

YES, there is a future for Venice ...*

Is Venice dying? The problems the city is facing are immense. Its vibrancy is challenged even more by the relentless loss of its population, by thronging crowds of visitors, by the eyesore and menace of huge cruise ships in its harbor, by the transformation of the lagoon into a stretch of sea, and by a lack of political will to face these threats.

The increasing challenge posed by flooding may be solved, at least for a few decades, by completion of the MOSE system in 2018-2019. Yet in the meantime residents are fleeing the historic city. The frequency of floods, the pressure of tourists, the high price of property, and the opportunities created by extending the hospitality industry into private homes are all contributing to the exodus. Corrosion by salty water menaces houses and historic monuments, like the Basilica of San Marco.

The designation of Venice as a World Heritage site has immensely increased the attraction of the historical city, whilst cheap mass transportation and the diversification and growth of tourist accommodation in the historic center have triggered a massive influx of people that the fabric of this fragile city is unable to absorb. Mass tourism has negative effects both for permanent residents and shapes the kind of goods offered to consumers. Some parts of the city are unbearably overcrowded and others are becoming ghost neighborhoods, especially at night when the one-day visitors leave.

In 2005 around 15 million tourists arrived each year. Currently there are more 25 million. If there is no slackening in the current pace of growth there would be some 30 million tourists in 2020 and 50 million in 2030. An unimaginable scenario.

50 years after the 1966 disastrous flood, the works supposed to better control the tides and “acqua alta” are not yet completed in spite of the huge amount

* Fifty years after the 1966 Venice flood, the Fondazione Giorgio Cini held an international workshop devoted to the theme ‘Sustainability of local commons with a global value: Venice and its lagoon’. The theme was addressed by international experts from various disciplines: economics, ecology, political science, sociology, tourism, urban planning, and cultural heritage. These experts decided to assemble the main ideas and proposals raised during the meeting in this document, which is meant as a sort of ‘manifesto’ addressed to public opinion and politicians.

of financial resources put in that venture. And more financial resources will be needed for its very costly maintenance. Yet there is no indication which authority will be in charge of managing and funding its operations.

Even worse, the system of governance of the complex eco-system (the historical city and its lagoon, the “terraferma”, the port and airport and their related activities) is completely inadequate and does not encompass the entire set of interrelated problems facing this unique city. Too many different authorities locally, regionally and nationally are involved in managing the city and the lagoon. They have differing priorities and the coordination costs are huge with everyone able to veto decisions to address the vital issues.

Is Venice dying, a victim of its environment and of its own success? Many people fear so: the local residents who observe the decline and decay of their beloved city, the Italian authorities, the millions of visitors, and the millions more who may never visit but who still deeply care about Venice. Beyond the splendor of restored churches and palaces, beyond the magnificent façades the reality is dramatic: the city is becoming a kind of Potemkin village admired from a distance and from gigantic ships in the Giudecca canal by cruisers of modern times. The survival of Venice as a living and vibrant city is at risk.

However this bleak and dark assessment should not discourage all those who love the city locally, nationally and internationally from acting. There is still hope for Venice.

We, a group with expertise in ecology, engineering, economics, urban planning, tourism, political sciences, conservation, protection, and governance, believe that Venice could and should look to a great future.

It's time to stand up and fight for the future of Venice and not only for its past. Such a venture requires enthusiasm, energy, and ambition. Venice needs to develop a long-term strategy of resilience rather than a short term attitude of self interest and fatalism. Venice can rethink and reposition itself as a city of energy, potential and vitality.

Venice can draw inspiration from other cities around the world, such as Amsterdam, Bruges or Barcelona that are facing similar challenges of excessive tourism growth and environmental degradation to varying degrees. Money and regulations are important but they are not enough. *Protection is a necessity, revival is a duty.* This can be done provided that all concerned

parties join forces and look ahead with *innovative ideas, a collaborative spirit and imagination*.

