

TOURISMIFICATION IN VENICE (ITALY): A STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF MASS TOURISM ON A HISTORIC CITY BUILT ON A LAGOON ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse the tourism-driven gentrification process of tourismification using the most recent literature and the case study of Venice (Italy). First will be analysed the recent history of the city to better understand why and how this phenomenon outburst in the initial stages, and then data will be analysed to understand which implications this phenomenon can have economically, socially, and culturally speaking, and what should a strategy consider dealing with this issue.

Keywords: Tourism; tourismification; Venice; gentrification; economic development; touristic development.

Turismificación en Venecia (Italia): estudio sobre los efectos del turismo masivo en una ciudad histórica construida en una isla-laguna

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el proceso de gentrificación de la turificación ejercido por el turismo utilizando la literatura más reciente y el estudio de caso de Venecia

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(Italia). Primero se analizará la historia reciente de la ciudad para comprender mejor por qué y cómo este fenómeno se desarrolló en las etapas iniciales, y luego se analizarán los datos para comprender qué implicaciones puede tener este fenómeno a nivel económico, social y cultural y cuáles deberían ser las estrategias para hacer frente a este problema.

Palabras clave: Turismo; Venecia; gentrificación; desarrollo económico; desarrollo turístico.

1. INTRODUCTION

Venice – in Italian “*Venezia*” – is a world famous historic, architectural and arts jewel, full of folklore and culture. But first of all, it’s a city. To better understand its most famous problem, tourism (cf. Russo and Di Cesare, 2004; Zanon, 2000; Settis, 2014; Salerno, 2018; Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019), it’s necessary to understand the causes that led to the rise of the phenomenon of *tourismification* – a gentrification process triggered by tourism activities, also known as *touristification* – in this peculiar city. To understand its implication will be analysed its recent history acquainting about the main demographic movements and economic changes that defined the city in its modern era, learning about the depopulation the city is experiencing since 1970s and the process that led to the current tourism-based economy. This data will be put in the context of the most recent literature regarding this issue to study the negative externalities the city is experiencing, like the continuous depopulation, the change in the retail offering to please tourists, and the rise in accommodation offering. The importance of mitigating or reverting these trends towards a sustainable form of tourism for the good of the inhabitants, and therefore the city itself, will be highlighted. Lastly, the most recent tourism policies applied in the city to achieve this goal will be presented.

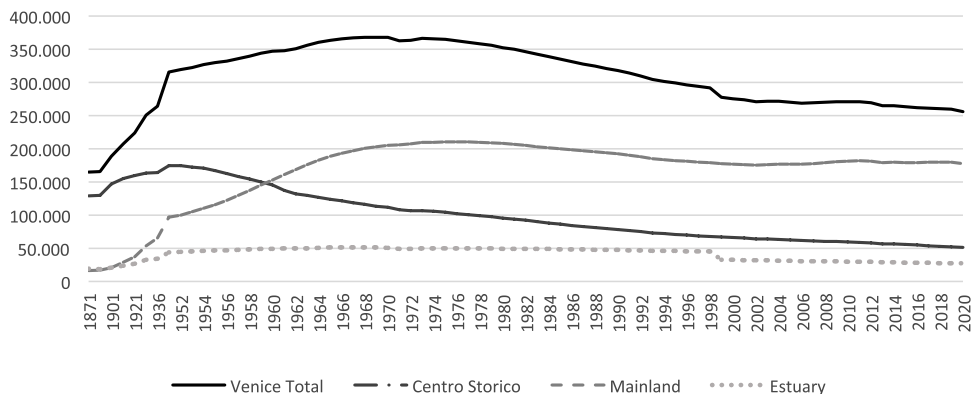
2. MODERN HISTORY OF VENICE

The 20th century started with after-effects caused by the fall of the *Repubblica di Venezia* (Republic of Venice): the harbour, hub of the local economy, started to reduce its functionality, also because of the change in the bottom of the lagoon. This resulted in a series of connected effects which lowered the ability to trade, and consequently the welfare of Venice’s citizens. All the structural solutions made to overcome this situation moved the hypothetical centre of the city toward the mainland, changing the balance of the city: this created the conditions for the creation of Marghera (in the 1920s, with his own harbour built in 1917) and the rest of Venice on the mainland through the annexation of the city centres already present (Zanon, 2000; Salerno, 2018). Because of this move the importance of some areas of insular Venice decreased to the point of being considered almost peripheral to the city as a whole. Thanks to the reinvigorated local industrial sector on the mainland and the need for new workers, Venice continued to attract new citizens. Despite this, the morphological structure of the city acted as a bottleneck to the city’s growth. As stated by the Statistics Office of the City in 1921:

“[...] the obstacles that have so far prevented the rapid flourishing of Venice must be sought above all in the lack of large building areas, which allow the rise of industries and the construction of houses, and in the lack of rapid, economic means of communication between Venice and the Mainland and between the various districts of the city.” (Ufficio Statistico del Comune di Venezia quoted in Zanon, 2000)

This quote highlights how moving towards the mainland was seen as the best choice to make the city grow again. Despite the original idea, this project failed to reduce demographic pressure and social tensions caused by the overcrowded city: inhabitants of the Venice isle (“*Centro Storico*”, in Italian) grew until 1951, with the peak population of 175.000 units (Fig. 1), thanks to the favourable life conditions during the war, but after that – in the post-war crisis – inhabitants fled from *Centro Storico* to the mainland, creating a fertile situation for the real estate market in the 1970s (Zanon, 2000). This also happened thanks to the regional law for the 1966’s post-flooding reconstruction¹. The population displacement opened the way to the *capital’s secondary circuit* (Lefebvre, 1974) – real estate speculation thanks to the *rent gap* (Smith, 1996) – in two different occasions: the first one, when new houses and infrastructures were built on the mainland on inexpensive land; the second one, when the financial capital entered undisturbed in the neglected *Centro Storico* with hotels and luxury firms (Agostini, 2015). Since then, local activities like shops, craftsmen’s workshops, public services etc. continued closing and moved from *Centro Storico* to mainland, where there were more request and accessibility was (and still it is) higher (Zanon, 2000).

Figure 1
VENICE’S DEMOGRAPHY



Demographic trend of the City of Venice. In 1999 Cavallino-Treporti detached from Venice municipality becoming an autonomous one (Own elaboration on data from Comune di Venezia, 2020).

¹ Legge 16 aprile 1973, n° 171 “Interventi per la salvaguardia di Venezia”

At the same time, in the early 1900s, the city undertook another development strategy to differentiate its offer: in 1895 was held the first International Arts Exposition by *La Biennale di Venezia*² that increased and diversified the flow of tourists coming to the city. Before that, in the early 1900s, fashion for “*bagni salsi*” (literally: brackish water baths) broke out, attracting many tourists to the city’s beaches (Zanon, 2000). La Biennale could be seen as the first event used for transforming Venice in worldwide recognized city for its cultural relevance (Zanon, 2000). At the end of the 20th century, being almost emptied of its inhabitants, Venice’s *Centro Storico* was a fertile ground for the tourism industry, turning it into a “world famous tourist package” (Salerno, 2018:14). The transition was also fed by local government thanks to policies that encouraged the change of intended uses to boost local economy³.

3. THE PHENOMENON OF TOURISMIFICATION

The evolution of the tourism in the city of Venice followed the same generic path of every gentrification based on tourism exploiting but was enhanced by its physical peculiarity of being a city built on an island (Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019). This feature implied a very limited amount of available space for expansion, so displacement was even more harmful.

Extractivism is the concept behind the economies that profit from the predatory grabbing of someone else’s resources, nowadays intended as one of the economic mechanisms that move capitalism (Salerno, 2018; Harvey, 2010; Gago and Mezzadra, 2015; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2015). Tourism economies can be seen as a new kind of extractivism, with huge effects on urban transformations (Salerno, 2018; Colomb and Novy, 2016; Cabrerizo, 2016). These economies use established cities/places as the main source of wealth (Salerno, 2018), transforming them into the object of cultural consumption (Lefebvre, 1968). Venice, commonly known as an art city, is full of capital accumulated over time in the form of its physical assets (Salerno, 2018). This “dormant” capital can be awakened (Harvey, 2014), and this can be done thanks to the new labour engaged by extractivism (Salerno, 2018).

