Venice Planning Topographies: Towards a Comprehensive Space for Tourism

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Abstract: In Venice and in the whole Venetian Region, tourism has become one of the first economic powers over the last decades. During the years of crisis, tourism was virtually the only economic source which seemed not to show any recession set against the manufacturing industries and industrial production in general. Although the Venice Region has a long touristic vocation related not only to its historic heritage but also including winter sports, as well as coastal (sea and lake) and health (springs or thermal baths) resorts, some conditions have changed. Many changes have occurred since the 70s, considered the period of extreme expansion of spaces, in terms of buildings and infrastructures for tourism in the Region by expansions of large parts of villages or local settlements with the direct consequence of a huge amount of land use. Venice today faces peculiar conditions where the struggle for inhabitants to keep their residential and daily lives comes up against the huge power of private investments oriented exclusively towards tourism. According to recent surveys there is no longer accommodation for longterm affordable renting throughout the island. Many local associations have striven, through provocative actions and initiatives, in order to defend a specific right to live the city. Following this general framework, the paper aims at documenting how the city has changed in terms of physical space, modification in use of public spaces and the lack of administrative local policies to defend local inhabitants in the city. Meanwhile, over the last five years some studies and researches, especially in the IUAV University in Venice, have stressed the accent to reuse and recycle spaces for living or collective purposes, though local administration and public opinion generally shows itself to be unresponsive to these suggestions. Is there the need to display a reflection much more related to space and its specific role in a peculiar city like Venice? Especially during a new crisis due to the pandemic situation? This kind of work is oriented to read this phenomenon via a spatial lens through maps, re-drawings and interpretation of data coming from different sources. In order to show how the impact of tourism is apparently affecting the daily and ordinary spaces in the city of Venice, the study focuses on potential spatial planning initiatives towards a possible, hopefully alternative, scenario for the future.

Key words: mass tourism, mapping, Venice, urban space

1. Poorly Controllable Phenomena Venice, the Paradigmatic Study Case

Tourism, despite geopolitical, environmental or social factors, continues to grow to the point of becoming the first economic listing for the Veneto region featuring figures for presences of 70 million per year. In fact in Veneto for 2017 the tourist economy generated about 17 billion euros in turnover, up 6% compared to the figures for 2016, constituting more than 20% of the regional GDP, defying any comparison with the regular turnover of the more traditional regional economies such as agriculture, food, textiles and commerce. The Veneto Region ranks third among the Italian regions after Lazio and Lombardy, and if Rome receives €6 billion 743 million (+20% compared to 2016), the takings for Venice are 3 billions 769 million (+19.4% on 2016) [1]. The entire region is focusing on a massive tourism promotion campaign, seeking on the one hand to consolidate given traditional destinations, on the other by wagering on new forms of tourism, such as the rediscovery or reformulation of local traditions or the

