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CULTURAL EVENTS, URBAN MODIFICATIONS.  
VENICE (ITALY) AND THE MODERNITY

FABRIZIO PAONE

A brief review of Venice as a case study has to start connecting its modernity to its history, and especially to its loss of independence (1797) after a millennium of autonomous development. The hypothesis cultivated in this writing concerns the existence of specific phases by which the relations between the urban places and the temporary events have been evolving during the XIX and XX century. The final thesis focuses on the utility of a number of events dispersed in the city, able to enter in touch with an increasing fragmented society.

Foreign domination over the Serenissima Republic of Venice (a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy and patrician democracy) irrupted in the urban space in many ways. An example of this was the dramatic constitution of the Napoleon Wing in piazza San Marco. Its brutal irruption in 1807 irritated the native population terribly by the demolition of the San Geminiano church built by Jacopo Sansovino in the XV century that was jointing the serial rhythms of the Procuratie Vecchie and of the Procuratie Nuove. The topological and anti-perspective urban space of Venice turn intoregular pattern much closer to the orthogonal rules of a generic classicism or neo-classicism. The official reason in order to demolish three ancient buildings in the higher symbolic space in the city was the opening of a Dancing Hall for Napoleon and for the new international élites, a space created to host events in a certain sense. It is important to notice that the events that characterized this period look very different from the traditional ones of the ten Doge parties, as Canaletto drawings and Brustolon engravings of the middle of the XVIII century visually confirm.<sup>1</sup>

The loss of political independence, the demolition of places deeply rooted in the citizens imagery, the railway connection of the lagoon archipelago with the land, marked a loss of continuity in the urban evolution of Venice. During the XIX century the notion of «event» was related to great political or war actions, with direct consequences on the destiny of the conservation of the city, in a former or renewed asset, and on the wide and fuzzy notion of «culture».<sup>2</sup> During XIX century the great political revolutions came together with the

1. Giovanni Battista Brustolon, Antonio Canaletto, *Feste ducali*, Ludovico Furlanetto, Venezia, s.d. [1768].

2. Cfr. the general studies about this period in venetian urban history: Giandomenico Romanelli, *Venezia Ottocento. Materiali per una storia architettonica e urbanistica della città nel secolo XIX*, Roma, Officina Edizioni, 1977; Ennio Concina, *Venezia nell'età moderna. Struttura e funzioni*, Venezia, Marsilio, 1989.

multiplication of the design proposals.<sup>3</sup> The modernity was searched as an adjustment, mainly linked to the new mobility systems. After the creation of the new Italian state, the Venetian Riccardo Selvatico proposed to hold «a national art exposition» every two years. It became in 1895 La Biennale di Venezia, with interests in several fields, from art to cinema, music, theatre, dance and architecture.<sup>4</sup>

At the turn of the century, the «cultural» event appears like a possibility of conversation among nations and civilizations. The linguistic identities make the internationalism possible, not only to intensify the commercial and business exchanges. The brilliant tradition of International Expositions and of Universal Expositions held in several capitals in Europe, in America and worldwide, projected its consequences also upon the autonomous, middle-age venetian labyrinthine space. The expositions were usually placed in specific sites outside the historic centers but well connected to them. In Venice, Biennale exhibitions tried to colonize an estranged space like Giardini (the Gardens) located in the sestiere<sup>5</sup> of Castello, introducing a pavilions system unique in town.

This period was fertile for the rising of the notion of «cultural event», as seen from the particular point of view of the new north-eastern Italy. The moving borders and the conflicts about nations (Austro-Hungarian empire, France, Italy, the riots around 1848 and then the unification under the new Italian monarchy) obliged to shift from the idea of nation to the idea of national culture. Some specific situations, like the one of Trieste, showed an extraordinary atmosphere for cultural exchanges and contaminations in literature, music, theatre and visual arts. Café littéraire and schools of translations (like urban public places) are only the most known innovations of this season. At the same time, the rising of cultural events in Italian northeastern historic towns linked the fine arts and crafts expositions with the different dimension of popular and vernacular events. Strongly suggested by economic reasons, the international cultural events became a space for commercial exchanges and tourism. In some way, it seems that historical towns, such as Venice, need continuous external stimulations to preserve their own life and vitality.

The democratization of the society in Europe after the second world war, the increase of individual mobility and the reduction of working time gave the possibility to many people to stay in touch with cultural events. An increasing part of the European population got the possibility to spend some time not only in working places or in their own private dwellings, or in the social institutions organized by the religious, industrial or political powers. The time for culture became a real and imaginary dimension of freedom. A strong network of physical, mental and infrastructural relations was built after the abolitions of the barriers between high culture and popular culture. At the same time, new and more articulated barriers were introduced. The first one is the event dimension, confirmed by the

3. Cfr. Giandomenico Romanelli and Lionello Puppi (eds.), *Le Venezie possibili. Da Palladio a Le Corbusier*, Milano, Electa, 1985.

