotel guests. This vast mass of people gathers in the delicate boundaries of old towns, in crowded streets and squares, in small and vulnerable places.

The old centres are likely to sink into a decline incompatible with the daily life of an increasingly scarce population, and it is certainly true that the cities have lost the complexity that made them viable in the previous centuries. It was the balance among the social classes which ensured wealth of relationships and beauty. Today the historic centres have expelled the lower classes to ever more distant suburbs. The activities related to residents close down. Their place is taken by pizzerias, pubs, breweries, activities which are the same everywhere with the same range of goods, with the cities all looking deplorably the same.

2. TOO MANY TOURISTS IN ROME

In Rome, which has one of the most beautiful historic centres of the world and an extraordinary artistic heritage, we can measure more than in any other city the effects of changes induced by tourism without rules. The number of beds in hotels in Rome, including the buildings belonging to the church, in 2002 had reached a figure of approximately 94 thousand. Beds available in the old town are approximately 41,500 (44.1% of total). Another portion is located close to the Aurelian walls, and in the neighbourhoods of San Pietro (about 5 thousand beds) or in

the area of Salaria and Nomentana Parioli (over 8 thousand beds) Outside this narrow area, most of the other hotels are concentrated near the Vatican along the Via Aurelia (13 thousand beds), and along the axis of Colombo-Eur-Fiumicino (8 thousand beds). Immense suburbs account for the remaining 17 thousand beds (*Fig. 1*).

The great attraction represented by the celebration of the Jubilee 2000 was the turning point of the restructuring of the sector. In addition to the consolidation of the major Italian and international groups which had already been on the market for decades, new large international chains arrived in Rome. Marriott International, for example, operates the former Hotel Flora on Via Veneto and is about to open a new facility of 2,000 beds along the Rome-Fiumicino road. Other large hotels are being completed. The Acqua Marcia company is completing two new buildings along the axis of Colombo. And two hotels will be made in the EUR district. Another is opening soon next to park Tor Marancia. Thanks to the huge areas belonging to the State Railways a hotel designed by Fuksas will be built in Ostiense. Another skyscraper to be used as a hotel will be built near the old Magliana district. Yet another skyscraper-hotel will be built along the Rome-Fiumicino motorway, just before the Fair of Rome.

In 2007 the number of beds increased accordingly. Today it amounts to 97,600, 43,729 of which, amounting to 44.8%, are located in the old centre. Compared to five years before, the number of beds increased by 3,600 (+3.8%), while those located in the historic centre rose by 1730, representing an increase of 4.1%. Compared to the previous five years, therefore, there is a further process of concentration of accommodation in the historic centre. This process is further amplified by the number of beds available in bed and breakfast accommodations that are in total 1301 and are present in the Centre in number of 361, equivalent to 27.7%. In quantitative terms, this segment of the supply is approaching the threshold of 5,000 beds (*Tab. 1*). The official statistics speak of approximately 20 million guests in hotels in 2006. The figures for 2007 speak of 26million. The hotel industry produces a huge turnover and keeps the total number of employees high. Tourism in Rome and the related manufacturing sector have seen in ten years a growth in employment of 70 thousand units.

OFFERTA DI POSTI LETTO IN STRUTTURE ALBERGHIERE, CASE DI ACCOGLIENZA, BED & BREAKFAST, AFFITTA CAMERE E CASE VACANZA

(Fonte: Azienda di Promozione Turistica di Roma, 2007)