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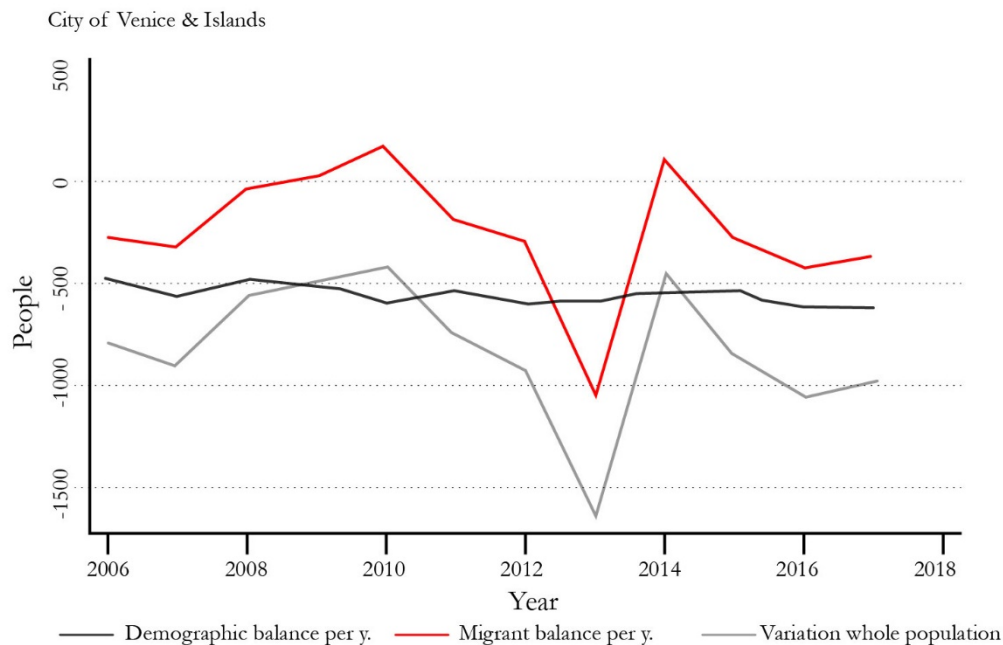
definition of new chains of relations with the latest trends related to food, wine and the experiential dimension of travel. It can be said that the years of the economic crisis experienced by the Veneto region were particularly tough and that tourism has been the constant driving force behind the forms of recovery in the region. The immense growth of the tourist phenomena [2] which has involved parts of the planet, until recently considered of little to no interest, has been even more extensive in Venice, producing effects hitherto unseen in the city throughout its millennial history. The history of Venice, made up of an inclusive approach and a substantial openness towards the new populations who came there to work, trade or simply to visit the city, today seems to have come to an end. More and more people are experiencing conditions of intolerance, annoyance and closure towards a mass tourism that leads not only to a distortion of the city layout, but above all to that of the life of those who live or work there. One is faced with a constant paradox that never seems to be resolved and that sees on the one hand a tourist demand that is constantly growing and on the other a contraction of the city in   terms of it residential, work and service offer, compelling residents-users of the city to adapt to forms of precarious housing, which fall far short of defining Venice as an ideal city in which to live. The policies of local administration also seem to be not up to the task of tackling a problem that only apparently concerns the island city of Venice but which has actually taken on a scale that encompasses the entire territory. If inscribed within the Venetian metropolitan system, the island city seems to suffer from a tourist pressure that does not only concern the historical boundaries of the city (Venice and Mestre) but also and above all neighboring areas, inadequately infrastructured and equipped to receive and tackle modern tourism. In fact, this becomes the result of phenomena that see contemporary society relate to a global system in which tourists no longer know where their boundaries

lie, nor can they safely identify the center from the periphery or outskirts. The image of the territory loses its external margins and its internal hierarchies and the subject is merely left with his or her own interpretation of reality, to build itineraries and look for goals and things to achieve [3]. The tourist destination moves from the margins of a space-time system to which the subject belongs (the coastlines, the deserts, the mountain ranges, the historical matrices, the frontiers of the future) to places endowed with specific and autonomous meanings such as given neighborhoods and locations attractive from a predominantly economic point of view, but not entirely associated with quality or spatial value. Each place becomes a potential object for drawing the tourist's gaze, in a sort of global competition between local spaces, each of which tending to accentuate its own characteristics and enhance its own image, in the context of complex tourist regions, capable of offering inexhaustible possibilities of choice and experience. Thus the tourist space expands beyond the specialized areas of the historic city of Venice, comprising its identifying and highly iconic places, manifestly emptied of their social values, involving the spatial resources of smaller towns and inland areas and designing new social and human geographies. Observing the tourist phenomena from the point of view of spatial modifications means identifying the characteristics of tourist movement, its territorial dimensions and the networks through which new strategies are defined, where new images of the territory and not least where new visions for the future can be built. Venice is a paradigmatic example of how, from a dimensionally contained city, the web of a tourist region with multi-purpose images is derived. Here physical-morphological features such as the sea, the lakes and the rivers, the large water reserves, no longer form frontiers but, through the major infrastructures for mobility (mainly road), become connective elements linking the resources of a new territorial subject — the more or less sustainable

excursionist or hiker — prone mainly to moving on foot or by bike but able to present themselves on the global scene [4]. The communicative rhetoric behind this image is very consolidated, using the term VENICE as an easily recognizable and acknowledged commercial brand. An example is the tourism section of the Veneto Region website that defines the region as *The Land of Venice*, or the advertising slogan of the Winter Olympic Games: *The Dolomites, the mountains of Venice*.

