

# Heritage, Tourism, and Demography in the Island City of Venice: Depopulation and Heritagisation

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**Abstract:** A city fully urbanized, dominated by heritage, logistically isolated, impervious to physical renovation, Venice must struggle with a massive influx of tourists and the fascinating, yet difficult to manage unique features of its architecture and engineering. Venice is becoming increasingly depopulated as residents move off of the archipelago and to the mainland town of Mestre. The usual narration of Venice's demography is, however, oversimplified. The Venetian people are not migrating from their island city motherland to a foreign mainland out of necessity or for convenience's sake; rather, they are trying to reach a difficult balance between their island and mainland identity. This paper examines Venice's special demographic challenges in light of the laws in place to protect its built heritage, its geography relative to other lagoon communities, and developments in the tourism industry.

**Keywords:** demography, depopulation, heritage, island cities, tourism, Venice, Mestre

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## **Heritage, Tourism, and Demography in the Island City of Venice: The Depopulation and Heritagisation**

### **1. Introduction**

Venice is a spectacular example of intensive island urbanisation. This small cluster of islands has been completely built up for centuries and – unlike many densely urbanised near-shore islands – has been popularly recognised as distinct and separate from its hinterlands. There is a tendency to consider the islands of Venice as a place unto itself rather than within its wider context.

This paper considers Venice's challenges as a comprehensively heritagised island city. The demands of world heritage have created an emphasis on preserving Venice's historic built environment, at the expense of the needs of the local population. This has led to a precipitous decline in population. This focus on preserving Venice's built heritage is underpinned by law and complements efforts to maintain the city's high levels of tourism. By considering Venice alongside its neighbouring communities of Mestre-Marghera on the mainland and the Lido island, this paper assesses why policies currently targeted at solving Venice's problems may not work and argues that the island city must be understood within its wider geographic, economic, and demographic context.

### **2. Background**

The Municipality of Venice (*Comune di Venezia*; 'the municipality') is a subnational jurisdiction of Italy. The municipality is divided into six districts (*Municipalità*), two of which are made up solely of islands (Venice and the Lido), which together contain around a third of Venice's total population of 260,000 people.

The Venice Lagoon contains hundreds of islands, but it is the archipelago of the historic city of Venice (*Centro storico*; hereafter, 'Venice') that attracts the most spectacularly outsized attention. In the words of Erla Zwingle (2015):

Venice really is small. It covers a mere three square miles, but it's denser than osmium, composed of ponderous masses of old buildings separated by 182 canals on 126 tiny islands connected by 435 bridges and God knows how many tiny, twisty streets. Its phenomenal importance to world history and to Western culture is out of all proportion to its miniature dimensions.

Venice and the wider lagoon environment are a result of historical and more recent land reclamation and engineering projects. This reflects the tension between the benefits of island spatiality, which encourages city formation (Grydehøj, 2015a), and the constraints that island spatiality places on urban growth, which encourages the expansion of existing islands and creation of new ones through the manufacturing of ground (Grydehøj, 2015b). As in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the challenges of building in a wetland environment led

to the historical use of pile foundations to construct and anchor Venice's artificial islands (Naldini et al., 2010), with complex hydraulic engineering projects being subsequently undertaken to maintain not only the islands but also the navigability and flow of the surrounding water system. Indeed, Renaissance thinkers noted the similarities between Venice and Mexico-Tenochtitlan (today's Mexico City), "two cities [that] shared a common urban fabric, with buildings built on water, interlaced with canals and bridges" (Kim, 2006: 83).

Venice's demand for land means that open space is at a premium. Venice's largest green space is San Michele Island, a cemetery island, though there are also pockets of greenery in the Castello district and on San Giorgio Maggiore (Municipality of Venice, 2016a) – all of which are part of the built environment. So dense is construction and so high are visitor numbers in Venice that some of its famous narrow alleys are sometimes designated for one-way pedestrian traffic only.

Yet despite its extreme density, Venice remains a physically isolated city. Because it can be reached by car, bus, or train from the mainland in as little as five minutes, it is easy to overlook the fact that this crossing is only made possible by a single 4 km bridge, supplemented by ferry and water taxi crossings. A tram line has run on the bridge since late 2015 (ACTV s.p.a., 2015), and Venice's airport is located on the mainland.

