
WE ARE HERE VENICE

WHOSE CITY IS IT ANYWAY?

Venice is one of the world's most attractive tourism destinations; in many ways the city can be seen as a victim of its own success. This report explores the dynamics which govern the historic city, examining Venice's uneasy relationship with global fame and local priorities.

Venice's struggles with overtourism, residential depopulation and *acqua alta* (flooding) are critical. In outlining the position of *We are here Venice*, this report aims to stimulate discussion on the local population's current (lack of) political agency. Venice's future relies on those with a deep understanding of the city's unique metabolism

being able to press for change in the way the city is run – and exploited.

This report was triggered by the 2019 referendum on Venice's territorial administration and completed during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown. The world will not be the same in the wake of Covid-19. We hope that by providing a synopsis of 'what was', underlining 'what's important' and conceptualising 'what could be', the enforced hibernation will stimulate a more sustainable future when we all emerge from this state of crisis. The study is based on a combination of academic research and more than a decade of experience navigating Venice's political labyrinth.

WHOSE CITY IS IT ANYWAY?

MA DOPO TUTTO DI CHI È LA CITTÀ?



Written by Carolyn Smith & Jane Da Mosto for *We are here Venice*
With contributions from Kasia Ruszkowski

This is a moment of necessary change. Official forecasts predict reduced tourism globally for years to come, giving Venice the much-needed time and space to reconcile with the city's complex challenges. This report is the baseline from which *We are here Venice* will develop strategic responses for the city's future, and it presents a set of policy recommendations to support the city's transition to a sustainable equilibrium. It is clear that immediate action is required to address Venice's tourism monoculture. There is no suggestion that Venice should be rid of tourism entirely, merely that the current scale, model and dependency is unsustainable. A healthy city, more focused on quality of life than the extraction of profit, with a thriving resident population and within a resilient ecosystem, will be enriched by visitors, rather than impoverished.

UNINVITED PROPOSITIONS

INCENTIVES AND DISINCENTIVES TO ENSURE THE FUTURE OF VENICE

Three critical factors will determine the sustainability of Venice: housing, employment and services. An integrated and proactive policy framework is necessary to support Venice's current socio-economic fabric, cultivate the city's resilience and set the standards by which the private sector engages with the *città storica*.

1 – HOUSING: STABILISE THE RENTAL MARKET.

The introduction of tax incentives for the long-term rental of properties should be used alongside specific regulations which address the prevalence of short-term lets, akin to those implemented in Berlin. These include restrictions on the number of days per year entire properties can be made available and penalties for landlords with vacant properties left unoccupied for long periods.

2 – HOUSING: SUPPORT LONG-TERM / PERMANENT INHABITANTS.

The housing subsidy scheme from the 1990s, which helped residents in rented accommodation to buy property in the *città storica* should be revived.

3 – HOUSING: STRENGTHEN VENICE'S LOCAL INSTITUTIONS.

Consultation with the city's university sector and other key institutions is necessary to address the quality and quantity of housing for staff and students via concerted efforts and appropriate policy and planning measures.

4 – HOUSING: ATTRACT NEW RESIDENTS.

Housing subsidies could be used to attract new residents to the city and support those who already work in Venice to relocate to the *città storica*.

5 – EMPLOYMENT: PROTECT LOCAL BUSINESSES.

Local SMEs should be defended through the current economic downturn with rental support to maintain jobs in the city.

6 – EMPLOYMENT: CULTIVATE ECONOMIC RESILIENCE.

Build on the city's human capital and broaden the range of competitive productive activities in Venice by fostering subtle economic opportunities. This could be achieved with tax incentives or through the lease of publicly-owned (and under/unutilised) spaces, such as the *tese* in the Northern Arsenale, and may introduce new enterprises or allow existing activities to 'scale up'.

7 – EMPLOYMENT: PIONEER NEW SYNERGIES.

Mutually beneficial schemes could be used to pair landlords with productive activities; these might stimulate the renovation of abandoned or vacant spaces through temporary use and occupation while offering low-cost premises for new enterprises and initiatives.

8 – SERVICES: CONSERVE ESSENTIAL SERVICES.

Planning tools should be used to regulate retail diversity and safeguard local services. These can be used to limit commercial conversions to tourism-centred enterprises and already apply to specific areas in the *città storica*.

9 – SERVICES: CULTIVATE SERVICE PROVISION.

After consultation with the local community, these same planning tools should also be used to incentivise the growth of necessary services to support everyday life in Venice.



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Venice has captivated the world for centuries, but there is a sense that contemporary Venetians have been sidelined within their own narrative. Overwhelmed by the tourist masses and consistently overruled in the political arena, at best the city's residents feel ignored; at worst actively opposed. This lack of agency must be urgently addressed if Venice is to remain a living city with a resident population.

So much has been said and written about Venice that it can be difficult to disentangle the living city from its many representations. Overshadowed by its rich past and laden with cultural heritage, the *città storica* (historic city) struggles to negotiate its position in the modern world. The Death of Venice has become a well-rehearsed prophecy which hangs over the city; driving its decline, feeding an atmosphere of sensationalism and catering to the nostalgia of mass tourism. In the wake of the destructive *acqua alta* (flooding) of November 2019 and the lockdown prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic, these fears have never felt more prescient.¹

In contrast to the bleak prognoses, however, this report argues that Venice's challenges should not necessarily be seen as the end of the city's history, but its continuation. If viewed from a different perspective, Venice's endurance in the face of such persistent problems is evidence of the city's resilience, rather than its fragility.

Most cities are almost entirely disconnected from the natural world. This limits our environmental awareness and leads us to conceptualise nature as something separate, divorced from our everyday existence, at a time when the future of the planet hinges on a global re-evaluation of our relationship to it.² Venice and its lagoon exist in symbiosis within a single ecosystem. The

1. On the 12th of November 2019, Venice experienced the second highest *acqua alta* in recorded history: the water reached 1.87m above mean tide level. More than 85 percent of the city was flooded and the city sustained damage estimated to be in the magnitude of hundreds of thousands of euro in a single night. Giuseppe Pietrobelli, 2019; Il Post, 2019; Nelli Vanzan Marchini, 2019.
2. More than half of the global population currently lives in cities. By 2050 this is predicted to increase to two thirds; United Nations, 2018.

3. The pavements have been raised relative to the reference water level (set in 1871), which is 30cm below today's average water level. This means that any tides of +80cm directly impact accessibility and mobility, while damaging the built fabric and accelerating maintenance requirements; Jane Da Mosto & Giannandrea Mencini, 2016.
4. The use of Lazzaretto islands for quarantine and isolation was one of the first examples of systematic resilience management; Igore Linkov et al., 2014.
5. Michael Cozza, 2016. The literature on Venice's contemporary issues is falling rapidly out of date: the last comprehensive study, *The Venice Report*, was published in 2009. For context, Airbnb was founded in 2008.
6. MOSE is a system of retractable floodgates designed to limit the influx of water into the lagoon during storm surges in the Adriatic. The project was the subject of a corruption scandal, which broke in 2014, but the subsequent calls for a thorough design review have been ignored. Salvatore Settis, 2014, pp.171-173; Alberto Vitucci, 2019.

boundary between 'natural' and 'manmade' is entirely blurred: the shallow waters protected the city from invasion during the era of the Venetian Republic (697 to 1797) and the lagoon has been subject to significant human intervention since the fifteenth century. This singular, precious and fragile city is *the* postmodern paradigm. As the climate crisis is increasingly felt across Europe, Venice is at the forefront: increases in global sea levels are felt most acutely in a city whose urban form is permeated by water and rhythms of life are dictated by the tides.

Survival in the Venetian lagoon has always required innovation. Indeed, the city's persistence over the centuries is the result of the constant, conscious management of interdependent physical, human and natural factors. Subtle but significant changes are continuously taking place. The pavement level in the majority of the *città storica* has already been raised to a quota of 1 - 1.2m to reduce exposure to the flooding caused by chronically high tides; there are few cities which can endure such exceptional weather conditions without grinding to a halt.³

Venice was pioneering in its use of both spatial and temporal isolation to control the spread of successive plagues throughout the medieval and early modern periods;⁴ the city must now approach its future with the same ingenuity that defined its past.

