

URBAN SPRAWL ON THE VENICE MAINLAND: RISKS FOR THE REGIONAL PUBLIC HERITAGE

EXPANSÃO URBANA EM VENEZA CONTINENTAL: RISCOS PARA O PATRIMÔNIO PÚBLICO REGIONAL

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ABSTRACT

The current economic crisis is strictly dealing with a long time undisturbed dynamics of building and road densification affecting the environmental quality of the Venice mainland and such increase in land consumption shows no sign of slowing down. Main risks concern irremediable devastations and dissipations of the regional public heritage perpetrated ever since the Sixties, the early years of the economic “miracle”. A more immediate awareness of these incremental trends derives from an empirical approach: travelling in the Veneto region is the proper way to grasp the shapeless hybrid mess represented by urban sprawl, which extends beyond the city yet is devoid of any countryside. These are unfortunately insatiable incremental trends not totally related to the legitimate and desirable requirements of harmonious development, and rather express the appetites of a race without shared rules towards the expansion of consumerism, land speculation, increased use of cement and the need for roads. Urban sprawl generates a widespread crudeness of discomfort and social conflict, declining furthermore shared sociality. The word “unease” was even used to underscore the negative effects in a broad sense of the chaotic densification between the meshes of the ancient Roman centuriation, amid the most highly-prized achievements of the Palladian landscape, bordering on river courses and around old-town centres. As to the hydrographical system and despite the numerous offences suffered, the Venice mainland still continues to offer major water endowments of undisputable beauty, where the centuries-old anthropization of these areas has implanted an extraordinary cultural heritage, in which Palladio played a major role, a further added value which should sound as a warning against potential dissipative threats. Riverscapes have to be considered as the key element behind the making of any truly innovative urban choices and for a land-use policies sensitive to the preservation and requalification of the environment and from which derive effective opportunities for the consolidation of a high quality of life.

Keywords: urban planning, heritage, soil, sprawl, environmental risk, social perception, economic crisis, unease, cultural resources, hydrography.

RESUMO

A atual crise econômica acha-se, durante longo tempo, intrinsecamente ligada à dinâmica contínua relativa à densificação dos processos de construção de edifícios e estradas, afetando a qualidade ambiental das terras continentais de Veneza e promovendo aumento, o que ocorre sem perspectivas de conclusão do consumo de terras. Os principais

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riscos concernem irremediáveis processos de devastação e desaparecimento da herança pública regional (heritage) que remonta aos Seiscentos, anos do então cedo “milagre” econômico. Uma consciência mais imediata dessa tendência de crescimento deriva de uma perspectiva empírica: viajar pela região do Veneto consiste numa maneira de entender a confusão disforme representada pelo urban sprawl, o qual se estende para além da cidade, tornando-se esta desprovida de campo. Achemo-nos assim, infelizmente, diante de insaciáveis tendências incrementais que não se acham totalmente relacionadas com as exigências legítimas e desejáveis de desenvolvimento harmonioso, expressando de preferência apetites relativos a uma corrida sem regras, que está mais adequada à expansão do consumismo, à especulação de terras, ao aumento do uso do cimento e às necessidades de mais estradas. O urban sprawl engendra uma crueza generalizada em termos de desconforto e conflito social, reduzindo perspectivas de sociabilidade e convivência. A palavra “desconforto” foi usada de propósito para realçar os efeitos negativos do sentido amplo que assume a densificação caótica que abrange as malhas da centurição romana, as mais expressivas realizações da paisagem palladiana, as margens dos cursos de água e os arredores dos antigos centros das cidades. Quanto ao sistema hidrográfico, e a despeito das várias infrações sofridas, as terras continentais de Veneza continuam proporcionando ambientes aquíferos de incontestável expressão e beleza, espaços nos quais a antropização secular acha-se representada pelo extraordinário patrimônio cultural, sobretudo palladiano, que deve constituir uma base para alertar a sociedade contra as ameaças iminentes e difusas a herança regional. A paisagem fluvial tem que ser considerada como elemento chave por trás da tomada de quaisquer decisões urbanas verdadeiramente inovadoras tendo em vista uma política de uso da terra sensível a preservação e requalificação do ambiente, da qual podem derivar oportunidades efetivas à consolidação de uma elevada qualidade de vida.