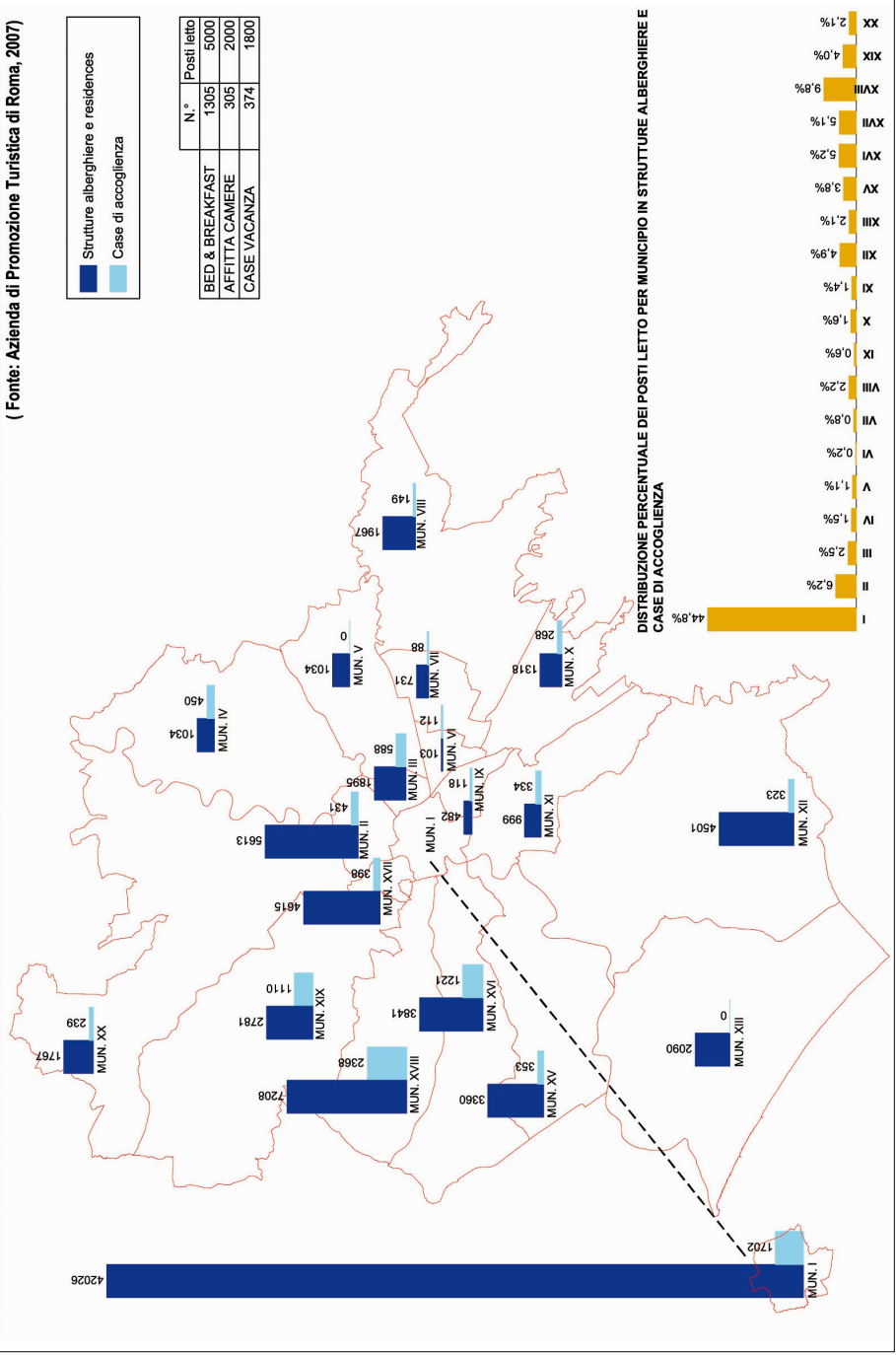
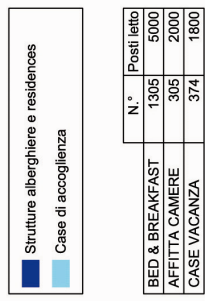


Fig. 1 - Rome Municipalities, beds in hotel and in other accommodation (OA), 2007 (source: Azienda di Promozione Turistica di Roma).

Tab. 1
Rome Municipalities, beds in hotel and in other accommodation (OA), 2007.