In the case of Venice, this phenomenon took place thanks to the mass displacement of inhabitants to the mainland in the 1970s leaving the *Centro Storico*, and concurrently its heritage (Agostini, 2015). The flow of the investments followed the rent gap, acting first on the unused mainland territory (in the 1920s, with the construction of Mestre and Marghera, the mainland part of Venice), and afterwards on the almost neglected established city of the *Centro Storico* (from the 1970s). In the first step surplus value was extracted thanks to the inhabitants themselves, with the new urbanizations. But the objective of the second step were the new users of the city, among which we find tourists (Semi, 2015). This second step consisted of investments in Venice that initiated a self-regenerative process: new users were attracted to Venice to allow surplus value extraction and generate

2 <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history> - “*La Biennale di Venezia History 1895-2020*”

3 Regional law *Legge regionale n. 11 del 14 giugno 2013 “Sviluppo e sostenibilità del turismo Veneto”*

profits, bringing into the city more capital that subsequently was invested in more urban transformations to accommodate even more new users, with the purpose of allowing the extraction of further surplus value. These changes – like the rise in hospitality industry’s activities (hotels and bed & breakfast) and tourism-oriented shops replacing local shops, activities, and services required for the everyday life (Salerno, 2018) – made the *Centro Storico* of Venice a lesser friendly environment for the original inhabitants who chose to stay in the “ancient city” despite the attractiveness of the mainland also significantly increasing housing prices. This *displacement pressure*, typical of gentrification processes, induced their move outside the revalued *Centro Storico* to the more affordable and accessible mainland (Mestre and Marghera) (Salerno, 2018; Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009).

What makes this kind of gentrification special is the identity of the new users of the space: the tourists. Tourists are citizen-like users “who doesn’t belong to the place, but essentially participates in it through consumption” (Ingersoll, 2004, 41 quoted in Salerno, 2018). Their presence completed the transformation of the city’s space into a good needed to be sold and consumed (Salerno, 2018). This marks the start of the commodification of the culture, being the space the crystallization of (local) culture over time. With the arrival of tourists “a sedentary population is replaced by an intermittent one, characterized by its very nature by relatively short periods of residence” (Salerno, 2018:8). The dichotomy citizens-tourists can also be viewed as Bertocchi and Visentin (2019) suggested (reworking Kavaratzis and Minoia (2017) and Novy (2017)): two different population sharing the same spaces and urban amenities who diverge in the ways of using them.

The displacement of the original inhabitants (true keepers of the culture – a culture that only partially lives in the physical assets of the city) contributes to subtract and alienate the culture from the city: Salerno (2018:21) highlights the fundamental role of citizens in the construction of the city:

“If the whole city is a common good, constantly reproduced by its inhabitants, the urban heritage is only the diachronic manifestation of that common work”

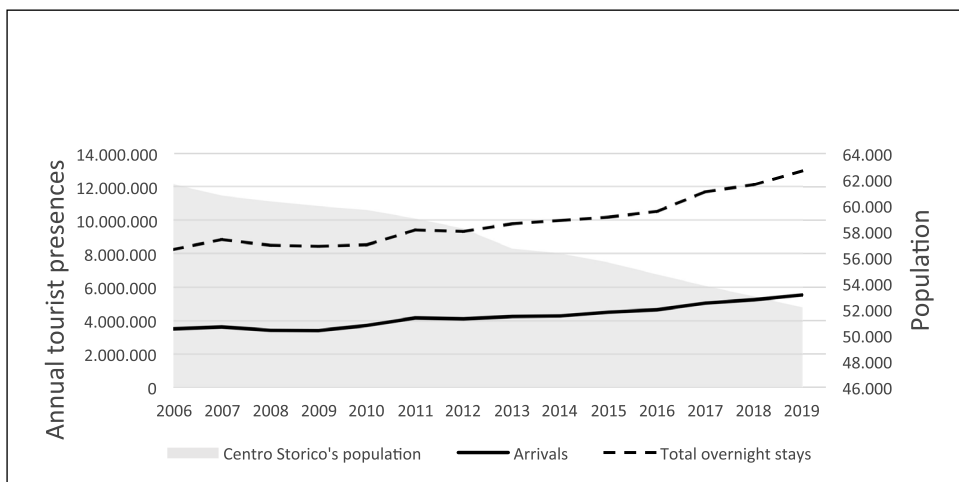
Fearing this emptying of substance (that helps maintaining the value and the usefulness of the city-commodity) the extractivists implemented a strategy trying to stem this loss: they tried to immobilize the city as it is, to protect it from crumbling. This strategy dragged the city into a paradoxical immobility, where the physical space couldn’t evolve anymore to accommodate the social evolution happening in these spaces. This freezing of the physical aspect of the city increased the pressure on the remaining inhabitants, that failed to meet their own needs, upsetting the social tissue (Salerno, 2018). This kind of behaviour triggers and enhances the phenomenon of *museumification*: museums commonly are the only legitimized place to preserve local culture and, complementarily, non-museum places appear to be exempt from that task. Russo and Di Cesare (2004) refer to this phenomenon as the *museumification of the local culture*. At the same time, museums aren’t places to live, so transforming a city into a museum involves excluding it from the circuit of living and everyday life (Agamben, 2005; Salerno, 2018). This process transformed what was once a living city into an open-air museum (Salerno, 2018): trying to rigidly preserve the city acting only on its physical aspects transformed it even more (Ingersoll, 2004).

