1 Venice: Trapped Between Dream and Nightmare

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To Edoardo and Maddalena,
that their future may be rich
in opportunities and values.

1.1 Introduction

In recent years, anyone who has grappled with Venice and its problems – and there have been many of both – has had to confront the city's unique morphology (Rubini 2016), the experience it provides (Scarpa 2000), depopulation (Somma 2024), overtourism (Visentin, Bertocchi 2019), the imagery it creates (Borelli, Busacca 2020), and the risks that accompany it (Settis 2014).

None of these issues are trivial or easy to solve. They are all what are known as wicked problems (Termeer et al. 2019) – problems with high levels of complexity that are deeply interconnected with each other and influenced by numerous factors. If this were not the case, we could not explain why Venice's problems have been debated for over 60 years (Cini Foundation 1964), or why themes relevant today were even mentioned in the mid-nineteenth century (Ruskin 2025). After

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all, Venice is a special city, and its uniqueness is even established by law n. 171/ 1973[1] and law n. 798/1984.[2] However, this status does not protect it from the common problems that every city faces.

Settis (2014) reminds us that cities die for three reasons: under attack by an enemy, when an enemy conquers and imposes its rule, and when they lose their memory. Venice has experienced all three of these forms of death. It seems to me, though, that people today do not realize that these forces are now acting against the city together, exerting pressure in a different way than in the past.

Today, there is no Austrian army bombing Venice as they did in 1849 or during the First World War. Yet, what remains on the streets at night after more than 100,000 people have visited the city in a single day looks very much like the aftermath of a battle, including the wounded staggering dazed and leaning against the walls of a narrow *calle*. Similarly, no enemy is occupying the city as Napoleon's troops did in 1797, which marked the end of the thousand-year-old Republic of Venice. However, new users of the city – commuters, students, tourists, and day-trippers – have eroded the space available to the Venetian civitas.

Venice, along with the few remaining Venetians living in the historic city, has not lost its memory but has instead turned it into a fetish to be celebrated uncritically. The city and its Venetian identity are glorified as if they were inherently positive values, ignoring the fierce classism that characterizes both.

However, Venice is also at risk of dying for another reason not mentioned by Settis: nature. As Nobel Prize for Water Andrea Rinaldo reminds us, if we do not do something to stop it, the water will submerge Venice in about 50 to 70 years.[3] It would seem, then, that Venice is dying.

But that is not the case. The central argument of this book is that Venice is not dying but rather going through a crisis, and there are visible signs of a potential rebirth. These signs are evident in three key contexts: economic, social, and physical.

The tourism industry has a power and pervasiveness that could seemingly suffocate all other city economies. Yet, these other economies have the qualities needed to carve out their own space, especially if they are supported by policies and governance focused on economic diversification.

1 Legge del 16 maggio 1973, n. 171. Interventi per la salvaguardia di Venezia.

2 Legge del 29 novembre 1984, n. 798. Nuovi interventi per la salvaguardia di Venezia.

3 Here, an interview with Andrea Rinaldo, recipient of the prestigious Nobel Prize for Water and member of the FAI board of directors `https://uk.fai-international.org/news/andrea-rinaldo-venice-has-no-more-time-to-lose/`.

The social issues should perhaps be examined separately for the two parts of the city: the historic islands and the mainland. In the former, it may no longer be accurate to speak of 50,000 residents; instead, we should start discussing a population of over 100,000 people comprised of residents, students, and workers who live in the city every day and require different goods and services from those of tourists. On the mainland, we need to address the city's demographic transformation, with a continuously growing presence of foreign-born citizens and an aging native population that tends to migrate beyond the city limits.

Finally, on a physical level, the tripolar structure on which the city was built throughout the 20th century – the Lido for tourism, the historic islands for culture, and the mainland for industry – is no longer sustainable in the face of global changes and needs to be completely rethought.

To understand the city and its transformations, it is essential to delve into these three dimensions and assess the city's overall health.

1.2 How Are You, Venice?

This question stems from a widespread perception of the city as being in crisis, transition, or transformation – terms often used interchangeably to suggest that Venice needs a fundamental rethinking and the development of new capacities to face its main challenges, from managing tourism and depopulation to addressing socio-demographic changes.

The answer, however, draws on the findings from nearly two years of collaborative work as part of the *Ri-Pensare Venezia* (Rethinking Venice) project.[4] It's an attempt to synthesize what was produced by a collective intelligence comprising academics, associations, civic movements, professional organizations, and active citizens.