While Venice's challenges are well documented, there has been little consensus as to how to address them and initiatives have been consistently stymied by political instability and a lack of accessible information.⁵ The extreme flooding event which occurred on the 12th November 2019, and submerged most of the historic city (and other lagoon settlements), would have been avoided if Venice's flood defences had been completed. The system under construction, known as MOSE, has been consistently marred by poor management and corruption, and the underlying design issues have become increasingly apparent.⁶ The project has consistently proceeded without meaningful consultation with local expertise, or citizen participation to determine the priorities for public spending in Venice, and the desire to minimise the visual impact of the project was prioritised over both the budget and functionality of the system. Despite devouring a third of the public funding allocated to protect and

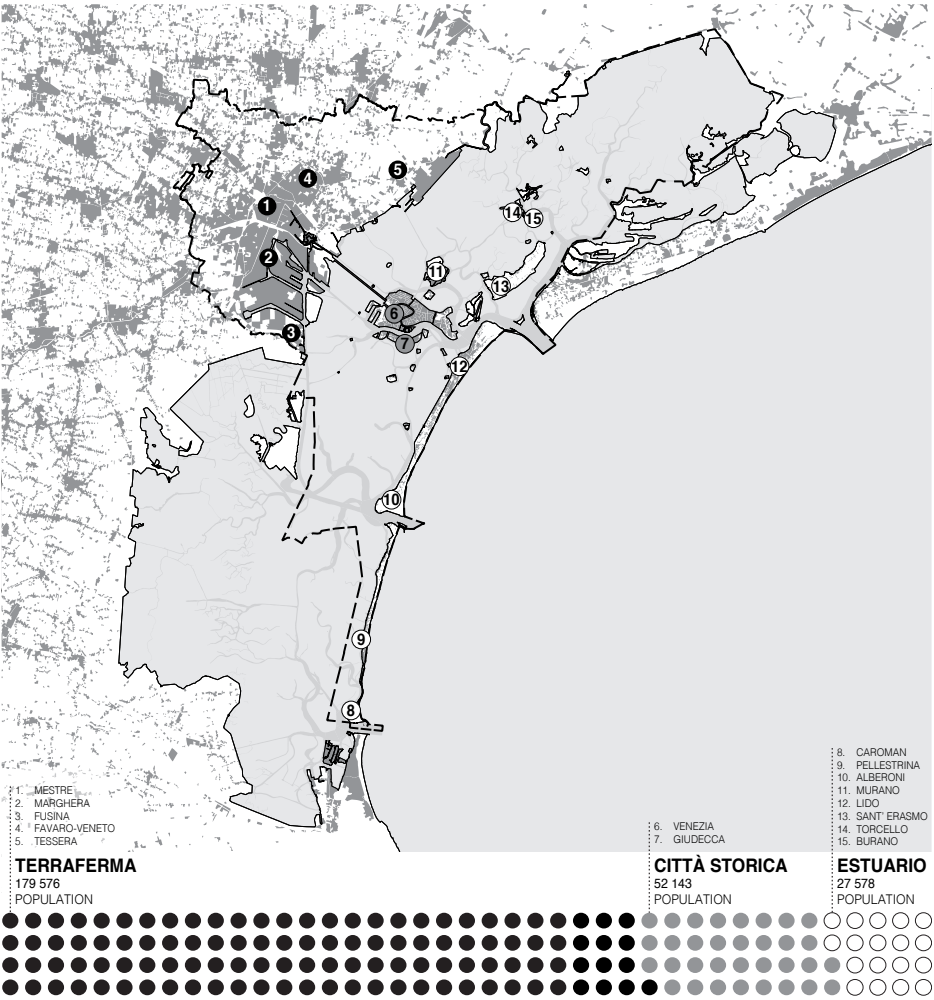
maintain Venice since 1986, it remains unclear whether the retractable floodgates will ever function.⁷

The multifaceted challenges of the amphibious city and its ecosystem require incremental, studied interventions – which involve the city’s diverse range of stakeholders – rather than grand, heavy-handed solutions, which sound impressive but rarely deliver in reality.⁸

This study was triggered by the referendum on Venice’s territorial administration, held on the 1st December 2019.⁹ The current legislative structure of the Comune di Venezia (with a total population of 259,000 in 2019) combines *terraferma* (mainland) settlements (which include the city of Mestre and a resident population of 180,000 in 2019) with the *estuario* (lagoon) communities (which includes the *città storica* and the other island settlements with a total resident population 80,000 in 2019).¹⁰ The referendum called for the separation of Venice (in this case meaning the *città storica* and the other *estuario* communities) from the *terraferma* districts. It was hoped that this re-articulation of the local administration into two discrete legislative entities would engender a more directly accountable local administration in both territories, thereby cultivating a more participative form of democracy, which might make better use of the wealth of local knowledge and advocate for the unique city in the political sphere. The results of the referendum were disappointing and highlight the extent of present political disenchantment and apathy. Two thirds voted for separation but voter turnout was less than 22 percent overall and the referendum failed to reach the legal quorum.¹¹ The *estuario* communities were unanimous in returning majorities in support of the separation, illustrating their need for the political agency they are currently denied.

We are here Venice is an evidence-based, solution-focused organisation. We endeavour to stimulate meaningful debate through the provision of reliable information and formulate specific action points which work towards the long-term sustainability of the city.¹² Maintaining Venice as a living city is a fundamental precondition for the preservation of its heritage and natural capital. Over the years, we have both drawn upon and fostered the wealth of local knowledge; we have campaigned consistently

7. The project was originally due to be operational by 1995 with a budget of €1.5 billion. It has, to date, cost more than €6.2 billion and the system’s estimated annual running costs have ballooned from €10 million to €100 million. Tom Kington, 2014; Settis, 2014, pp.171-173; Gianfrancesco Turano & Alberto Vitucci, 2017; Alberto Vitucci, 2018a, 2018b, 2019.
8. The Municipality’s track record for large-scale infrastructural projects is poor. The industrial area of Marghera has a legacy of pollution caused the city to sink 11cm in half a century; Caroline Fletcher and Jane Da Mosto, 2004. The VEGA Science Park development has been consistently stymied by political interference and is widely considered a ‘failure’; Cozza, 2016.
9. This was the fifth referendum on the subject to date (1979, 1989, 1994, 2003, 2019).
10. Città di Venezia, 2020.
11. Città di Venezia, 2019; Francesco Furlan, 2019.
12. We are here Venice’s ongoing poster campaign is a relevant illustration of the organisation’s methods. Concise, informative statements, extracted from reliable, peer-reviewed sources have been distributed throughout Venice via the Municipal billboards since 2017; see Eleonora Sovrani, 2018; Enrico Tantucci, 2019.



THE MUNICIPALITY OF VENICE

Population data from: Città di Venezia, 2020

The Comune di Venezia is comprised of six municipalities and three primary components: the *città storica*, the *estuario* and the *terraferma*. Confusingly, the name Venice is often used to refer specifically to the *città storica* and also the Comune as a whole. For the purposes of this report 'Venice' will be taken to mean the *città storica*.

Venice, Mestre (and the other *terraferma* suburbs) were merged into a single administrative entity in 1926 and have been governed as one Comune since then, despite their contrasting histories, and physical realities. Today, 70 percent of the Comune di Venezia resides on the *terraferma*; the local administration is therefore obliged to focus their attention on the needs and perceptions of these voters. This imbalance has resulted in the large-scale mismanagement of the lagoon territory by policy-makers who do not necessarily understand the peculiar, interdependent dynamics which dictate the culture, social fabric and economic pressures of Venice.

for better governance and evidence-based policy. Our aim is to develop a vision for Venice which is informed by the city's rich past, without discrediting its present and undermining its future. This report examines the dynamics which govern Venice and considers the city's uneasy relationship with global fame and local priorities. As we begin to emerge from lockdown, it's worth remembering 'what was' so we can learn 'what's important' and formulate 'what could be'. The world will not be the same following Covid-19; combined with the devastating *acqua alta* of 2019 this has exposed the vulnerabilities of Venice's tourism monoculture. This is a critical opportunity to ensure that this tragedy will be succeeded by a brighter, more sustainable future.

The study first outlines the contemporary context of the *città storica* as it was before the Covid-19 pandemic. The need for political agency is illustrated in relation to the city's unsustainable tourism monoculture and resulting depopulation trends. The second section analyses what we mean by the term 'living city' and who maintains 'life' within the *città storica*; the fundamental components of Venice are examined in the context of the 'right to the city'. The report concludes with an assessment of the current situation and highlights some essential priorities which we believe must underpin a sustainable future for the city.