Palavras-chave: Planejamento urbano, Heritage, Solo, Sprawl, Risco ambiental, Percepção social, Crise econômica, Desconforto, Recursos culturais, Hidrografia.

INTRODUCTION

The current critical situation, which is undermining the solid and widespread stereotype of the Italian north-east as the “locomotive” of Italy, must not only be considered within specific social and cultural contexts, but also within particular geographic scenarios. The issue is widely dealt with in an extensive bibliography, with lines of investigation involving a major part of scientific, as well as historical and social, economic and town-planning fields; from these are also extracted a number of philosophical, psychological and literary reflections. In this respect, the 5th centenary of the birth of Andrea Palladio, celebrated in 2008, represented yet a further chance to reflect on the situation of the so-called “Palladian landscape”, starting with the fundamental essay of Denis Cosgrove and his subsequent analyses and comparisons between Los Angeles and the results achieved by the Veneto regional model (COSGROVE,

2006). Besides the usual celebration of the role of Palladio in helping to contribute to the aesthetic quality of the Venice mainland, lauding its masterpieces with a major exhibition in Vicenza, later transferred to prestigious exhibition sites in London and New York, other meetings and conferences were also staged which attempted to deconstruct the rhetoric of the Palladian celebrations promoted by a regional government responsible for a prolonged and devastating erosion of the main elements making up the backdrop against which the masterpieces of the Veneto architect are set. Suffice it to recall that the Palladian year itself was marked by the start of the extension works of the NATO base and motorway route “amid the villas” and indicated as A31, which aroused so much indignation not only in Italy but also among the persons in charge of the British *Landmark Trust*. This strong contradiction represents a disappointment for all those who have called for a renewal of area policies, with greater focus on the environmental and monumental heritage and therefore less inclined towards the usual undisturbed dynamics of building and road densification. A more decisive approach had been expected, at least as regards the increase in land consumption, which shows no sign of slowing down. And instead, like the most hard-headed negationists, we stubbornly continue to plea the cause of growth and the escape from centuries-old poverty, stressing that it is impossible to go back and that we must continue to be competitive, ready to face global challenges.

Yet, only a few years ago, there appeared to have been awareness that the urban dispersion which had followed the economic boom of the north-east model had produced undeniable negative consequences. Important signs of a reversal in trend, compared to gross and greedy land consumption, had appeared in the so-called *Asiago Charter* of 2004, which resulted in the drawing up of the new building scheme law of the Veneto region, the main aspects of which have continued to be reiterated up to the more recent *Documento Preliminare al Piano Territoriale Regionale di Coordinamento* (PTRC) – Preliminary Document to the Regional Territorial Coordination Plan – adopted on 7 August 2007. We find ourselves faced with a totally aware narration not only of the risks involved, but above all of the serious and, to a large extent, irremediable devastations and dissipations of the regional public heritage perpetrated ever since the early years of the economic “miracle”, through to the extraordinary expansion of land consumption in these first years of the new millennium. The language adopted in the regional documents, and in the various area plans of the single provinces, represents an alarming and apparently sincere denunciation of the degradation, such as to raise the hopes of those who read such documents with a sense of civic responsibility.