For the time being, cruise ship passengers are still lucky enough to disembark at the Maritime Station in Venice proper (Venice Port Authority, 2010), but the current arrangements are widely considered too invasive (Casagrande, 2015), and various alternative routes and solutions are under consideration. A proposal was even put forward to have the cruise ships disembark their passengers as far as Trieste, 150 km from Venice (Corriere del Veneto, 2015).

Venice's network of islands and canals produces peculiar infrastructural challenges. Special transportation arrangements and practices are not unusual on islands (Enoch & Warren, 2008; Grydehøj & Hayward, 2014; Warren & Enoch, 2010). Although less urbanised small islands may prove resistant to certain mass transit systems (Baldacchino, 2008b), densely urbanised small islands and archipelagos are often innovators in complex and multifaceted mass transit systems. It is nevertheless safe to say that, in this respect, Venice is unique. All land motor vehicles are banned within the city, and even the use of bicycles is strictly limited (Articles 25 and 28 of the Urban Hygiene Regulation, Municipality of Venice, consolidated version, Municipality of Venice, 2015). Minazzi (2016), in an article based on the municipal budget, analytically details the consequences of Venice's unique artificial geography for the local authorities' provision of public services: fully manual rubbish collection; small cemeteries and water purifiers scattered across the various islands, the necessity of maintaining a 'Tide Office'; difficulties in the management of public lightning, public greenery, transportation for disabled people, school cafeterias, *etc.* A local think tank has

estimated that the municipality is compelled each year to spend 41 million euros more than a comparable 'ordinary' Italian Municipality (Minazzi, 2016).

### **3. A city in stasis**

Venice is isolated not only in space but also in time, as if it were frozen or suspended. The entire Venice Lagoon makes up a unitary Site on the UNESCO World Heritage List (UNESCO, 2016b). The Lagoon was listed in 1987, upon the recommendation of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), which acts as an advisory body. The 1986 ICOMOS reports (UNESCO, 1987) is highly significant for understanding how Venice is seen and perceived, even in the most qualified circles. The city is indeed described as "one the most extraordinary built-up areas of the Middle Ages," "one of the greatest capitals in the medieval world" and "one of the most extraordinary architectural museums on earth" (UNESCO, 1987, p. 2).

This is perfectly in line with the contemporary, tourist perceptions of the city. On its website, *Lonely Planet* lists Venice's top-ten experiences as St Mark's Cathedral, the Dogal Palace, the Academy Galleries, Tintoretto's Heaven on Earth, the Fenice Theatre, the Venice Biennale, and, bizarrely, the Scrovegni Chapel, which is actually in Padua (Lonely Planet, 2016). All the listed buildings are centuries old. The Fenice Theatre was actually rebuilt between 1996 and 2003, after it had been destroyed by a devastating fire (Teatro La Fenice, 2014), but the original design was strictly respected. The Venice Biennale was established in 1895 (la Biennale di Venezia, 2016b), but it takes place in the old Arsenal premises.

This consideration of Venice as a historical site, especially by the dominant touristic economy, has a practical, architectural impact on the city. Only the major historical buildings, which are included in the travel itineraries, have a chance to be conserved and renovated, if and when the State budget or private donations allow. All the other buildings, which formerly housed the majority of the Venetian population, are abandoned or used to accommodate tourists on a very short basis, often of no more than one or two days. Even in the last case, the buildings are not conserved or renovated, since tourists will use their rented room only to sleep, spending the rest of their time visiting the city and being thus indifferent to the condition of their temporary dwellings.

This fundamental economic factor, together with the high cost of construction works in Venice, the lack of space available for new buildings and the assumption that tourists will prefer a 'perfectly preserved city', keeps the city frozen in an unreal fantasy scenario. In light of this, it is easier to excuse ICOMOS for its insistent reference to the Middle Ages, while reporting on a city which was an independent state until the very end of 18th Century, and the contribution of which was essential for the Western victory in the 1571 battle of Lepanto.

Venice's stasis is also favoured by law. Article 42(2) of the Italian Constitution reads:

Private property is recognized and protected by the law, which shall regulate the manner in which property is acquired and used, as well as the limits to property, in order to ensure the social purpose of ownership and the accessibility of goods (State Printing Service and Mint, 1947).