There is now widespread agreement about the critical challenges which face Venice, but too little work which articulates specific policies and actions which could be implemented to instigate change. This research is not the culmination, but a summary of the work *We are here Venice* have undertaken on this topic so far, and forms a foundation from which we will develop future projects. We hope this report illustrates exactly why Venice cannot, and should not, attempt to return to the previous status quo; by deconstructing this complex topic we aim to highlight specific issues which are within reach of policy makers and stakeholders. Through clear, objective analysis we intend to stimulate the change Venice urgently requires.

THE TOLL OF TOURISM

“The demographic, social, and economic changes evidenced in available statistics have prompted researchers to conclude that historic Venice has in fact been overwhelmed by tourism and that it is now malfunctioning in the extreme.”

Bernadette Quinn, 2007, p. 463.

Venice is both sustained and destroyed by tourism: the link between the *città storica*'s residential exodus and the rise of mass tourism is undeniable. Venice is subject to over 28 million visitor presences each year, or an average of 77,000 tourist presences each day, despite having a calculated Tourism Carrying Capacity of 52,000 presences per day.¹³ Meanwhile, the last two decades have seen the loss of more than a third of the residential population of the *città storica*; in 2019 an average of two residents left the city every day.¹⁴

Venice has always been a tourism destination; the *città storica*'s issues today are a question of scale.¹⁵ Tourism has grown exponentially in the last 50 years, aided by the explosion of the global middle class and a proliferation of low-cost travel options. But while today's tourism market is global, the *città storica* remains a collection of 118 islands covering 6 km². As one of the most popular tourist destinations on the planet, Venice is a city under siege. The unregulated tourism industry now dwarfs the *città storica* and the effects of this imbalance are both physical and conceptual.

The physical consequences of overtourism extend beyond congested streets and crowded public transport: Venice's burgeoning tourism industry has critically intensified pressures on housing. Successive relaxations of housing regulations have made property speculation an attractive investment opportunity; as a result, property prices more than doubled in the *città storica* between 2000 and 2010.¹⁶ This created the ideal conditions for the rise of online booking platforms (such as Airbnb) and the

13. Tourism Carrying Capacity takes into account available accommodation and services and is defined as the maximum number of visitors a site can sustain without degrading the physical environment and affecting the quality of the tourist experience. The daily average of 77,000 in 2018 is calculated for the Municipality of Venice. The Tourism Carrying Capacity of the area is 52,000 per day and thus 19 million per year; Nicola Camatti, 2018.
14. Città di Venezia, 2020.
15. Venice's existence as a tourism destination predates the term itself; the city has had official tour guides since 1204. Bernadette Quinn, 2007, p.462.
16. Regional laws L. 431/98 and L. 33/2002 relaxed the regulations on rent for the tourist market. This helped to develop tourism in Veneto, but has had dire consequences for Venice; Dario Bertocchi and Francesco Visentin, 2019, p.6-7.

17. OCIO, 2020 (b). This is sometimes referred to as the 'Airbnb phenomenon'; Daniel Guttentag, 2015; Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019.
18. Jane Da Mosto et al., 2009, p. 59; Orazio Alberti, 2019; OCIO, 2020 (a).
19. Il Gazzettino, 2018; VeneziaToday 2016; Enrico Tantucci, 2018.
20. Term developed by Antonio Paolo Russo, 2002.
21. The 1990s saw the large-scale transfer of commercial offices from the *città storica* to Mestre and Padua and the loss of Venice's remaining big businesses. See Margaret Plant, 2002, p.433.
22. Da Mosto et al, 2009, pp.46-67; Russo, 2002; Ignazio Musu, 2000; Jan Van der Borg, 2007; Antonio Paolo Russo & Albert Arias Sans, 2009; Augustin Còcola Gant, 2015.
23. Luca Pes, 2002, p. 2426; Russo, 2002.
24. Còcola Gant, 2015; Giacomo Salerno, 2018; Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019.
25. Giuseppe Tattara, 2014, p.34.
26. Blake De Maria, 2010, p.25.
27. Cultural heritage and urban form are the foundations of collective identity; Maurice Halbwachs, 1980, pp.131-134.
28. Salerno, 2018.
29. Ibid.

number of bedspaces available to tourists (both within hotel and private rental facilities) now surpasses the number of remaining residents within the *città storica*.¹⁷ Rigged to reflect tourist demand, the cost of living in Venice has spiralled beyond the reach of an average income;¹⁸ in 2018 an average of six to seven evictions took place within the Comune di Venezia every day.¹⁹

In tandem with the increasing pressure on long-term accommodation, the 'vicious circle' of unregulated tourism drives the economic decline of the city.²⁰ Venice has, today, been largely abandoned by economic enterprises which support daily life, in favour of those related to either tourism or the maintenance of the city's heritage.²¹ This monoculture further drives the exodus of the *città storica*'s working demographic,²² and the tendency for tourism to block other productive activities, coupled with its seasonal volatility, has created unemployment, extreme tensions around jobs and "an exploited underworld without precedent".²³ Life in Venice has become increasingly difficult as key services are steadily relocated to the *terraferma* and replaced by enterprises which cater to tourist traffic.²⁴ As the socio-economic mass of the city thins, the costs generated by the tourism industry but borne by Venice's resident community become proportionally greater: by one estimate, the externalities of the cruise industry alone results in a cost of €3,300 per capita each year.²⁵ The legal status of a Venetian *cittadino* (citizen) was once a socio-economic privilege,²⁶ but many contemporary residents feel penalised for continuing to live in their own city.

The physical and economic consequences of Venice's tourism industry are relatively easy to quantify and communicate, but attention is now being increasingly directed to its conceptual ramifications: to the impact on social dynamics, cohesion and identity. Just as real estate speculation can deplete available housing stocks by raising property prices, tourism's commodification of history, culture and the public urban realm has the potential to disinherit local populations of the very glue which binds communities together.²⁷ The parasitic nature of Venice's tourism industry has been compared to colonial 'extractivism' (the predatory withdrawal of natural resources).²⁸ Here, the extraction is not of material goods, but the city's cultural capital and urban realm, which is repackaged, branded and sold.²⁹

