

# CARING FOR THE ISLAND CITY

## Venetians reclaiming the city in times of overtourism: contested representations, narratives and infrastructures

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**ABSTRACT:** Overtourism has transformed Venice into a Disneyfied city in several ways, for example through short-term tourists and their perception and use of the city as a fun park. There is little perception of Venice as a lived-in space which is inhabited by families, elderly people and students going about their everyday lives in a city with only 52,000 inhabitants and a staggering 24 million visitors every year. The article examines the question of how Venetians are reclaiming their right to the island city as a common good for its inhabitants, relating this directly to how the city is cared for. It discusses the phenomena that come with the reshaping of the spaces and everyday lives of Venetian residents due to mass tourism. The different ways the city is inhabited are discussed, and the consequences thereof, based on ethnographic research containing field research in the form of qualitative interviews, participatory observations, analysis of social media activities on Facebook, analysis of secondary data and debates in the media.

**KEYWORDS:** Right to the city, touristification, taking care, inhabiting the city, narratives of change

### Introduction: contested narratives of the island city

This article explores the negotiations surrounding Venice as a contested, iconic, inhabited space, both through narratives and citizen protests, in the context of touristification. It offers a closer look at the challenges of how Venice is cared for (Tronto, 2013)<sup>1</sup>, and the ways the city is inhabited in relation to the phenomenon of overtourism. In recent years, the island city has been facing two major challenges. On the one hand, due to the impact of climate change, solutions must be found for problems caused by rising sea levels. On the other hand, the city is in danger of sinking in the wake of mass tourism (Settis, 2016). It is not only Venice that is facing these challenges, touristification and commodification of housing are virulent contemporary phenomena which many cities are currently confronting (Russo and Scarnato, 2018; Russo, 2002; Van der Borg, 1996). However, Venice, as an island-based heritage city, is being markedly reshaped by mass tourism in the form of day tourists from cruise ships, bus tourism and those who enter the city from the surrounding region (Casagrande, 2016; Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> Caring for the city in this context means caring for the community of inhabitants and reclaiming common goods such as public infrastructure in the city.

Venice is a place of longing for many people, as its inhabitants are facing the daily challenges of living in a small town which is overwhelmed by mass tourism. There are various consequences of this, such as the touristification of housing, vanishing public infrastructure, especially infrastructure relevant for daily life. One result of this is a virtually monofunctional economy which is totally dependent on tourism (Cristiano and Gonella, 2020: 2), and which is not resilient in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic (Salerno and Russo, 2020: 3), causing the depopulation of the city (Russo, 2002). In recent years, therefore, a number of initiatives have been set up to promote a liveable future for the city. In this light, Venice can be considered as a contested imaginary space of desire premised on an iconic city located in a lagoon (Harding, 2012). There are contemporary antagonistic narratives which are linked to Venice. The most hegemonic are touristic imaginaries (Salazar, 2012: 864), those of the destruction of the city, which are mainly reproduced in the media, and the otherwise invisible layer of Venice as a lived space with inhabitants.

Firstly, I want to look at the touristic perceptions of Venice as a romantic city, a heritage city and, in recent years, as a fun park. They have a major impact on the transformation of the city due to vast and rising visitor numbers. There is an ongoing debate about these imaginaries and forms of culturalisation in the Island Studies:

*It has been said that 'the richness of literary and cultural islanding can be so obtrusive and pervasive that it could actually threaten and dismiss the physicality of islands as "real lived-in places." (Baldacchino, 2008: 44)*

As a travel destination, Venice has become an iconic city, due to its heritage sites and the image of Venice as romantic place that 'must be seen once in a lifetime'. Not only that, travel destinations in general are idealised as places of fortune and happiness, hence everyday life worries are hidden (Wöhler, 2011). Thus, visitors – and especially short-term visitors – have the perception of Venice simply as scenery equipped with historic facades, or as a fun park. The effects of the "tourist gaze" (Urry, 1990) – the visual aspects of the touristic perception of heritage cities – related to its usage is causing the transformation of public infrastructures into commodified private ones (Farias, 2011). This aspect is well-researched in the framework of the heritagisation of island cities (Casagrande, 2016: 124), also under the term Disneyfication (Cosgrove, 2003; Roost, 2002). This perception causes many problems, such as how people use the city space and how they behave during their stay. One of the everyday life challenges my interview partners commonly experienced is that short-term tourists neither imagine Venice as an inhabited city nor as a real place where people are working and children are going to school (see Section VI). A commonly investigated aspect is the perception of Venice as a shrinking city with vanishing inhabitants (Settis, 2016). This image is reinforced by many documentaries and through national and international media reports. It is well-researched that Venice is an overtourism icon as Francesco Visentin and Dario Bertocchi established in their studies (2019: 18). Furthermore, as a result of digitalisation processes in our society these imaginations of space are not only distributed by travel guides, they are spread far and wide through social media via Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. The city is used as the backdrop for many a self-portrait, so called 'selfies' (D'Eramo 2017), with a heritage site such as the Rialto Bridge or San Marco Square in the background, and then distributed via social media.

