

Cultural and Touristic Strategies for Preservation and Enhancement of Venice and its Lagoon

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1 Introduction

This paper focuses on the complex relationship between the waters of the Venice lagoon and the community of people who share its amphibious space, residents and visitors. Starting from a systemic analysis of the current situation of this World Heritage site, it proposes a structured response to three main issues, all of which stem from the delicate and fragile interface between land and water, from the gross imbalance between residents and visitors, and from the uncertain relationship between the community and its CH, at the level of the lagoon as a whole.

2 Crisis of Identity

The first issue is a crisis of community identity. The lagoon community has identified itself intimately with the water since the time of the Serenissima Republic. Today, however, the lagoon has lost much of its functionality as an interconnected urban archipelago. It has also lost its unified management through the oldest public administration of the modern world: the water board (*Magistrato delle Acque*) founded in the sixteenth century and closed in 2014, because it had long ago ceased to play its role in actively managing the lagoon waters. In modern times its role had been mainly concentrated on implementing works of hydraulic engineering: the famous mobile barriers at the inlets to protect the lagoon from the exceptional high tides (*acque alte*). Territorial management of the lagoon has been split into many administrative bodies.

The polycentric network of communities that face the lagoon has become disintegrated, because the lagoon cities and villages look to their

vis-à-vis on the mainland, easily accessible by car, rather than to their neighbours across the lagoon. The lagoon has become a barrier, where historically it united all the settlements.

We must work to restore the lagoon's role as a mediator, a concentrator of social relationships. To this end, two bodies - the Committee for the Ecomuseum of the Lagoon, and the Steering Committee for the UNESCO World Heritage Site Venice and its Lagoon - are striving to strengthen the links among institutions, associations and citizens around the lagoon. The association Venti di Cultura, together with these two committees, is contributing to forging these stronger ties by organising a festival across the lagoon, one of the network of major festivals along urban waterfronts supported by the European Commission through the River of Opportunities programme, by the River/Cities European platform.

3 Crisis of Access

It is the inadequate network of mooring points allowing effective interchange along the shores of the lagoon. The territorial and urban system around the lagoon has grown since the WWII with infrastructures oriented to the rationalisation of land transport, to the detriment of the overall water transport and distribution network. The processes have continued to the point where many communities have only partial access to the network of the lagoon canals; in particular, they are handicapped by the lack of quays, landing stages and mooring places in the lagoon network. It is essential to consolidate the places of land/water interchange, distributed around the perimeter of the lagoon, such as a sequence of interpretive centres of the local cultural resources. This is the objective of the UNESCO office for Venice and its Lagoon, based in the city of Venice, which is harmonising the municipal urban plans, and has drawn up an outline plan for enhancement of the lagoon's landscape and culture. For the UNESCO Venice office, the author is coordinating a team of professionals, including representatives of all the municipalities that are committed to opening or reopening their doors to the lagoon waterway network.

4 Crisis of Tourism Offer

The tourism offer of the lagoon is excessively concentrated in the central area of Venice. The outstanding CH concentrated here is visited by an impressive global audience, but is threatened by the loss of identification by the local community, as mentioned above. This antinomy could be envisioned as an opportunity for the 'heritage community' to become an interpreter of its material and immaterial heritage. Fernand Braudel (1987) reminds us:

the foreigner has been fascinated, monopolised by the city, and he too easily disdains the inland sea which belongs to it as a plant belongs to its flower.

Consequently, a sense of deprivation makes the tourists less motivated to return to Venice today. As stated in the National Geographic's study on the most important UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Venice is overwhelmed by tourists' monoculture, and visitors feel guilty of "complicity in the degradation of the city".¹

Observing this saturation of the main routes in the city, one cannot help but regret the absence of any offer of cultural tourism based on a stay of several days in the lagoon, hence the *Lagunalonga* itineraries presented below.