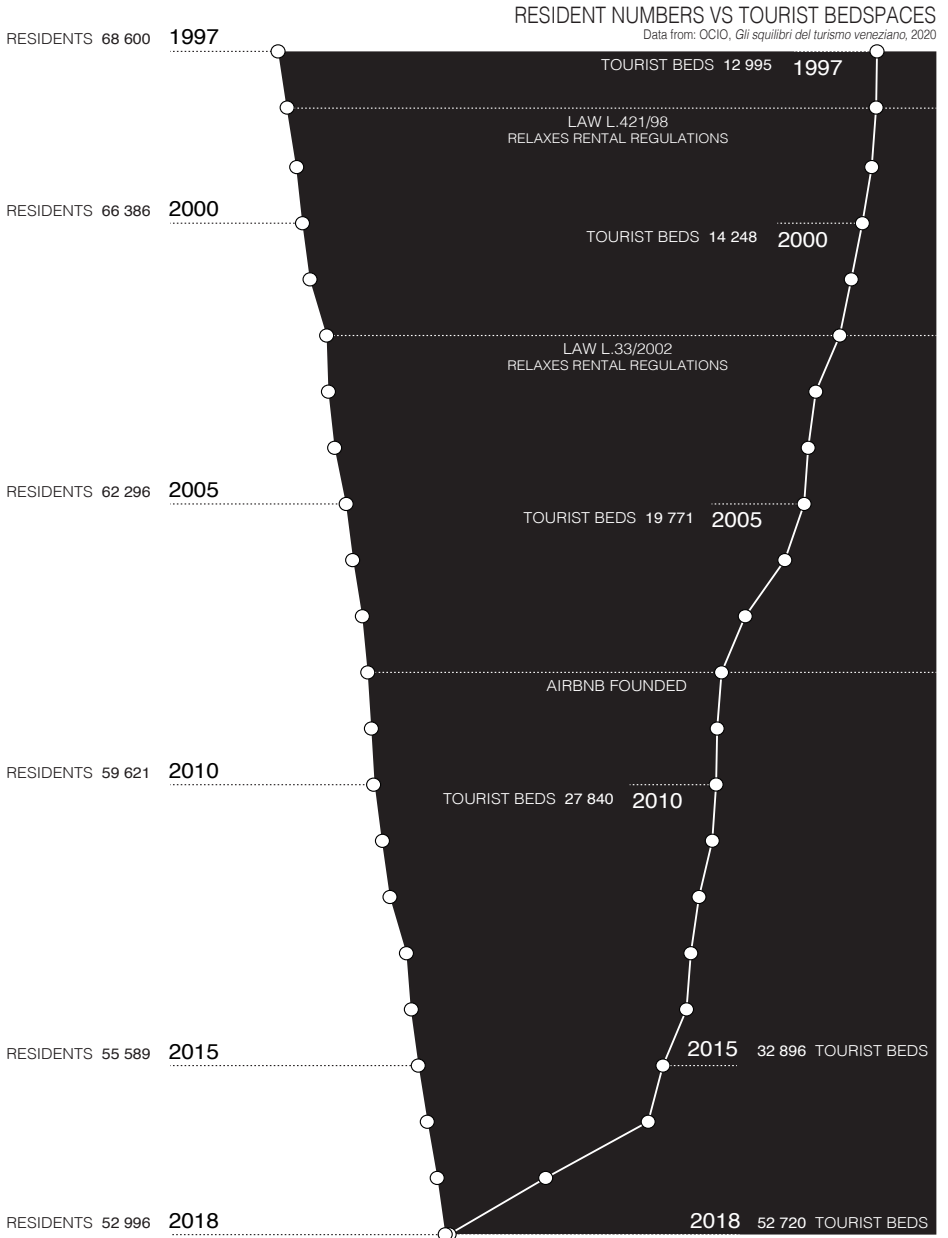


Figure illustrates population figures for the *città storica*. Tourist beds data is drawn from regional data which also includes the islands of Murano, Burano and Torcello. This has limited impact on the figure as the number of beds counted for these external areas is relatively minimal: numbering only 800 in 2019.

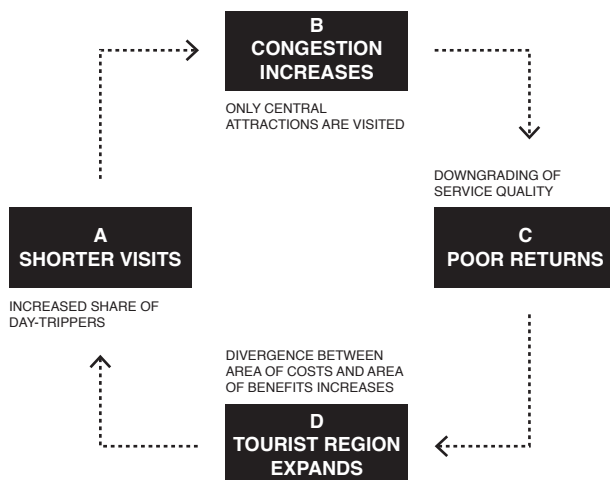
After the boom in tourist rentals in 2017 and 2018, the number of tourist beds exceeded the residential population in 2019. The residential population of the *città storica* is now 51,751 (as of May 2020).

30. The only available form of resistance was passive avoidance; the Venetians would voluntarily evacuate Piazza San Marco when Austrian bands played and boycotted the theatres. This was so successful that the Apollo theatres were closed due to lack of patrons. Plant, 2002, p.153.

31. David Harvey, 2003, p.10. The process which commodifies and therefore privatises the public realm is defined by Alvaro Sevilla-Buitrago as 'enclosure': a form of "spatially orchestrated dispossession"; 2015, p.1002.

32. Paolo Cacciari (former Deputy Mayor), quoted in Robert Davis & Gary Marvin, 2005, p.77. In a city where the majority of the inhabitants live in apartments, the use of communal outside spaces are critical to residents' quality of life. Giovanna Del Negro describes the complex ritual value of the *passaggiata* in modern Italian society. Swamped by the anonymous masses, the residents of the *città storica* lose ownership of their public social arena and a vital tool for the cultivation of *venezianità* (Venetian-ness).

33. Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019.



THE 'VICIOUS CIRCLE' OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Adapted from: Russo, 2002, p.167

The 'vicious circle' of tourism development begins when the growth of the tourism industry outstrips the capacity of a city's physical resources. This begins a cycle of decline. Shorter visits result in increased congestion in primary sites; the quality of services decreases along with repeat custom and prices rise to compensate for inflated costs. This increases the area of tourist accommodation and depletes the attraction of the centre, which in turn shortens visits. This spatio-economic dynamic illustrates the link between the expansion of tourism and economic decline.

The mechanisms employed by Venice's population to cope with the tourist bombardment today are remarkably similar to the policy of voluntary evacuation employed by Venetians during the city's period of Austrian occupation (1798-1806).³⁰ Swathes of the contemporary city (most notably Piazza San Marco and the main arteries leading to it from the train station) have been almost entirely abandoned to tourism, illustrating the industry's "accumulation by dispossession" of both the *città storica*'s cultural heritage and the city as a physical space.³¹ The "dictatorship of the tourist" consistently alienates Venice's local population, and the large-scale infiltration of local spaces actively corrodes the city's social fabric.³²

Tourism is an important vehicle for economic and urban development, but it can also be highly problematic.³³ Venice is a pioneer in this industry, but an unregulated market is inevitably open to exploitation. The administration's 'dogmatic' pursuit of neo-liberal policies over the last two decades has

prioritised private interests over those of the local population and paved the way for overtourism.³⁴ Sustainable tourism will not emerge in Venice without adequate regulation.³⁵ Instead of debating the relative benefits of various tourist demographics and hoping the market will begin to self-correct, Venice requires specific and meaningful policies from both the local and regional administrations to address the city's dysfunctional relationship with tourism. Tensions between globalisation and local identities are a key paradigm of the postmodern age, but the role of the government should be to bridge the gap between global markets and local priorities; to ensure that qualitative judgement and social sustainability are balanced against quantitative measurement, competition and price.

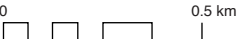
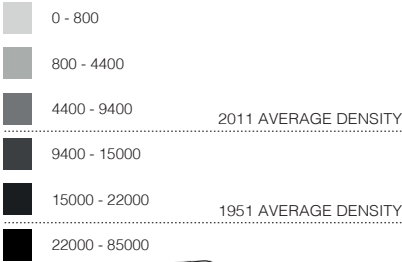
34. Salerno, 2018.

35. Nicolò Costa & Giudo Martinotti, 2008, p.60.

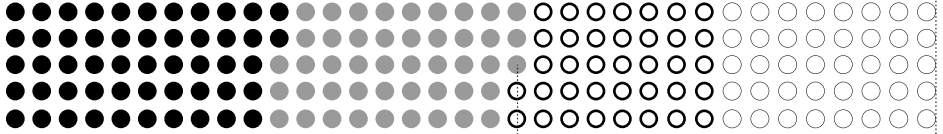
THE POPULATION DENSITY OF VENICE

Data from: ISTAT, *Censimento della popolazione e delle abitazioni*, 2011.
Città di Venezia, *Popolazione residente dal 1871 al 2019, 2020*.
Luca Pes, 2002.
Salvatore Settis, 2014.

NUMBER OF RESIDENTS / km²



100 %



30 %

52 143
2019 POPULATION

98 000
1631 POPULATION

135 000
IDEAL POPULATION

174 808
1951 POPULATION

The last 70 years have seen the loss of two thirds of the inhabitants of the *città storica*. The remaining population (of 52,143 in 2019) is less than a third of the city's 1951 population (174,808) and significantly below even the reduced population following the devastating plague of 1630 (98,000). While the population density of the 1950s did not meet contemporary standards of living, the ideal number of inhabitants for the *città storica* is cited as 135,000. Since 1993 the average annual loss of residents from Venice has ranged from between 470 to 853 (the latter is the total from 2019), averaging at a loss of 690 residents per year.



THE VALUE OF VENICE

*“If the city is the world which man created,
it is the world in which he is henceforth
condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, (...) in
making the city man has remade himself.”*

Robert Park, 1967, p.3.