In February 2009 the arguments contained in the Technical Rules of Implementation of the PTRC of the Veneto region (adopted with Regional Government Decree no. 372 dated 17 February 2009) were even more explicit with regard to the negative consequences of land consumption, which in the Veneto plain “takes on aspects of a pathological nature and becomes a real and true waste of resources when it is not strictly adapted to the needs deriving from an increase in the number of inhabitants and from improvement in living conditions” [p.184]. We can only hope that this erosion of quality land areas will be curbed by rationalising and upgrading what has already been built and disorderly dispersed in the area rather than “opting for further expansion [...] The PTCP (Provincial Territorial Coordination Plans) and the PAT (Town and Country Planning Schemes) must drastically curb land consumption and the number of built-up areas; in the first case because extremely high critical thresholds have been achieved and in the second, to maintain a quality open context” [p.227]. But at this point, we had better focus more closely on the post-modern territorial complexity of the Venetian Mainland and consider the constantly changing way in which people perceive an area which, despite everything, continues to have an indisputably strong appeal for mass tourism; so much so that statistics show the Veneto region to hold the national record with around 60 million visitors a year.

CULTURAL SEDIMENTS AND GROUND RENT

The most recent trends expressed by the evolution of the town-planning law of 2004 leave little room for hope. Such consideration derives not only from the careful reading of the provisions, but above all from a more immediate empirical approach: travelling along the roads and amid the proliferation of building lots, production sites and shopping centres, one cannot but begin to have doubts about the dynamics under way, also because the key words “for sale” and “to lease” are the recurring theme which recalls the still very widespread attraction of the pursuit of capital gains. Will that which is often referred to as the Third Veneto be a land of large shopping centres, road corridors, new multi-storey buildings designed to accommodate the advanced tertiary professions, ring-roads and new motorways and extensive quarrying or will it be that of an intensification of quality farming, the recovery and protection of short production processes, of sustainable tourism, of *greenways*, of energy saving and more still? Quite apart from good

intentions and the adoption of a shared but rather too generic language which rotates around concepts such as environment quality, care for resources, adoption of European directives and sustainability, great uncertainty remains as regards the concrete measures taken by each municipality, also because it will not be easy to improve and reorganise the upshot of forty years of untidy dispersion and the concentration of dwelling houses, manufacturing facilities and shopping centres.

But now let us ponder for a moment on what is left of the Palladian landscape. Veneto's well distributed building network, from the Alpine foothills to the coast, has accommodated a split-up and scattered production model, devoid of any elementary planning structure, which has favoured the almost automatic switch from small farming properties to an initial stage of artisan entrepreneurship which marked the start of the by now famous "Veneto model", an area development also found in the Emilia Romagna region and which, around the mid-70s, the economists defined as Third Italy. A model of decentralization not governed by an overall view works well in terms of economic success, so well in fact as to show a growth trend as regards industrial employment which, around 1973, contrasted the general drop of the secondary sector in the rest of the country.

At the bottom of the formation of this model, specific provisions must be mentioned which promoted numerous incentives in favour of the so-called underdeveloped areas, issued by the government starting in 1957. In the light of current federalist tensions, the usual rhetoric regarding the "virtuous" aspects of the Veneto model should therefore be reviewed. And in fact "that the Veneto region became the most benefited by such mechanisms – almost 84% of its municipalities were considered "economically underdeveloped" – was only partially due to the low standards of living of the areas affected by such provisions [...] but rather derived from the patronage system put in place by the Christian-Democrat party which requested, and obtained the qualification of "underdeveloped area" for those municipalities in which it had strong absolute majorities" (ROVERATO, 2001, p.134). The type of incentives could not but favour the widespread distribution of small companies where ties with traditional artisan know-how were still strong, without neglecting the external benefits offered by the large population, by polycentrism and by the "convenient" configuration of the plain.

The subsequent passing of specific town-planning laws (Law 28.02.1985, no. 47) made the network of controls less extensive, hence the increase in irregularities, the reporting of which remained a purely formal act, i.e., without any concrete consequences as regards the restoring of environmental quality. On the other hand, it is easy for the

curious visitor and tourist to grasp, in virtually all the Veneto region, the peculiar physiognomic innovations which have dissipated once and for all “the Venetian mainland, one of the most beautiful rural landscapes in the world [...] the great gift of the Palladian landscape.” (COSGROVE, 2000, p.346).