MUNICIPALITY	HOTEL	OA	TOTAL	%
I	42.026	1.702	43.728	44,8%
II	5.613	431	6.044	6,2%
III	1.895	588	2.483	2,5%
IV	1.034	450	1.484	1,5%
V	1.034	0	1.034	1,1%
VI	103	112	215	0,2%
VII	731	88	819	0,8%
VIII	1.967	149	2.116	2,2%
IX	482	118	600	0,6%
X	1.318	268	1.586	1,6%
XI	999	334	1.333	1,4%
XII	4.501	323	4.824	4,9%
XIII	2.090	0	2.090	2,1%
XV	3.360	353	3.713	3,8%
XVI	3.841	1.221	5.062	5,2%
XVII	4.615	398	5.013	5,1%
XVIII	7.208	2.368	9.576	9,8%
XIX	2.781	1.110	3.891	4,0%
XX	1.767	239	2.006	2,1%
TOTAL	87.365	10.252	97.617	100,0%

Source: Azienda di Promozione Turistica di Roma.

It is a good sign that the economy is booming. More precise is the number of arrivals. If one takes into account the increase due to other types of client, namely those that use a residence, that are hosted in homes or who choose to stay in the towns of the outskirts before reaching the city, it can reasonably be estimated that up to 30 million tourists annually flock to the city, or rather to its ancient heart. Which sights are the most visited by this impressive number of tourists?

I imagine typical package tours visiting the most famous places of the centre, and avoiding, for example, some extraordinary places further out as Villa Adriana or the Etruscan necropolis of Cerveteri, or also Ostia Antica. Even great historic districts such as Esquilino, to say nothing of Testaccio, are excluded from most tours. In essence, the bulk of tourists is concentrated among the Vatican, the Baroque trident, the Villa Borghese, the Capitol and Fori, Trastevere, that is in a geographical area that represents less than half the total size of the old centre.

3. THE CENTRE WITHOUT RESIDENTS

This impressive number of tourists is no longer balanced by the presence of residents. The population of the historic centre of Rome at the beginning of the new millennium is just over one hundred thousand inhabitants. A constant decline trend in the years after 2001 has brought the population living in the historic centre of Rome from 111,229 inhabitants to less than one hundred thousand inhabitants. A worrying trend that lends itself to three considerations. You must first reflect on the fact that the major decline in population that started after World War II is far from coming to an end. It is since 1951, in fact, that residents have been falling incessantly: at that time there were over 370 thousand Romans who lived inside the Aurelian Walls.

In the post-war years the housing situation of the old town was peculiar, not only for the high density of residents, but also for the actual characteristics of housing. There were many ground floors or basements inhabited by large families. It was predictable that there would be a decrease in population. But besides this physiological phenomenon there was also the great expansion of the tertiary and office sectors to cause depletion of the great centre in the years '51-'71.

In the last two decades this process has decreased if compared with the previous period, and this was largely predictable. But an inversion of the trend, which everyone expected, has never happened. Although to a lesser extent the decline continues, it still causes high demographic erosion and rising property value.

The second consideration concerns the spatial distribution of the erosion trend. If you look at individual districts you can easily see that the large depletion of the '60s and '70s was accompanied by the increasing concentration of offices in the Baroque trident and the elegant Ludovisi quarter. In the Trident and baroque Piazza del Popolo the decrease in population in the twenty years from 1951 to 71 was 65%. A slightly smaller decrease occurred in Piazza Fiume, where in the same period the decrease was 59%. Other districts did not have the same trend. The Esquilino showed in the same period figures below 50%. Testaccio and Ripa did not reach a 40% decrease. Clear sign that, thanks to the strong presence of public properties, the processes of depopulation had been less strong.

Since the '80s, the service sector has continued to erode housing, while the market for accommodation for short holidays and students has caused a further increase of the phenomenon. The sale of the building stock of social security institutions did the rest. Today, the trend of depopulation has reached in almost all districts the rate of 70%.

In essence, while in areas that had been affected early in the 60s dynamics of depopulation have slowed down since 1981, they are inevitably continuing in other areas of the old town only slightly touched at first by the phenomenon. Now only the areas of Testaccio, Aventine and San Saba have a percentage of decrease of the population below 60%. The other areas stand above 70%.

The number of tourists is therefore twice that of the residents. And it is quite clear that the commercial activities, without any new regulations in the last decade, have taken advantage of this situation. Some streets look like giant amusement parks like those of any other city. Pizzerias, ice cream bars, sandwich shops, and all sorts of tourist facilities have supplanted the traditional activities related to the residents. The old town is being impoverished and is losing its identity.