The Code of Cultural Heritage and Environment (Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato s.p.a., 2004) empowers various Authorities at the state and local level to place buildings or entire areas under special public protection. The private owner of a building subject to special protection needs a public permission, usually released by the Arts Supervisor's Office, before starting any work on the building in question. In Venice, the existence of public protection restrictions is so commonplace that the local Arts Supervisor's Office has established an unofficial public database to allow for their search (<http://venezia.gis.beniculturali.it>). Irrespective of legal restrictions, the emphasis on built heritage in Venice's historic centre means that significant intervention or urban renewal is impossible, leaving the city without urban landmarks such as shopping malls, large corporate headquarters, and above all, factories. The only substantive exception, until the Eighties, was social housing (Territorial Enterprise for Social Housing in the Province of Venice, 2016); however, a lack of public funding has almost stopped social housing initiatives in Italy. The lack of production plants is particularly significant in a country such as Italy, the economy of which has traditionally been based on manufacturing rather than services.

#### **4. A city in decline**

Venice's built environment may remain in stasis, but life in the archipelago moves on. The most significant trend affecting Venice is undoubtedly depopulation. According to the Historical Series of the Municipality of Venice (Municipality of Venice, 2014), the city's population reached its peak in 1951 (174,808 residents) and dropped to 56,311 by 2014. The Historical Series start from 1871 and thus do not cover the era of the Most Serene Republic of Venice. Under the Republic the city population was highest in 1563, with 168,627 (Beltrami, 1951) or 163,627 residents (Beltrami, 1954). Real-time, semi-official counters of the resident population are also displayed on the shop windows of two pharmacies in the historic centre (Corriere del Veneto, 2016 & VeneziaToday, 2016).

The demographic decline is popularly attributed to the economic and logistical constraints of Venetian life. Car parks, which can be found only around Rome Square, are very expensive, and so are boat moorings; the latter must be granted by the public authorities, since all water areas are State property in Italy. Basic goods, such as groceries, are also more expensive, since they must be carried by boat and by foot. The same applies to construction and even renovation works, without counting the legal limitations and proceedings. Moreover, as noted above, the architectural and urban stasis of the city forbids or limits the creation of facilities, which are common in cities or even towns: cinemas, gyms, *etc.* In order

to live in Venice, you need to walk, which you can be unwilling or unable to do. Finally, your career options could be limited by the ubiquitous tourism sector.

However, all of these factors, while significant, are overshadowed by some basic economic considerations related to real estate management. If you own a house or a flat in Venice, renting it to tourists is simply too lucrative, in comparison to actually living in it: In Venice, the tourist season never ends, and an owner can be reasonably sure to have every room booked all year round.

While the number of residents falls precipitously, the number of tourists visiting Venice keeps growing. Nevertheless, bearing in mind that the municipality encompasses a much larger area than the historic centre itself, visitor statistics must be treated with caution. According to a report released by the Office of the Municipal Commissioner for Tourism in 2014, more than 26 million people visited the city that year (Vitucci, 2014). However, if you compare this with the 2015 statistics released by the Provincial Agency for Tourism Promotion (Provincial Agency for Tourism Promotion, 2016), the figure of 26 million is likely to include tourists visiting the beaches around Venice during the summer. This is a completely different, seasonal tourism, which in most cases does not affect Venice. More reliable data is therefore provided by the number of tourists specifically classified as “visiting the Artistic City [of Venice]” (Provincial Agency for Tourism Promotion, 2016): Such visitors numbered 9,427,415 in 2015, amounting to around 167 visitors per resident per year.

In the table below, a comparison was drawn between the population/visitors ratio of Venice and the same data related to some famous touristic cities.

City	Surface area	Population	Tourists per year (estimated)	Year
Florence	102 km <sup>2</sup>	378,174	9,000,000	2015
Madrid	604 km <sup>2</sup>	3,141,991	8,300,000	2015
Paris	105 km <sup>2</sup>	2,257,981	36,907,372 (nights)	2012
Rome	1290 km <sup>2</sup>	2,868,347	7,000,000	2015
London	1572 km <sup>2</sup>	8,663,300	36,115,000 (nights)	2015
Venice	157 km <sup>2</sup>	56,311	9,427,415	2014

*Figure 1:* Comparison of visitor numbers and resident populations in major tourism cities.

Sources: Municipality of Florence, 2016a, 2016b; Metropolitan City of Florence, 2016; Municipality of Madrid, 2015a, 2015b; Municipality of Paris 2016; Paris Tourism and Congress Office, 2016; Municipality of Rome, 2016a, 2016b; Lio and Voltattorni, 2016; Greater London Authority, 2016; British Tourist Authority, 2016; Municipality of Venice, 2014; Provincial Visit Britain/Visit England, 2016.