The Municipality of Venice (Comune di Venezia) is the capital of the Veneto region and is divided into six districts. Two of them are located in the archipelagic lagoon: Venezia-Murano-Burano (*Centro storico*) and Lido-Pellestrina. The other four are located on the mainland: Favaro Veneto, Mestre-Carpenedo, Chirignago-Zelarino and Marghera. In my

research I focus on the historic city of Venice, the *Centro storico*, hereafter referred to simply as Venice, which again is divided in six districts (*sestieri* in Venetian): Santa Croce, San Polo, Dorsoduro, San Marco, Cannaregio and Castello, which are located on 118 small islands. The historical centre of Venice, *il pesce* (the fish), is losing more and more inhabitants to Mestre and other areas in the region. In 2019, 52,000 inhabitants lived in the historical part of the city (Città di Venezia, 2020) - in 1950 the figure stood at 180,000 (Quinn, 2007: 7). There are various reasons for this: rising housing prices due to short-term rentals to tourists, the vanishing public infrastructure and shops for everyday life, and the masses of tourists in the streets of Venice, who have transformed the city's infrastructure based on their needs (Visentin and Bertocchi, 2019: 27). Every year more than 24 million visitors enter the city, 7.5 million of whom are overnight stayers, with the remaining 17.5 million being day tourists (Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019: 5).

From the everyday life perspective of the inhabitants, one of the main problems when it comes to the usage of the public space is that visitors linger around on bridges, obstructing pedestrian flows, and because of the masses of tourists overcrowd the small streets. As a result, inhabitants avoid areas such as the island of San Marco during the day, especially in the high season of summer (Cavallo, 2016: 136). A study by Canestrelli and Costa in 1991 contended that "Venice could absorb a total maximum number of 22,500 daily arrivals, of which no more than 10,700 should be excursionists" (Visentin and Bertocchi, 2019: 22). In 2019, 66,800 excursionists arrived every day.

The current COVID-19 crisis shows the risks of a nearly monofunctional economy which is based on tourism. A huge portion of the Venetian economy is dependent on tourism, such as hotels, inhabitants who rent out their flats for tourist usage, restaurants, shops, museums and the harbour and port; and all of these sectors are struggling during the pandemic because of the missing tourists (Salerno and Russo, 2020: 3). In this situation there have been widespread discussions about future strategies and visions for a liveable future among local researchers, entrepreneurs, local citizen initiatives and other local actors. Several of these actors point out that it is necessary to develop different economic anchor points, such as creative industries, new technologies, sustainable energy production (Venezia da Vivere, 2020), smart city development tools and the re-establishment of handicrafts as ways of sustainable tourism. However, there is no political commitment in the regional or city governments to take up such strategies. In the last ten years, local citizen initiatives such as Comitato No Grandi Navi<sup>2</sup> ('No Big Ships Committee') and Poveglia per tutti<sup>3</sup> ('Poveglia for everyone') protested against overtourism and commodification of common goods, and movements such as the Un'altra Città possibile<sup>4</sup> developed alternative visions for Venice and its inhabitants.

Key aspects discussed in this article include the impacts of overtourism from the perspective of the everyday lives of the inhabitants, the practising of protests and the negotiation of shared infrastructure through citizen initiatives. One outcome is an analytical lens 'caring for the city' which is based on the synthesis of analysed empirical data combined with the application of Joan Tronto's theory of care (2013). Based on my empirical findings, I take a look at the effects of different forms of inhabiting the city by short-term residents. The research presented in the article was carried out by the author. I am familiar with the island

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<sup>2</sup> See the No Grandi Navi website.

<sup>3</sup> See the Poveglia per tutti website (nd).

<sup>4</sup> See the Un'altra Città possibile website (nd).

firstly as a student, later as a tourist, then a tourist guide in the Vento region (including Venice), and then as a researcher in the city since 2015. I have visited Venice numerous times in the last 20 years and the visible changes in the city's infrastructure, the crowded alleys in the city I experienced repeatedly as a tourist guide, together with numerous conversations with visitors about their perception of Venice as a kind of fun park, laid the foundations for the conception of my research. I wanted to understand how everyday life in Venice is from its inhabitants' perspective. What local initiatives are reclaiming the city and what practices of protest and resistance are they using? What strategies and visions are being developed by its inhabitants and local initiatives?

This study takes a closer look, based on my empirical findings, at how everyday-life perspectives relate through narratives of urban change by the city's inhabitants and initiatives which are fighting for common urban good, as well as taking care of their neighbourhoods. Mechanisms of regulation and deregulation of common goods through the legal framework, trans-local urban policies and negotiations of social inequalities frame the issue. The article is structured as follows: after the discussion of the research approach, the research field and an introduction into the 'right to the city' debate, the ways Venice is being reshaped through mass tourism are discussed. In the following sections I analyse the ways of taking care of the city, take a closer look at the different ways the city is inhabited by different groups of users and the consequences of this. I focus on the inner perspectives of change and everyday life of the inhabitants and how they are reclaiming the city and its common infrastructures. It is necessary to write about the challenges of Venice in developing solutions, but at the same time it is important to turn the spotlight on the lively communities on each of the small islands and identify how they are fighting for the city in different ways, trying to keep the community alive.