Museumification highlights how the city now became not suitable to the everyday life and became a commodity (Agamben, 2005). The city-museum it's a form of the city-commodity, and the original inhabitants who still resists the displacement are “the simulacrum of the lost urban life for the use and consumption of new customers” (Salerno, 2018:10). With the appearance of the city-museum the morbid fascination the tourist industry has for the past becomes even more clear (Cutolo e Pace, 2016).

4. EFFECTS OF TOURISM IN VENICE

The possibility to generate big profits made Venice's economy almost rely only on tourist monoculture since the 1990s (Salerno, 2018; Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019) admitting 22 to 30 million annual tourists (Van der Borg, 2011; Lanapoppi, 2015), despite an estimated carrying capacity of 19 million annual visitors⁴. This number of arrivals leads to overcome the 1:1 ratio of visitors to inhabitants in some periods, triggering the phenomenon of *hypertourism* and the consequent *Disneyfication* of the city (Costa and Martinotti, 2003; Semi, 2015). This makes the tourists – through the tourism industry and firms – the actual owners of the space (De Rita, 1993) reducing the available residential space (Van der Borg, 2007). Bertocchi and Visentin (2019) report the presence of two parallel and opposite trends in Venice: depopulation of the city and the continuous growth of the tourism sector (Fig. 2).

Figure 2
VENICE'S POPULATION AND TOURIST ARRIVALS

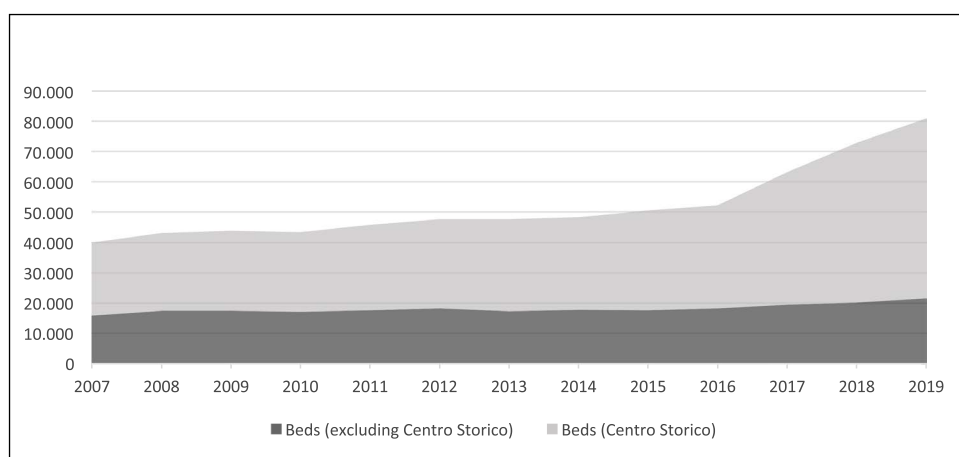


Representation of the two trends of Venice, the growth of the tourism population (not accounting the daily hikers) and the loss of inhabitants in 2006-2019 period (Own elaboration on data from Comune di Venezia, 2006; 2015; 2019a; 2019b).