Venice's image has seduced the global imaginary for centuries. There are few environments in the world which have been so avidly watched and jealously guarded, and the city is said to have 'belonged to the world' since the late nineteenth century.³⁶ Since then, the prominence of Venice within the global consciousness has fuelled the impassioned preservation of the city's cultural heritage, often at the expense inhabitants' needs.³⁷ This has resulted in attempts to keep the city in stasis, reserved as a site for collective nostalgia.³⁸ But while the *città storica*'s exceptional beauty is captivating, the precedence given to Venice's physical appearance fundamentally misunderstands the value of the city – and actively undermines it.

Cultural heritage is both fundamental to collective identity and a commodity with market value; it is not by chance that international tourism and heritage conservation have evolved together.³⁹ This duality can cause dissonance: marketable cultural heritage, selected as a product for the tourist industry, varies in character to that which is required to foster domestic collective identity.⁴⁰ The designation of world heritage (through organisations such as UNESCO) has been criticised as a method for disinherit local populations in favour global tourism.⁴¹ In Venice's UNESCO listing, the city is described as "one of the most extraordinary architectural museums on earth."⁴² But while the *città storica*'s physical form may bear striking resemblance to Venice in the eighteenth century, Venetian citizens live undeniably modern lives. This fixation with *The Stones of Venice*, over the living culture which built, inhabits and maintains them, is a key catalyst in the *città storica*'s residential exodus.⁴³

36. Plant, 2002, p.228.
During the conservation debate (which still largely defines our contemporary understanding of heritage and history) "Venice had the world for its audience, its own citizens were confirmed as a lower order." Ibid, pp.209-210.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid, p.193. Many internationally-supported interventions in Venice are purely focused on the conservation of tangible heritage: Venice in Peril (English), Save Venice (American), Venetian Heritage (Europe-USA), Comité Français pour la Sauvegarde de Venise (French), etc.

39. Tourism is the direct commodification of history and culture; J.E. Tunbridge & G.J. Ashworth, 1997, p.59.



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A city is not just a collection of landmarks, buildings and streets, but a complex tapestry of economic, cultural, political and social practices which are shaped by – and, in turn, shape – the physical urban fabric.⁴⁴ Venice is constructed from layers of socio-political context as much as it is from stone and brick; its foundations find their footings in myth as much as they do the mud of the lagoon. A city and its citizens are two sides of the same coin; the *forma urbis* therefore grows and changes like a living organism: adapting according to its inhabitants, while remaining true to its cultural DNA.⁴⁵ This is why emphasis on Venice's value as a museum is so damaging: it pushes the *città storica* to become a representation of itself, preserved at a specific point in time. A museum cannot keep a culture alive. Culture is never static: the word itself means growth.⁴⁶

While it is unlikely that Venice will ever become entirely depopulated,⁴⁷ the scenario is worth consideration as it underlines the fundamental importance of the city's local population. Without residents, Venice would cease to be a city at all: the *città storica* would be reduced to a commercialised carcass,⁴⁸ marketed as a historical theme park or a ruin. Concerns regarding the maintenance of the city's cultural heritage become largely irrelevant if Venice loses the critical mass of residents required to maintain the soul of the living city.

The dynamic between city and citizen was once explicit. Under the Venetian Republic, social structure was enshrined in law: each caste had defined socio-economic rights and civil responsibilities, and there was a strict process for the naturalisation of new citizens.⁴⁹ But in democratic times, and with increasing trends for residential mobility, the 'right to the city' is instead apportioned according to active participation:⁵⁰ those who engage with Venice, and who participate in its cultural practices, are fundamental to maintain the life of the *città storica*.

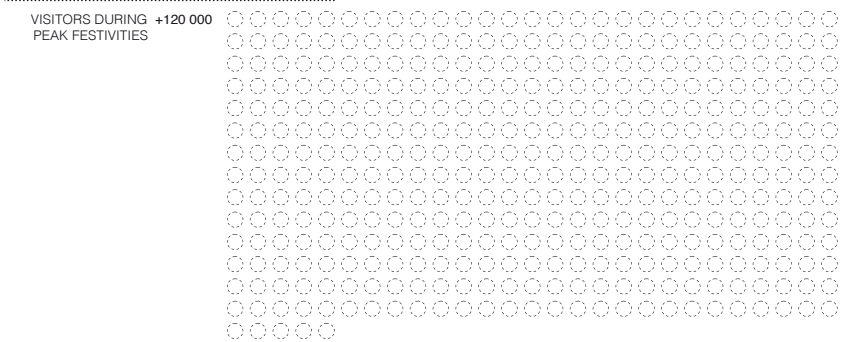
The coexistence of different social groups is a fundamental component of the city;⁵¹ active participation in a culture can be expressed in many forms.⁵² Venice supports, and is supported by, a spectrum of engagement. This ranges from the investment of a lifelong resident, actively thinking of the future of the city, to the superficial connection experienced by the visitor who spends

40. Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1997, p.26. Heritage produced for a tourist audience are simplified to make them commercially viable for those without a deep understanding of the host culture. Foreign heritage can only be accessed or appreciated via the tourist's own cultural understanding of place, history and society. See Ibid, pp.65-66.
41. Plant, 2002; Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1997.
42. ICOMOS, 1984.
43. Pes, 2002, p.2401; Halbwachs, 1980, pp.131-134.
44. Settis, 2014, pp.14-16; Halbwachs, 1980, pp.131-4.
45. Plutarch, *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance*; Settis, 2014, p.116.
46. Just as laws (or customs) are being constantly refined, re-argued and amended, culture is constantly renegotiated and adapted; Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, 1983, pp.2-3.
47. Pes, 2002, p.2428.
48. Settis, 2014, p.14-16.
49. See Brian Pullan, 1971, pp.100-105; De Maria, 2010, pp.25-30.
50. Term refers to the theories of Henri Lefebvre, 1968; David Harvey, 2003. The city is the product of collective work; it follows that those who contribute to its production have the right to use and benefit from it.

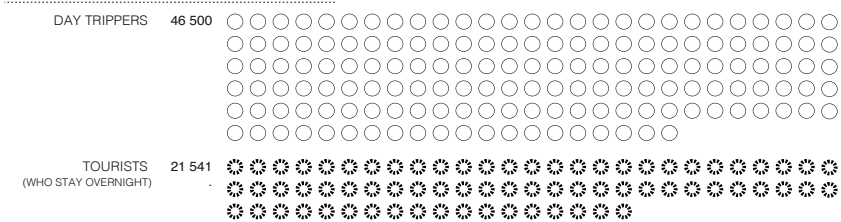
THE ASSEMBLED POPULATION OF VENICE

Adapted from: Giulia Foscarì & Piem Koolhaas, 2014
Data from: COSES, *Rapporto 141.0*, 2009, p.26
ISTAT, *Censimento della popolazione e delle abitazioni*, 2011
Fabio Carrera, 2016
Città di Venezia, *Annuario del turismo 2017*, 2018, p.15
Città di Venezia, *Popolazione residente dal 1871 al 2019*, 2020

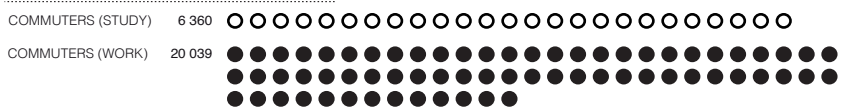
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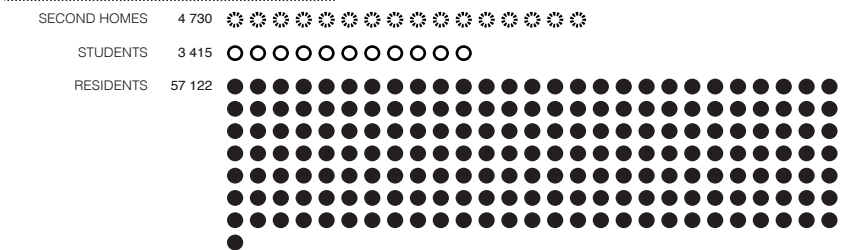
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91 606



65 267



188 041

TOURISTS

26 339

COMMUTERS

65 267

EFFECTIVE RESIDENT POPULATION

The figure illustrates the equivalent daily assembled population of the *città storica* and the islands of Murano, Burano, Mazzorbo, Torcello and Sant' Erasmo. The statistics come from a model produced by COSES in 2009; this is the most up-to-date, comprehensive study on the subject. COSES was disbanded in 2012. The residential population statistics have been updated using the same methodology to reflect the most recent figures (for 2019). The number of commuters (for work) has been updated using the 2011 ISTAT census data (was previously calculated from the 2001 census). The tourist statistics have been updated using Città di Venezia, 2020 and Fabio Carrera, 2016.

only a few hours in the *città storica* – and sees it as little more than an ornate backdrop for a series of selfies. The issue is not that these different forms of engagement exist, but the present imbalance: the scale of mass tourism has shifted the balance towards the superficial end of the spectrum. As one of the few cities in the world where visitors are regularly surprised to discover a resident community,⁵³ Venice risks becoming a city of tourists.