As you know, if the population falls below a certain threshold, a range of services, such as schools, neighbourhood commercial activities, and craftsmen inexorably disappear, condemning the historic centres to the mono-tourist use. Let us now discuss the parts of Rome that do not have the complexity typical of city centres: the businesses are all dedicated to luxury goods or to fast foods and lack the network of serv-

ices necessary to urban life. Rome has gone well beyond that threshold. Now just over 4,000 inhabitants live in Via Veneto, while in 1951 there were 16 thousand. In the Baroque Trident, a very wide area, lived 31 thousand residents. In the Celio district a little less than 3 thousand inhabitants resist, while there were 11 thousand in 1951. Another district has fallen from 12 thousand to just over 3 thousand. Throughout the old town there were about one hundred thousand residents, but those who live in the part affected by intensive tourism, namely the area between the Capitol and Piazza del Popolo, are less than 50 thousand. An empty city that is filled with tourists.

4. AN UNTENABLE PROSPECT

The prospect of further increases in tourism in Rome is largely predictable. Along with the consolidation of the best Italian and international hotel groups already on the Roman market (Jolly, Boscolo, Hilton), new groups like Marriott International and Sol Melia (second European chain) are arriving, and other groups already present are expanding (Golden Tulip, Bass Hotels and resorts, Sifa hotels, Starwood, Choice Hotels). Soon the U.S. giant Hyatt Cendant is going to enter the Roman market.

In order to understand the size of companies that operate in the Roman market we may take as a reference the 6300 hotels which Cendant owns around the world. Choice Hotels (Trade Clarion, Comfort and Quality) has 4200 hotels for a total of 400,000 rooms, and this is a company whose annual budget exceeds the combined GDP of many poor countries. They are companies that have sophisticated and highly effective means of pressure.

Studies of Planethotel inform us that the increase in hotel rooms belonging to the category of luxury (four and five star hotels) owned by international structures has increased in recent years by 57%. Thanks to the extraordinary resonance of the Roman Jubilee of 2000, tourism has risen very strongly. In 2005 there were about 16 million tourists staying in hotels in Rome. In 2006 the forecasts spoke of 18 million people. If

this number is added to the «underground» tourists who are staying in other types of offer (bed and breakfast, flats, rented accommodation and church related hospitality) we can estimate the presence of more than 30 million annual tourists. Every day, therefore, the exploited Roman historic downtown streets are walked by nearly 100 thousand tourists.

It is often said that Venice is just a city of tourists, and it is undoubtedly true. But if you think that with an official offer of 16 thousand beds in hotels, 60 thousand residents still live there one understands how the case of Rome is in some ways even more alarming, even for the fact that the vast majority of tourist routes are concentrated only in the Capitol, in the Baroque district, and a few other areas: in essence the number of tourists daily is at least twice the number of residents in those same areas.

You can of course argue that the processes related with tourism and globalization are difficult to change at the local scale. But if this is true the basic question remains, because even accepting the market logic, how can we implement policies to ease the situation in the historic centre? Or, taking more drastic measures, it might at least be possible to freeze the number of accommodations in the center, strictly prohibiting any further increase. Unfortunately, the attempt to delineate an idea of structure of the old town is not even being made, and indeed, at every step we witness the extraordinary success of the Roman tourist market, without any assessment of its adverse effects, without the slightest criticism of a process that is literally destroying the historic identity of Rome.

Tourists do not travel on foot. The lack of access to many protected quarters ensures at least that some areas are reached on foot, while the coaches wait in the nearest free space, whatever square or street may be available. The World Tourism Organization reduces travel times to increase potential demand and the city is invaded by coaches.

In many situations, especially after protests by increasingly exasperated residents, draconian measures are announced concerning future restrictions for tourist coaches. But everything continues as usual, with the constant presence of tourists and their massive buses. The hotels are located in the centre and they have also to be reached by numerous vehicles needed to solve the problems of supply, maintenance and service. Just try to go in the early hours of the morning in many squares

in the centre to get an idea of this huge number of vehicles.

The problems of these services have not been eliminated. In the past decades the vehicles of those who work in the offices of the centre have been banned or discouraged. Those workers unable to reach work by car have found alternatives in the public transport system. But the supply of goods and services can be difficult, as it is concentrated in a few hours of the day. And the goods, cleaning contractors and maintenance staff still circulate in the centre so numerous and undisturbed by car.