Like any summary, it can never be entirely comprehensive; the gaps will be more numerous than the insights. However, the sheer amount of useful and usable knowledge generated during this process is immense, offering a truly rich and diverse snapshot of the situation.

Let's start at the end. Venice is not in perfect health, but it is not doing so badly, and more importantly, it is possible to act concretely and with a few key moves reactivate the urban dynamism the city needs to face the future with optimism and confidence. In this work, we have chosen to adopt a specific a priori position, one that rejects the common metaphor of cities as living organisms that can, like living things, change or even die. Instead, we view the city as a

4 Here the website containing all the materials produced during the *Ri-Pensare Venezia* project: https://www.ripensarevenezia.it.

social product resulting from the interplay between the mode of production – a concept Karl Marx or David Harvey might use – and the social structure that forms its foundation – a view Mark Granovetter might take. Therefore, rather than 'dying,' cities tend to change their state, unless faced with truly exceptional circumstances, such as those described by Settis and mentioned earlier in this volume.

Within the city lies a great potential of energy, ideas, and other resources – a valuable asset to begin Venice's transformation and give it the right momentum to look ahead. Since the early 2000s, there have been ongoing attempts to build a large metropolitan area with Padua and Treviso. Together, these three cities would form a single, highly interconnected functional area, capable of offering businesses and citizens an urban scale suitable for international competition. This idea was first discussed in the 1980s and was tried again about 20 years ago (Busetto 2014), but now is the right time to recognize that the urban scale global cities are looking toward is a regional one. Milan has done it, followed by the Bologna-Florence area. Why shouldn't the Northeast do the same?

Furthermore, even while hit by depopulation in the historic center and demographic changes on the mainland, Venice still has great strength from its resident population and its ability to attract a significant number (over 150,000 according to recent data) of non-tourist users – commuters who travel daily from other cities to Mestre and Venice for study, work, or leisure. Venice attracts more than just tourists.

Finally, the wind of necessity is pushing Venice forward. As Andrea Rinaldo reminded us, in about 70 to 100 years, Venice will die because the MOSE system will no longer be enough to save it from rising tides Thus, it is not a matter of if or when: action must be taken now.

It is true that Venice has many problems, but by intervening quickly, it can not only be saved but also put back in shape. Now, we will review the main themes that emerged during the two years of work on the *Ri-Pensare Venezia* project. These reflections will provide a foundation of knowledge about the city to put the reader in the best position to understand the three essays that complete this volume, which offer original viewpoints on the urban transformations underway. Specifically: Eleonora Girotti's essay proposes interpreting the transformations presented here based on Nancy Fraser's idea of Cannibal Capitalism; Beatrice Gervasi's contribution, using an original urban research method, shows how the presence of social infrastructure acts as a dam against the proliferation of tourism; Finally, Emma Maria Rossi's work tells the story of social entrepreneurship in a tourist city, presenting it as a market with autonomous potential distinct from the tourism economy.

The topic that took up the most space, in terms of both reports and insights, was tourism, described as both a resource and a

problem. Tourism has monopolized the local economy, creating negative consequences for society and the city's overall wealth. The tourism supply chain is made up of businesses in low-value-added sectors where competition on labor costs is at its peak, leading to the spread of poorly paid and under-protected jobs. This situation, in turn, encourages increasingly sharp forms of social and spatial segregation, with entire neighbourhoods inhabited by foreign-born residents who occupy the lowest positions in the local value chain. At the same time, however, tourism is currently the city's leading economy. Without it, Venice would have a very limited job market. As such, tourism is a resource to be protected and enhanced.

However, the effects of tourism are not just economic. When you walk through the historic center of Venice, you find yourself in a perpetual queue: waiting in the narrowest *calli*, to enter the docks, at the supermarket checkout, and on the smallest bridges. Waiting in line forces us to slow down, which lets us pay attention to what people near us are saying. In Venice's case, this is made complicated by the variety of languages we hear at every turn. Tourism is now omnipresent, both spatially (no part of the city is excluded from tourist flows) and temporally (what was historically the low season in winter now sees only a slight drop in tourist pressure).