⁴ [https://www.unive.it/pag/14024/?tx_news_pi1\[news\]=5268](https://www.unive.it/pag/14024/?tx_news_pi1[news]=5268) - “Venezia, oggi sostenibili 19 milioni di turisti l'anno”

Growth of accommodations for tourism purposes is the main displacement force since it actively removes residential area from the market to allocate it to tourists. Thanks to the attractiveness of profits and to some local policies⁵ that simplified the bureaucratic process needed to open new accommodation facilities, the number of facilities, rooms, and beds in the city – especially in the *Centro Storico* – is constantly growing (Fig. 3). In recent years the “parallel market” worsened the situation: services like *Airbnb* boosted the growth even more, thanks to even simplified and more profitable rental options. Out of the 6,321 listings in the *Centro Storico* on their portal, 81,6% offer entire homes/apartments (Inside Airbnb, 2019).

Figure 3
BEDS AVAILABILITY IN VENICE



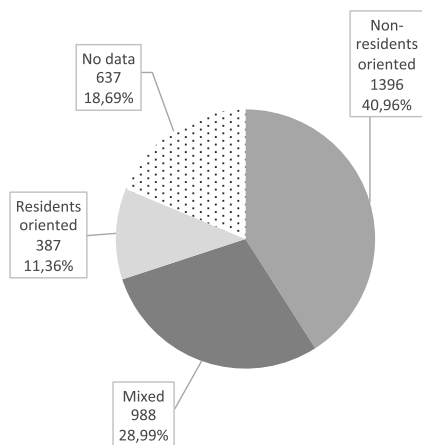
Increase of the availability of beds in Venice in 2007-2019 period. Since 2016 are visible the effects of the 2013's regional law regarding the simplification in the change of intended uses (Own elaboration on data from Comune di Venezia, 2012; 2015; 2019a).

The retail and services offering of *Centro Storico* is always more tourists-oriented: in the 1981-1991 period, despite the loss of 10.000 employed and contrary to the overall city trend, the number of workers employed in the commercial sector grew (Zanon, 2000). This trend creates a paradox where the city's supply exceeds the demand of its inhabitants while not providing the right amount of supply for some essential functions. IUAV (2019) University of Venice did a survey about the retail business (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) in the *Centro Storico* arguing the trivialization of the urban landscape caused by the supply of the stores mostly aimed at the tourists with low quality merchandise, consistent with the type of demand.

In fact, the tacit tourism strategy of Venice makes the economic supply adapt to a kind of customer – the *daily hiker* – characterized by limited knowledge about the product and

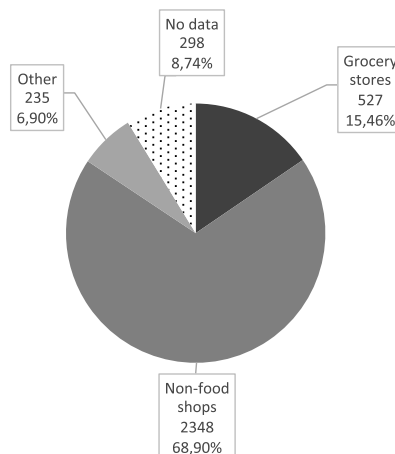
⁵ Regional law *Legge regionale n. 11 del 14 giugno 2013 "Sviluppo e sostenibilità del turismo Veneto"*; Regional law *Legge regionale n. 33 del 4 novembre 2002 "Testo unico delle leggi regionali in materia di turismo"*.

Figure 4
REFERENCE CUSTOMERS



Potentially two thirds of the shops in Centro Storico aim to tourists (Own elaboration on data from IUAV, 2019).

Figure 5
PRODUCT TYPE



More than one third of the non-food shops is dedicated to the sale of tourist-oriented merchandise (Own elaboration on data from IUAV, 2019).