The only city whose imbalance vaguely resembles the Venetian one, at least in terms of the surface/visitors ratio, is Paris. However, the apparent small size of the French city is

probably due to its administrative borders. In fact, the Metropolitan City of Greater Paris, which includes typically Parisian districts such as La Défense, has a much greater area and population than Paris proper (Metropolitan City of Greater Paris, 2016).

#### **4. Policy responses**

The Italian Authorities are aware of the critical problems affecting Venice. The fragility of the city was brought to national attention after the 1966 flooding (Cavaleri & Bertotti, 2016). In 1973 the Italian Parliament passed the so-called ‘Special Law for Venice’ (State Printing Service and Mint, 1973). Article 1(1) of the Law reads: “The safety of Venice and of its Lagoon is declared a problem of the highest national interest.” Article 5 established a Committee for the Safety of Venice, which includes a UNESCO official and must approve any public or private work impacting the territory within the lagoon (Art. 6(1)). The Law also allocated money for public works and aid for Venice residents. In the Italian constitutional system, however, a Law providing for expenditures needs to be refinanced by Parliament every year, and the funds earmarked for the Law have been subject to a major reduction in the past years (Municipality of Venice, 2008).

The Law is implemented at a state, regional, and municipal level. Besides being a municipality, Venice is also the capital of the Veneto Governorate and of the Province of Venice, though the latter jurisdiction is being phased out. In the coming years, the municipality should gradually gain metropolitan status, thereby combining the powers and competencies of a municipality with those of the former province.

If the Italian state is accused of underfinancing the Special Law, in other cases its financial support has been too generous, so much so that it has violated European Union laws on state aid to enterprises. Italy, for example, is still struggling to recover many millions of euro of aid in the form of social security exemptions, which had been granted in 1995-96 to over 1,000 enterprises operating in Venice and the lagoon (European Commission, 1999).

The measures of the Special Law and of similar legislative instruments are aimed at stopping or limiting the depopulation of Venice by granting financial aid to residents and offering support to local undertakings, so that they can provide residents with local jobs. Other policies and proposals purport to limit the influx of visitors to the city, both to ensure safety and to ease the pressure on residents. It has already been recognized by the Authorities, however, that the enforcement of such limits could be difficult, given the enormous pressure on the two main gateways to Venice, Rome Square and the railway station. Both these accesses are constantly used not only by tourists, but also by residents, commuters and delivery services providing Venice with food and other goods. Under this respect, Venice is thus different from other limited access sites, such as the Galapagos Islands, Mount Athos or Himalaya, which do not face a similar pressure. Most observers agree that enforcing the influx limits using physical checks, such as turnstiles, would be unpractical, unless such

limits are applied only to some districts within the city, the most popular suggestion being the use of IT checks (Padovan, 2016; Vitucci, 2016a).

A lesser known aspect of these tourism containment policies is related to limiting the incidence of a tourism economy in order to give residents a wider choice of jobs, ensure the provision of services targeted at residents, and safeguard the city's historical and cultural heritage beyond the scope of its utility for tourism. Venice was for centuries a great maritime, colonial, and commercial power: Its economy is thus a pillar of its heritage, not just the other way around.

Large cruise ships have come to symbolise the struggle to prevent tourism from monopolising the Venetian economy. Currently, cruise ships literally pass through the city in order to enter or leave the port of Venice, crossing the Giudecca Channel and brushing up against St Mark's Square. In principle, the government and the Venice Harbormaster's Office have already ordered such ships to take different routes, but before this can be done it is necessary to excavate a new channel within the lagoon (Casagrande, 2015). Another even more radical proposal envisages the imposition of a daily quota of visitors (VeneziaToday, 2015).

In the meantime, sizable investments have been made by public and private actors to turn the city into an educational and cultural hub. The city hosts the Venice International Film Festival, the International Art Exhibition, and the International Architectural Exhibition. All three events are internationally renowned and funded by the Italian Government via the Biennale Cultural Corporation (la Biennale di Venezia, 2016a; State Printing Service and Mint, 1998). Venice also hosts two universities (Ca' Foscari University of Venice and IUAV University of Venice); an academy (Venice Academy of Fine Arts); and the Venice International University, an international academic consortium. The city is also home to a UNESCO Office (UNESCO, 2016a) and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2014). This emphasis on cultural hub status is rooted in the exceptional ability of small islands to be the sites of highly visible 'creative cities' (Khoo et al., 2015).