5 Heritage-based Development Models

The approach presented in this paper is inspired by the pioneering work on the interplay between cultural landscapes and communities. The processes of participation in CH are inspired by the Faro Convention. The importance of participation is also underlined by the deterioration of the Italian landscape since WWII. The landscape has practically lost its fundamental role as the direct expression of the resident communities. The notion of *participation* applied to the landscape suggests enhancement of the HC, formed by "people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations" (art. 2). The Faro Convention also promotes the reinforcement of social cohesion "by fostering a sense of shared responsibility towards the places in which people live" (art. 8).

Participation in CH has seen radical changes in recent years. On one hand, inclusive processes have been put in place, giving citizens the chance to participate in transformation of their territory, to share choices that are consciously proposed by public authorities and/or by professionals. A precursor in Italy (and Europe) was architect and town planner Giancarlo de Carlo, who as early as the late 1960s started teaching and implementing models of active and responsible participation of users in the design process.

On the other hand, participation in museums is designed to provoke a dynamic interaction between the visitor and the objects, no longer just static and (possibly) ecstatic, but involving a participatory experience of the user, searching for the meaning of the exposed material. It is no coincidence

1 "Best, Worst World Heritage Sites Ranked". *National Geographic Traveller Magazine*. November/December 2005.

that local museums in the USA are called interpretive centres. The key is no longer an 'academic' description of the values of an aseptic area, but a multi-sensory experience offered to the visitor so that each person can form his or her own interpretation. Similarly, science museums have for several decades been seeking to enrich the visitor's experience by going beyond the tactile, so-called "hands on" (Wagensberg 1998), experience, to engage the visitor emotionally ("heart on") and intellectually ("mind on"). This means in a sense redefining the scientific narrative in the context of the visitor's experience and the wider 'landscape' to which the heritage refers. The network of science museums in Catalonia was a pioneer in this respect, the visitor experience being rooted in the sense of identity of the region. Facing the complexity and unpredictability of globalisation

economic and social institutions have changed their dynamics and organisational methods [...], to face these challenges there has been a tendency to promote new, much more flexible organisations that can adapt to the new situations and which tend towards joining together and sharing authority, rather than transferring it to a higher level (Casanelles Rahola, Matamala 2009, 175).

The Venice lagoon is clearly on the border of these two paradigms of participation, where interactive exhibits and displays in numerous museums tell the story of transformations of the Venice lagoon over the centuries. It is essential today to take inspiration from the long 'cultural path' represented by the ecomuseum of the Venice lagoon, effectively distilling the countless traditions, artifacts, archeology and activities as the 'DNA' of a homogeneous territorial system.

Venice and its lagoon, beyond their stereotypical image - as if immortal - have been debating their contradictions for several decades. The contradictions are typical of modern society, contradictions between the local and the global, between environment and industry, between citizens and tourists, and of course between the centre and the periphery. Depending on how these contradictions are managed, Venice and its lagoon may attain a new equilibrium, a structured sustainability in the future; if not, the risk is asphyxiation, and the unsustainable lightness of an empty shell. Culture in general, involving the active participation of the *heritage communities*, has a crucial role in restoring the balance, so that the citizens continue to feel a sense of identity with their material and immaterial heritage, through museums and through environmental and productive resources.

One of the main issues is to reorient the flow of tourists towards the lagoon and its polycentric community. The HC is increasing day by day and might be the lever for an authentic (re-)interpretation of the heritage of Venice and its lagoon, where land and sea, nature and man, have become inextricably linked through centuries of constant reciprocal adaptation.

The Serenissima Republic successfully managed this precious and fragile equilibrium, just as the Italian Government and the Municipality are trying to do today. But where the public effort is currently focused on purely hydraulic parameters, we need to devote as much attention to the community living around the complex border between land and sea.

For most visitors and many citizens, the lagoon is only a space to cross as quickly as possible; it is no longer perceived as the cradle of the polycentric history of Venice, nor as an environmental protected area of European importance, nor as a literal 'melting pot' of local products. Alongside the current institutional patchwork, there is clearly a need for a sustainable cultural development agency to foster these cultural resources. They are already partially available to citizens and tourists, but need to be consolidated by 'opening the doors' to countless and diverse features: natural 'oases' in the dunes, rivers and fish farms, museums of material culture, environment and production, interpretive centres of eno-gastronomic activities, handcrafts. These can be brought together as the *ecomuseum of lagoon*, as we shall see. But first we need to deal with the potential demand, represented by the tourist, introduced above as a threat, but who clearly also represents a potential.