Paradoxically, this discouraging situation has worsened above all since the late 70s, i.e., following the considerable replanning efforts made by the country. This was a real “counter-reform” at national level, which saw the good intentions of remedying the environmental mistakes which had been built up during the economic “boom” years to a great extent defeated and disappointed; suffice it to mention the “sentences of the Constitutional Court of 1982 and 1983, which made many of the innovative aspects of these laws impracticable, above all those of the *Bucalossi* law” (DEMATTEIS, 1995, p.685). In the Eighties and Nineties in Italy, and in Veneto in particular, a period of environmental waste began – and which in many ways has not yet ended – which, if possible, was even more serious than that perpetrated during the economic boom. This extended from the town and city centres to outlying areas without any sort of regulation or control. Today we are slap bang in the midst of the shapeless hybrid mess represented by urban sprawl (Fig. 1), which extends beyond the city yet is devoid of any countryside (DAL POZZOLO, 2002). And the prestigious polarities of the small walled towns, of the Palladian and non-Palladian villas, of the rural villages, of water courses, of farming houses, of the tiny pattern of traditional agronomies are under the constant threat of continuous quality erosion and suffocation by buildings. These are unfortunately insatiable incremental trends not totally related to the legitimate and desirable requirements of harmonious development, and rather express the appetites of a race without shared rules towards the expansion of consumerism, land speculation, increased use of cement and the need for roads.



Fig. 1: **Immagine dell'urban sprawl nell'alta pianura veneta**
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LANDSCAPE RISK

It is necessary to recall how, in the early 60s, the morphology of the Veneto landscape still continued to show an appealing continuity with the physiognomic characteristics of a praiseworthy geo-historical legacy. Perhaps not everyone remembers the frequent quotations in the contemporary popular divulgation of a heartening imaginary geographic scenario rich in cultural assets which not only the pen of Bepi Mazzotti, especially after the victorious outcome of his battle in favour of the Veneto villas, but also that of the last Giovanni Comisso loved to describe, inviting the population, by now on the verge of enjoying the first sober seductions of well-being, to leave town and discover the attractions of the countryside and the region's minor heritage, in a partial repetition of the short trips promoted by the Touring Club in the years immediately after the war. The idea was to encourage the observation and aesthetic appreciation of the landscape by trying to promote a more deep-rooted awareness of its cultural importance and its intimate links with the sense of living. This attitude of observer, right in the very midst of the lively years of the economic boom, was instead increasingly diverging from that of actor, of protagonist of a territorial construction that was changing the inherited status quo according to the requirements of the moment, to new needs, often urgent, which left no time to reflect on possible side effects.

Suffice it to give here a description of the physiognomies of central Veneto, today the still unsettled epicentre of the concrete explosion contained in the essay on the Italian landscape written by Aldo Sestini, one of the masterpieces of geographic divulgation, and one still unsurpassed, published by the Touring Club in the *Conosci l'Italia* series of 1963. We are in the transition belt from the high to the low plain between Vicenza and Treviso, the densest and most prestigious heart of the cultural heritage, where Palladio's name intersects with those of Mantegna, Giorgione, Paolo Veronese and Pietro Bembo. The detailed description of this area has, in this day and age, the pleasant taste of a narration of an old traveller from across the Alps: "The gaze falls everywhere on a completely cultivated landscape, split up in a very regular way by rows of mulberry trees, and sometimes fruit trees, and even more so by trees tangled with vines and more or less evident rows of vines resting on dead supports. Alternating in the fields are the various shades of green of the wheat and corn, of beans and leguminous animal feed crops [...] The countryside is dotted with numerous detached rural buildings, but also groups of buildings huddled together (*contrade*), or even aligned, more or less detached the one from the other, in long lines at the sides of the roads," (SESTINI, 1963, p.64).