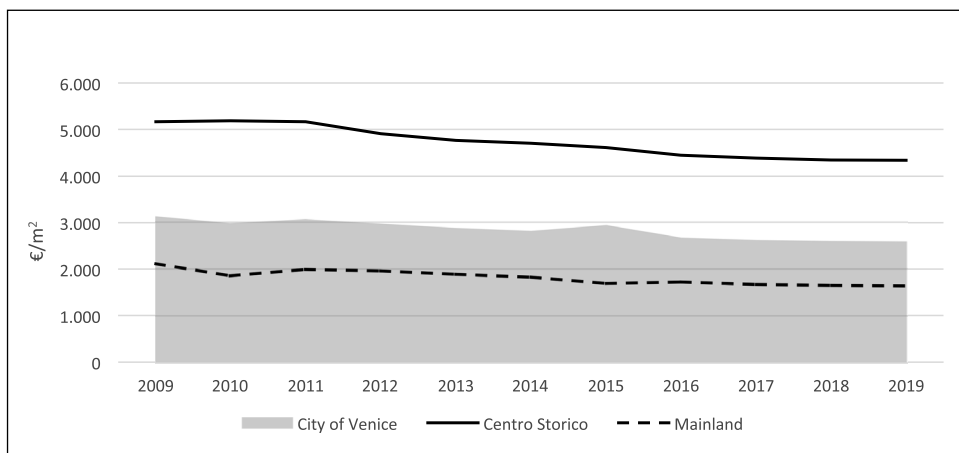
limited budget to invest into it. This remodelling tends to erode the city, transforming it in a mere product, and lower its value (Russo and Di Cesare, 2004). This kind of tourists, in addition, tends to spend their budget for accommodation outside the city to take advantage of lower prices in exchange for a relatively small increase in distance, easily an economically covered thanks to the mass transit transport system. The rise of this kind of tourist is accountable to the growth of accommodation prices in the city (Russo, 2002). Another indicator of this economic trend is the nature of the stores: grocery stores, despite only 5,11% being classified as strictly fast foods, are mostly dedicated to selling fast foods, street foods, takeaway foods, and beverages, offering products often inspired by local tradition (IUAV, 2019); this category is currently on a positive trend, with +159,9% new restaurants in the 2008-2019 period (Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019). Street food is also noteworthy because of the impacts on waste management (that tends to be complex due to the conformation of the island of Venice). Non-food stores have a strong predisposition to the tourist market too, with 24,01% being souvenir and glassware shops (being glass a traditional local product). Spatially, stores tend to place themselves on the main tourist routes (e.g.: *Strada Nuova*, routes to *Piazza San Marco* via *Campo San Polo* and *Ponte dell'Accademia*) (IUAV, 2019) contributing to the marginalization – and subsequent abandonment – of non-tourist residential areas (Zanini, Lando, and Bellio, 2008).

Other than reduction of residential capacity, pauperization of economic offering in terms of retail shops and services, and reduction of the socio-ecological complexity (Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019) weakening the social tissue, there are more negative externalities related to overtourism, like overcrowded pedestrian streets (*calli* in Venetian),

overcrowded mass transit transports and increased garbage to manage (Salerno, 2018). The insufficiency of information regarding the tourism supply of the city causes the overcrowding of the main attractions (generally more accessible and known) and makes almost unused the peripheral ones (less accessible and known) (Caserta and Russo, 2002; Russo and Di Cesare, 2004). This is caused by the lack of cooperation and strategic synergies between the various cultural players (the “manufactures” of the cultural product) and the tourist-oriented players (the “wholesaler” of the cultural product) (Russo, 2002; Russo and Di Cesare, 2004; Minoia, 2017) producing simultaneously the consumption of the former and the neglect of the lasts.

Lastly, being a branch of gentrification, tourismification has influence on home prices. Despite being hit relatively more by 2008’s real estate crisis, *Centro Storico* remains in the last ten years above the mean price of the entire city and the mean price of the mainland alone (Fig. 6). The opportunity to sell, or even better rent to tourists making huge profits is one of the reasons that make inhabitants leave the area (Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019).

Figure 6
RESIDENTIAL SECTOR: PRICE PER SQUARE METER



Mean price, in Euros, of the number of normalized real estate transactions in the 2009-2019 period (Own elaboration on data from OMI, 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; 2018; 2019; 2020).

5. RESPONSES TO MODERN TOURISM IN VENICE

The pressure on inhabitants caused by tourism and tourists is high: a survey by Bertocchi and Visentin (2019) shows how a significant part of the local population embraces the idea of leaving its current home to move outside the *Centro Storico* because of tourism-related issues, underlining how the depopulation trend is not about to reverse soon. In the city are also present some associations, and committees established by locals to claim the right to the city which has been stolen from them by tourism and speculation (Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019).