As already stated, the core objective is to strengthen the sense of identity of the citizen with the territory. This is under threat, and we cannot overlook the huge impact that millions of visitors have on the landscape and on the daily lives of citizens. Tourists are asphyxiating the city, but are more and more discerning, and open to 'conscious' and responsible tourism. The *Survey on the attitudes of Europeans towards tourism*, as Flash Eurobarometer by the European Commission,² indicates growth in the percentage of those who are looking for destinations qualified as "alternative" or "emerging", allowing them to explore different cultures, traditions and local ways of life. The major motivations for the main holidays of European citizens are rest (54% ticked "rest, recreation, sun and beach"), and discovery (23% ticked "city, culture, nature and religion"). The favourite destinations are "traditional" and "well-known" (58%) but more than half of these (28%) aspire instead to go "off the beaten track" to explore "less obvious places". Those who visit new destinations are relying increasingly on internet and reports of acquaintances. In choosing a destination most Europeans are attracted to its environmental attraction (32%) and cultural value (27%).

There is also a clear trend in European tourism demand towards appreciation of combinations of nature and culture, gastronomy and local products, tangible and intangible heritage.

Despite being underused, the Italian inland waters indeed offer a unique

2 European Commission, Directorate General Enterprise and Industry, Flash Eurobarometer 328. The Gallup Organization (2011). *Survey on the attitudes of Europeans towards tourism*, 22

insight into an incomparable cultural and environmental heritage, including UNESCO sites, parks and historical cities. In an attempt to meet this demand, the association Venti di Cultura started in 2009 an experimental annual rally or *cabotage* through the entire Venice lagoon.³ The annual event was born from writing a guide on the diffuse museum network: *Rooms of the ecomuseum of the lagoon of Venice*, published by the Province of Venice. The thread that weaves the cultural lagoon was first experienced in open boats by a small group of specialists and citizens. Then *Lagunalonga* was presented in national and international contexts, such as *European Tourism Day 2011*, and the *Icomos 2013 conference* on “Protecting deltas: heritage helps” in Amsterdam, and at the *World Canal Conferences* in Toulouse in 2013 and Milan in 2014.

At each step in development of the project, the *Lagunalonga* promoters have been resolutely seeking practicality and sustainability. The event and the underlying concept are now recognised as a driving force for the community of those who live around the lagoon, a factor of identification. This is confirmed by the Committee for the Ecomuseum, which promoted the sequence of visits and events mentioned above, and contributed to the production in 2014 of a documentary on the cultural resources, in collaboration with the local institutions and associations.

At the same time, the *Lagunalonga* promoters have been working on the design and implementation of tourist packages that use historical and innovative boats, minimising the impact on the fragile ecosystem.

6 Towards a More Authentic Relationship?

Discovering the precious and fragile heritage of the lagoon could be combined with the most advanced experiences of HCs, where citizens express and communicate to visitors their sense of identity and their own experience of vibrant and authentic places. These nodes of the lagoon network are today the pieces of a puzzle, that give only a hint of the overall picture. The whole picture has to be assembled, revealed and made accessible to a much wider audience through new models of interpretation and promotion.

This is one of the objectives of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Management Plan for Venice and its Lagoon, coordinated by the City (Basili, De Vettor 2014), supported by the activity of the Committee for the Ecomuseum of the Venice lagoon. The target of these processes is twofold: on one hand, the citizens of the municipalities inside the lagoon and the surrounding areas, and on the other hand the tourists that ‘animate’ the coastline and the cities of the Veneto, the main Italian tourist region.