At night, though, the city seems to empty out. Day-trippers return to their home cities, and tourists go back to their hotels. The residents are few and their numbers are constantly decreasing. The explosion of tourism has completely reshaped the city, not only by re-functionalizing most of its economic activities but also by distorting its civitas. Today, Venetians are not just few in number, they are also profoundly different: in addition to the locals, who we must remember still exist in a significant quantity, a growing number of inhabitants come from the most disparate parts of the world. They have different skin colors and features, work in jobs that connect them with the rest of the world, have medium-to-high levels of education and income, and work in various positions within the tourism, culture, or related and complementary sectors. This diversity is a form of wealth. Today, the size of the population, along with the characteristics of the physical space, encourages daily interaction. You can see it by listening to the large number of people greeting each other on the street or counting the number of active associations in a small patch of land and lagoon – by some estimates, more than 100. This was and remains one of the great values of the historic center: the ability to build relationships in public more easily than in cities where people get around by car or other motorized vehicles. In Venice, you get to know people with your feet. Therefore, Venice today resembles a small global village more than ever. It is as small as a village, yet it consistently attracts new residents from every corner of the world and engages daily with thousands of equally global tourists. However, this part of the city, after spending the

last 50 years caring for its physical infrastructure – cleaning stones, digging out canals and the lagoon, and restoring facades – thanks to a national law that recognizes Venice's special status, is now waking up more and more uncertain, worried about its future, and angry about the inability to govern tourism. This is happening despite a legislative framework, particularly the 2022 Pellicani amendment, which gives the City of Venice the power to regulate tourist rentals. The lack of courage or, worse, the desire not to upset the interests of some has led the municipal administration to prefer an ineffective experimentation that cannot curb a phenomenon exerting intense pressure on the city. In addition to not discussing the regulation of short-term rentals, there is also no discussion about equalizing the negative consequences of tourism. The wealth generated by tourism, which is evident in positive municipal budget balances derived mainly from tourist taxes and other revenue from the sector (primarily ACTV), could be used to support new urban economies, revitalize housing, strengthen preservation efforts, enhance social services, and address security issues. Instead, it is left to produce a budget surplus with a generalized destination, not one specifically targeted to repay citizens for the damage caused by tourism.

In analyzing the problem, it becomes possible to glimpse a solution: transforming tourism into an opportunity to rebalance opportunities for well-being among the population, by redirecting the resources generated there toward interventions that can benefit the citizens most affected by its consequences. Some issues, like this one, are not only practical but also ethical, and the pursuit of greater social justice is one of them. This must motivate the courage to act, even at the risk of displeasing some.

Now, let us cross the bridge and land in Mestre, a part of the city that has undergone a deep and less-publicized transformation than Venice. Just a walk through the streets of the city center on a weekday afternoon reveals a dramatic decline. Closed storefronts and 'for rent' or 'for sale' signs are visible even on the most prestigious streets, right into the city's main square. The urban economy is in a deep crisis, first triggered by an excessive number of large shopping centers outside the city and later worsened by the flight of many residents from the center to the suburbs. This exodus has left voids – both in terms of commercial activities and residential units – that have been quickly filled by new residents, criminal phenomena, and a sense of insecurity. The simultaneous arrival of these new groups has led to the association of the two events, creating the 'immigration-crime' pairing. In reality, the two phenomena are independent and generate different, though complex and in some cases negative, effects. This association must therefore be dismantled and exposed as a rhetorical device used to gain easy consensus. Crime is a product of inactivity, both socially and politically. Making the city more lively, frequented,

well-lit, and patrolled is a fundamental ingredient in any process that aims to address the problem of insecurity. Between the late 1980s and the early 2000s, Venice had been able to invent a completely original way to deal with the security problem, based on street work and the ability to coordinate repression and prevention. Teams of street educators worked in the neighborhoods, intercepting criminal activities, which they reported to the competent authorities. At the same time, they engaged in dialogue to reduce the impact of these issues on the area and its citizens. Aware that criminal activities hit hardest where social distress is widespread, that method knew exactly where to act. Insecurity disproportionately affects poorer social classes, who lack the economic means to protect themselves and whose property loses value. The wealthy have always had the resources and ability to shield themselves from insecurity. Therefore, security is an issue of social justice before it is one of public order. Civic movements like *Riprendiamoci la città* (Let's Take Back the City) and initiatives such as *Le cene di quartiere* (neighborhood dinners) are examples to be followed and supported. However, a grassroots response also needs an institutional one – from above – with capable institutions that are ready to intervene. The coordination among the members of the security committee should be strengthened, avoiding the media posturing of some individuals, which only serves to rigidify the actions of others. The revival of social policies based on street work and dialogue with local communities represents the third leg of the effort needed to address the issue of insecurity. This phenomenon, however, is not only caused by crime but also, to a large extent, by the crisis of urban economies. Closed shop windows, workshops, and bars create shadowy areas that increase citizens' perception of insecurity. Lighting those spaces again and attracting new visitors, thus increasing the presence of people in the city center, would mean restoring a sense of security and triggering a virtuous cycle among citizenship, urban economies, and safety.