2. Looking for New Spaces for Tourists

In Venice, day-trippers not only exceed the number of overnight tourists but the sum of the two exceeds that of residents, now just over 52,000. According to official estimates, the figure for the resident population is destined to fall further, in line with demographic rates on a national scale. This is inevitably a symptom of a profound deterioration of the residential and, at the same time, tourist quality for the city. Yet some studies [5] underline how the migratory phenomenon from the water city of Venice is constantly growing (Fig. 1). This is associated with local and national reports that denounce daily situations of intolerance on the part of the residents, phenomena of vulgar behavior or lacking

City of Venice & Islands

Source: Margherita Belgioioso (Brunel University of London - Data between 2006-2018 from Comune di Venezia)

Fig. 1 The constantly growing migratory phenomenon outside the water city of Venice (Belgioioso, 2018).

any respect towards the city by tourists and basically a malaise felt by both parties. Clearly, they are certainly not phenomena circumscribed to Venice, even many other cities such as Barcelona, Amsterdam and Berlin are facing similar situations with profoundly different morphological, political and social conditions. The question falls on the understanding of how a city can adequately respond to a stress of similar intensity. The feeling is that we are progressively moving towards the acceptance of a form of development that continually requires resources, ground and raw materials and that above all is made up of services, which the diffuse urban forms of the Veneto have not been able to establish and absorb over the years. Tourist economies manifest themselves by requiring a large amount of space, accepting consolidated practices, linked to services, but also unpredictable ones associated with needs and public safety, which it is essential to guarantee in the form of standards of urban welfare. The studies carried out so far do not

highlight the impact of tourism in Venice on the physical and built environment. We never talk about how much water and energy consumption is required by a city made up mostly of hotels, hostels, b&bs and apartments for tourist use where those who pay feel entitled to consume more than they would at home. Over and beyond the need for specific data collection, defining the impacts would result in a catastrophic scenario for the city, where the terms sustainability and balance in the use of resources become completely meaningless. In support of this consideration, the public administration of Venice has demonstrated, on the basis of unspecified data how, according to daily water consumption, the city on average presents a number of inhabitants equal to twice that declared, trying to placate any controversy on the depopulation of the city and the absence of policies in support of residential housing [6].

3. A map That Changes According to the Eyes of the Beholder

The problem of data in Venice is a serious one, since collection and access, not to mention control of the same is at times impossible. Official and other data released would allow a quantification of some direct and indirect phenomena of tourism. Some examples may become paradigmatic: the number of vacant, closed or uninhabited dwellings seems to be completely impossible to attain, both for reasons related to the uncertainty of the data, and for the physical spatial conformation of the city. Another example of lack of accessibility to data, for example, is the attempts at obtaining aggregated data from the web platforms (Airbnb, booking.com, Homeaway etc.) that do not allow a true monitoring of the actual situation, denying the possibility of exact quantification and above all of any representation of the activities of the same. These data could become indicative by being aggregated by indicators (accredited accommodation facilities, municipal monitoring, vehicular passages etc.) though certainly

not exhaustive since they do not include a series of data, such as that relating to accommodation, offered by web search and sharing economy platforms that, in the absence of regulatory agreements, do not issue data on the number of presences. If the data is not enough or cannot be directly controlled the description of the city and the phenomena related to tourism becomes highly complex [7].

Describing the repercussions of tourism within the urban space leads to training the eye to recognize particular indicators that alternate in some parts of the city with a certain recurrence. Venice, which can traditionally be considered a tourist city, shows the wounds of an intensive exploitation of its urban fabric for tourism purposes, carried out without too many scruples. Not only in some parts of the city where interminable sequences of commercial and catering services are concentrated, but above all the ground floors of the buildings, that have been turned into places of access to tourist accommodation and storage and supply facilities mainly for the same. If this concerns the ground floors of the buildings that show a main front, the fate of the lateral part that face onto the courtyards and the alleyways is that of becoming access spaces to residences or tourist apartments, the above mentioned goods storage spaces or emergency exits for large hotels. There is therefore a logic of high intensity of uses and functions in some parts of the cities, mainly concentrated in some areas or along some preferential routes, accompanied by a sprinkling of empty spaces at the ground floor level, which belong to a idea of "gray ownership" (the *Laboratorio Venezia* is a report, curated by Laura Fregolent, Massimo Gheno and Filippo Farronato, that demonstrates the replacement of commercial activities for residents in favour of product and sales presentation). But if what has been said so far refers to the ground floors, it becomes interesting to try to build some maps that illustrate phenomenologies, even in an iconic and in some ways provocative way, that allow a description and mapping

of the upper floors as spaces dotted with tourist accommodation considering the constructed ground [8] that makes Venice so unique.