In recent times the local government itself tried to cope and mitigate the tourism problem in a more active way. *#EnjoyRespectVenezia*⁶ campaign was launched to promote a more respectful approach to the city for the tourists: behaviours considered inappropriate like consuming food and drinks sitting on the ground or on the steps, or abandoning waste, are now sanctioned and explicitly prohibited. In certain days, the municipality organizes squad of inspector wearing a *#EnjoyRespectVenezia* uniform to actively monitor and suppress behaviours considered degrading for the city, sometimes enhancing the muse-umification of the space through an overzealous approach. In addition to the tourist tax, a new access fee is introduced, with an amount depending on the criticality of the day (with fee ranging from 3 to 10€/visitor). Electronic gates were temporally installed in critical places in the city for some special days, to try to restrict the number of visitors allowed at the same time in some areas. Local government also took actions to curb new openings of takeaway groceries. In 2020 was inaugurated *Smart Control Room*, a technological centre used for monitoring and managing the flows in the city using a more modern approach (Comune di Venezia, 2019c). The city also entered the S.LI.DES⁷ programme, to promote a more sustainable tourism in the Adriatic Sea area in conjunction with other four cities (Ferrara - IT, Bari - IT, Dubrovnik - HR and Sibeni - HR).

Residence is explicitly mentioned among the issues the city needs to deal with to achieve a sustainable tourism, with the project of several conventioned housing accommodations (Comune di Venezia, 2019c). During the 2020's SARS-CoV-2 pandemic outbreak, IUAV University of Venice made the proposal of renting, at a subsidized fee, to students the rooms intended for tourists use⁸: this was possible because the sanitary emergency stopped the tourism industry altogether, and IUAV University saw in this an opportunity to emphasize the right to the city.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Lack of information about – and consequent lack of preparedness for managing – the tourism in the early days, and the uniqueness of the urban morphology of Venice have contributed to the arise of the phenomenon of tourismification, that nowadays is spoiling the city and its culture. Since cultural tourism became a main income in the economy of the city it's now mandatory taking actions to preserve the integrity of the assets, otherwise the ability to generate economic profit will be definitely eroded, not to mention the immeasurable cultural damage that this could lead to. A change is needed to make the dynamics of tourism sustainable (Russo and Di Cesare, 2004). According to Argan (1954) and Cederna (1956) to preserve the true essence, and therefore the value, of cities it's necessary preserving the original intended uses for their spaces. Any action will have to consider the living nature of the city: museumification invalidates the right to the city for its citizens, preventing the implementation of further modifications to the physical space according to their needs (Gregotti, 2012). Settis (2014:53) pointed out how the freedom

6 <https://www.comune.venezia.it/en/content/comportamenti-vietati> - "*Forbidden behaviour*"

7 <https://www.comune.venezia.it/it/content/slides> - "*Slides*"

8 http://www.iuav.it/NEWS---SAL/comunicati/2020/Case-a-Venezia.doc_cvt.htm - "*Case a Venezia, una proposta dell'Università Iuav*"

of transformation is fundamental for the objective of preservation, because “tradition is also a continuous renewal”. To achieve this, it’s necessary to stop using Venice and its traditions as a showpiece (Mazzariol, 1969).

Venice it’s a victim of its own success: the increase of tourism industry beyond the city’s boundaries made increasingly more external stakeholders benefits from Venice’s tourist fame. Being so disconnected from the city, this kind of player don’t have interests in maintaining a healthy city as long they can pull out even more economic revenue (Russo and Di Cesare, 2004). Salerno (2018) highlights how in this kind of economies only the losses are socialized, while the gains tend to be centralized and, in the Venice’s case, removed from the city in an extractivist manner (Russo, 2002).

Culture can be capitalized not only selling out the city to the daily hikers, but instead attracting ideas, financial capital, and wealth to renovate the city in a healthier way and adapt it to the modern era (Russo and Di Cesare, 2004). Culture can be the joint between local and global economies, connecting a model based on a physical world to a new model oriented towards flows and information (Castells, 1996; Russo and Di Cesare, 2004), based on immaterial products that affects the material world (Salerno, 2018; Gorz, 2003): “(...) the production space tends to blend in with the urban space. (...) In other words, the production of the common is nothing more than the life of the city itself.” (Negri and Hardt, 2010, 253 quoted in Salerno, 2018). Cities should be the places where a new kind of human species – the *homus novus* (literally: “new man”) – should be born (Russo and Di Cesare, 2004), and culture should be the vector of this transformation. But to achieve that, cities must be kept alive (Minoia, 2017) and full of culture. “Opposing the tourismification of historic [urban] centres ultimately mean affirming that the municipality that built and inhabits them has not stopped being able to produce [values, culture and assets], and that its capability of taking care of its assets has the ability to oppose the forces that push in the direction of its expropriation.” (Salerno, 2018:21).

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