Why would young people want to live in a city with these characteristics? In fact, they prefer to migrate elsewhere, both within and outside the region. This phenomenon, however, further impoverishes the city, because young people are a social group that, more than others, lives in the city and stimulates the local economy, both as workers and consumers. However, a very poor job market and a widespread sense of insecurity tend to drive away many who do not aspire to make a living from tourism. The real estate market does not help either, due to both the quality and quantity of available properties, which do not meet the needs of potential young residents. During one of the many workshops we held, we learned that to visually measure a city's real estate economy, you should count the number of cranes. In Mestre, you count very few, just a handful, a sign of a stagnant economy. New houses are not being built, and old ones

are not being renovated because the market is static, and no one has ever thought of initiating large-scale urban regeneration processes.

Urban regeneration does not just mean building a new high-rise, a park, and putting up some lights. Regeneration means profoundly redesigning a part of the city by planning new urban functions and creating new living environments. This is certainly difficult in a context where small and fragmented property ownership is prevalent – a right that is in itself inviolable. However, it is possible to build winning public-private partnerships, where the latter invests with economic objectives, and the former balances the scales by requesting investments in collective social infrastructure in return, such as green areas, shared spaces, sports facilities, commercial activities, and community building. The economic spinoff of such operations could give rise to new urban economies and make the city attractive to new residents, which is more necessary than ever given that the demographic balance of the Municipality of Venice is negative despite the large influx of foreign citizens. These operations could also be used to combat the phenomena of spatial segregation that were humorously represented by a map that circulated online a few years ago. It described Mestre's neighborhoods based on the main ethnic characteristics of their residents: Bissuola inhabited mainly by citizens of Russian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan origin; Altobello now known as 'Little Dhaka'; the 'Chinatown of Via Piave'; and 'African Marghera.'

This phenomenon, left to run its course without any attempt at governance, has had its effects on the poorest and most vulnerable citizens, such as the elderly. For them, these new forms of coexistence erode economic and social resources, setting the stage for an ethnic-based social conflict that risks becoming increasingly heated at any moment. A problem could thus become an opportunity, based on a strategy already tested in many international cities, from Milan to Barcelona: urban regeneration as a comprehensive strategy for economic, social, and cultural development. The centrality of the security issue and the promotion of new urban economies in Mestre, as well as the governance of tourism and the redirection of resources for equalization purposes in Venice, are ideas made possible by the social vitality and the presence of local economies that could, in their nascent form, challenge the monopoly of the tourism economy.

The rate of civic participation is very high, in both Venice and Mestre. In addition to the aforementioned committees that work on the idea of living the city as a way to counter crime and insecurity, cultural and sports associations and solidarity volunteering are widely present and active. The neighborhood concierge services, climate shelters, and sports clubs are some of the most visible and concrete examples of this. Many of these have made a fundamental contribution to *Rethinking Venice*, demonstrating analytical and

reflective capacity as well as a capacity for action. For this reason, they deserve to be given greater consideration and involved in the city's governance processes, not just treated as recipients of grants or users of spaces made available by local institutions. Their knowledge of the city – from its people to its problems – is a fundamental resource for designing concrete solutions that are relevant to the issues, rather than those crafted in an office by technical experts.

