

ARTICLE

How to Protect Art Cities from Overtourism

The Case of Venice

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Abstract

Overtourism in Venice has long posed a threat to the 'functioning' of the part of Civitas located in the historic Urbs. Today it has taken the form of a more serious threat to the 'structure' and vitality of the entire Venetian Civitas: the one that has expanded in the modern age 'beyond the walls' of the waters of the lagoon. Overtourism has displaced and is crowding out both residents and non-tourism jobs in historic Venice. The fight against overtourism may adopt one of two strategies: to take full advantage of a historic Venice reduced to a productive district of tourism only (max 90–100,000 visitors per day) or to combine tourism with both 'antibiotic' (max 50–60,000 visitors per day) and 'probiotic' measures such as reinvigorating the maritime port activities that have made the Serenissima a great power.

Introduction

There is overtourism and there is overtourism. What is interesting for Venice, and what has put it on the front pages of the international press (e.g. Horowitz, 2017), is the excessive pressure of visitors on a 'city of art' – an urban and historical-cultural tourist destination. It is an urban destination because the visitor is attracted not only by this or that monument, but by the city as a whole, by its 'form' and its 'functions', by the Urbs and the Civitas that animate it; and it is a historical-cultural destination because the fantastic evocation sought there is unleashed by the artistic and architectural signs inherited from the past.

Historic Venice shares the characteristics of an urban heritage destination with the pre-modern centres of other cities of art in Italy, such as Rome, Florence, Naples, and Milan, to name but a few of the capitals



of yesterday. What distinguishes Venice from them is that the expansion 'beyond the walls' that these cities underwent during the industrialisation phase of their development took the form here of an expansion 'beyond the lagoon': the lagoon that the Serenissima Republic had maintained and constantly rebuilt for defence purposes and to house the roots, the port and the arsenal, of its maritime power. The lagoon has, ambiguously, also become part of the site 'Venice and its lagoon', protected by the UNESCO World Heritage List.¹¹

Tourist carrying capacity (TCC): physical, economic, social

In cities of art, overtourism is measured not only in terms of its potential effect on the physical conservation of cultural attractions (exceeding the 'physical' tourist carrying capacity, or TCC) and the potential reduction in the quality of the experience of the visitor, a temporary user of the city (overcoming the 'economic' TCC), but also in terms of the potential conflict with the livelihood needs of the local community, especially those who do not make their living from tourism (the 'social' TCC) (Canestelli & Costa, 1991).

On the one hand, Venice has never had to worry about overcoming the 'physical' TCC, partly because the tourist experience in Venice consists mainly of outdoor immersion in search of unusual landscape views (in 2019, of the almost 20 million visitors to historic Venice, including day-trippers, fewer than 1.5 million entered the Doge's Palace, the most visited museum), but mainly because concerns about the preservation of tourist attractions have been absorbed by

1. the concern for the defence of the entire historic city against catastrophic floods, such as those of 4 November 1966 and 12 November 2019, and
2. the need to find the financial means for the restoration and maintenance of the entire Venetian built heritage, both monumental and minor, regardless of the use that would have been made of it.¹²

The 'primum vivere' monopolised the attention of Venetians and the whole world up to 10 July 2020, when the MoSE mobile barrier system proved its ability to protect Venice from the ravages of the sea. As a matter of fact, the MoSE's barriers are now also protecting Venice from the effects of climate change on average sea level, which leaves us safe for about the next 70 years,¹³ but call for a new round in the Venetian history of resilience against natural threats.

From 1970 to 2005, a whole cycle of restoration of the small private residential heritage was financed by a generous contribution from the Italian state.

Day-trippers versus overnight tourists

On the other hand, the possibility that the 'economic' TCC might be overcome became clear to Venice unexpectedly and traumatically. On the evening of 15 July 1989, a Pink Floyd concert was organised for the 'notte famosissima' of that year's Festa del Redentore, held on a floating stage in the centre of St Mark's Basin. Historic Venice, which at the time had 79,500 inhabitants, was overwhelmed by the arrival of more than 200,000 visitors. The shock of that night, amplified by the images of St Mark's Square disfigured by rubbish, sowed the seeds of a distinction, not always rational, between day-trippers and overnight tourists: the latter to be welcomed with open arms, the former to be rejected.