We might say that the loss of aesthetic appeal is offset by economic growth, an escape from centuries of subordination, the already mentioned condition of "underdeveloped area". And on this point, it cannot be denied that opinions tend to converge. But the idea of growth starts to no longer coincide with that of development whenever far-flung manufacturing areas are considered, far away from any form of control, perhaps close to precious river beds or on top of important groundwater deposits. Successful production corresponds fairly precisely with geographies of discomfort, expressed by the constant growth of public committees spurred by impotent anger and desperation for the prolonged exasperation of environmental conflicts which wound the Veneto of so-called "affluence". In many cases, these are real *Landscapes of Fear* in which emerge in all their crudeness of discomfort and social conflict the close relations between economic growth and environmental impact, an almost didactic situation of how the decline of opulent societies is above all played out on the noose of area saturation and on the inevitable contrasts between residential and manufacturing areas. This is the definite decline of shared sociality and private interests prevail to such an extent that local authorities, after suffering a dramatic cut back of resources from the central government, recently replicated with the elimination of the ICI (Communal Property Tax), are now

obliged to split up quality reserves (such as the Sites of Community Importance and the Special Protection Areas) in order to manage to balance their budgets.

With regard to the issue of widespread overbuilding in north-eastern Italy, most definitely an emblematic geographic ambit, but not the worst on the disheartening Italian scenario, we cannot but consider the impressionist analysis of perceptions, by constantly and regularly referring to the conspicuous number of articles in local and national newspapers, but also in trade magazines, religious and non-religious weeklies, web pages, leaflets published by public committees and national associations, electoral programmes of all the political parties, dedicated to issues which can be generically traced back to territorial problems, complaints, protests and concerns, but also proactive voices and constructive criticism produced by the tumultuous and devastating expansion of building on the Venetian mainland. In other words, a wealth of information on specific matters, the sad refrain of which reminds us that in the midst of all this concrete, amid bulldozers and metal cranes, earthmoving trucks, summer dust and autumn mud, people live badly, saddened and concerned about the destiny of common assets, the protection of the environment and health.

The statistical data concerning the increase in building activities in the Veneto area are all too explicit. There is an abundance of scientific comments, the analytical rigour of which is hard pressed to conceal an implicit criticism of the trend under way, and the concerned taking up of positions which emerges from the reports produced within the regional organisations appointed to govern area practices. These are emerging doubts consolidated a long time ago, highlighted to an increasing extent in the local press and in sector reports. As I already said some years ago (VALLERANI, 2005), in step with the drawing up of the regional law of 2004, intended to address the town-planning chaos in Veneto, a shared dissent of what has occurred until now has also come to light, with strong critical attitudes, in regional literature. The word “unease” was even used to underscore the negative effects in a broad sense of the chaotic densification between the meshes of the ancient Roman centuriation, amid the most highly-prized achievements of the Palladian landscape, bordering on river courses and around old-town centres: “the upshots of such densification are already today a source of growing *unease* [the italics are mine] for members of the public and companies, but their importance concerns above all the future, in relation to the risk of a major drop in the quality of life” (Veneto Region, 2004, p.62). From what we see today however, we realise that the hopes of those years were based more on the need for illusion than on rational disenchantment: i.e., the Veneto

region was and remains at the top of the national list as regards land consumption and, moreover, has a far from negligible complication, i.e., to overbuild the countryside, raw materials are required. Hence the extensive quarrying of aggregates goes hand in hand with intense regional urbanisation. This is very definitely a binomial of unparalleled destructive power.

But the phenomenon needs no confirmation considering what is indicated by the evolution of the statistical data provided by the ISTAT and by the CRESME or by a comparative comparison of satellite surveys. (Fig. 2) Urban anarchy and the consumption of land are a sad and worrying area concern which appears with vulgar arrogance to whosoever is obliged, in the context of local daily existence, to travel along the congested Veneto road system. This situation also suffers from a prolonged absence of the institutions which, precisely in Veneto, have managed to ensure many decades of continuity of consensus, exchanging this for short-lived controls on individual action, determining until only a short while ago, an irrational use of the land, detrimental to the most elementary components of daily living (suffice it to mention drinking water, traffic, air pollution, waste disposal).