While not yet a fully organized sector, the cultural industry has now reached significant volumes. This is thanks to the work of both large and small cultural institutions, and the professional efforts of a growing number of workers in the field who are organizing into small businesses or cooperatives. The music, songwriting, theatre, dance, artistic, and general creative work scenes now represent an important occupational sector. This is evidenced by the increasing number of cultural and collaborative spaces – like coworking and fab labs – that are emerging in the city and finding growing success, as seen at the M9 museum, the Hybrid Tower, or on Via Rosa. Connecting this sector to the larger chain of international events and the film industry, which is growing rapidly in the Veneto region, could be a unique opportunity for the city. Venice would become a producer as well as an exhibitor of cultural products, tapping into higher-value-added parts of the industry and increasing its international appeal, especially in regenerated areas of the mainland. This idea is so powerful that it has prompted some to propose the cultural sector as the new occupant of the old industrial zone, which is often presented as being in crisis. However, thanks to the *Ri-Pensare Venezia* project, we have learned that the Marghera and Port area are less disused than it appears when you drive past it. The number of businesses and employees in the area, along with the commercial value of the land and properties, reveals a more dynamic productive space than expected. Hypotheses for the establishment of parts of the hydrogen and space industries are attracting increasing interest. However, in this case as well, without a strategy and a way to govern this phenomenon, these possibilities are short-lived. They run up against the absence of collective goods for competitiveness, which is the set of tangible and intangible infrastructures – including public and common areas and the relationship with universities, research centers, and the credit system – that businesses consider fundamental when deciding to invest in one place over another.

Finally, we come to the last topic, which is not the least important, but rather the one that encompasses all others. Without addressing it, there is no point in talking about Venice's future: safeguarding. We have already been reminded by Rinaldo that we have between 70 and 100 years to deal with a sea-level rise of about 100 cm. The money and political battles spent on the MOSE will be rendered completely useless by the effects of climate change. Without the

ability to act, Venice will literally die by submersion. The climate issue has two sides: on one hand, we need to act today to counteract long-term effects; on the other, we need to act today to deal with the immediate effects on the population. Rising temperatures cause physical discomfort but also an increase in current expenses for cooling, which disproportionately affects the poorest citizens who, on average, live in less energy-efficient homes. With the exception of a few initiatives, such as the creation of climate shelters, this issue has so far been left in the hands of private citizens, resulting in increased inequality. In the city, there is no discussion of either energy communities or the creation of favourable climate islands – all interventions that would require a strong public-private partnership.

Citizens, therefore, describe themselves as worried, angry, and tired of a city they see as increasingly degraded and emptied out. At the same time, they show they are ready for action and willing to participate in planning, decision-making, and taking action. This approach can be interpreted as a growing desire for good politics – one that combines the specific interests of homogeneous groups of citizens with the collective interest of a city, which is, by its nature, heterogeneous. It represents an excellent starting point for any desire for urban transformation.

1.3 Venezia in the Works: The Economic and Productive Foundations of the City

To support the assertions made so far, this essay now presents, even though in brief, the results of research conducted over the past seven years. We will begin by surveying the main economic sectors before offering some general reflections in an attempt to answer the question posed at the beginning of this essay: "How are you, Venice?".

1.3.1 The Hegemony of the Tourist Sector

The tourism sector in Venice is a complex and layered phenomenon, simultaneously fundamental to the local economy while also generating profound and complicated social and environmental implications (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024).

Analyzing specific data for Venice reveals significant and constant pressure from tourism. As early as 2009, the city recorded an average of nearly 60,000 visitors per day, with an annual peak exceeding 30 million tourists overnight stays in 2011. More recently, on some days in 2023, Venice saw over 100,000 daily tourist visitors, a figure that highlights the intensity and continued growth of this phenomenon. This massive presence often translates into a 'hit-and-run' tourism

model, where visitors, despite contributing to overcrowding, stay for very short periods, limiting the economic benefits while creating significant disruption for the local community.

From an employment standpoint, the tourism sector represents an economic pillar at both the local and regional levels. In 2022, activities directly related to tourism employed approximately 257,000 people in Veneto. Specifically for Venice, 2023 saw about 24,500 new hires, and tourism was confirmed as the main driver of labor demand in the province, accounting for roughly one-third of planned hires.[5] However, despite these significant numbers, the sector faces increasing difficulty in finding staff, particularly in the restaurant industry, where more than half of the needed professional roles are hard to fill.

In parallel, the supply of tourist beds in Venice has undergone a radical transformation.[6] Recent data from Inside Airbnb,[7] Municipality of Venice,[8] and Yearbook of Tourism,[9] updated as of early 2025, shows that Venice's historic center (including Venice, Murano, and Burano) has a number of tourist beds (over 60,000) that exceeds its resident population (fewer than 57,000). A significant percentage, approximately 64%, of these beds are in non-hotel accommodations, such as tourist rentals and B&Bs, a phenomenon that has grown rapidly since the early 2000s. The historic center, despite being home to just one-fifth of the municipal population, accounts for over 60% of the tourist accommodation supply. However, this trend is also growing rapidly in mainland areas closer to the historic center.

