

Airbnb and touristification in the time of a pandemic: what happens in Venice?

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Since Ruskin's and Turner's grand tours in the nineteenth century, Italian historical centres – both of larger cities and of hundreds of historical villages – have exerted increasing attraction for tourism. 45 of these sites are UNESCO world cultural heritages and represent a key asset that has been more and more exploited for private interests. During the last few decades, mass tourism flows – further exacerbated since the introduction of digital platforms – have made the phenomenon unsustainable. Touristification has produced the expulsion of residents and of traditional activities from historical centres in favour of a transit tourism based on consumption, with the consequent upheaval of social, economic, relational and affective life that has always accompanied urban living and urbanity (Colomb & Novy 2018).

In 2019, the number of Airbnb listings was reaching 30,000 in Rome and 8,500 in Venice (Celata, 2020). Venice is emblematic of having almost totally converted and devoted itself to tourism: daily flows of tens of thousands of people, up to one hundred thousand during peak periods; an entire economy of bars, restaurants, services, souvenir and fashion shops directed at, and depending on, tourists has replaced primary goods stores and proximity services. One out of four houses in Venice is not inhabited by residents (Erbani, 2020). The historic city has lost much of its resident population in recent decades, dropping from 175,000 in 1951 to 52,000 in 2019 (Comune di Venezia, 2020).

In face of an industry that is expropriating inhabitants of their own homes, streets, public spaces and even of their cultural heritage, social movements begun to emerge (see for example the SET – Southern Europe in the face of touristification – network). These movements aim to reverse the course, so that together with the places we have known, loved and lived, the very idea of what a 'city' means does not die, transformed into a banal theatrical setting, consumed as a commodity and sold weekend after weekend to those who can afford it (Milano et al., 2019).

Suddenly, the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown imposed to contain it, led to a total suspension of tourism activities in Venice in the spring of 2020. For nearly two months its spaces, small streets and heritage of inestimable value were returned to its inhabitants in a surreal and fascinating atmosphere of peace and silence, obviously marked by a deep economic crisis and uncertainty for the future. A key stakeholder in the city, the university (and its intellectuals) started to advance the hypothesis that the pandemic might represent an unprecedented opportunity to think about a new space to exercise the right to housing for 'real' inhabitants.



The dean of the University Iuav of Venice, Alberto Ferlenga, proposed that a quota of now empty apartments, normally rented to tourists, could go to university students. The university population numbers about 30,000 people in Venice, if we consider students enrolled in 4 higher education institutes of the city, i.e., Cà Foscari and Iuav universities, the Academy of Fine Arts and the Conservatory. In April 2020, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Municipality of Venice, Iuav, Confedilizia Venezia (Italian confederation of building property), Abbav (Association for the opening and management of B&B and Apartments) and the Agata Association (operators of the real estate market specialized in the rental of tourist apartments in Venice) to promote the rental to university students. As Prof. Mauro Marzo (the dean's delegate for teaching) argues, everyone would benefit from such an initiative. On the one hand, the students, who have been excluded from Venice due to unaffordability, could return if more accessible prices were granted. On the other hand, small owners would benefit from renting to students – who would stay between 3 and 5 years in flats that would otherwise remain empty, considering that it is unpredictable when tourism will return to pre-Covid-19 levels. According to Marzo, students represent *'an important presence for a city that has gradually lost inhabitants for decades'*. In order to make the proposal operational, the student's demand is being registered through a questionnaire promoted by Study in Venice (joint venture of the 4 higher education institutes), in order to collect information about their housing needs. Then, steps will be taken to match supply with demand and to make the protocol operational.

However, future sustainability of this initiative is uncertain, since owners might not be willing to continue to accommodate students when the tourist flow will massively return. Beside the much lower profits compared to short-term tourist rentals, Marzo explains that the main concerns preventing owners from allocating their houses to students are the risk that the apartments will be damaged (due to parties, poor maintenance, negligence), late payments and that students will not leave the apartment once the contract is over.

'University students should not be considered just as stoppers, that is, owners only turn to students to replace absent tourists', Marzo says. *'We hope that at least some of the tenants will continue renting their houses to students. We think students, beyond any rhetoric, constitute a very important population, a channel for the renewal of the city, that is notoriously sinking for over-tourism.'* The basic problem is the lack of a clear scenario for sustainable future of Italian cities: whether to favour permanent/long-term residency and bring back Italian historical centres to life or to surrender to ongoing touristification. The Covid-19 crisis is an opportunity to rethink our cities, but comprehensive and forward-looking political vision and planning on housing as a means for urban regeneration seem to be still a long way off.