

BOOK REVIEW

A Future for Venice? Report on the conference 'A Future for Venice?', organised by the Instituto Veneto di Scienze, Letteri ed Arti in Venice on 2 november 2006: considerations 40 years after the 1966 flood.

Mazzarolli Leopoldo, Ignazio Musu, Gherardo Ortalli (2008). Turin, Venice

Slowly she glides by, at least twelve storeys of steel painted white, a block wide, a street long, cautiously finding her way through the channel of the lagoon of Venice, overshadowing the waters by her sheer size. We can see where she is headed. The Doges palace and the San Marco bell tower both look diminutive in comparison with the dimensions of this enormous cruise ship. In a few moments' time she will spit out two thousand or so tourists who intend to scuttle through the square of San Marco and the surrounding streets and alleys – like rats in a maze. They mingle with the crowd of tourists already there.

Seldom did I see a photograph portraying the content of a book in such a striking way as the image described above, photographed by Daniele Resini, on the front cover of the book *A Future for Venice?*. The sledgehammer blow dealt to this famous city by tourism is simply immense. It is a small miracle that Venice isn't slowly sinking away in the lagoon just by the sheer weight of all these hordes of people. Beautiful palaces, richly decorated mansions, churches and all, once symbols of a world power, fall to pieces as a result of this gigantic influx. The preservation of these buildings alone is costing the city millions.

The book *A Future for Venice?* originates from a conference the 'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Letteri ed Arti' held in November 2006 in commemoration of the catastrophic flood of 4 November 1966, which caused so much damage to precious buildings and important works of art.

The contribution by Gherardo Ortalli provides us with some insights into the *werdegang* of this city. Annual tourist arrivals are estimated at around 18 million; the number of daytime visitors varies between 25,000 and 110,000 per day. If there is any place in the world in need of some serious visitor management, it would be this place.



After the end of the Second World War the island city, built on 118 islands, counted some 178,000 inhabitants. By the 1960s, this figure had already decreased to 145,000 people. In 2005, the total population was a mere 62,000. Most residents moved to the mainland, to the area known as Mestre. Industry and other non-tourism activities make up the economic backbone of this region. Public services in Mestre, as for instance public transport, are fully sustained by revenues generated by tourism in the island city of Venice, which falls under the same municipality.

The heavy pressure from mass tourism requires creative and drastic regulatory measures. One of the conference participants proposed the idea of introducing entrance fees in an attempt to strike a better balance between benefits and costs. Although most of the visitors arrive via the city's causeway, sealing off the island city entirely is clearly not an option. In addition, developing drastic measures is currently not considered a priority, because most of the voters of the city-council live on the mainland. They don't have any interest at all in changing the status quo, since tourism is – as mentioned previously - paying for many of the public services.

The island city is thus rapidly becoming a one-industry economy, almost entirely devoted to tourism.

The conference participants obviously contributed solutions to this problem of one-sidedness. For instance, efforts are being made to upgrade the city's university into a real world-class institution with state-of-the-art research facilities. This will attract international students who will enrich and diversify the cultural scene in Venice. Another solution is to forge ties with leading research institutions. Transforming unused buildings into studios for young entrepreneurs in the creative industries, would also help create a more diversified economy in Venice.

The tragedy of Venice is that it has come to assume a mere peripheral character – its era of being the centre of the world has long passed. The arrival of important research institutions or the upgrading of the university will not go a long way in changing this aspect.

The book has been modelled along the programme of the conference. In the morning sessions, the researchers of the organising Instituto Veneto held their talks. Their contributions are described in the first part of the book. They provide a helpful overview of the situation.

After an introduction by Ignazio Musu, Gherardo Ortalli highlighted the difficulties regarding the city centre and the choices to be made. The problems related to physical conservation were discussed by Andrea Rinaldo. Wolfgang Wolters ended the morning session - and also the first

part of the book - with a contribution on the restoration of Venetian buildings.

The middle part of the book consists of pictures of Venice, almost as if we take a stroll through the city in our lunch break. The pictures are placed in contrast with each other in that a picture of tourists in San Marco Square is counterbalanced by a picture of locals in Campo di Ghetto Nuovo. A picture of the hectic situation on the Rialto bridge contrasts with the emptiness of a quay in one of the outlying parts of the city.

The conference (and also the book for that matter) is concluded with some concerned, or even emotional contributions by well-known Venetians, such as cardinal Angelo Scola, as well as by a few non-Venetians who feel a strong sense of attachment to the city.

This compilation paints a lively picture of the problems with which Venice is faced and the long-standing discussions about them. As such, it comprises a successful introduction to the issues at stake.

It is a pity no literature for further reading is presented in this volume. Furthermore, it contains no footnotes. There are no background descriptions on most of the contributing Venetians, so for non-Venetians it is difficult to ascertain their status and position.

Despite these remarks *A Future for Venice?* is well worth reading. It provides a well- founded overview of the gigantic problems concerning this UNESCO world heritage site.

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