As a group, we recommend:

- First, a strong commitment of all interested parties (local and national officials, international groups and institutions) to a long-term strategy of both *conservation* and *development*. Setting very clear priorities and making courageous choices is a political imperative.
- To finalize the high water protection works, including MOSE, and to implement a sound maintenance and management plan as soon as possible. Once in operation these works should make Venice and its lagoon among the best protected low lying coastal area world wide.
- Elaborating a strategic plan encompassing not only the city but also its natural environment is urgent. Venice in the past was not an isolated island but a jewel both protected by and dependent upon its lagoon and “terraferma”. This milieu must be reconstructed in policy and institutional terms.
- A full assessment of the value that Venice represents as a public good belonging not only to its inhabitants but also to humanity as a whole, and to explore the options to mobilize international support to conserve the city.
- A radical policy to revive the *centrality* of the historic city (after all, this is what visitors and tourists come for) while allowing *resources and visitors to disperse* onto the “terraferma” part (including distributing tourist flows better).
- The flood of tourists is an emergency but it can be better managed. As temporary residents, all tourists should contribute to running, conserving and developing the city by paying a daily charge. Venice is not a museum but a living city. It needs resources to preserve its heritage and the contemporary culture and creativity it supports. It is legitimate that visitors pay their fair share to the costly running and preservation of this delicate ecosystem. At present the tourism mono-industry rewards a few private beneficiaries while the costs are unevenly distributed on local and national tax-payers. A mix of positive and negative incentives should encourage cultural tourism and

longer-staying high spending guests, and minimize the damage to the city due to day tourists.

- It is important to go beyond the long-standing dichotomy between the historic city and its mainland (Mestre). The needs of the “two cities” should not conflict. The historic city will regain its splendor only if the mainland is also valued and “engaged with”. The solution to managing the historic centre lies in developing its surroundings. Some initiatives have to be taken: large scale investments in low cost housing both on the mainland and the historic city, well integrated into existing urban morphologies; a greater emphasis on explaining the ecological uniqueness of the lagoon in the tourist experience; investing in the infrastructure and landscape of the larger area around the lagoon; establishing centers of excellence in suburban areas; cooperating with other port authorities in the Adriatic Sea in developing the port of Venice.
- Venice needs new blood. Building for the future means first of all to bet and invest on the young generations. It must regenerate itself by engaging residents more and also by stimulating a new influx of permanent or quasi-permanent (students) residents.
- Bringing young people and families into the city requires a radical overhaul of present policies (or lack of policies) such as creating campuses in the historic city, an ambitious program of social housing and housing renovation, and allocating housing to people who cannot afford to buy or rent under the present market conditions.
- Venice needs to communicate differently with a focus on what it can do for the young and how the city can help them make their ambitions come true. It implies developing attractive research centers and creating incubators for start-ups and spin-offs. The underused spaces of the ‘Arsenale’, for example, could become a vast incubation center for start-ups connection to the universities and research centers.
- Venice can draw inspiration from cities such as Amsterdam, which built their strategies around three key elements: transportation infrastructure, the presence of world class research industries and attracting young people in the creative and technology industries. In setting up a strategy for the future, Venice has to value its cultural, natural and historical uniqueness. It

should fully exploit the resources from its glorious past in art, design, restoration, craft skills, maritime heritage and culinary traditions. These should be given a new lease of life thanks to the digital revolution and creative tourism. There is no need to look for “additional” economic sectors but rather to build on historic capacities that make use of the tourist flows. The city has always been the meeting point between East and West, South and North and it should aim to recover this vocation through education, research and innovation.

- Last but not least, a renovated system of governance is needed to manage such a complex and fragile ecological and cultural heritage. These governing bodies require the proper instruments to protect and develop this “local commons with a global value”.
- A national authority in charge of regulating and overseeing the protection of the main Italian cities belonging to World Heritage (Rome, Florence, Venice) should be set up and facilitate the fight against the negative effects of an excessive tourism mono-industry.
- Finally, a new institution, the “Greater City of Venice” should replace the present “Metropolitan City” whose powers are minimal and unused. A proper institutional setting should be designed and implemented to give the city, the lagoon and its natural environment efficient tools of governance that reconcile the values of democracy with the need to protect and develop a world public good.

Signatures

Bonnie Burnham, President Emerita, World Monuments Fund

Joan Busquets, Urban Planner, Harvard University

Charles Landry, Urbanologist and Writer

Simon Levin, Ecologist, Princeton University

Yves Mény, President, Scuola Universitaria Superiore Sant’Anna, Pisa

Charles Perrings, Environmental Economist, Arizona State University

Greg W. Richards, Professor of Leisure Studies, Tilburg University

Richard Sennett, Sociologist, London School of Economics

Pier Vellinga, Climate Impact Scientist, Wageningen University