Fig. 2: Il Veneto dal satellite
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But built-up countryside is also the result of agronomic transformation following the fast and huge drop in the number of farm workers, the spread of new production processes, new distribution rules and crop management methods, which in terms of landscape means a simplification of traditional physiognomic orders and ecological

degradation caused by the prevalence of monocultures which have required the removal of trees and hedges, the covering of most ditches, the abandonment of many rural buildings and, in short, a general disaffection for the not directly productive aspects of the landscape. Everywhere in the Veneto countryside, just like in the rest of Italy unfortunately, we are obliged to assist, on a daily basis, in what is a shapeless transformation euphoria caused by a childish enthusiasm for machines which, in just a short time, are able to flatten, dig, bury, deforest and pour cubic metres of concrete even among the rows of vines on hillsides.

ECONOMIC SUCCESS AMID FEAR AND GRUDGES

Among the consequences of the economic success of Italy's north-east, and closely related to the extraordinary increase in the number of buildings and small businesses, we must include the giving up of peaceful existence. A phenomenological approach may be of some help in this case, taking from the living space empirical data and travel impressions, and copying from the notebooks which the curious traveller, mid way between anthropology and geography, carefully fills as he/she roams amid towns, villages, craftsmen's workshops, shopping malls and office blocks, listening to people talking in cafés, reading the local newspapers and watching people behave in the streets. The assumption that "time is money" works perfectly here and the slowness of the traffic in the countryside and urban sprawl of central Veneto produce the monsters, the slaves of haste, the home-delivery maniacs, people rushing here and there aboard fast and powerful gravel-carrying trucks, people who ignore speed limits and no-entry signs.

Self-exploitation, aggressive dedication to economic success, uncritical spirit of sacrifice, the overturning of existential priorities, the transfiguration of well-being into well-having involves not only the so-called "*padroncini*" (small entrepreneurs), but even the workers, who consider themselves just a step away from a long-dreamt-of lifestyle, only measurable by accessing certain consumer products, certain leisure pastimes. In this respect, Paolo Rumiz, in one of his enquiries, says "They all work like animals, bosses and workers [...] There isn't a boss who hasn't been a worker and there isn't a worker who doesn't want to become a boss. They all have the big hands of peasants and poverty still well impressed in their minds. And so they live like poor people despite the billions in the bank; they have not even had time to realise they have become rich." [RUMIZ, 1997, p.66].

Everything which represents an obstacle to these aims produces violent reactions, stress and anxiety. The seasoned manufacturer type fits in perfectly with the consequent deficit, perhaps not of happiness, but certainly of peace of mind and inner calmness (COIN, 2006). The models are well spread around by seducing TV messages, so that everything which is tied to the past, both sociological and territorial, tends to lose its right to exist, can be sacrificed, abandoned, including because such things are dusty obstacles to the new status of person invited to take part in the banquet of economic success.

Conspicuous and unusual accumulations of money for the former beggars of the former “joyful” Marca, traditional basin of emigration to the four corners of the world until the early Sixties of last century, are a big achievement for acquiring both freedom from centuries-old and heavy conditions of subordination and a big jump forward towards a less anguishing way of viewing existence. And instead, the dark ferocity of a peasant world made up of abuses and meanness re-emerges just as soon as the irresistible growth of bank accounts and material assets, which make possible a lifestyle still unconceivable until just a few years ago, appears threatened by the tangible inefficiency of the central state or slows down due to hard-to-control international situations. Hence the years of secessionist anger and the grudges of the small homelands scared by the fiscal pressure of “thieving” Rome and globalisation (BONOMI, 2008).

This enormous entrepreneurial power has in fact hit the delightful and vulnerable environmental and historic-artistic quality of the landscapes of the north-east like a tornado, causing a flood of concrete of rare intensity (Fig. 3), in no way stopped by regulatory dykes, common aesthetic sense and necessary ethical reflections: in other words, all the ingredients exist for unprecedented widespread environment vandalisation, supported by a reckless class of politicians, clever in diverting public attention from territorial cannibalism towards a rhetoric of safety which emphasises the risky threats to individual gilded microcosms. Suffice it to recall that the intense and ramshackle urbanisation of the former countryside is the result of the equally intense quarrying of aggregates: hundreds of quarries supplying gravel, sand, clay and lime. A vicious circle which generates exorbitant private wealth able to influence with soft arrogance the choice of area policies at all levels. The result is worrying – people become used to the burdensome succession of degrading changes which flattens perceptions and produces, on the one hand, general indifference and, on the other, inconsolable anguish among a not yet addicted minority.