## II. Research approach and methods

The starting point for my research was a stay in Venice in 2015, during which I led a series of background discussions with members of the municipality of Venice. Furthermore, I met members of the local Instagrammers group @ingersvenezia, who organised regular Instagrammer meetings. Through this I got to know one of their community managers Lorenzo Cinotti, who is one of the directors of the online city magazine *Venezia da Vivere*, and he put me in contact with local inhabitants who are engaged in local initiatives. My initial contacts from 2015 were important for the preparation of my 2019 research visit, which took me three quarters of a year. In preparation for the field research, in the summer of 2019 from July to August, I initiated contacts at the University Institute of Architecture of Venice, IUAV, and was invited to be a guest researcher with the UNESCO Chair on the Social and Spatial Inclusion of International Migrants - Urban Policies and Practices (SSIIM). My hosts, Giovanna Marconi, the scientific director of the research project, and Adriano Cancellieri, an employee of the project, both put me in touch with members of local citizen initiatives. Via e-mail and Facebook, I established contact with the Comitato No Grandi Navi. Additionally, I observed the Facebook pages and websites of the local protest groups and followed media reports and documentaries about Venice (by Venetians) from May 2019 until September 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic intervened in my research plans and I had to cancel my stay in March-April until May 2020. However, I managed to organise two stays in July and during the elections in September for two weeks. Since I have two small children, longer research stays are only possible together with my family, which is difficult during the pandemic. As an expatriate, I do not see my role as a spokesperson for members of local citizen initiatives or research. I cooperate with them and am in regular contact with them through the

attendance of conferences, workshops and talks. This includes contact with several local researchers and members of the local housing research group OCIO (L'Osservatorio Civico sulla casa e la residenza).

In my research, I follow the approach of "study from the inside" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) which is a form of ethnographic urban research (Lindner, 1996) and digital ethnography (Pink, et al, 2009). In doing so, I take on specific roles in the research field. On the one hand, as a researcher who investigates local initiatives and citizen protests in the course of participant observations since 2015, and on the other hand, I experienced the city as a temporary resident of the Sant'Elena neighbourhood in Venice 2019, immersing myself in the everyday practices with my family during the high season. The research process and analysis follow the principles of Grounded Theory, according to Strauss and Corbin (1996). Accordingly, I documented my participatory observations immediately after they took place and kept a research diary. Additionally, I wrote memos related to the observations, conceptualised the data and generated codes, and later categories, implementing an empirically based set of these which I later linked to theories.

### III. The field of research

Following my research interest, I have attended to the views of actors who are involved in exemplary citizens' initiatives, standing up in various ways for common goods in the city, such as for the preservation of communal infrastructures, for affordable housing and against the pollution of the lagoon. The selection criteria for inclusion of citizens' initiatives in this study was that they are organised by residents, they have the goal of preserving common goods in the city and are active in the historic city centre (the area that is particularly affected by touristification). The selection was based on an analysis of international media reports and interviews with local researchers.

I had contact with 27 people in the form of participatory observations (including informal talks), regular meetings, e-mail contact and informal/non-recorded conversations. I conducted qualitative interviews with 12 of these contacts and protocolled conversations with 8 inhabitants and activists who I have been accompanying for several years, some of whom I am in regular contact with. I used a 'snowball system' to obtain my interview partners. My research language is English, in part translated during conversations with activists from English into Italian. I understand spoken and written Italian which is relevant for the participatory observations. I am aware that it makes a difference to interview people in what is a foreign language to them. Where applicable, I provided the source of my data; the names of all interviewees are changed, except those who wanted to be mentioned. The datasets generated for this study are not publicly available, in line with the EU General Data Protection Regulation and to protect the research participants.

I examined the views of activists of the protest movement Comitato No Grandi Navi, which has been protesting against cruise ships in the lagoon since 2012. I conducted the research based on four qualitative interviews with members of the Comitato, and three with local researchers and inhabitants, participatory observations, the analysis of international media reports and a social media analysis based on a set of related Facebook groups. In addition, the Assemblée Sociale Per La Casa (ASC) Venezia was part of the investigation, my analysis being based on three qualitative interviews, with one activist and two researchers, and an analysis of media, documentaries and reports on housing in Venice. ASC occupies and renovates dilapidated, vacant buildings. Thirdly, the so-called Vida Movement was included in the observations. They have been campaigning since 2017 for the preservation of the

former anatomy building Antico Teatro di Anatomia di Venezia, aiming to make it available for the community. I interviewed three members of the movement who were involved in the occupation and conducted a series of participatory observations, followed Facebook groups and analysed media reports through local newspapers. The three initiatives were a starting point for my research, during the course of which other movements became relevant, such as Poveglia per tutti. The empirical basis of the analysis was extended through repeated interviews with members of the movements, inhabitants, local researchers and also short-term visitors, which ended with a research stay in September 2020 during the elections of the regional government. (NB – all quotations from Venetians in the following sections are extracted from interviews conducted by the author in 2019.)

#### IV. The right to the city debate in the context of heritage cities

In theory, the debate on questions of the ‘right to the city’ emerged in the discourse of critical urban research (Lefebvre, 1991). To demand the ‘right to the city’ in this context means “to demand fundamentally and radically the power to shape urbanisation processes and to participate in the decision-making process when it comes to the way in which our cities are to be created and renewed” (Harvey, 2012: 29). In the case of Venice, the members of these organisations do not identify themselves as ‘right to the city’ movements. However, they are dealing with issues related to the ‘right to the city’ debate. Many these movements are discussed in this theoretical context in the research community (Salerno and Russo, 2020: 3; Vianello, 2017: 15; Cavallo, 2016: 134).

The transformation of historic old town centres which are converted into commercial value by mass tourism is discussed in urban research under the terms “touristification”, “the tourist gaze” (Urry, 2002), and the “Disneyfication” of cities (Roost, 2003). The process of touristification includes both rising rents generated by renting out housing as holiday homes – and thus a specific form of gentrification – and the transformation of urban districts through mass tourism. Barcelona is a well-researched example, where the rental of housing via Airbnb has triggered massive protests from citizens and led to a transformation process of urban policies (Russo and Scarnato, 2018). Another aspect of this phenomenon is the impact on urban structures through tourist guides and city maps for tourists (Fariás, 2011). These leave traces in the real urban space to the extent that in the popular areas marked on tourist maps and travel guides, as in the case of Venice, they lead to a massive transformation of infrastructure and very crowded streets. This makes the everyday journeys of the inhabitants difficult and, in addition, has an impact on the infrastructure of the ground floor zones (Zukin, 2010). Current research on Venice is concerned with the question of the causes and effects of tourism (Horvath, 2018; Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019) and is investigating the phenomenon itself, as well as the protests associated with it (Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019). This research project ties in with the current debate in the field of tourism research, but questions the phenomenon from a different anchor point, namely the everyday life perspective of the inhabitants and related narratives and practices of protest along contested infrastructures.