These developments have created a series of complex problems. Overtourism and the proliferation of short-term rentals have accelerated gentrification and depopulation, drastically reducing the availability of housing and other essential services for residents, contributing to their exodus. Over the last two decades, Venice has lost an additional 20,000 inhabitants. The city, already fragile, is

5 Here, the Regional Labour Market Observatory of Veneto Lavoro presents the results of a study on labour supply and demand in the tourism sector in Veneto https://www.venetolavoro.it/documents/10180/1693590/Misure_118_Settore+turistico.pdf/02cba477-9fb5-8386-54ca-8f199d651ddd?t=1692951869068.

6 Here, the Italia Nostra Association - Venice presents a report on the evolution of hotels and accommodation facilities in Venice https://www.italianostravenezia.org/statistiche-su-venezia/alberghi-e-strutture-extra-alberghiere-nel-corso-degli-anni/.

7 Inside Airbnb is a mission driven project that provides data and advocacy about Airbnb's impact on residential communities https://insideairbnb.com/.

8 https://geoportale.comune.venezia.it/Html5Viewer/index.html?viewer=IDS.IDS&LOCALE=IT-it.

9 Here, every year, the Municipality of Venice publishes the Tourism Yearbooks in an open version https://www.comune.venezia.it/it/content/studi.

subject to unsustainable logistical and structural pressure, hosting a number of visitors that far exceeds its capacity, causing congestion and compromising the daily quality of life for its residents. This has led to a progressive deterioration of the cultural heritage and a worsening of the tourist experience itself, in addition to serious risks to environmental sustainability (Giupponi 2022). Recent measures, such as the introduction of an access fee for day visitors, represent an attempt to manage the flow of tourists, but the challenge for Venice remains how to balance the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of its social and cultural identity, preventing it from transforming from a liveable city into a mere place of passage.

1.3.2 Craftsmanship and Commerce: Between Tradition and Touristification

Venice's economic fabric, traditionally anchored in a rich heritage of craftsmanship and a varied commercial landscape (Busacca, Paladini 2022; Busacca et al. 2025), is undergoing profound transformations, largely influenced by the growing pressure of mass tourism. An analysis of available data reveals a complex dynamic, characterized by a progressive shift in the commercial and artisanal landscape of the historical center (Paladini 2024a).

The number of artisan businesses in Venice – and more generally in the Veneto region – shows a declining trend. At the regional level, artisan businesses decreased by 0.4% in the third quarter of 2023, and although Venice ranks third in the Veneto region for the number of artisan businesses (with nearly 15,000 units), the sector is struggling to maintain its strength and is declining faster than in the rest of the region. This decline is not uniform and depends on the specific trades. For example, there isa reduction in traditional manufacturing activities, while niche trades related to artistic and traditional craftsmanship, restoration, and cultural heritage preservation are showing more resilience.

A deeper analysis of commerce reveals a clear touristification of businesses. Venice's historic center has seen a progressive replacement of local neighbourhood shops and traditional commercial establishments with businesses oriented almost exclusively toward tourism. This trend is documented by studies that show the density of tourist-focused businesses (like takeaway food and souvenir shops) has increased exponentially (Studio Sintesi 2018), at the expense of historic workshops and essential services for residents. Between 2009 and 2017, the number of businesses serving residents in the historic center decreased by 32.8%, while those serving tourists increased by 22.2%. This transformation is particularly evident in some areas of the historic city, where the number of tourist-oriented

businesses has grown significantly, changing the very character of the neighbourhoods.

Artisan and commercial businesses in Venice face several challenges. Complex logistics, a lack of adequate space for artisanal production, high rental costs, and difficulty in finding specialized labour are among the main obstacles (Paladini 2024b; Bertocchi, Visentin 2019). Real estate pressure, fueled by tourist demand and the conversion of commercial spaces into accommodations or souvenir shops, makes it difficult for small, traditional workshops to stay in business. This contributes to the progressive depopulation of the historic center, as the decrease in essential services and the loss of commercial identity make living in the city less appealing.

The transformation of the commercial fabric also impacts employment. While the influx of tourists generates jobs in the sale of souvenirs and fast-food products, it simultaneously endangers traditional artisan trades that require specific skills and are often passed down from generation to generation.