Despite some success in the cultural area, overall the policies that have been adopted and implemented in order to stop or reduce Venice's depopulation and consequent loss of identity and cultural heritage have failed.

In theory, some of these policies – such as subsidies and attempts to increase cultural activities or the presence of international organisations – could be strengthened, but this would require the allocation of more funds by the Italian state or increased involvement from foreign public or private actors. Any increase in public funding is difficult to envisage, not only in light of the dire condition of the Italian state budget but also due to the constraints imposed by European Union regulations (State Aid regulations, Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure, Growth and Stability Pact, Fiscal Compact, *etc.*), which have



elsewhere created impediments for innovative island governance solutions (Grydehøj, 2013). The financing of general interest projects or initiatives with private funds is, for the time being, an uncommon practice in Italy. The government has attempted to change this trend with a 2014 reform (Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato s.p.a., 2014), but even if it succeeds, the new, fiscally incentivised private funds would have to address the needs of Venice's mammoth Italian cultural heritage. The increased involvement of foreign actors would for its part risk further diluting the city's identity. A full ban on large cruise ships would be a symbolic gesture – albeit an important one – rather than a solution to the problem.

Finally, an attempt to limit the daily number of visitors would be met by serious resistance and would even raise legal problems. According to Article 16(1) of the Italian Constitution, “every citizen can freely travel and stop in any part of the national territory, without prejudice to the limitations laid down by the law for health and security reasons” (State Printing Service and Mint, 1947). EU law, for its part, also protects EU citizens' freedom of movement and generally ensures that they are subject to the same treatment as national citizens (European Commission, 2012: Articles 18 & 21). Would it be lawful to force an Italian or EU citizen to pay or book a ticket in order to enter an entire city within the national territory? And even if this was legal, would doing so not turn Venice into even more of a giant, open air museum?

More generally, it is difficult to imagine that any aid package from public policies could act as a counterweight to the Moloch of Venice's tourism economy. Even Venice's civil society is heavily intertwined with the tourism economy and resistant to any policy that threatens it: Significantly, a Cruise Venice Committee (2012) was established to defend the city's cruise industry. It is difficult to estimate the value of the tourism industry surrounding Venice. The local Chamber of Commerce reports that, in 2014, foreign visitors spent more than 2.7 billion euros in the Province of Venice (Chamber of Commerce of Venice Rovigo and the Lagoon Delta, 2015). As noted above, this data also includes tourists visiting the beaches around Venice in the summer. However, it does not include the Italian tourists and does not cover the full turnover of the tourism economy, which goes beyond mere visitor expenditure.

## **5. Venice's mainland and island connections**

For demographic purposes, the Municipality of Venice is divided into three areas: the mainland (including Mestre-Marghera), the historic centre of Venice, and the islands of the lagoon (excluding the islands of the historic centre and those linked to the mainland, such as the islands on which Marghera's port is located).

The city's administrative organisation can retrospectively be seen as an embodiment of these kinds of policies. In 1926, the fascist government, in a drive to disempower local governments, merged the Municipality of Venice with the Municipality of Mestre, Venice's 'twin city' on the mainland (Zucconi, 2003, pp. 73-79). Mestre is an 'ordinary' city, lacking Venice's peculiarities, and the re-establishment of Venice as a distinct municipality

routinely proposed. The Italian Constitution requires a referendum to create a new municipality, and so far, all of the votes held on the issue (in 1979, 1989, 1994, and 2003) have rejected the separation proposal (Municipal District of Venice-Murano-Burano, 2014). A new vote will be held this year (Vitucci, 2016b).

In theory, this administrative link was supposed to create a 'Greater Venice' and allow the Venetian people to spend their days in Mestre, working jobs outside of the tourism sector and far away from the tourists, and then to return home in the evening, at a time when the 'family vacation' tourism model prevalent in Venice leaves the archipelago relatively empty and quiet. In the end, however, most Venetian families simply moved to Mestre, without having to lose – at least on paper – the prestige of living in the city. This is why the people still actually living in Venice proper, in order to avoid any ambiguity, draw a distinction between themselves (who live on “this side of the bridge”) and the others (who instead live “on the other side of the bridge”).