4. La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Le esposizioni internazionali d'arte 1895-1995: artisti, mostre, partecipazioni nazionali, premi*, Milano, Electa, 1996; for a syntetic overview, see: *Federica Martini and Vittoria Martini, Just another exhibition. Histories and politics of biennals*, Milano, Postmedia, 2011.

5. Sestiere is a word, in venetian and after in italian language, that belongs to the specific toponomy of Venice: the city is shared in six parts (sestieri) rather than in four parts (quartieri).

visitors number, which reflects the economic size and relevance of the cultural event. «Big is beautiful» is not an obvious statement, if applied to the fragile and narrow body of the ancient town, as the Italian town planner Gustavo Giovannoni repeated many times during the first half of the XX century.<sup>6</sup> The process directed to the bigness of the event had its climax in the late eighties, with the suggestion of Venice as a likely site for the Universal Expo 2000, that was announced as a great tourist attraction that would lead to Venice tens of millions of paying visitors. The apocalypse was anticipated by the Pink Floyd concert with floating stage in the San Marco basin in 1989. For an entire day authorities completely lost control of public order. The following morning the city woke up under a layer of wastes one meter deep, with a deep sense of violation.

Thenot reversible process of modernization increased not only the use of central places, but also the spread of settlements connected to cultural tourism, and invented the icon of «art-cities», elected sites worth to be totally preserved. In Venice there are 10 million tourists per year (85% from foreign countries) in comparison to the 60.000 inhabitants living in the central islands. In the world imagery, Venice appears as the witness of a glorious collective past, and consequently as a dream town for lots of people that desire to visit it at least once in life. Its power to attract had increased more and more and it is still getting bigger, especially for travelers coming from India, China, Russia. Its appeal is obviously related to the attraction of the historic heritage, that is able to bring to mind images of ancient civilizations, and leads to buy something related to its supposed artistic essence. The Venice appeal has been taken-for-granted and policies and planning limited themselves to accompany the touristic phenomena, growing higher in its international dimension in last 15 years by internet bookings and low cost flies especially.

Within this scenario the cultural activities, the education and the tourism growth in last two decades produced modifications running in the direction to strengthen the inner differences in Venice territory. In its central islands the recent problems in the regulation of the transformations caused by the high touristic presences belong to the same field of the general town planning, in the city and in the state too. In particular in long periods we can read an opposition between the ordinary town planning regulation efforts, and short periods of deregulation, that draw their dramatic consequences on the others. In 1999, in particular, the Veneto Region introduced a law that deregulated the opening of hospitality activities outside hotel structures, producing a number of transformations of small houses or flats into bed & breakfast and rooms for rent, with conflictual effects within the residential heritage. In this way the rules foreseen by the plan for ancient centre drawn by the municipality in the same year were completely vanished. The plan introduced tight rules for new hotel activities, that couldn't be introduced in residential units smaller than 120 square meters, and without separate entrances for residents and for tourists. In the same way, all the palaces, that usually in Venice have the same basic size, couldn't product higher profits than changing their use in hotels or retail surfaces.

The relevance of cultural events in central places have been recently related to contemporary arts. The activities by Francois Pinault in Palazzo Grassi and in Punta della

6. The clearest statement of these positions is in the collected writings: Gustavo Giovannoni, *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova*, Torino, Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1931.

Dogana with Tadao Ando interventions, the Emilio Vedova Museum and Foundation by Renzo Piano in Magazzini del Sale, the Palazzo Grimani Exhibitions, the Accademia Galleries and Natural History Museum renewal are only a few of the interventions done last years. Many other smaller interventions and events have took place and also many new art galleries were opened, renewing the ground floors layer of the city, especially in the Dorsoduro and San Marco sestieri. Also some national and international educational programs held in Venice have been recently more art oriented, gaining appeal from the beauty of the city itself, and from the links with the Venice Biennale activities.

From second world war since today a lot of town planning efforts have been done in Venice, most of them finalized to the two general master plans approved in 1962 and in 1999. The direct urbanism forecasts about tourism impact has been treated in two ways basically. The first level has been looked for a wise action about the single buildings use regulation. This regulation demonstrated to be useful and necessary, able to be transferred in ordinary practices by the action of the city administration and by the work of the Authority for Architecture and Landscape Preservation of Venice and its lagoon. The second level that seemed decisive to the planners is the re-organization and rationalization of means of transport at a large scale. The mobility problem has been considered mainly as a problem in the access to central isles. This reorganization failed, for several reasons. The idea to re-equilibrate the land accesses to Venice by the creation of two strong land terminals in Tesserà and Fusina remained illusory, also after the construction and the enlargement of the international airport. The municipal and port authorities, the stakeholders, the Region and the State didn't collaborate, and all kinds of chaotic processes of urbanization happened in the periphery. Today a strong civic conflict raised about the frequent passages of big cruise ships along the Giudecca channel and through the San Marco water basin, after several inhabitants and committees' protests and the lack of authorities decisions. Even though this presence is not dangerous for city conservation and for navigation, it has a strong visual impact on the inhabitants' perception, and it has become a proper cultural happening, due to the ships height, less or more double than the houses height.