3 <http://www.lagunalonga.com>

The Venetian UNESCO site now is in a very delicate passage, because the UNESCO board is evaluating a local request, done by local cultural associations, of placing it in on the 'in danger' sites, because of the difficult governance of the impact of the mass tourism with the fragile material and immaterial heritage. This contradiction is exemplified by the 'grandi navi' issue: they are gigantic ships hosting up to 5,000 passengers and 2,000 workers, sailing in the basin of San Marco and arriving in the maritime station, in central Venice. In a high season Saturday dozens of them might stay contemporary, releasing a great concentration of thin powders in the air, and of tourist in the Venetian narrow streets.

Furthermore Europa Nostra recently classified Venice as "the most endangered site", emphasizing the unfair pressure on the little resilient local community of the outstanding number of visitors. Also indicating the key difficulty Venice is facing, is the intricate interaction between the many bodies interested or responsible for the destiny of this unique world patrimony. The phase is delicate and in transition, and we all share the necessity to reduce the impact of the mass tourism in the central Venice, building an inclusive governance framework.

In this direction the Committee for the Ecomuseum of the Lagoon was established in 2013, in application of a new regional law, but blocked by the delay of its financial and procedural implementation. This impeachment resumes the governance difficulties, but the content and participated process remain the proper and sustainable strategy. The Committee is made up of all the associations that offer links between the cultural resources of the lagoon, the citizens that live around it and tourists. Inspired by the UNESCO Site Management Committee, the ecomuseum group is enhancing the existing network of places and people connected by the inland waters of the lagoon, as a palimpsest full of extraordinary cultural resources, both tangible and intangible. This is a participatory process. The ecomuseum's mission is to promote an integrated territorial cultural system, bringing together existing environmental, productive and cultural resources, material and immaterial, through the identification of their main points of interest, connected by 'slow' paths, by water and bicycle. The ecomuseum is therefore not just another museum; it is a network of citizens, institutions and activities that are striving to enhance the cultural resources in which the resident community recognizes itself and its history. These resources form the web, convey its *genius loci*, the most authentic figure of the plural and polycentric territory.

More recently, the UNESCO Site Venice and its Lagoon Management office promoted a design competition, about a *Master-plan for the enhancement of the culture and landscape of the lagoon*, won by the author. Last year we completed a participatory bottom-up process, producing eleven

design projects.⁴ The anchor points of the slow tourism network are promoted by the nine municipalities facing the lagoon (Venezia, Chioggia, Campagna Lupia, Codevigo, Mira, Quarto d'Altino, Musile di Piave, Jesolo, Cavallino-Treporti, Venezia), and shared with the specific stakeholders: the central Superintendency, the Regione Veneto, two provinces (Padova and Venice) and many local cultural association and entrepreneurs. The lagoon during the last century lost its physical permeability and the project wants to give back its foundational role of media, reconnecting again the disjoint communities through the water. The spread sequence of docks with services (bar, shop, interpretive center, bike renting and parking) give to the visitors an easy entrance to every territory. It is a network that exalts the lagoon *unity of space/time* recognized by Fernand Braudel, and the different cultural, productive and touristic resources of each territory. Now the projects face the institutional difficult task to harmonize central and local governance, public and private founding, and to be realized.

Restoring and consolidating an authentic relationship between citizens and the lagoon, reviving historic and compatible activities, promoting responsible tourism off the beaten track, enhancing the broad museum network: these objectives make up a hugely ambitious programme, with many challenges to be faced. Success can only be achieved through the combined efforts of the citizens – as users and witnesses – and the institutions, both local and international, and certainly not in a single gesture, decided by a single committee or a single plan. The development will be the result of a long multicultural process, that must of essence be both inclusive and participatory.