#### V. Reshaping the urban fabric: transformation of the city through mass tourism

The Serenissima has been a contested space since its beginning, in the sense that it was taken from the sea, and that refugees created land using wooden pails as the foundations (Distefano, 2017: 8). As a hub for both trade and art, Venice has been a destination for

travellers and traders ever since (Salerno and Russo, 2020: 4). Its history is strongly connected to both the water, the lagoon, and the way of life which is linked to them. Especially at the time of the monarchy in Europe, it was a destination for the more well-off (O'Neill, Sandy, Wootton [eds], 2012). Venice held an unusual place in the Victorian imagination. As one writer in *Sharpe's London Magazine* declared in 1866, "Venice! Of all cities of the world there is perhaps none which is so well-known to those who know only by report" (Buzard, 2002: 9).

Since the 1960s, Venice has become a destination for wider groups of travellers. In the 1990s, bus tourism brought more and more daily tourists to the lagoon. Beginning with the low-cost airlines and cruises ships entering the lagoon in the early 2000s, the city has since been reshaped by mass tourism on many levels (Salerno and Russo, 2020: 4). The inner perspective of the transformation process was described in detail by various interview partners. One of them, Marcella (name changed), an inhabitant who grew up in Venice, describes the transformation of the city space from an everyday life perspective. In the quote she describes the colonialization of everyday life through overtourism taking place at the micro-social level of the city space:

*And then it broke our habits. We were used to having space and time for the Venetians, just to go for a walk and move around the city, and then with all this stuff came the problem of affordable housing and tourist rentals.*

The consequences of touristic forms of inhabiting the city are that many former inhabitants are forced to move out of Venice to Mestre. Due to tourist rentals, they cannot afford the lodgings and living costs in Venice. Barbara Warburton Giliberti, member of Comitato No Grandi Navi, explains how the properties have been repurposed:

*There were 250,000 residents in the historic centre, but now there are 52,000 - one-sixth of the population. And the rest of the property hasn't disappeared. It's all there. Except that it's been taken over by Air B&B. All of the property that comes onto the market is turned into tourist accommodation. Therefore, many Venetians have been forced to move out of the historical centre because they couldn't afford the rising rents anymore.*

One of the main challenges in the context of overtourism in Venice is that people have considerable difficulty in finding any affordable accommodation as a result of the rising number of tourist rentals. Bertocchi and Visentin analysed the huge transformation process of accommodation which was formally used by residents and is now rented out for tourist purposes, based on the data of the municipality in the period between 2008 and 2019 (Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019: 7). Alice Corona, a local researcher in Venice, points out, in her analysis based on the internal data of Airbnb, that 12% of the housing stock in the historic centre is rented out via Airbnb. This amounts to 1,081 listings, with 61% of them being rented out via the platform for more than 60 nights a year. The trend is also clear, Airbnb accommodation rose significantly in comparison to the year 2018 by 13%. The reasons for this touristification of housing are, on the one hand, a change in the regional law in recent years that made it possible to rent out more properties for tourist purposes (Fava and Fregolent, 2018: 108). On the other hand, 9% of the housing in Venice is municipal housing – 10,884 buildings in Venice (Fava and Fregolent, 2018: 100), which is a high proportion by Italian standards (the national average is 4%), as Laura Fregolent, Professor of urban planning at the IUAV, explained in an interview with me. Of this municipal housing, 15% is empty, and of these 864 empty flats, 115 are under construction. One half of this housing stock is

managed by the city of Venice and the other half by the regional non-profit developer Azienda Territoriale per l'Edilizia Residenziale (ATER – the 'Territorial Company for Residential Housing'). The percentage of the unused flats which are managed by the ATER is 5% higher than that which is managed by the municipality.

There are municipal buildings that have to be renovated and therefore cannot be rented out. The current mayor, Luigi Brugnaro, promised to renovate parts of this stock in 2015 in order to create affordable housing for families in Venice. However, there are only a few Venetians who have access to affordable flats based on their social networks. As Marcella explains:

*I'm living actually right now in the same flat I was living with my parents. I moved there in January 1990 and I'm still living there. It's an amazing flat I love it and the owners are people from Venice who have a strong political view 'I want to rent my flat, the one I had because I'm a lucky person, to people who live here'. They're friends of course, but they allowed us as a family before and well now as an adult keep living and working in the city without spending my entire money on living, which is unaffordable.*

This is why ACS Venezia Assemblea Sociale per la Casa ('Social Assembly for Housing') has been occupying empty flats and houses mostly not for their own use for more than twenty years. The activists occupy the living spaces and restore them, in cooperation with the project Rebiennale, among others, in order to make them available to people who have lost their homes due to tourist rentals (Ghiglione, 2018). Rebiennale is a project run by Venetians who reuse materials from the art and architecture biennales (Rebiennale, nd) and provide ASC with materials to renovate abandoned homes in Venice. One idea of ASC is to prevent residents from being forced to move to the mainland because they can no longer afford the cost of housing in Venice. Barbara Warburton Giliberti points out the consequences of Venetians moving away to the mainland for the city:

*And a young couple which wants to get married. They are obligated to move to the mainland. But quite a long way on the mainland to be able to afford any accommodation. Now there are some consequences. If the families live on the mainland their children are born on the mainland they go to school on the mainland. So, in Venice the schools are closing down. People are not doing their regular shopping here anymore. They do it on the mainland. So, the shops are going down. If you want an electrician or a plumber or a carpenter, it's like finding gold nuggets on the floor. They are very difficult to come by and very expensive - what is happening now is that we mainly have supermarkets.*

## VI. Taking care of the city

Among the consequences of touristification described in the section above is a transformation of the social fabric. Venice, with its 52,000 inhabitants, is confronted with 24 million tourists a year. As a result, the small city has to contend with metropolitan phenomena such as anonymity. This means, especially for older inhabitants, that in the areas which are highly touristically commodified, such as the area around Campo Santa Margherita where one of my interview partners Marcela lives, they often do not know anyone in their neighbourhood who can help them to cope with daily challenges. There are only some *sestiere* left with strong internal ties. There is generally no one there who can take care of the community as the short-term residents, who normally only stay for a few days, do not



know the inhabitants. One resident, Marcella, described the transformation of urban neighbourhoods and linked to it the challenge of taking care of the city as follows:

*In the sense of a community, we are struggling to keep it alive. In my building, there are eight flats and three of them are for tourists... And in the little square of my building, we have... at least ten tourist flats and it's very small. So, you're having unknown people coming and going every week. If you need something, it's really hard. Well, I know where to ask for help but it's not that common. You know, on the stairs of eight flats maybe you know people in one or two. And a lot of them are older people. So, the point is that: we need to bring back families and the working class and families with babies, and this is something that the current administration seems not to be interested in. It's quite evident our mayor, who basically is making business with this company in the city, doesn't care at all about the people who live here. Because we are not an interesting number of voters.*

In this last part of the quote she points out what was common among all interview partners, namely that they have the feeling that the current administration is not taking care of the needs of Venetian inhabitants. This is the central topic that emerged from the empirical research concerns caring for the city and its community. Venice is divided into 118 small islands, each of which forms a microscopic social fabric. These small islands are affected to varying degrees by mass tourism. Thus, caring for the city and its residents becomes an issue at the level of the urban district. The practices of protesting and volunteering for the lagoon and its inhabitants can also be seen as a form of caring.

Currently there is interdisciplinary theoretical debate around the notion of 'care'. One of its most prominent representatives is the political scientist Joan C. Tronto. With her monograph *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (2013) she has advanced the debate. In her volume she asserts that care work is not a private task, but rather a political and social task. She develops four phases of care. Firstly, *attentiveness* - caring about "someone or some group's unmet caring needs" (ibid: 22). In the context of Venice there are several inhabitants of the city who realised that Venice is under pressure due to mass tourism and the climate crisis and care strongly about this. Secondly, *responsibility* - "[o]nce needs are identified, someone or some group has to take on the burden of meeting those needs. This is a responsibility, and that is the key moral quality of this second phase" (2013: 22). In this phase citizens form initiatives. Thirdly, *competence* - the practices of caregiving, in the realm of social movements after developing concepts and plans and starting to realise them, for example, in the form of campaigns against cruise ships or interventions in front of the Vida theatre, such as public meals, flea markets or a theatre in the public space. Fourthly, *responsiveness* - care receiving. After the practice of caring there is a response which can occur.

The cultural researcher Elke Krasny has taken up questions of caring and introduced them into the discourse of architecture and planning. In an exhibition curated by her and Angelika Fitz at the Architektur Zentrum in Vienna whose title translates as 'Critical care: Architecture and urbanism for a broken planet' (Fitz and Krasny, 2019), they explore current challenges against the background of climate change and environmental pollution in the context of caregiving.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown in Venice, one of the local citizen initiatives, Generazione 90<sup>5</sup>, provided for elderly people by purchasing food for them. Generazione 90 was founded in 2016 with the vision of developing prospects for young Venetians to find a job outside the sphere of tourism and creating affordable housing. With their activities they are fighting for a future in Venice for younger generations. In the case of Venice, various protest practices involve taking care. One example is the case of the Vida movement<sup>6</sup>. The movement occupied the former anatomical institute (Antico Teatro di Anatomia di Venezia), at Campo San Giacomo dall'Orio, in 2017. The movement is connected to the neighbourhood, which is one of the more lively ones, with many families and elderly people residing there.

The background to the occupation is the sale of the former anatomical institute to a private investor. According to the land registry, the building regulations state that the ground floor zone is to be used for community purposes. The investor plans to build a restaurant. This is problematic for the local neighbourhood, as numerous restaurants have been opened in recent years, thus reducing already rare public space. In a neighbourhood where many families with children live, this is a major problem, especially as there are no playgrounds nearby. The effect is that the citizens' initiative is very broadly based. Many residents, including families with children, elderly people, scientists, former employees of the city administration and students, are getting involved. After the police ended the occupation, the initiative moved its activities into the public space. There have been regular neighbourhood dinners, theatre productions, flea markets, readings and other interventions, such as the juggler who performed for the children of the neighbourhood in summer 2019 (Figure 1). One of the activists told me during an intervention:

*Vida is not just protesting; they are bringing something to the city using and adapting the space. There is the desire to create something. It is a loved place. The chance to use that space for everyone, that it is possible, is important for the community.*