It is estimated that every day, only in the limited traffic area there are more than 4 thousand service lorries carrying all kinds of goods, making maintenance and ensuring the efficiency of the tourist system. And this is the price that residents pay to be at the centre of mass consumption.

The overwhelming tourist pressure that already exists in the old centre is still considered insufficient by the largest organizations of international tourism. Other great hotels are currently being planned. The first one concerns the re-use of buildings in Piazza Nicosia, behind Piazza Navona. The second concerns the project of reconstruction of a building on the western foothills of the Gianicolo, in a wonderful location just a short walk from the Vatican. The property, formerly Torlonia, is completing a luxury category hotel.

So far we have been dealing with private initiatives that perhaps could not be addressed elsewhere. It is rather surprising that the city administration is not trying to discourage the establishment of new hotels in the centre. The historic site of the first Roman town, housed in a beautiful Renaissance palace in Via Giulia, is about to close. The place was sold, and in its place comes a new hotel. The Municipal Circus Maximus incorporates an old building that originally was the first headquarters of the historic Roman Pantanella pasta factory. This property, currently home to some municipal offices, will be sold and in its place will come a hotel.

No one could miss the speculations made by the public companies, such as the state railways, who privatized – along with all the properties created through the resources of the state on the altar of the market – the areas of the station of San Pietro, behind the Leonine walls overlooking the dome of Michelangelo, where a new hotel is under construction.

Besides hotels, other types of businesses are in great growth. Whole buildings are rid of the annoying impediment represented by the last tenants and converted into residences. The building of the Jesuit Seminary in Via del Pantheon became a home to accommodate tourists. The convent of the Augustinian nuns of St. Seven Sorrows of Mary in Trastevere designed by Francesco Borromini was recently transformed into a hotel.

The perspective is clearly unsustainable. If today some parts of the centre day and night are prey to uncontrollable masses of people attracted by the offer of fun, it's clear that every increase in the number of tourist beds will result in further consolidation of the existing process.

5. THE FAST TEMPO OF THE TOURIST MASS

The statistics say that the average stay is 2.4 days per person. Every visitor in our city sleeps only two nights. The packages of mass tourism have a limited duration to compensate for price increases and maintain high demand, because in many major international tours Rome is only a stage-the others being Florence, Venice – of the trip to Italy.

The fact remains that in three days you must be able to visit the most famous places. There is a need to hurry, hasten the tour; and reduce the time of travel.

But convulsive use of time is inconsistent with the life of the historic centre. More than 600 coaches are allowed access inside the Aurelian Walls. All together they represent a line of twelve kilometers always moving and always looking for parking spaces. And where the biggest coaches cannot pass, such as within the protected areas, a clever alternative was found. The most exclusive tours, especially for Japanese tourists, are organized in merry convoys of five or six large rental cars with drivers. The increased flexibility of this means of transport allows you to violate any place including the pedestrian areas. The visit to the Pantheon takes place while the cars are waiting beside the porch of the temple. In the hot summers they are all in line with the engines running so as to keep the air-conditioning going, but at the same time poisoning the environment with exhaust gases.

And the effects of this mechanism can be felt in the entire city, not only in the historic centre. Among the new characteristics of tourism there is also the aggressiveness of low cost air travel, which we have been witnessing in the last few years. The airport preferred by these companies is Ciampino, which is located east of the city and lost in the 60s its supremacy in favour of Fiumicino. This happened because of problems of space; in fact it could not be enlarged due to proximity to a park and to dense residential areas represented by the eastern suburbs (Cinecittà) and the surrounding municipalities (Ciampino and Marino).

Today the airport is subject to heavy traffic and over 400 thousand residents located nearby suffer the consequences. And since 2000 they have begun making increasingly strong protests as many neighborhood committees have been formed to defend the health of the population. The ungovernable situation became evident when the Lazio Regional Council in November 2006 voted unanimously a proposal to ban at least night flights. The same fate could soon touch the inhabitants of the Salaria district, north of Rome. Urbe airport, built between the wars and so far used for recreational flying, will certainly stimulate the appetites of Roman and national economic powers. Restructuring of the airfield to make it available for the private business flights has been systematically attempted for some years. The fact that the small airport will be located within a densely populated residential area is negligible in comparison to the tremendous economic benefits that the gross domestic product will receive.