7 Cultural Cabotages

“Culture is Italy’s oil” says recently the Italian Minister of Culture. This phrase has become a mantra, almost as if only saying it would bring us closer to its realization. However, all too often we continue to write excellent books about cultural sustainability, but without learning to dig wells. We have read and written books about the Venice lagoon’s extraordinary cultural resources, and have invoked its development, which has always been inadequate considering the abuse wrought by mass tourism on the city, and the lack of respect for its fragile lagoon ecosystem. We also studied how tourists spent their time on the rivers and canals of central and northern Europe, with increasing attention to the culture of the landscape. The famous ‘boaters’ discover the region ‘on tiptoe’, with the water’s an-

4 http://www.veniceandlagoon.net/web/en/ongoing_projects/management_plan_projects/rehabilitation-and-enhancement-of-the-lagoon-landscape-and-culture.

cient value as a means of communication restored. It is the setting for a unique experience that is both touristic and cultural. But, although Venice is the most extraordinary city on water in the world, its lagoon is mainly traversed by big cruise ships, and managed by huge infrastructural works. The possibility of being accompanied on day or weekly cruises aboard little sustainable slow boats, by those who can offer an authentic experience of living for and in the lagoon, is rare and quite unexploited. All the above considerations have led to definition of the strategy now pursued by the Venti di Cultura partners: the *Lagunalonga* cultural tourism packages. The *Lagunalonga cabotage* means spending a week in the Venice lagoon and along its tributaries, on a boat that proceeds slowly along the channels, so as better to appreciate the delicate balance between nature and culture, as layered over the centuries, through the countless and often extraordinary interactions between the lagoon and the people who inhabit it. *Lagunalonga* offers unique access to the treasures of the lagoon, the priceless archeological heritage, the pristine nature reserves, the rare artisans' products, and of course food and wine. *Lagunalonga* will accommodate a small group of tourists in standards of luxury for a week, enabling them to discover the *genius loci* of the lagoon. Passing by or through charming oases of calm and nature that are among the most valuable in Europe, the route winds through those countless features that are the hallmark of Venetian civilisation: sandbanks, museums, islands, monasteries, oases, basilicas, dunes, vineyards and walled archeological sites.

Lagunalonga plans to offer four different typologies of itineraries to interpret in different ways the large number of cultural and tourist resources spread throughout the lagoon, as well as inviting the visitors to make their individual discovery and appropriation, according to their aspirations.

The *Cultural Itinerary* is dedicated to the museums around the lagoon, and the heritage of classical and industrial archeology. The cultural programme includes various museums - the Archeological Museum of Altino, the Torcello Museum, the Burano Lace Museum, the Murano Glass Museum, the Museum of the Lagoon in Pellestrina and the Fishing Museum in Chioggia. The itinerary also opens the doors to the extraordinary industrial and military heritage: the Arsenale in Venice, Porto Marghera, Forte Vecchio in Treporti and the network of Octagons in the south lagoon, Forte Marghera and Forte S.Andrea.

The *Enogastronomy Itinerary* is dedicated to local food products, fishing and crafts. A route for a gourmet to discover and taste the most typical products. It winds its way from the walled vineyards to the *moeche* (soft-shell crabs), and will introduce tourists to the typical violet artichoke of S. Erasmo, the white beans, the *broeto ciosoto* (broth from Chioggia), and many other typical dishes of the lagoon. Different experiences with the various fishing techniques that are typical of the lagoon, from fish farms to touristic fishing, from the lagoon to scuba-diving. At the end this route

propose traditional handmade crafts, Murano glass and the original fishermen pipes of Chioggia, crafts of seamen, smiths and local artisans.

The *Nature Itinerary* is dedicated to environmental resources of the lagoon, immersed in the silence of contemplation of the extraordinary natural and spiritual areas. Original and pristine natural resources of the lagoon, from coastal dunes to salt marshes, mud flats, the WWF oasis, river parks. Spiritual resources, such as the convent islands, sites of meditation, churches. It is a transversal route to focus on the landscape and on ourselves.

The *Beauty Itinerary* provides a cross experience through the three topics: nature, enogastronomy and culture.

These itineraries are more than a cruise on the lagoon: they are a door that opens to places that are magic, authentic and little-known, combining adventure or relaxation, culture or sporting events, natural or gourmet cuisine, reconnecting citizens with visitors, Venice with the 'amniotic fluid' of her lagoon.

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