In other words, we are dealing with the possibility of describing the repercussions of the phenomenon of tourism in a highly subjective way that leads to the definition and elaboration of very different perceptual and sensorial data [9]. The resulting map is one traced

by tourism as a phenomenological subject and one of power [10], that defines new geographies (Fig. 2) that plays a key role in the decision making where the city is planned, strongly influencing the choices, defining paths and directions the city must undertake for the future, establishing itineraries and hierarchies between the parties and the subjects involved.

Fig. 2 The section demonstrates, through a sample of the city, how in Venice the touristic destination is a pervasive power, infiltrating the largest part of the built heritage.

The rules dictated by tourism involve entire buildings or apartments, modifying them spatially, weighing them down with services and infrastructures required for contemporary ways of life and above all by placing spaces on the level of (economic) convenience rather than sharing and the common good. If you build a map of what might be called tensions in Venice, the number and polarizations that would result could be immediate. There are many places where over the five years local residents have managed to put up a fight, the outcome of which for the most being entirely negative. We are talking about the area of the former Gasometers, the ex-Actv area, the former Teatro dell' Anatomia, the former Cà di Dio retirement home, Villa Herion in Giudecca and the list could be even longer. Tourism determines the list of spaces and goods to be sold, defines functions and needs but overlaps with a layer, much more complicated to construct and to define, that coincides with that of resistance to tourism itself, creating a mixed reality [11] made of tacit approval, protest and indifference. Individual buildings or groups of buildings that constitute urban aggregates typical of the urban building fabric that, alongside rendering up their fascinating history of stratification and modification, also cede to today's practices imposed by tourism. The perception is once again called into question alongside the speedy and energetic restructuring that takes place, like with the use of the same type of window, the presence of air conditioning, the absence of names and surnames on the doorbells and front doors, are the clear indicators of tourist destinations within. Thanks to this kind of mapping that could be resorted to on the one hand via individual monitoring, data sharing and search for responses, we could work towards a more accurate control and determination of the effect and action of tourism on the city.

The images that can be obtained, for example, can sometimes entail a more provocative value since it could be useful to represent the hotel areas as urban voids, usually spaces that are not inclusive and not open to the communities that live there. It is the map of a future vision of the city where the void, the absence, corresponding to the hotels, becomes the figure that builds the image of the city, of its practicability and accessibility (Fig. 3). An exercise of this type refers to the concrete possibility of building new interlinking space chains that intercept tourist, accommodation and residential presence in the same place where, depending on the different hours of the day, some spaces can be used according to different functions: in the morning as a breakfast room, in the afternoon as a space for courses, in the evening and pre-evening hours spaces for public meetings or encounters among local citizens. In this way perhaps even the heterotopic figure, typical of the hotel within the city, could fit into a process of modification of uses and practices, as well as forms, typical of densely inhabited contexts.