1.3.3 The Decline of the Estuary

The Lido of Venice, once a renowned seaside resort that attracted European aristocracy and international high society, has seen a progressive contraction in its beach tourism. This trend stands in stark contrast to the vigorous growth of neighbouring coastlines like Jesolo and Cavallino-Treporti. This dichotomy highlights a shift in tourist preferences and the different adaptive capacities of these destinations.

In parallel with the decline of traditional beach tourism, the Lido has attempted to reposition itself by increasingly focusing on culture-based economic activities. The most famous of these is undoubtedly the Venice International Film Festival. This globally renowned event generates significant economic and media activity, attracting industry professionals, celebrities, and an international audience for a limited period each year. Other cultural and conference initiatives have developed over time, seeking to capitalize on the Lido's fame and its proximity to Venice.

However, these activities, despite their prestige, have not been enough to fill the economic and employment void left by the decline of beach tourism (Cusmai 2021). The economic benefits of the Film Festival, while significant during its run, are limited and do not guarantee a continuous flow of tourists or year-round demand. Cultural events create a different type of economic and employment impact from traditional beach tourism, which is often more widespread and locally integrated (e.g., managing beach resorts, widespread seasonal restaurants, and related services). Outside of the Film Festival period, the Lido's commercial and hospitality

sectors struggle to recover. The general perception among local business owners is that cultural events, while prestigious, cannot replace the economic volume and stability that once came from a prosperous beach season. The decline of its beach resort identity has led to a decrease in the Lido's commercial and social vitality outside of specific events, highlighting the need for more integrated and diversified development strategies for its revival.

1.3.4 The Mainland Economy: The Port and Airport as Strategic Resources

The Venetian mainland, with the port system of Venice and Porto Marghera, is a key economic and employment driver for the region.[10] Today, the Porto Marghera area is a consolidated industrial and logistics district, home to approximately 1,000 companies that provide direct employment for about 11,000 workers. These jobs are distributed across industry (38%), logistics and transportation (20%), the service sector (22%), and commerce/other sectors (20%). This production base has shown remarkable resilience, with over half of the businesses continuing to operate without interruption even during the pandemic.

The port's future is set for further growth thanks to significant investments and strategic projects. The construction of the new container platform, on a 90-hectare site once occupied by Montefibre, involves a total investment of 189 million euros. Work began in April 2024 to move the riverbank and build a new dock. In addition, a Simplified Logistics Zone, centered around the Port of Venice and the Rodigino area, was established in October 2022. This initiative is expected to attract about 1.4 billion euros in investments and create over 4,200 direct new jobs, with an additional 6,300 indirect jobs. This is also supported by 80 million euros in government funding made available in September 2024. These developments are part of a broader vision that includes creating new commercial, logistics, and energy terminals and building a new multi-modal corridor (road and rail) to effectively connect the terminals to the trans-European network, improving transport capacity and reducing impact on more urbanized areas.

However, these positive dynamics coexist with challenges in the local labor market. The province of Venice is experiencing increasing difficulty for businesses in finding qualified and unqualified staff, with a difficulty rate reaching 52% in 2025. This is mainly due to a lack of

10 Here, the Re-think Venice project presents the materials from a workshop https://www.ripensarevenezia.it/il-laboratorio-seconda-giornata/.

candidates (32%) and inadequate skills (12%). This scenario highlights the need for targeted policies to increase female employment and to manage migration rationally, including training programs to integrate people into the workforce and meet employment needs. The current growth model has led to a significant increase in the foreign population (a 498% rise between 2002 and 2022, representing 16% of the total provincial population), particularly concentrated in Mestre Centro and Marghera. Here, more than one in four residents is a foreigner, often employed in low-skilled and low-wage sectors such as tourism and industry (e.g., Fincantieri), which creates a risk of zoning in some urban areas and potential social imbalances. To avoid such trends and support equitable and inclusive growth, it is imperative to diversify the mainland's economic base, promoting higher value-added sectors and strengthening collaboration between academia and the business community. The Venice airport represents the infrastructure that has grown the most in recent decades, leading its owner to present a new Master Plan in 2023 (Aeroporto di Venezia 2023). The airport is managed by SAVE, a company that heads the Northeast Airport Hub, which includes the airports of Venice, Treviso, Verona, and Brescia. In 2024, the Northeast Airport Hub as a whole handled about 18.4 million passengers, an increase of 3.1% over 2023. The airport system's impact on the area is multi-faceted and contributes significantly to the development of the local and regional economy. The data is notable and is included in the Sustainability Report that the company has been producing and certifying since 2014. According to the latest available data, the Northeast airport system generates employment for over 30,000 workers, both direct and indirect, and contributed about 1.6 billion euros to the area's GDP, despite the impact of the pandemic. The Master Plan's traffic projections for Marco Polo Airport predict 20.8 million passengers by 2037. The new Master Plan's interventions are therefore designed to accommodate these growth forecasts, considering that without the new works, the airport would reach its saturation level of 12.5 million passengers as early as 2026. This means approximately 8 million new passengers in about 10 years. Potentially, this would widen the entry point to Venice for tourist flows, which numerous international sources predict will grow rapidly in the coming years, especially due to an increase in travellers from emerging economies.