This conviction was reinforced in 1990 when, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Venice was 'quietly and politely' invaded by thousands of Eastern European citizens who arrived in Venice every morning on hundreds of old buses (Zannini, 2014) and left in the evening.

The idea that day-trippers were the scourge of Venetian tourism led to a refinement of their categories (day-trippers coming from their places of residence, those coming from the beaches of the Adriatic where they spent their holidays, those coming from hotel residences chosen in the vicinity of Venice to escape the high prices, etc.).

It is this rejection of day-trippers, which has been cultivated for many years, that led the Italian Parliament to approve a law that will allow Venice, from April 2024, to charge day-trippers an entrance fee: a tax that would discourage this type of visitor or, in any case, make them contribute to the city's operating costs.

This is a measure with effects that are not easy to predict and on which it is therefore necessary to suspend judgement. We can only observe, for now, that this entrance fee will not affect the other, more substantial transformation of both tourism and the city that occurred in the same years: the huge increase in tourist overnight stays.

Working and living in a touristic Venice

If the day-trippers have gradually complicated the 'functioning' of the city (the congestion of the public water transport system is the first victim), it is overnight tourism that has changed its 'structure'.

The building stock of the historic city – which by definition cannot be expanded, as it must be preserved as a site of outstanding cultural value on the Unesco World Heritage List – has undergone, and continues to undergo, a process



of 'crowding out' of both monumental and smaller buildings by hotels, restaurants, and tourist residences, to the detriment of offices, workshops, neighbourhood shops, and permanent residences.

For example, the number of hotel and non-hotel beds, which was just under 13,000 in 1987, rose to over 24,000 20 years later (2007) and almost 44,000 in 2017, the year in which the non-hotel sector, driven by the boom in shared accommodation, accounted for 58 per cent of the total (De Marchi, 2019: 175).

From 1970 to 2005, a whole cycle of restoration of the small private residential heritage was financed by a generous contribution from the Italian state.

This recent phenomenon of shared accommodation, which has affected the existing housing stock throughout the historic city (but also beyond), has only accelerated and worsened a phenomenon that has been observed for some time and can be logically explained in terms of the difference in reserve prices between tourist and non-tourist buyers or tenants of a given quantity (Prud'homme, 1986) of unmodifiable property.

All these phenomena are closely linked to the decrease in the population of the historic centre: the 170,000 inhabitants of the early 1950s are now fewer than 50,000, with a constant linear decline over 70 years.

City of art or a city of life?

However, in order not to place too much blame on the tourism sector, we must not forget two other phenomena: one physiological and the other pathological.

The physiological one is that the 'exodus' from the historical centre in the 1960s had to do with the redistribution of the population between the centre and the periphery of a city that was expanding 'beyond the walls' of the lagoon, driven by the industrial development on the lagoon edge in Marghera (Costa, Dolcetta, & Toniolo, 1972).

The pathological issue is that, from those years onwards, the historical centre was also abandoned by many productive activities, those of tertiary and quaternary services. This is due to the poor accessibility of the lagoon settlements, the result of transport technologies (a single railway and road bridge over the lagoon and a public transport system in the lagoon entrusted to nineteenth-century vaporettos) that did not want to be updated;¹⁴ and the port and logistics activities, hampered by a disproportionate – and culturally incorrect – interest in the intangibility of a lagoon built not by nature but by the Venetians over the centuries (Rinaldo, 2009).

In short, the tourist 'conquest' of the historical Urbs, its tendency to be reduced to a productive district only for tourism and 'liberated' from inhabitants and from any activity not functional to the attraction of visitors, can be explained by the charm that the tourist destination of Venice exerts on the whole world, but it has been favoured by the weakness of the demand for alternative non-tourist uses. At the end of the 1970s, we thought that the historical centre of Venice, after the downsizing of the industry located in Marghera, was destined, not unlike the centres of Milan, Florence, and Rome, to be transformed into the business district of the great metropolitan Venice that was being formed – the Caput of the region, Veneto and beyond, which would become a protagonist on the scene of Italian industrial and post-industrial development (Costa, 2019).