Fig. 3: Consumo di suolo agricolo nella bassa pianura
Foto: Varotto

Every so often, people timidly raise their heads, like when a large fire broke out in an industrial shed of a globally-renowned Treviso company on 18 April 2007: people show concern and signs of protest, immediately refuted and classified as improper alarmism, subject to legal prosecution. The threats of administrators, more than the certainties of actual security, snuff out public opinion. Not to speak of the committees against the proliferation of mobile phone antennas, against incinerators, against the eastern ring-road, against the heavy traffic of lorries coming from the quarries on the plain, against the abnormal use of underground waters, a common asset transformed into merchandise. In other words, a crescendo of complaints spreading around, creating unhappiness and resignation in a portion of the public which in this part of the world continues to be reduced to a minority, except on rare, precarious and ephemeral occasions, as in the case of the administrations of Montebelluna, Padua, and the province of Rovigo. The scenario of an unhappy and anguished north east thus needs to recover hope. Hope in a different territorial culture, in a repentant class of local politicians which, on the one hand praises the traditional and memorial values of Veneto identity, and on the other does not hesitate to attack and cancel these forever in the name of not so much legitimate well-being, but of immoderate opulence and the exhilaration of individual success.

THE HYDROGRAPHICAL HERITAGE: FROM DEGRADATION TO URBAN THERAPY

Despite the numerous offences suffered, the hydrographical system of the Veneto region still continues to offer major water endowments of undisputable beauty, where some traditional anthropic vocations survive, even though subject to a constant evolution of production procedures which tends to marginalize the less profitable aspects of material culture. This means the eclipse of multi-crop growing by elderly farmers, responsible for the maintenance, for example, of the extraordinary terraced system at Valstagna, in the Brenta canal, but also of the stable meadows in the *palù* of the Quartier del Piave and along the upper Sile. These are perhaps the residual environmental resources at stake in the decisive game being played to create a desirable process of re-equilibrium and recovery of the area, the need for which was already amply discussed in the early Seventies of last century (INDOVINA, 1972). The cultural context of that period was truly favourable for the reclamation of inherited landscapes, fuelled by the euphoric divulgation of themes appertaining to nature, local history, trips into the countryside, but also the upgrading of living standards in urban centres and the setting up of new nature parks (ZUNICA, 1981).

The centuries-old relationship between coastal communities and fresh waters has been on the decline since the Fifties, making marginal and obsolete the traditional economic and social relations which can be found along the segments of the extensive surface hydrography of the Italian north-east. Restricting our interest to the case of the Veneto mainland, the exemplary value of which is accentuated by the fact that this is the land area which embraces the world's most famous amphibian city, it will suffice to mention the burying of the medieval water courses of the old-city centre of Padua, along with the demolition of the Conciapelli quarter of the same period, very much a theatrical aspect of an attitude unfortunately still widespread among the different players operating within the area (VALLERANI, 2004).

The centuries-old anthropization of these areas has implanted along the water courses an extraordinary cultural heritage, in which Palladio played a major role, a further added value which should sound as a warning against potential dissipative threats (Fig. 4). The Brenta is very definitely the river richest in memories for the great architect, but at the same time one where critical situations coexist with absolutely outstanding environmental and historical-artistic wonders. This dualism is in part still unresolved and

continues to weigh heavily given the exasperation of the numerous environmental conflicts which succeed one another along its course, from the increasingly more voracious quarries in the narrow valley bed amid the Grappa massif and the Asiago plateau, to those of the plains; from the pressure of buildings in the Bassano conurbation to production facilities “at risk” in the riverside areas along the middle course of the river; from too much water pumped for irrigation purposes to the pollution of the terminal section; from the expansion of the salt-wedge by tens of kilometres to the extensive building projects in the already suffocated historical urban areas of the Riviera del Brenta, without any doubt the most monumental stretch of river in the world.



