

Reflections during the meeting DO WE KNOW WHERE VENICE IS GOING?

organized by Confartigianato

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### **WATER IS THE ONLY WAY**

Have we reached the point of no return? Over the past fifty years, we have witnessed the gradual social and economic impoverishment of our city, while the use of its historic buildings (often saved by the Special Law for Venice) has changed, resulting in the loss of inhabitants and local businesses. Bad political choices, apathy and shortsightedness of successive generations of politicians have caused this regression of our city from political and economic capital and European manufacturing centre to a provincial village, where you can buy the same tacky goods you can find everywhere.

We must limit tourism and bring residents back to the historic city: 75,000 inhabitants could support the burden of tourists whose numbers, in any case, should be restricted (thirty years ago, Paolo Costa suggested a maximum of 20,800 day-trippers). We now want to work on attracting artisans to the city, because this type of economic activity is a necessary part of civic life.

I would like to mention a qualitative factor that is often ignored. Venice needs to recognise what it is: an architectural, urban and social miracle set in a unique and extraordinary environment. Venice has to think of water as a *resource* and not as a problem that has to be resolved as fast as possible. It is our distinctive element, not a curse. Water should be valued as a unique feature, not as an obstacle that prevents its citizens from leading the same lifestyle as every other 'normal' city. Venice – the Venetians and their representatives – needs to be more aware that it is, and has always been, a civilization based on water, an amphibious city, and that this is the key to its future.

We could begin with the revitalisation of the Arsenal: building on its potential as a museum, a centre of industrial archaeology, and as a site for traditional Venetian shipbuilding while increasing its accessibility via land and water.

Levels of cooperation between the Monuments Commission and the Public Works agency (formerly *Il Magistrato alle Acque*) could be increased to provide effective protection for the city and its environment, and best practices could be formulated and applied to other contexts. At the same time, priority for mooring permits and subsidies for traditional wooden boats throughout Venice could bring not just aesthetic benefits, but could improve everyday life in the city. This could also be advantageous both for traditional boatyards and for the control of traffic in the canals.

To make water transportation sustainable and traditional boats a viable alternative, the waves caused by motor boats such as water taxis need to be drastically reduced. This equates to a cultural revolution: respect for traffic regulations and somewhat slower mobility together with rationalised goods distribution and, over time, the use of boat hulls designed to reduce waves and wakes. We propose that the Region, the Municipality and the Chamber of Commerce address sustainable mobility as a policy priority, including incentives for the acquisition and maintenance of traditional boats. The typical Venetian transportation system needs to be revived as well, with more *traghetti da parada* for crossing the Grand Canal in gondolas, with gondoliers being given an active role in traffic reform. Traditional businesses such as boatbuilding and fishing should be considered essential economic activities.

A lot could be done to prevent the disappearance of Venetian rowing (*voga*), which is one of the fundamental aspects of Venice's identity and has been practiced for over a thousand years (our history and our culture began with the oar). For example, it could be added to the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding stipulated by the Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003). A number of rowing activities are already organised by Venetian schools and university sports departments, but we should show more appreciation for *voga* as a regional sport and the *regatanti* (rowing champions and aspiring champions) as defenders of a Venetian tradition. New rowing schools and courses could be established to revamp nautical activities that should be a

priority in the transition to sustainable lagoon mobility. Initiatives involving residents in the rowing arts, revitalisation of the management of the *remiere* (rowing clubs) in all the *sestieri* (districts) and islands, could enhance social interaction. The international attention enjoyed by Venice and its lagoon thanks to the Vogalonga, the Velalonga, the Velaraid and other nautical meetings could be better used.

To maintain Venice's identity as a living city, attention to its uniqueness as a water city (along with the features of a functioning, modern town) is our best hope. Re-launching these aspects of the Venetian way of living would improve the quality of life for its residents while enhancing the experience of those who visit this unique city.

Ideally, this uniqueness would be administered via a special form of city management, with its own specific set of rules. However, this status cannot be granted easily when the territory also includes urban centres on the mainland (such as Mestre and Zelarino).

We are facing difficult choices, but with the collaboration of citizens and institutions – the Municipality, the Regional Administration, the University, trade unions, the Biennale and private Committees, Cultural Heritage Departments, judiciary – we will be able to attain the *pax in aqua* needed to guarantee a future for Venice.

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