In Venice it has been reported to magistracy the construction of the Constitution Bridge by Santiago Calatrava, whose costs doubled and brought externalities in the close properties, that didn't participate at all to the public costs. All the management of the Consorzio Venezia Nuova, who was encharged to design and build the new protection works from high tides (MOSE) is now on trial, as well as the director of the Ater (Province Institute for Popular Housing) and the major, who was obliged to resign in 2014, temporary substituted by a commissioner send from the central government. Anyway individual or groups faults have to be brought and proven in trial. Although this procedure is common all over the world we must admit that in Italy it takes very long time.

This phenomenon highlights a general problem of deterioration in public life that is hard to fully understand. The citizens don't trust that the global and local leading phenomena can be managed in the public interest by the actual political and economic representations.

However, the city continues to evolve itself, and to preserve its monumental image. Ordinary operations of urban maintenance had a decisive impulse with the first major Cacciari administration, during which channels restarted to be digged, through the institution of a new

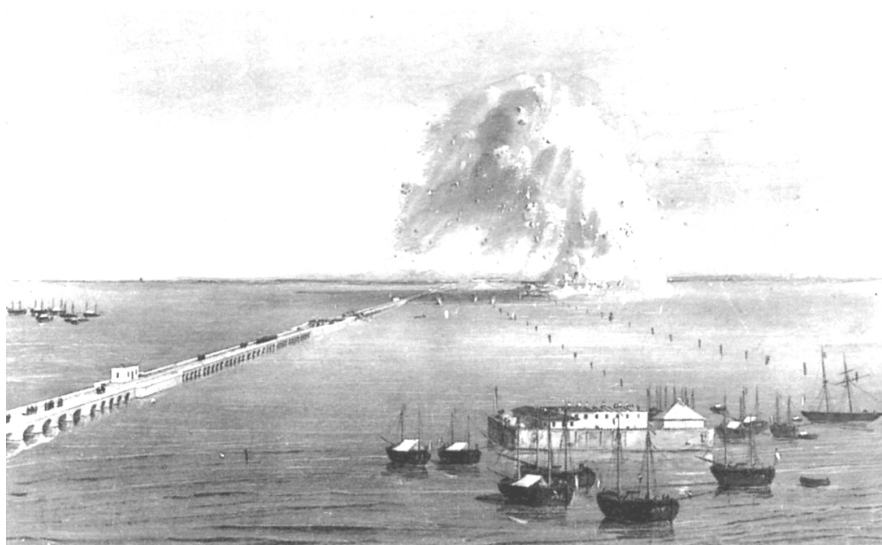
public society, called *Insula*. For the first time after the second world war, a systematic action of conservation of the city was taken. This action involved interventions «isle by isle» about channels, undergrounds nets and also the connection of the sewer system.

The main change in historic central islands seems to be a process of re-centralization that moves its barycenter towards piazzale Roma and the mechanized systems of moving goods and people. Decisions such the transfer of the tribunal once in Rialto to piazzale Roma, or the transfer of the post office once in Fondaco dei Tedeschi, the transformation of the block close to the railway station into Region offices, and the multiplication of university buildings in the sestiere Dorsoduro go in the same direction. Also several public spaces in Venice, called «campi» and «campielli», have been re-vitalized in this area, and private interventions of restoration has involved every kind of buildings. The real estate values has grown higher in these zones, letting the places far from the land connection (Castello, partly Cannaregio, Murano, Burano, Lido) mostly for local market. Also in the land territories many things happened, most of them related to the 1999 masterplan directed by Leonardo Benevolo. It created new parks in Catene and in San Giuliano on polluted soils, and stimulated the regeneration of the brownfields of Marghera, opening the possibility for new commercial areas and business incubators, like the building named Vega.

It's useful to stimulate and to promote new shared visions about Venice in the near future, able to re-open a dialogue between citizens and technical elites. These new visions of the city should be able to create a collaboration between several field such as transportation planning, public works, urban maintenance. In such a hypothetical direction may be will be more useful to design and to manage the connections between culture, education, tourism, economy, arts, environment, architecture. The promotion of small and diffuse events and initiatives, rather than big and chaotic events, would be more respectful of the structure of the archipelago and would enhance the relations between water and land settlements. The present tourists will continue to go to Venice with an unlimited, vague and mediatic idea of its essence. The citizens and their deputations should think at Venice like a great but limited resource that cannot be preserved if its citizens don't increase it through ordinary actions day by day, inside a coherent public vision.



Roberto Roberti, *View of the piazza San Marco, Venice*, 1806. (Source: Museo Civico, Bassano)



Luigi Quarena, *Mine Explosion in San Giuliano*, 1849 (Source: Museo del Risorgimento, Venice)



Anonimous, *Historical Regatta on the Grand Canal*, ca. 1960. (Source: Popular postcard)