Fig. 4: Villa Emo a Fanzolo (territorio trevigiano) di Andrea Palladio (1558)
Foto: Vallerani.

Many are the problems affecting the River Brenta, just as many are the emergency committees set up to address them, considering that, to an increasing extent, the river is seen from a recently-acquired and fast-growing environmentalist perspective which identifies as precious leisure-time resources the thick undergrowth of its flood plain and the many branches of its turquoise or emerald waters – depending on the type of river bed. The disorderly increase in river-bed aggregate quarrying activities has caused a rapid drop in level which varies, along the middle course of the river, between 4 and 8 metres, creating a new morphological configuration dominated by steep slopes. Since such activities began, the connections appear clear between excavations and environmental disturbance: “the instability of the banks or the collapse of bridges due to removal of earth around the pillars, the lowering of the water table and the simultaneous change in the flow of underground waters close to the river” (CASTIGLIONI, PELLEGRINI, 1981, p.26). Such

risks had already been identified over twenty years earlier, but had not been addressed by local policy-makers, thus leaving freedom of action for operations “tied solely to private interests and profit, in complete contrast to the precarious balances of the water course itself” (ZUNICA, 1981, p.3).

The Veneto mainland is very definitely among the European regions richest in water memories, if nothing else but because it was, for centuries, dominated by Venice, the amphibian city; hence from the mindful recovery of this particular aspect, can derive a more mature sense of identity and of awareness of the environmental heritage (Fig. 5).

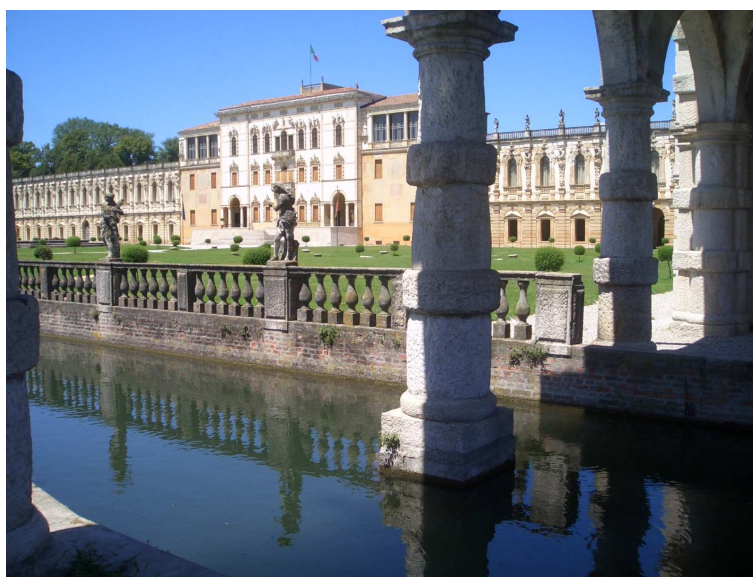


Fig. 5: Villa Contarini a Piazzola sul Brenta (Padova), seconda metà del XVI secolo
Foto: Vallerani.

The segments making up the hydrographical network of Veneto rivers, precisely because they are distributed within a strongly anthropized area, take on even more the aspect of semi-natural linear oases in which the relationship between hydrological dynamics and hydraulic management has to adapt to the growing social demand for leisure-time environments. This then is perhaps the key element behind the making of any truly innovative urban choices, which clearly take into account the pathological level of land consumption, also because such issues have become the common heritage of the general public, constantly stimulated by a local press increasingly more focused on environmental matters, by now an important test bench for land-use policies sensitive to the preservation and requalification of the environment and from which derive effective opportunities for the consolidation of a high quality of life.

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Artigo recebido em 20/08/2011 e aceito em 25/05/2012