1.4 Present and Future Implications

An analysis of Venice's economic and productive health reveals a still-vital economic base, but it also highlights a growing and worrying over-reliance on the tourism sector. This dependency has significant consequences for the city's social structure and future prospects.

While tourism is a crucial economic pillar – as shown by the number of daily visitors and the fact that it drove about one-third of planned hires in the province in 2023 – its dominance is disproportionately absorbing economic, political, and administrative resources.

Media and policy attention tends to focus on managing tourism, often neglecting other areas. This is evident in the emphasis on tracking and containment measures for tourist numbers – with questionable results – while overlooking policies related to healthcare, housing, and local services. Such policies could create a more favorable environment for residents and help diversify the urban economy.

The continuous growth of tourist beds, which by early 2025 had surpassed the number of residents in the historic center (over 60,000 vs. fewer than 57,000), and the proliferation of non-hotel accommodations like tourist rentals and B&Bs (64% of the total supply), suggest that time and money are increasingly being allocated toward tourism. This risks to come at the expense of other strategic sectors and, moreover, fueling precarious, low-wage, and poorly protected employment.

This excessive dependence is also evident in the touristification of the historic center's commercial and artisanal fabric. Over the last 20 years, businesses catering to residents have decreased by 32.8%, while those catering to tourists have increased by 22.2%, resulting in a net negative change of over 11%. This transformation not only alters the city's identity but also contributes to gentrification and depopulation. Venice has lost an additional 20,000 inhabitants in the last two decades, starting from an already critical situation. The unsustainable logistical and structural pressure from a number of visitors that far exceeds the city's capacity compromises the daily quality of life for residents and leads to the deterioration of cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the characteristics of the local economy, heavily focused on tourism and related low-skilled services, have profound repercussions on the social fabric, creating new challenges for co-existence. The difficulty in finding qualified personnel in the tourism sector, particularly in restaurants, where more than half of the professional roles are hard to fill, highlights an imbalance in the labor market. This is often characterized by seasonal, low-wage jobs with limited protections. This scenario is also linked to the significant increase in the foreign population (+498% in the province between 2002 and 2022, reaching 16% of the total). This population is concentrated in areas like Mestre Centro and Marghera and is often employed in low-skilled sectors like tourism and industrial support activities. This dynamic fuels a risk of zoning and potential social imbalances, putting a strain on the city, whose welfare system has not yet adapted to these changes.

Finally, the limited economic diversification and the prevalence of low-value-added sectors tend to drive more educated young people

away from the city. Despite the Venetian mainland, with its port system, serving as a significant economic and employment engine with about 1,000 companies and 11,000 direct employees – and despite future investments in the new container platform and Simplified Logistics Zone expected to create over 4,200 new direct jobs and 6,300 indirect ones – the province of Venice is having increasing difficulty finding both qualified and unqualified staff, with a difficulty rate reaching 52% in 2025. The Municipality of Venice also has a negative and declining resident balance, a sign of a slow but progressive depopulation that is not fully offset by the arrival of foreign citizens. This difficulty is not due to a lack of available jobs but rather to a mismatch between supply and demand. The scarcity of professional opportunities and careers in high-value-added sectors, coupled with the dominance of tourism-related jobs and low-skilled services, discourages qualified young people from staying or returning to the city. This contributes to a loss of local human capital, innovation, and economic dynamism.

The city resembles a patient with a difficult-to-cure disease, but one who also has the qualities and resources to recover if properly cared for. You will find some of these qualities in the texts that follow and that complete this book.

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