The attempt to establish an economic link between Venice and Mestre is epitomised by the Marghera petrochemical complex, a sprawling industrial cluster, which is still visible as you reach Venice from Mestre. The decision to build a petrochemical complex within one of the most delicate lagoons in the world, in front of Venice itself, may seem questionable at best. However, the origins of the industrial area date back to the 19th Century, and the decision to significantly expand it was taken in the 1960s in order to allow the Venetian people to take their share of the Italian industrial boom (Romanato, 2003). At the dawn of the current century, however, the economic downturn hit Marghera hard, and the entire complex was declared an “industrial crisis area” by the government in 2010 (State Printing Service and Mint, 2010).

The most populous island of the Venice Lagoon (excluding the historic centre) is the Lido, the Riviera of Venice. The Lido is a narrow, 12 km long strip of land separating the Venice Lagoon from the Adriatic Sea. In common with other Northern Adriatic beach resorts, the Lido is crowded during the summer (when it also hosts the Venice Film Festival) and quiet during the rest of the year. Most importantly, residents of the Lido can own and operate cars and motor vehicles, which can be transported between the island and the mainland by ro-ro ferry.

The Historical Series reveals that the lagoon's resident population has declined from a peak of 51,079 in 1965 to 28,792 today. Spectacular though this decrease may be, it pales in comparison with that which has affected Venice itself. The comparatively healthy demographic situation of the Lido is significant in terms of the depopulation of Venice. The Lido is even less connected with the mainland than is Venice since it lacks a fixed link to the mainland and is served by many fewer public ferry services. The Lido's urban landscape could potentially be renovated, but it simply has not been, at least not significantly. The most iconic building is the Excelsior Hotel, the famous backdrop to the Venice Film Festival,

which opened in 1908. The Lido's buildings are not particularly modern; indeed they tend to be somewhat outdated, as in many Italian holiday resorts, which boomed in 1960s. Neither, however, is the Lido's urban fabric stuck in a past that is distant to the daily lives of most residents. The fact that the Lido is not dominated by built heritage makes it easier for it to host a vibrant community.

What really distinguishes the Lido from Venice is its being just an ordinary island city. On the Lido, you can own a car or take a bus. You do not need to download the municipality-sponsored smartphone app that warns you in the event of an impending exceptionally high tide. Your house or flat will not be closely watched by the Office of the Supervisor for Arts and Landscape. The Lido's economy is still dominated by tourism, but the Lido market is not overcrowded by competitors and tourists as is the market in Venice. Traditionally, the Lido's beaches have attracted regular Venetian costumers.

The Lido's distinguished performance in the Venetian fight for demographic survival shows that the decisive factor behind Venice's depopulation does not simply come down to Venice's insularity. It instead comes down to the precise constellation of island effects influencing life in Venice. Venice's suffers from a combination of: extreme spatial constraints, which prevent de-densification through expansion; relatively easy island-mainland transport links, which encourage large numbers of visitors and encourage dependence on mainland labour and services; and a densely heritagised urban fabric, which makes it difficult to modernise infrastructure and diversify the economy. All of these are challenges related to island city spatiality. The Lido too is affected by spatial constraints, but it has been spared the stifling embrace of heritagisation.

## **6. Island connections**

As seen above, Venice is physically and legally resistant to any external intervention, due to its nearly perfect insular isolation and its delicate architecture. With its relative demographic buoyancy, the Lido seems to occupy a sort of middle ground between the historic centre and Mestre, the mainland twin city on the land that is formally part of Venice and to which most Venetian families have moved. In its hybrid – or perhaps, aquapelagic (Hayward, 2015) – nature, the Lido embodies the inherent tensions of island life. On one hand, the people living on the island share a distinct identity and heritage and proudly claim it; on the other hand, they are part of a wider mainland-island community. The Lido's residents are ultimately Venetian islanders willing to live in a way which is a bit more similar to that of the mainland. This is not merely an issue of comfort and logistics, for the Lido is more isolated than Venice proper. The people living on an offshore island belong to wider communities, and their lifestyles are part of their intangible cultural heritage.

The case of Venice, with special regard to the partial exception of Lido, provides us with lessons on how to avoid the demographic demise of island cities. It is necessary to ensure that densely urbanised islands do not stultify through rigid preservation of existing built

environments, that they are not made impervious to modification. Such rigidity can be a consequence of policies that fail to balance competing demands for maintaining ‘world heritage’ and local economic, social, and cultural needs. It should come as no surprise that these challenges are shared – to different degrees and in different ways – by other spatially constrained historic island cities, walled cities, and indeed walled island cities (see for example, Cassia, 1999; Creighton, 2007; Evans, 2002; Ronström, 2008).