6. DISAPPEARING PUBLIC SPACES

There is no square in the most beautiful of the cities that does not present a set of tables and chairs where you can enjoy a break together with the surrounding sights. But when the tables are too many, it might be inconvenient. Even for them, as in all natural phenomena, there is a limit.

In the case of tables in the Roman historic centre, the limit has long been passed. With a force of self-reproduction unknown and inexhaust-

ible they occupy squares, streets and alleys. Aided by the inevitable umbrellas they hide historic facades, beautiful vistas, great sceneries, and narrow spaces expertly designed. The Pantheon, the Fountain of Giacomo Della Porta are now intolerable obstacles to the free unfolding of the tables. In Piazza Navona, the long facade of Palazzo Pamphili irreparably breaks the symmetry of the expanse of tables that occupy, uninterrupted, almost three quarters of the square. In Campo dei Fiori it is the severe Giordano Bruno who hinders the increase of GDP. The route between Trevi and the Rotunda weaves in a way that puts a strain on the capacity of the tourist guides to keep together groups without seeing someone swallowed by hungry tables. At Santa Maria in Trastevere it seems that bar owners are collecting signatures to have the fountain removed: the sound of water sometimes covers the noise at night. Absolutely intolerable. In short, the tables are phagocytising the squares.

And if all this were limited to umbrellas and tables, you could almost breathe a sigh of relief. But this kind of creativity for tourist traps never stops and is now endeavouring to fence entire areas, thereby establishing once and for all how public space should be shared. This is what we mean by decay. And sad colored plastic flowerpots appear. Then grids of painted wood giving a green garden effect that give more privacy from the gaze of swarms of convict-like tourists. Clumsy architecture of metal to make up for the historical lack of Art Nouveau architecture in the capital. In Campo dei Fiori, fences of iron and reinforced glass have been put up, would you believe it, to protect clients from bottles being thrown around in the evening.

Such yards then, are particularly adaptable to more complex uses. By joining them with the walls of buildings it is possible to form a lattice-style arbor that, when needed, can be covered with corrugated iron or with the finest fake plastic roofs. Even the vertical walls lend themselves to interesting solutions. In the winter of 2005 everything had a pleasant appearance of transparent sheeting, providing a shelter from the cold and rain.

A mixture of vulgarity and bad taste accompanies the days of the Romans. And nobody can do anything about it. There is no awareness of the effects of this decay. Infocamere tells us that in the historic centre,

from January 2003 to the end of 2005, 154 new businesses were created, mostly pubs and bars. In the spring of 2005, the offices of the City Hall still had to deal with 150 new businesses trying to exploit public land. We have arrived at the point that even the smallest local governments are trying to occupy vastly larger areas. And they run a risk of irreversible degradation.

Unless, and it is with this hope that I would conclude, we go back to having a comprehensive idea of the city and its unique historic centre. Cities are complex organisms and they must therefore be governed by complex and culturally elevated ideas.

RIASSUNTO

I centri storici sono per definizione organismi delicati: se si supera un numero ragionevole di turisti è assai probabile che l'identità storica dei luoghi sia messa a rischio. Proprio gli elementi più preziosi di quel lento processo di stratificazione che ha formato l'ambiente costruito sono preda di un inesorabile deterioramento. Gli antichi centri sono verosimilmente destinati a sprofondare in una fase di declino incompatibile con la vita quotidiana di un popolazione residente sempre più scarsa anche perché le città hanno perduto la complessità che li ha resi vitali nei secoli precedenti. Solo l'equilibrio tra le classi sociali ha permesso la ricchezza delle relazioni e la bellezza. Oggi i centri storici hanno espulso le classi sociali più deboli verso lontane periferie. A Roma, che possiede uno dei centri storici più belli al mondo, ed un patrimonio artistico straordinario, possiamo misurare meglio che in qualsiasi altra città gli effetti dei cambiamenti apportati da un turismo senza regole