The future of Venice: two 'scenario-objectives'

Since we cannot rewind history, it is clear that the future of Venice, both the historical centre and the broader, functional area in which today's Venetians live, requires the containment of overtourism. However, this needs to be achieved by combining 'antibiotic' measures (containment of tourism) with 'probiotic' measures (development of non-tourism productive activities), with a choice between two alternative 'scenario-objectives'.

The first 'scenario-objective' is to accept the current trend: to prepare to make the most of Venice as a tourist destination, embellished with cultural events such as La Biennale, which improve the quality of the visit and the visitors.

In this scenario, in order to respect the tourist carrying capacity, the physical TCC and the economic TCC, *but not necessarily the social TCC*, a level of daily visitors can be set and enforced that can easily reach 90–100,000 units.¹⁵ This level must take into account that the Venetian Civitas will then only fully express itself on the mainland ‘beyond the lagoon’, renouncing the transformation of the historic centre into modern forms other than those of tourist reception. This hypothesis punishes the local community but pleases the international one, which, as UNESCO de facto claims, only expects Venice to preserve the historical Urbs in order to show it tomorrow to visitors from all over the world. The contemporary Civitas is only a more or less useful accident, to be endured if it is functional for preservation and visitation.

The second ‘scenario objective’ is to maintain a share of inhabitants and non-tourist productive activities in the historic centre, which would thus not lose the characteristics of urban liveability due to the presence of a part of a Civitas fully integrated with the rest of the wider functional Venetian community.

This is a much more complex project, in part because it is forced to contrast the development path represented by the first scenario-objective.

Setting the conditions for a revitalising strategy

There are two sine qua non conditions that give credibility to this scenario-objective.

The first is the ‘antibiotic’ one of a carrying capacity limit set at a maximum of 50–60,000 visitors per day, to be kept dynamically equal to, or less than, the sum of residents and non-tourist employees in the historic centre (Costa, 2022). This limit would be reached gradually by a ten-year programme to facilitate the reduction of tourist beds and catering places and related services.

The second is the approval of the use of the lagoon for productive purposes capable of generating income comparable to that of tourist activities. This means strengthening Venice’s port and logistics activities at the scale of the Upper Adriatic integration so as to reintroduce the port of Venice into the global supply chains of Italian and European interest.

UNESCO should perceive such a hypothesis as functional for the revitalisation of a Civitas that maintains and animates the Urbs that it wants to hand down to posterity.

A project that would make the veins in your wrists tremble, but the only one that would entrust to the local community,

above all, the responsibility of keeping historical Venice alive, endowing it with a future role that would free it from the fate of ‘living only on the genius of its fathers and the curiosity of foreigners’ (Papini, 1913).

For, in the words of Shakespeare’s Coriolanus, ‘what is a city but its people?’¹⁶

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ENDNOTES

Section 2

- 11 The ambiguity stems from the erroneous idea that the Venice lagoon is a natural environment to be protected, rather than an artificial environment – because it is maintained by the Venetians with colossal investments – functional for the exercise of the activities on which the Serenissima has gradually built its fortunes.
- 12 This is famous the rhetorical question formulated in 1969 by UNESCO in its Report on Venice: 'Which Maecenas can maintain an historical and artistic heritage of such a magnitude?'
- 13 In 70 years' time, the tidal frequencies that require the lifting of the MoSE will be such as to transform the moveable barriers into a dam that will always be closed. By that date (but we need to work on it now) it will be necessary to find a new form of protection for the Urbs as well. There is nothing new in the thousand-year history of Venetian resilience, of the defence of Venice and its lagoon from the forces of nature.
- 14 A sublagoon metro project, after several previous attempts, came to its declaration of public interest in 2004 but was not followed up.
- 15 On the night of the Redeemer's Feast 2023, Venice managed to welcome the same 200,000 visitors who had overwhelmed it on Pink Floyd's Night of the Redeemer.
- 16 William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, Act 3, Scene 1.