As Grydehøj (2014: 187) notes, small islands play a dual role when it comes to heritage preservation:

This belongs to a wider process of urban zonal differentiation following the straightforwardly delineated spaces of islands within cities. Thus, for instance, some island spaces are allowed to be (visually) ‘frozen in time’ by the modern taste for heritagization (as on Christianshavn in Copenhagen, Gamla Stan in Stockholm, and Île de la Cité in Paris). The creation of such island heritage zones partly protects historical buildings, cityscapes, and ways of life from the encroachment of modern urban functions. However, it also protects the needs of the modern city from unlimited demands for urban built and cultural heritage preservation.

Venice’s status as an archipelago thus permits the creation of a self-contained heritage zone that should neither change internally nor expand externally. The containment of ‘world heritage’ within Venice and its distinction from its surroundings strengthens the prospects for the city’s hinterlands.

The complex relationship between island preservation and isolation is well explored by the various theories of conservation, so much so that the rather extreme tendency of reversibility theories exist, or at least used to exist. Now widely discredited, reversibility theories advocated the return of conservation object to their supposed ‘original’ status (Muñoz Viñas, 2002: 25). Obviously, the tension between preservation and isolation involves not only the conservation of tangible objects, but also of whole island heritages. Venice’s magnificent buildings, palaces and tangible objects are constantly at risk of overshadowing this aspect. This is understood by Venetian scholars, many of whom identified the paradigm of intangible cultural heritage, legally adopted by the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (United Nations, 2007), as fundamental to the preservation of Venice (Picchio Forlati, 2014). According to Scovazzi (Picchio Forlati et alios, 2014: 132), the concept of intangible cultural heritage sums up spatial-objective components and subjective-social-community components.

This leads us back to island communities and to another front of theories, which alternatively portray such communities them as:

- Communities fiercely fighting for their insular identity against all odds (‘the heroic islander’ perspective);

- Communities that need help valuing, rediscovering, or maintaining their insular identities (the ‘conventional’ perspective);
- Communities that should seek to avoid contamination with the mainland for the sake of ‘authenticity’ (the ‘purist’ perspective);
- Communities that need to adopt creative, unconventional policies in order to survive together with their islands (the ‘opportunity’ perspective).

The ‘heroic islander’ perspective is actually more common in the mainstream media than in the scholarly literature (Roberts, 2011). For some Venetian examples, see Davies (2014) and *Il Corriere del Veneto* (2014). The peculiar case of the city status claimed by Peel on the Isle of Man is illustrated by Tutt (2014).

The ‘conventional’ approach is evident in the aforementioned UNESCO Convention, which provides educational, awareness-building, and capacity-building measures targeted at both the “general public” (Article 14.a.i) and “the communities and groups concerned” (Article 14.a.ii).

The limits and shortcomings of the ‘purist’ perspective, which is well represented in the specialist literature, are exposed by Baldacchino (2008a), who also argues for the need of creative and niche policies (Baldacchino, 2010: 89-109; Ronström, 2008: 12; Baldacchino, 2006), in line with the ‘opportunity’ perspective.

## 7. Conclusion

A research and policy approach focused exclusively on island identity rather than on balancing island and mainland identities will fail to meet the needs of the island community, ultimately destroying it, as in the case of Venice, a city with a perfectly preserved historic urban fabric, the preservation of which is causing the loss of the city’s community and identity. Nevertheless, mere recognition that island heritage is actually a mixed mainland-island risks concealing how much mainland and island identities can conflict, as shown in the case of Venice, in which the mainland (and Venice itself for opposite reasons) is hated as an identity stealer, a dominant force, and the source of the tourism influx – but also recognised as the place offering standards and ways of living that are regarded as integral to contemporary Italian identity.

While it is true that islands often require creative and unconventional policies in order to survive, the drafting of such policies should bear in mind the ways in which the Venetian people have sought to build their own ‘mainland island’ on the Lido. Paradoxically, unconventional island policies often aim to make the islands themselves more conventional. For example, the island tax havens and financial hubs of British crown dependencies and overseas territories are examples of creative policymaking based on the exploitation of the island jurisdictional peculiarities, but they ultimately create small-scale reproductions of the City of the London, the core of the mainland, metropolitan power. Venice’s islandness must

be embraced in a way that takes into account the needs of its community and its place in the wider geographic, economic, and demographic context.

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