The Vida movement expresses the residents' longing for communal spaces. In this sense the members are taking care of the city, reclaiming it for a common usage. I observed this longing and the wish to stay in the city, especially among students who work in volatile job markets and live in insecure conditions. There is a strong identification with the city and its neighbourhoods (Cavallo, 2016: 132) and an awareness of the specific way of life in Venice. This involves a sense of life related to the lagoon, the specific rhythm of a walkable city and somehow also the proudness of being part of this unique place which was raised from the water by their ancestors. Based on my field research, there is evidence that there are many neighbourhood initiatives which are driven by the local community. There are some community garden projects, common meals in public spaces, such as at Mercato di Rialto, the fish market, the initiative Tutta mia la città at the Rialto (AV, 2019), and at Sant'Elena there is an open bookstore project, regular flea markets and small community spaces in ground floor zones that are used for community purposes.

Due to the increasing touristification, there is a great need for community infrastructures for families with children, especially as there are bans on playing in some squares at specific times of the day, and regulations in the historic centre designed to not disturb tourists since

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<sup>5</sup> See the Generazione 90 website (nd).

<sup>6</sup> See the Vida website (nd).

1986 (Bon, 2019). In 2019, the Comune di Venezia wanted to enforce such a ban at Campo Santa Margherita, which caused massive resident protests led by mothers in July 2019 related to the *Manifestazione Non rubate il gioco ai bambini* (literally “don’t steal the children’s play”). The city government, under Luigi Brugnaro, intended to pass new regulation which was aimed at banning children playing on Campo Santa Margherita. It did not pass the city council’s consideration and, after the protest, further plans to enforce it were stopped. This is relevant because Campo Santa Margherita is seen as a child-friendly area of Venice, against the backdrop of a city with drastically shrinking numbers of inhabitants. That said, many families with small children still live there. A typical practice in Venice is that the children play on the squares called *campos* while the parents are chatting. None of the *campos* are equipped with playgrounds, all of the playgrounds are located at the parks and green areas on the 118 islands (48) and the mainland (19) (unattributed, 2019).



Figure 1: Intervention at Campo San Giacomo dell'Orio 2019 (author’s photo, 2019).

## VII. Who is reclaiming the island city and why?

‘Right to the city’ initiatives in Venice are very broad in their composition compared to in other cities such as Vienna, where mainly students, members of the academia or pensioners are active in local initiatives (Dlabaja, 2020). Based on my empirical findings, this concerns socio-structural characteristics such as age and family situation, but also educational background and employment status: parents with children are also committed to the future of their children in the city, as are older residents who offer their expert knowledge, such as lawyers, artists, scientists, retired city administration employees or journalists (see also Vianello, 2017: 174). Additionally, many students who would like to stay in the city but find it difficult to make a living due to the high cost of living and precarious employment also take part in citizen protests and initiatives. What they all have in common is their commitment to a future worth living for those people who work and live in Venice. There is a dense network among the initiatives. One reason could be the urgency of the challenges in Venice in terms of affordable housing, jobs, shrinking population and other livelihoods. The

challenges of the city are very diverse, and alongside housing becoming more and more expensive, the privatisation of public infrastructure is also a problem. Examples of this are the privatisation of the post office, the closure of various hospitals or the example of the former anatomical institute.

The crowded alleys in the ‘tourist trap’ areas are another problem. All these can be cited as reasons why so many residents are involved in the various initiatives. Another specific feature is that residents are often active in several initiatives at the same time. There are overlaps and links between the individual initiatives, which in turn is related to the fact that their objectives are in many ways the same. An example of this is No Grandi Navi, which is active against the cruise ships. Many of its members are involved in other smaller groups. Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that a number of researchers are involved in various ways in civic initiatives and support them with their expertise. On the other hand, there are citizens who are involved in social movements in the city to support the concerns of No Grandi Navi, but not in the way in which they were requested, since they are too radical from their perspective. For example, the fact they want to block cruise ships entering the Giudecca canal with small boats is perceived as radical by some inhabitants.

### VIII. Ways of inhabiting the city

Ports and trading cities have always been places where people from different regions of the world live. Venice, in particular, is a city that looks back on a long history as a trading metropolis and as the start and end point of many a journey. In times of a mobile society (Urry, 2002), forms of living in the city by short-term residents (see Van der Borg, 1996, Salerno and Russo, 2020) are becoming more and more common, especially in the context of tourism. In the context of touristification, the question is:

*How do they perform as scripted actors in a play about ‘island life’ that they rarely control? How do they behave when they are targets of an incessant regimen of construction, which would have them behave this way, and that in ways that fulfil the desires and dreams of all, for all seasons and for all tastes? Resentment, as Hay put it, is only one of a variety of ways in which islanders can ‘react’. (Baldacchino, 2008: 44).*

Above all, the tourist forms of inhabiting the city have a huge impact on everyday life and infrastructures in the city because, on the one hand, with the immense number of 24 million people a year, they are accompanied by a colonisation of everyday life and, on the other hand, they have transformed the housing sector, the economy and the social fabric. Salerno and Russo conclude that Venice has become a “short-term” city (2020). Each form of inhabiting the city has an influence on the transformation of Venice. By inhabiting, I mean moving in the city space, the use of the public space, tourist accommodation and the use of infrastructure (shops for food, cloths, souvenirs, restaurants), which have been transformed due to the sheer number of tourists and this shrinking number of inhabitants. A lot of public infrastructure such as schools, post offices, and hospitals has been privatised. Not only short-term tourists have an impact on the touristification of housing gentrification, also the short-term residents in the form of expats are affecting the increasing rents (Minoia, 2017: 265). Due to the huge demand on the short-term rentals, there are ever fewer flats which are available on the regular real estate market.