4. The City and Tourism, Venice, a Laboratory in Which to Monitor, Experiment and Imagine

To reach the practicability of similar evocations — the word scenario is not specifically used here — there is no lack of difficulties and elements for further exploration, the loss of the *fine-grain city* [12] is no more under control. How the public and social system and the private system can collaborate must be understood the same way as how regulation and free enterprise can exist side-by-side. The commercial and economic dynamics argue that the most severe of certifiers is the customer who brings with him his own format, his own vacation (expectations) and references to his own contexts of comfort and service. It must be said that in Venice tourism has always been seen as a revenue where demand is unlimited, a revenue that appears to be guaranteed, offering politicians and policymakers the possibility of not making any effort. This is an inescapable aspect that must be combined with the possibility and capacity of a local urban context. In 2016, the Italian government, with the
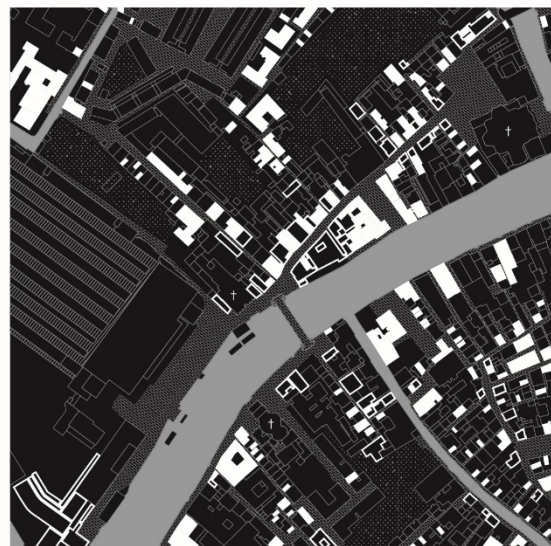
Hotel mapping
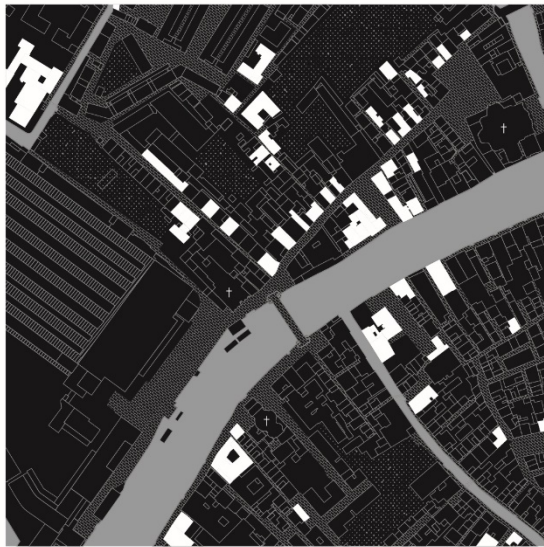
Hotel and B&B mapping
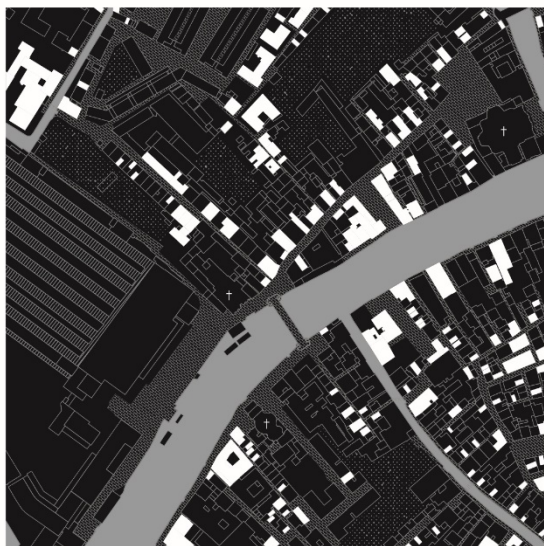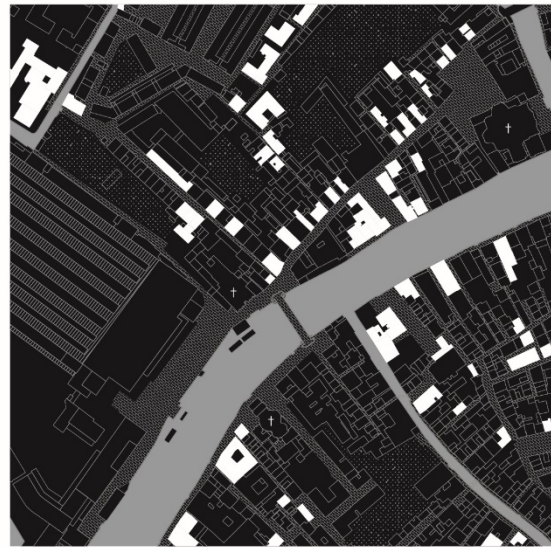
Hotel, B&B and AirBNB mapping

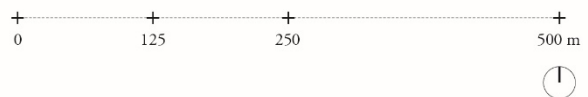Hotel, B&B, Airbnb and tourist destination facilities mapping

0   125   250   500 m

Fig. 3 **The maps show how could be displayed a hidden layer dealing with the multiple touristic purposes of the urban tissue (white boundaries). This way of mapping demonstrates the need of direct approach and observation in representing effectively the touristic phenomenon in urban space.**

"Pact for Venice", provided the city with substantial financial support, declaring it a test case in order to define governance policies for mass tourism. This provision provided an extraordinary economic and financial starting point for studying, testing and putting into practice far-sighted and far-reaching policies capable of contrasting and initiating solutions to issues such as housing, urban and physical degradation of the lagoon. The local administration actually issued a summary of the proposals that individual associations or groups or individuals had sent to the municipality. It is clearly a symptomatology of how much this administration is inattentive to mapping in listening to the proposals and needs of citizens in the face of a global phenomenon of which perhaps few are aware.