The dominance of tourism in Venice has actively decayed the plurality of the city,⁵⁴ eroding its resilience.⁵⁵ The previous chapter examined the extent to which tourism has not only depleted the population of Venice but degraded the city's economic plurality and damaged the social equilibrium.⁵⁶ In addition, the mounting resentment generated by the pressures of overtourism undermines the socio-cultural identity of Venice, as 'outsiders' are increasingly equated with 'tourists'.⁵⁷ Venice has supported high levels of residential mobility since the thirteenth century.⁵⁸ As one of the first truly global cities, the culture of the *città storica* is defined by diversity.⁵⁹ To flatten the cultural identity of contemporary Venice to include only its permanent inhabitants – and perceive all visitors as either an imposition or opportunity for economic gain – would reduce contemporary Venetian culture to "residues of original *venezianità*."⁶⁰

The outbreak of Covid-19 exposed the degree to which Venice's tourism monoculture has asset-stripped the city to the point of vulnerability. Restoring the (economic, social and cultural) resilience of the *città storica* will involve seeing beyond the image of the city to engage with and support the ancient amphibious culture which constructed it. Venice has worn many faces throughout the centuries. The early community was supposedly founded in the marshy lagoon in 421 by refugees fleeing the forces of Attila the Hun; borne from desperation, founded on hope and built by trade. Through innovation, imagination and ingenuity, these tenuous timber settlements became one of the greatest empires in the world. The exceptional beauty of the *città storica* is the by-product of this culture, a marketing tool for the city of merchants.

Venice is far more than its physical form; the *città storica*'s value

51. See Hannah Arendt, 1958; Jane Jacobs, 1970.
52. The argument that Venice should be reserved for those who 'properly' appreciate its cultural heritage tends to imply a certain socio-economic status and favours the *aesthetic experience* of the city. See Stephen Bleach, 2019; Katie Warren, 2019.
53. Claudio Minca & Tim Oakes, 2006.
54. The nature of a city is characterised by plurality, diversity and dynamism; Settis, 2014.
55. Resilience is as critical to city ecosystems as it is to ecology; Lorenzo Chelleri, 2012; Jianguo Wu and Tong Wu, 2012.
56. The social complexity of the *città storica* has become increasingly skewed towards older and socially elite demographics; Quinn, 2007, Settis, 2014.
57. This devaluation can include all foreigners and even the residents of Venice's *terraferma* districts; Davis & Marvin, 2005; Pes, 2002.
58. David Muir & Ronald Weissman, 1989, p.91.
59. Richard Sennett, 2011.
60. Pes, 2002, p.2429.
61. It has become clear that our future hinges on our ability to work with the natural world, rather than master it. See: Elias Carayannis et al, 2012; Will Steffen et al, 2015; WWF, 2018.



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is enmeshed in its existence as a *living city*. Rather than being considered an elaborate stage-set and a cautionary allegory for fame, nostalgia and excess, Venice presents a unique urban model; an alternative paradigm for the postmodern age as we rethink our relationship to the planet, and to one another.⁶² Modern cities around the world have been constructed as 'machines for living': atomised developments based on efficiency and individualism – and centred on the car. But we are not machines. We now know that these urban forms breed isolation and that technology is a poor substitute for human interaction.⁶³ As a pedestrian city, the *città storica* lends itself to the density of social interaction necessary for a cohesive community.⁶⁴ When analysed according to the criteria for a Creative City – *concentration, diversity, and instability* – it is clear to see why Venice has been such an historically productive and innovative city.⁶⁵ The *città storica* combines dense urban fabric with a high concentration of educational and cultural institutions, metropolitan diversity, and the dynamic instability of its tidal lagoon environment. The *città storica* is a key paradigm for both the historic and the postmodern city;⁶⁶ Venice's unique culture offers the world a chance to reconsider the kind of society we want to build for the future.

62. It has become clear that our future hinges on our ability to work with the natural world, rather than master it. See: Elias Carayannis et al, 2012; Will Steffen et al, 2015; WWF, 2018.
63. See Emma Harries, 2017; European Society of Cardiology, 2018.
64. Bonds which cut across primary social groups are critical to avoid polarisation and bind communities to 'place'; Henri Taifel & John Turner, 1986; Deepa Narayan, 2019, pp.59-61. These bonds are most commonly formed within the public realm through repeated exposure; Ash Amin, 2008, p.9; Talja Blokland et al, 2013, pp.127-8.
65. Gert-Jan Hospers, 2003.
66. Settis, 2014.

AN INTELLIGENT INVESTMENT

*“[we must break] the habitual pattern of
oscillating between palliative measures
and temporary schemes which we all know
to be ineffective”.*

Leonardo Benevolo, 1996, p. 82.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic brought most of Venice, and much of the world, to a standstill. But while a fog of uncertainty has descended on the present, it's important to think proactively about the future. This period of isolation is drawing to a close and visitors are already returning to the *calli* (Venice's streets). Our task now is to ensure that the *città storica* is reborn following this period of enforced hibernation – not merely resurrected as a facsimile of the former, ailing status quo.

There is widespread agreement with regard to the *città storica*'s critical issues, but little meaningful work which specifically articulates the policies and actions which could instigate change. Venetian governance is disconnected from the reality of the city and its lagoon.⁶⁷ In lieu of an in-depth understanding of the city's idiosyncratic dynamics, Venice is governed by policies which tend to be heavy-handed and replete with political motives.⁶⁸ The Venetians have long been aware of the city's contemporary challenges: Vladamiro Dorigo wrote extensively about the "decay of the city's civic heart", driven by depopulation, in the 1960s.⁶⁹ Since then, the resident population has halved.⁷⁰ The pervasive atmosphere of diplomatic inertia surrounding Venice has promoted the spontaneous market forces which generated Venice's burgeoning tourism industry.

In recent decades, the local administration has proposed various initiatives to address tourism in Venice, but these have amounted to little more than empty gestures, making headlines but no headway. Promised housing has not been delivered.⁷¹ Meanwhile marketing campaigns to spread the tourist load across the city have further eroded remaining 'local spaces'.⁷²

67. The current Mayor of Venice doesn't live within the Comune di Venezia (Luigi Brugnaro lives in Mogliano in the Comune di Treviso).

68. OECD, 2010, pp.24-25; Settis, 2014, p.134.

69. Dorigo quoted in Plant, 2002, p.360.

70. For more than 30 years, the city was sustained by the Special Law for Venice (1973), but this national fund was drained by the MOSE project and geared towards renovation efforts. The renovations largely succeeded in raising rents in the *città storica*, aiding and abetting real estate speculation, while development initiatives for affordable housing were focused on the *terraferma*, incentivising residents' relocation. Salerno, pp.13-14.