## IX. Reclaiming the city: negotiating on urban infrastructure

A case which was discussed broadly in the international media is the small island of Poveglia, which became famous as “the world’s most haunted island” (Cavallo and Visentin, 2020: 194). It is a property of the municipality which in ancient times was one of the quarantine stations in the lagoon. Around 2012, the municipality initiated an attempt to lease the island for 99 years to a private investor. This project provoked large-scale protests which eventually led to the creation of the Initiative Poveglia per tutti. As discussed in detail elsewhere in this issue (Cavallo and Visentin, 2021), this broad-scale movement developed a series of ideas and visions for a common use of the island. Several meetings and participatory workshops were held. Money was raised to prevent the sale or long-term lease to private investors. A significant detail in the political history of the town is that the highest bidder for Poveglia was the future mayor of the Venice, Luigi Brugnaro, who is an entrepreneur. This says a lot about the political culture of the city, and is in line with the numerous privatisations of public infrastructure in recent years. Brugnaro is also a member of a conservative party. In the end, the island was not leased to anyone and remains a common, although still disputed, commodity.

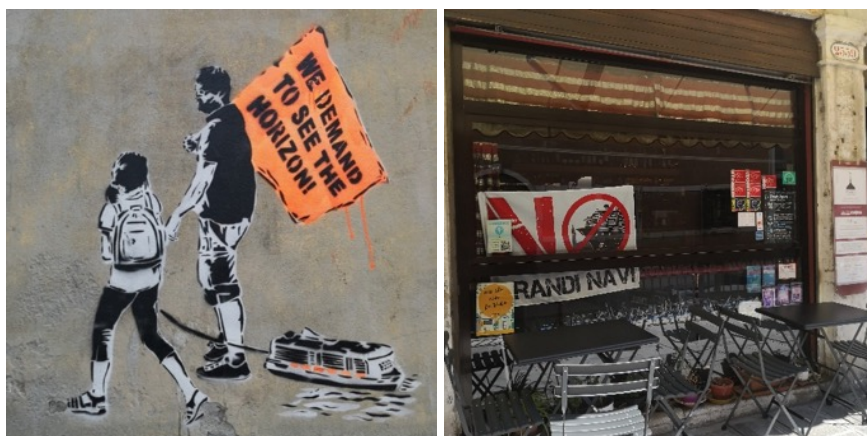


Figure 2a - “We demand to see the horizon” unknown artist; 2b - visual marks of protest in the city space (photos by the author, 2019).

The most visible protest movement in the international media in Venice is the Comitato No Grandi Navi, which was founded in January 2012 (Vianello, 2017: 174) to oppose cruise ship tourism in Venice. Michele Vianello describes this kind of protest in his research as a “mobilisation of a wide range of citizens and their engagement with issues that had not been addressed by local social movements before” (2016: 173). One of their aims is to stop the cruise ships entering the lagoon for various reasons, such as the environmental effects on the ecosystem of the lagoon caused by the heavy fuel oil. The ships are leaving a patina on the heritage architecture which is destroying the historical facades, especially when combined with rain and the chemical mixture which results. There are various ways people protest through No Grandi Navi. Besides the regular meetings of the movement, protest marches are organised, boats carry No Grandi Navi flags and make them visible to the cruise ships when entering the San Marco basin, and there are visible marks of protests in the city spaces such as flags on the balconies and pieces of street art, such as in Figure 2.

On 8<sup>th</sup> June 2019, a march by 10,000 people on San Marco Square against the big cruise ships took place. It was organised by Comitano No Grandi Navi in cooperation with several local initiatives, such as Fridays for Future Venice. This most visible form of reclaiming the city was triggered by an incident at the Giudecca Canal where a cruise ship collided with a tourist boat and injured five people. The incident provoked more widespread protests than ever before. Even people who are critical of No Grandi Navi and its methods joined the march. The mood in the Lagoon was heated in the summer of 2019. Many Venetians had had enough of the cruise ships, of the ‘white giants’ that entered the Giudecca Basin on a daily basis, often as high as skyscrapers that threateningly covered the city’s skyline, especially as they made the daily life of the inhabitants very difficult, with masses of people pouring into the city from the ships. Then came the COVID-19, and with one blow the city changed from a tourist icon to a city where the inhabitants were among themselves. Because of COVID-19, no more ships were allowed to enter the lagoon. The lockdown was a shock for the city and the inhabitants, flipping from overtourism to zero tourism (Cristiano and Gonella, 2020: 2; Salerno and Russo, 2020: 2).

In the second part of this section, I follow the question of the extent to which members of citizen initiatives are involving themselves in the political decision-making process and how the negotiation between political actors and members of citizen initiatives take place. In June 2020, the first tourists returned to the city. For a short time, between the end of July and the beginning of August, there were reports from No Grandi Navi that the cruise ships wanted to return to the lagoon. However, the protests and press conferences resulted in the ships not returning, probably until Spring 2021, and in September 2020 the regional elections and the election of the mayor took place. From conversations with activists during my research visit in July 2020 it became clear that some candidates from different political parties tried to politically capture the initiative, because the 10,000 people who were present at the march on San Marco square are potential voters. No Grandi Navi refused to support any party, although individual members have run as candidate for various parties. On 24th August the initiative celebrated news that the cruise ships were not to return. A few days later there was resistance from the dockworkers’ union, which demanded the return of the ships. The current mayor, Luigi Brugnaro, claimed in the media that he will be standing alongside the protesting harbour union, that demands that the cruises must come back to save the 5,000 jobs in this sector. Brugnaro won the elections in September 2020 and one of his electoral promises was to save the cruise industry. It remains to be seen how developments will continue. Venice’s economy has been hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis as it is so dependent on tourism, suffering heavy losses.