With regards to awareness, some thematic maps illustrating the real penetration of the tourist phenomenon in the urban fabric of Venice, the degree of modifiability and compromise could have a more efficient and more effective result in perceiving the issues. It is a question of reflecting on the problems of urban planning efficiency, so today the theme of the representation of phenomena is very important. It is a question of highlighting the plurality of values, of social dynamics that lead to the construction of new arguments with an impact on the disciplines to which they could refer [13].

The intention is perhaps to try to attain a form of representation for urban phenomena and the city of Venice itself which incorporates semiotic and imaginative readings, dictated by the practice and direct experience of the city, which do not refer to retro-utopias [14] full of memories and nostalgia but that look to the future with radicality and conscience and that refer to a social pact [15] in a complex medium and long-term operation that requires technical, regulatory and economic analysis and that finds its specific driving force in the agreement of the different social dimensions of the city.

A simulation that graphically describes the degeneration of the city in its aspects of places of encounter, of work, of free time and of living, salient elements for the design instances decided by the *Athens Charter* (1933) would show a city in strong contraction, with marked polarities of concentrations in some days or particular instances with places of permanent abandonment and voiding. Mapping and amplifying could argue the question of designing for visibility broadly, ranging from catalogs and instruction manuals to map and infografic systems [16]. The city should have and collect this kind of maps, displaying the possible project as extreme effort of imagination contributing vividly and radically to deal with these problems, exploring differences and possibilities as powerful criticism to the present [17]. This is why Venice becomes a laboratory of continuous experimentation and identification of new modes of working in which the role of the researcher, architect and urban planner could perhaps find new voice and strength to affirm decisions and indicate solutions where, according to the teachings of Lefebvre, space can regain its political office once again and against the peculiar *expulsionscape* [18].

5. Challenges During and After COVID-19: Rethinking the Metropolitan Dimension of the Lagoon

After the stoppage of economic activity linked to tourism due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as many other touristic spots, Venice has been living something brand new but above all unpredictable for months. The current conditions of the city seem on the one hand to demonstrate the complete inability to make decisions and forecasts in the face of an emergency situation, but above all it highlights the fragility of an economy totally based on the tourist exploitation of its built heritage and public space. In fact tourism and transports are traditionally the slowest sectors to recover. It is clear that the model of exploitation of the city, based on a global place making policy, today

clashes with an issue that imposes new mechanisms of governance. Therefore, this creates new conditions for an overall project on the city that will inevitably have to change both physical and conceptual scales, fully embracing the metropolitan dimension of Venice, its lagoon and the surrounding mainland. The public space of the pandemic city will have to be a space where people and new technologies will combine to guarantee social distance and to keep people in visual and virtual contact, guaranteeing possibilities of work, study, culture and meeting. A model of a compact, resilient city, in strong connection and balance with extreme environmental realities, as Venice actually is, has made it possible not only to identify the remaining communities within it but also to control till the maximum degree the spreading of the disease and to provide social and health assistance at a local level. This becomes a contemporary urban model that appears clear as a useful reflection principle to be explored not only for the inhabited islands around Venice but also for the mainland.

Moreover, the vacant dwelling spaces have allowed becoming support infrastructures for the isolation of people affected by the disease, guaranteeing a safe lightening of the local health structures. Many former administrators (e.g., the former mayor of the city Paolo Costa who often stresses this point during his interviews) state that Venice is not able to save itself alone after this crisis. The metropolitan scale should be reconsidered not only inside the administrative borders but including other cities around (e.g., Padova or Treviso). Only towards this direction for example an efficient mobility system could provide with professional services able to serve the city.

The cultural excellence of the city, such as the Biennale, the Museums, the libraries or art collections, if there won't be more visitors or constant presences has the clear destiny of decline. The artistic and cultural heritage of Venice, its environmental prominence are basic elements, but they are not enough to face the expected hard times. On the

European framework Venice has to play a core role to sustain a big plan for the European *Green Deal* in order to play a global role not only connected to tourism [19] but also with the Authority Port system, the art-crafts network and the Italian and international universities in the city.

It seems clear that after all these considerations, for the first time, Venice may have the space to dedicate new projects. Venice will end up with lots of empty buildings, the result of many hotels and accommodation activities will have to close. Now it is the time to think about what to do with all that available space. It is clear that if before the pandemic every project or idea had to carve out space from over tourism, now there is a whole new field of investigation, survey, control and representation.

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