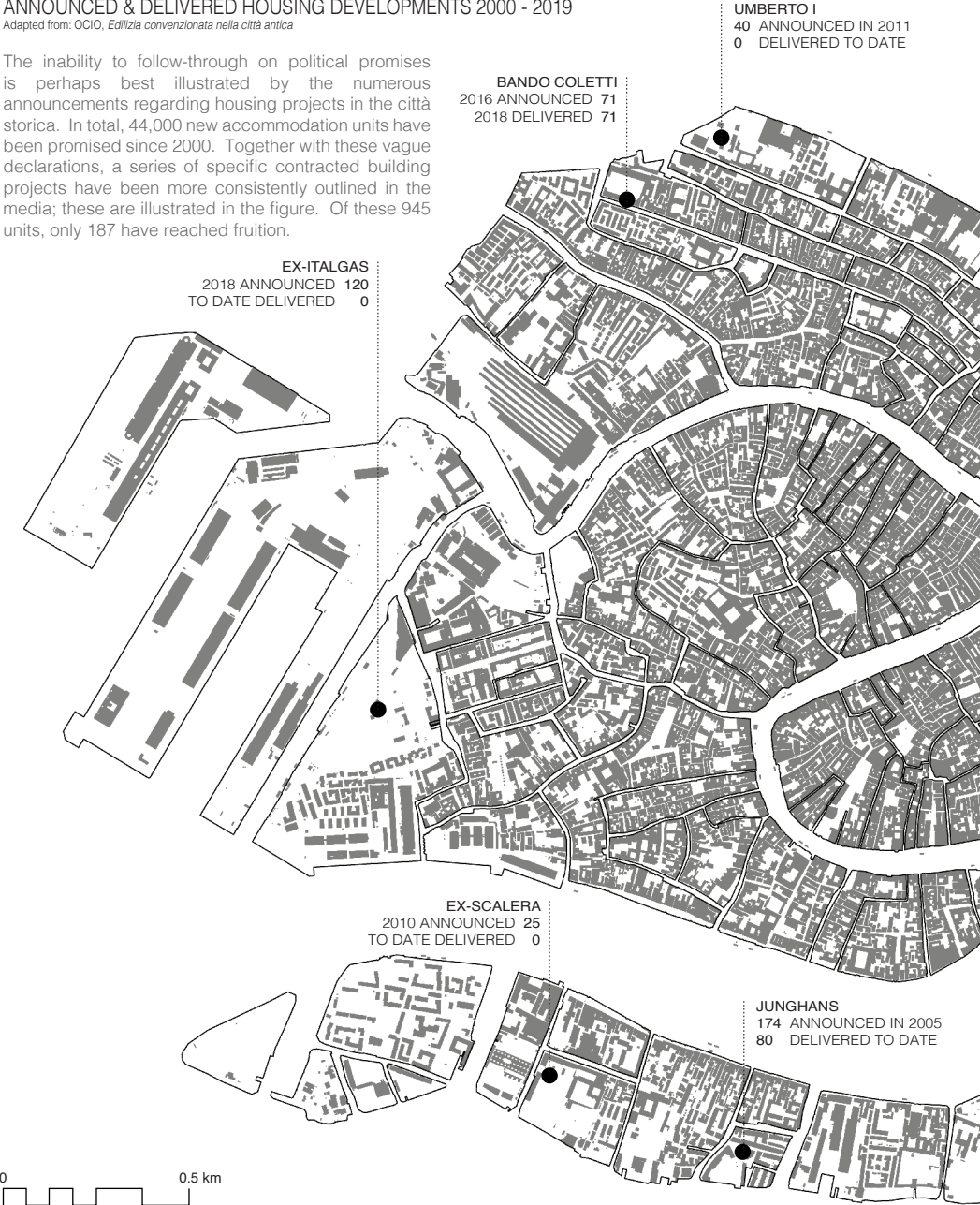
71. OCIO, 2020 (a).

EMPTY PROMISES

ANNOUNCED & DELIVERED HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS 2000 - 2019

Adapted from: OCIO, *Edilizia convenzionata nella città antica*

The inability to follow-through on political promises is perhaps best illustrated by the numerous announcements regarding housing projects in the città storica. In total, 44,000 new accommodation units have been promised since 2000. Together with these vague declarations, a series of specific contracted building projects have been more consistently outlined in the media; these are illustrated in the figure. Of these 945 units, only 187 have reached fruition.





72. Campaigns aim to distribute tourists more evenly throughout the lagoon, and potentially cultivate the (supposedly more sustainable) ecotourist demographic, but without sufficient legislation in place the *estuario* communities will fall prey to the same forces of real estate speculation and gentrification which have plagued the *città storica*.
73. Gloria Bertasi, 2018; Andrea Zambenedetti, 2018.
74. Minister for Tourism Gian Marco Centinaio quoted in *Il Gazzettino*, 2019. There is no viable plan for how (or where) to implement the tax; see Roberta De Rossi & Alberto Vitucci, 2019.
75. The declarations are not legally binding; their primary impact has been to convince international media outlets that the problem has been solved; BBC, 2019. See also *La Repubblica* 2013; Antonio Gasparini, 2019; Cathy Adams, 2019.
76. Joseph M. Cheer and Alan A. Lew, 2017.
77. Mimi Sheller and John Urry, 2004; Peter Adey, 2017, pp.167-207; Cheer and Lew, 2017; Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019, p.4-5.
78. The consumer experience can therefore be protected: if a restaurant is full, customers are asked to wait, not permitted to sit on other customers' laps. Excess demand is not negative in this context, but a sign of success.

The controversial turnstiles, introduced in 2018 to manage tourist flows, have inflamed local tensions.⁷³ It's unclear how the proposed tourist tax – an entrance fee for day trippers to the *città storica*, supposedly to be introduced by 2022 and described as “useless and damaging” by the Italian Minister for Tourism – will be implemented.⁷⁴ The successive declarations regarding cruise ships do not hold water (legally), and are therefore largely meaningless.⁷⁵ These hollow, palliative measures fail to address the root of the crisis: the overbearing scale of tourism in the *città storica*.

Venice is not alone: sustainable tourism remains elusive in many historic cities.⁷⁶ Contemporary tourism is a new ‘mobility paradigm’ (of social and spatial travel processes): a complex postmodern phenomenon at an unprecedented scale.⁷⁷ Tourism management within linear, synthetic settings (such as theme parks, museums or restaurants) is relatively straightforward: these places have bounded access and prescriptive models for service provision, engagement and remuneration.⁷⁸ But in a complex context, like a city, these techniques are not directly applicable: city metabolisms are dependent on unimpeded flows of people, goods and services;⁷⁹ ultimately, the EU judicial framework is based on free movement. Those who argue that tourism can be limited by raising prices misunderstand the true value of visitors to Venice and overlook the already inflated costs within the *città storica*.⁸⁰ However much a cruise passenger may spend in Venice, their environmental impact remains disproportional and connection to the city may be fleeting, while a visiting student may bring relatively little money, but actively engage with the city's culture and community. Attempts to restrict access to Venice risk undermining the *città storica*'s existence as a living city, crippling its economy and accelerating the pace of depopulation.⁸¹

Sustainable tourism will not emerge without adequate regulation.⁸² While other cities such as Barcelona and Berlin have begun to address the issues presented by modern tourism dynamics, Venice lags behind as one of the least regulated tourism destinations in Europe.⁸³ Instead of debating the relative benefits of various tourist demographics and hoping the market will begin to self-correct, Venice urgently requires specific and

meaningful regulation at both local and regional scales to both protect the remaining socio-economic mass of the city and cultivate resilience.

It is widely agreed that Venice's challenges could be mitigated by a competent and benevolent administration,⁸⁴ and there has never been a better moment to implement regulations to ensure that when tourism returns, it is sustainable. The Covid-19-induced lockdown has both exposed the vulnerabilities of the city and presented Venice with the chance to reset the scales. The official estimate states that global tourism will not fully recover in Venice until 2023.⁸⁵ Hopes that Venice's renewed tourism industry will be spontaneously improved are unfounded. Regional tourism has already returned: so many visitors came to Venice over the bank holiday weekend in June, hoping to see Venice devoid of tourists, that the bridge to the mainland had to be closed.⁸⁶ It is critical that this period is used to devise policies which stabilise the *città storica's* housing market and protect residents' quality of life. Properties which are usually short-term tourist lets have already flooded local accommodation forums,⁸⁷ but these are generally only available until the end of August 2020, when landlords believe tourists will return. A policy framework with incentives and disincentives to manage the short-term rental of properties, and the taxation of vacant apartments, is vital to meet housing demand.⁸⁸ Equally, planning policies which regulate retail diversity and safeguard key everyday services will be pivotal to "prevent the city from becoming a large souvenir shop."⁸⁹

Innovation is still at the core of Venetian culture and higher education is "one of the city's most vital assets, producing revenues, jobs and other intangible benefits."⁹⁰ Venice's universities are the last remaining large enterprises in the city unrelated to tourism.⁹¹ These institutions are powerful catalysts for socio-cultural renewal and are a lifeline for the ageing city.⁹² But a competitive student city cannot be sustained without a stable community; the lack of viable accommodation for staff and students is consistently highlighted as the most pressing restriction on the sustainability of Venice's university sector.⁹³ Student housing is particularly vulnerable to pressures from tourism due to the segmentation of the housing market and although Airbnb has been contacted

79. Adey, 2017.

80. Visitors have always been a central part of Venetian culture and to reduce this demographic to an economic value is damaging; Pes, 2002; Quinn, 2007; De Maria, 2010.