In 2019, Un’altra città possibile<sup>7</sup> was founded, set up to function as an umbrella movement and to develop alternative visions for Venice’s future and its inhabitants. It was supposed to lead to the founding of a political party running for the regional elections in 2020. The attempt to create a list of candidates, as Remi Wacogne explained in one of the interviews with me, failed in the end. However, another political party named Terra e aqua related to local activists was founded by Marco Gasparinetti, who is one of the activists behind the initiative Gruppo 25 aprile<sup>8</sup>. It is one of the social movements in the lagoon developing alternative strategies for Venice and its inhabitants. In 2017, the movement marched with 2000 people from the Arsenale to Riva degli Schiavoni, carrying a huge sign stating the point

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<sup>7</sup> See the Un’altra città possibile website (nd).

<sup>8</sup> See the Gruppo 25 aprile website (nd)

of the march - *MiNoVadoVia* (meaning ‘we will not go away’). Terra e Aqua did not directly result from this movement but can be seen as a new home for candidates which originated from several grassroots movements and citizen initiatives. In the elections in September 2020, the party won 4% of the vote in their first appearance. This is in contrast to Barcelona, where grassroots movements have already formed a political movement which has led to changes in urban policies in the context of tourism. However, the current examples under discussion show that there is indeed an attempt by some individual members of local initiatives to engage in decision-making processes.

### Conclusions: reclaiming, negotiating and caring for Venice

I would like to end by summarising the effects of the phenomenon of the touristic inhabitation of the city and the associated Disneyfication and heritagisation, which I examined empirically. Mass tourism brings with it a massive transformation of urban infrastructure, which includes ever further dwindling of shops for everyday needs such as grocers, butchers, office supplies, shoe shops and craftsmen. Instead, there is a significant increase in restaurants (see Bertocchi and Visenting, 2019) and souvenir shops. At the same time, public infrastructure such as hospitals, schools and post offices are disappearing, either through being privatised or left vacant. The example of the former anatomical institute and its sale shows how much the inhabitants defend these remaining public goods, as they are enormously important for the urban community and the vitality of the neighbourhoods. There needs to be places where people can meet and flea markets can be organised and, above all, public space is important for families as an area for children to play. This is especially since there are very few playgrounds in the city and the municipality wanted to ban playing in certain areas so as not to disturb the tourist business.

Reasons for citizen protests are currently very diverse. They range from protests and squatting by the ASC for affordable housing, triggered by tourist rents leading to a particular type of gentrification, partly due to rentals via Air B&B; to the younger *Generazione 90*, which is committed to generating jobs outside tourism and is trying to raise awareness among tourists that families live and manage their daily lives. All protests have one thing in common - they all take place because the inhabitants are massively affected by the colonisation of everyday life by tourism. The protestors, on the one hand, want to stay in the lagoon city and, on the other, they are looking for alternative strategies and visions for Venice. This has led to the various forms of protest and the testing out of alternative visions for the city as discussed in throughout this research article. These range from classic demonstrations, such as the march on San Marco square by *No Grandi Navi*, to temporary interventions in public space where, for example, plays are performed, or communal meals are organised by the *Vida* movement. In all these activities, the close-knit cohesion of the neighbourhoods becomes visible, exactly that which is partly threatened by the tourist fixation. This can be seen in the theme of caring for the city, when the majority of flats in neighbourhoods are rented out via Air B&B, elderly residents, in particular, do not know anyone who can help them with their daily needs. This transformation leaves this small town facing the problems of a big city - in this case anonymity.

Negotiations surrounding the city space concern contested urban infrastructure that influences the everyday life of the inhabitants. The best example is the issue of the cruise ships, which, due to their size, bring many thousands of short-term visitors every day who only spend a few hours in the city. On 14<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, *No Grandi Navi* celebrated a temporary victory over the cruise ship industry, that of stopping them entering the lagoon

until Spring 2021 (Mion, 2020). However, due to the continuing conservative administration, which primarily looks out for the interests of the tourist industry, the future of the inhabitants of the lagoon is uncertain. At the same time, a strategy for affordable housing is needed, such as the resumption of the municipal housing programme and the establishment of new residential areas for the Venetians, a demand that is also being promoted by the research network OCIO, among others (Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019; Vianello, 2017; Casagrande 2016). The regulation of mass tourism and the relocation of the port for cruise ships out of the lagoon are central strategies in this context. One question for me was whether political movements are emerging out of the citizen initiatives. As outlined in the previous section, there are currently two such movements, but in contrast to the well-researched case of Barcelona (Russo and Scarnato, 2018), they are yet to become part of the regional government or the city administration, although there is a strong desire to change the local policies inside the local initiatives.

The COVID-19 crisis is a painful reminder that tourism is an economic monoculture in Venice that has been put above all else by political decision-makers. The problem in Venice is the close ties between politics and the economy, as in the current administration surrounding Brugnaro, as exemplified in the case of Poveglia. It is an example of neoliberal policies. This touristic monoculture presents us with a mirror (see also Cristiano and Gonella 2020). In order to enable the inhabitants to live a life worth living, there is a need to build on collective caring practices.

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