81. This is often cited as a potential solution but pushes Venice to become the oft-prophesized historical theme park. The tourist demographic is not clear-cut or easily defined: many of Venice's visitors are from within national and regional boundaries and it is possible to be a tourist within your own city. How would a proposed limit distinguish between those who are travelling for work, visiting family or friends, and those who are tourists?

82. Costa & Martinotti, p.60.

83. Jose-Roberto Perez-Salom, 2000; Settis, 2014; Dianne Dredge at al., 2016; Bertocchi & Visentin, 2019.

84. Settis, 2014.

85. ENIT, 2020.

86. Corriere del Veneto, 2020.

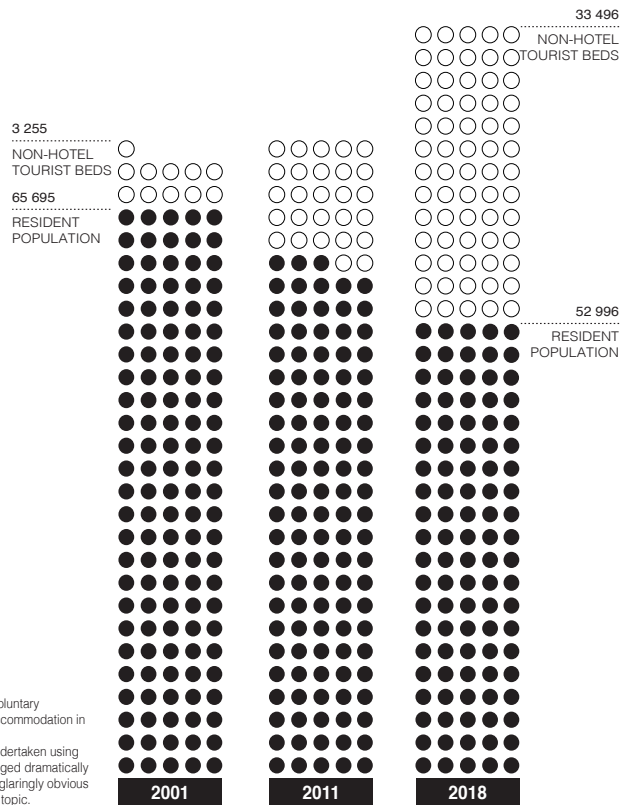
87. A trend seen across Europe as hosts attempt to recoup losses from the lockdown; see José-Luis Aras and Josep Catà Figuls; Feargus O'Sullivan, 2020; Ronald Quinlan, 2020; James Temperton, 2020.

88. Berlin has implemented a series of regulations which restrict the number of days entire properties can be let out per year, while simultaneously penalising landlords for leaving apartments untenanted for longer than three months. 2,500 apartments were restored to the local rental market in 2016 alone; Feargus O’Sullivan, 2018.

89. Bertocchi & Visentin, 2019. See José Rio Fernandes & Pedro Chamusca, 2014, for analysis of different planning measures which address resilience in urban retail.

90. Van den Berg & Russo, 2017.

to establish a system for apartment owners to rent to students this is, again, only a temporary measure – conceived from the viewpoint of the landlords rather than the students.⁹⁴ In recent years, both Ca’Foscari and IUAV have begun to develop new facilities on the *terraferma* (in Mestre and Marghera); the quality of the student experience is (hotly) debated and Venice stands to lose the benefits of a vibrant young community.⁹⁵



HOUSING IN VENICE

Data from: OCIO, *Gli squilibri del turismo veneziano*, 2020

The illustrated statistics have been compiled by OCIO, a voluntary organisation, dedicated to addressing the lack of viable accommodation in Venice. The last official study on housing in the *città storica* was undertaken using data from 2001. Since then, the reality of the city has changed dramatically and while the significant number of vacant apartments is glaringly obvious to the naked eye, there is no publicly available data on the topic.

The figure illustrates the population of the *città storica* (and therefore the number of bedspaces occupied by the local population) in relation to the number of non-hotel tourist bedspaces. The increase in total available bedspaces illustrates both the subdivision of appartments and that some vacant properties were successfully renovated due to the relaxation of policy.

Venice has a significant number of ‘invisible residents’: landlords who retain their primary address in the *città storica*, while living elsewhere and continuously letting out the property on short-term leases. Instead of paying business-rate tax on this income, landlords pay a standard-rate 20% *cedolare secco*. The estimated mean income for a landlord renting a two-bed apartment in the *città storica* on Airbnb is €33,095 (see InsideAirbnb); this would usually be subject to a rate of 38% income tax.

The *città storica*'s dependency on tourism will only be decreased through the introduction of sustainable, viable economic alternatives. Venice's tourism industry may have become parasitic and destructive, but it still contributed €3 billion per year to the local economy.⁹⁶ It is possible that residents who have managed not to be priced out of the city will now be forced to abandon the *città storica* due to the lack of tourism. There is a significant divide between those who rely on tourism to survive and those who are sufficiently removed to see the wider effect the industry has on the city.⁹⁷ But a sustainable future for Venice is not reserved for the minority who currently manage to live in the city and work in unrelated sectors.

To ensure a positive future for Venice, those who have made their living from tourism must be actively engaged in the economic re-diversification of the *città storica*; synchronising the needs of Venice's diverse stakeholders is critical to broaden the range of productive activities and employment opportunities.

We are here Venice have been inundated by media enquiries from all over the world asking how the *città storica* plans to address its very evident problems post-pandemic. It is clear that the city has a unique opportunity to implement adaptive and innovative measures to address these specific challenges. But the scope to reconfigure Venice is limited without engagement from the public administration. The strain of the current economic downturn is being felt most acutely by small, local businesses, low-paid workers and those without job security. If we don't wish to see widening inequality and the colonisation of the marketplace by large international corporations, Venice will require thoughtful, proactive responses to support diverse local businesses and the economically vulnerable, while making space for innovation and experimentation. Policies should aim to not only reinforce *città storica*'s existing socio-economic fabric but attract new residents and economic enterprises to Venice, foster subtle economic opportunities and build on the city's human capital. These could include measures which facilitate the renovation of abandoned spaces through temporary use and stimulate the occupation of vacant buildings; incentives to attract new residents; housing strategies to provide homes for the young people who work in the *città storica* but cannot currently afford to live here; and

91. Ibid; Russo & Sans, 2009. Together, Università Ca'Foscari di Venezia and Università Iuav di Venezia host a student body of nearly 35,000 (figure for the 2017/18 academic year); Ministero dell'Istruzione dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2020 (a); (b).
92. For more on how student populations bring about cultural change and social innovation, see Paul Chatterton, 1999; ; Russo & Sans, 2009; Van den Berg & Russo, 2017.
93. The most recent comprehensive study, (2004) found that 8,000 students wanted to live in Venice, but more than 50 percent were unable to find suitable or affordable accommodation; Da Mosto et al, 2009, p.18; Russo & Sans, 2009; Van den Berg & Russo, 2017.
94. Tom Kington, 2020.
95. Students who are forced to commute are unable to gain the same benefits from the city, in terms of library use, access to institutional facilities and the attendance of cultural and sporting events. This not only limits the cultural regeneration capacity of the student population but adversely affects their university performance, undermining both the students' cultural value to Venice and Venice's value as a student city. Van den Berg & Russo, 2017.
96. Kington, 2020.
97. Bertocchi & Visentin, 2019, pp.3-4.

tax incentives to encourage enterprises unrelated to tourism to relocate to the city.

If Venice is supported by policies which address overtourism, promote the growth of the local population and mitigate the economic fallout of Covid-19, a stable socio-economic balance is possible for the *città storica*. At *We are here Venice*, we are cautiously hopeful. This report is a foundation from which we are working to devise recommendations for specific actions to define a brighter, more resilient city. The fascination for Venice remains untarnished and with more attentive management by administrations connected to the local realities, the *città storica* could again become a hub of creativity, intellectual thought and trade. If nothing changes Venice will continue to be devoured by tourism, while the tides lap ever higher against the city's stones.

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