

CHAPTER 16

WATER AND THE WATERFRONT(S), OR THE MISSING DIMENSION IN THE DEBATE ON “METROPOLITAN VENICE”

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Introduction

The extraordinary and powerful image of Venice as a unique, fragile and endangered city informs the approach to evaluating its problems, resources and opportunities for urban and regional development in a way that tends to emphasize *diversity* and *uniqueness*. This perspective relies on and is justified by the distinguishing characteristics of this historic city’s architectural and environmental evolution as well as by the well-known problems and threats that affect the city: high tides, dramatic demographic decline, overtourism and the related crowding-out of the local population and associated economic activities, and physical and environmental degradation.

However, this approach leads to underestimating the fact that the city in the lagoon is part of a much more complex and larger territorial system, from both a spatial and functional point of view, extending well beyond the borders of the Venice lagoon. Consequently, focusing on the position and role that the city (historic Venice) plays within this wider territorial system is essential if we seek to place the future of Venice in the most appropriate geographical and territorial context.¹

A few examples can sustain the above argument: regarding overtourism, the city has recently established a “control room” to monitor

¹ Costa (2019).

tourist flows.² However, it is clear that to regulate the flow of visitors arriving at the historic city, it is necessary to design a management system that involves the main urban nodes (and actors) that together constitute the “Venice tourist region,” from which the flow of daily visitors (particularly the so-called false excursionists) originates.³

As far as the environmental management of the lagoon is concerned, many efforts have been made in recent decades to improve ecological conditions and reverse morphological upsets (Fig. 2). Nonetheless, for environmental management to be effective, it must address the complex relations between marine dynamics, the lagoon and the drainage basin.⁴ Regarding this perspective, there is still much to be done in terms of integrated environmental plans and programs.⁵

Again, if we focus on the goal of promoting the economic and social regeneration of historic Venice and the Venetian mainland (the urban districts of Mestre and Marghera, and the port and industrial zone, Porto Marghera), we need to focus on the regional economic system’s evolution over the last year in terms of economic competitiveness and attractiveness.⁶

At the same time, to cope with the problems described above, important changes in the sphere of governance are needed; in fact, poor coordination regarding territorial policies, administrative fragmentation and a lack of strategic approaches to planning and urban policy have been important conditioning factors. In 2014, a national law (Delrio National Law, n. 56) established the Metropolitan City of Venice, at the same time suppressing the former provincial level of government (Venice Province). That law has been regarded, particularly by the national government, as the answer to the demand for more effective and consistent forms of territorial governance, with the aim of addressing the variety of environmental and socioeconomic problems that the Venice coastal region is facing.

Against this background, our study aims to understand whether the “metropolitan reform” that led to the establishment of the Metropolitan City of Venice can help improve the governance system, particularly with reference to the complex system of Venetian waterfronts. To achieve this aim, we first provide a picture of these waterfronts by considering their

² Moreover, before the COVID-19 pandemics, the city’s government planned to test measures to manage the flow of daily visitors through temporary control gates located in the most important gateways to the city (see, for instance, Fig. 1). These gates never entered into operation.

³ van der Borg (1991); van der Borg, Costa and Gotti (1996), 303-21.

⁴ Soriani and Zanetto (1998), 221-34.

⁵ Buono *et al.* (2015), 21-31.

⁶ Soriani and Calzavara (2016a), 177-98.

functions and evolution. Second, we briefly recall the most important elements of the “metropolitan reform” in Venice. Then, we focus on the role that water and the systems of waterfronts play in the debate on “metropolitan Venice.” Our main argument is that the implementation process of the metropolitan reform pays too little attention to the relation with water and the evolution of Venetian waterfronts. We believe that this is an astonishing paradox, since what distinguishes Venice among other Italian metropolitan cities is, above all, the complexity of the relation the city maintains with water and the system of waterfronts. Finally, some conclusions are drawn.

The complex picture of Venetian waterfronts

Historic Venice stands at the centre of a complex framework of waterfronts. This territorial structure shows three different subsystems, which differ in terms of their spatial and functional logic and drivers of change: historic Venice and the lagoon islands; the “internal lagoon” (the “modern” waterfront, constituted by the port and industrial area of Porto Marghera and by Marco Polo international airport); and the “upper Adriatic coastal” waterfront (Fig. 3).

Historic Venice city, with approximately 28 million annual visitors (before the COVID-19 crisis began), 80% of them daily excursionists and 20% overnight tourists, is one of the most important destinations of international tourist flows in Italy.⁷ The historic city in the lagoon represents the “paradigmatic case” of the crowding-out effect that is today occurring in many historical centres in Europe because of overtourism. The “dictatorship of tourism” has long played a prominent role in the steadily declining population in the historical centre of Venice (today approximately 50,000). From this perspective, it is not surprising that the world “*Venetianization*” has recently become a way to describe the negative effects on the urban fabric caused by unmanaged tourism. However, despite the very significant concerns about the threats posed by the “dictatorship of tourism” on the survival of Venice as a “city” (instead of a poorly managed “theme park”), tourism has continued to expand recently thanks to the continued growth of inexpensive forms of accommodation (e.g., B&Bs and private apartments offered through Airbnb).⁸ Moreover, major new investments from the global tourism industry have recently been made in the historic city and in the lagoon; in the latter case, an outstanding example is the revitalization of Sacca Sessola Island (“Isola delle Rose”), with the

⁷ van der Borg (2017), 15-32.

⁸ *Ibid.*

construction of a new luxury resort.⁹ At the same time, however, new bottom-up initiatives have been recently organized and promoted with the aim of avoiding the further privatization of small lagoon islands. These initiatives (a paradigmatic example is the case of Poveglia Island) have catalysed interest and concern from both the local population and foreign people.¹⁰ The underlying belief in these efforts is that these small islands, mostly abandoned, have to be revitalized through public, local-community-driven and nonprofit initiatives.

It is also important to remember that since mid-1990s the Venice cruise port has experienced dramatic growth, which has led to conflicts in local, national and international political and cultural arenas regarding the possibility for the historic city to continue to house increasingly larger cruise ships. Not surprisingly, Venice is very often portrayed in the global media as a city whose survival and physical integrity are threatened by these “giants of the sea” (Fig. 4).¹¹

Moreover, due to flooding and high tides, the historic city has also become an icon of the threats that global environmental change is posing to postmodern societies – an icon of the *fragility*, in both a physical and a symbolic sense, that many cities on the water are experiencing today.¹²

The historic city in the lagoon (known worldwide as “*Venice in peril*”) is “*the Venice*” that everyone knows; that part of Venice is the core of the “*save Venice*” movement and of the international concern and involvement of private committees since the 1970s, and it is that part of Venice that is central in UNESCO activities, campaigns and narratives on the preservation of world heritage sites.¹³

⁹ For a picture of this Island, see Figure 4, Cavallo and Mastrovito’s chapter in this volume.

¹⁰ Cavallo and Visentin (2020), 194-211.

¹¹ Soriani (2017), 73-97. To note is that a new National Government Decree (n. 103), issued in 2021, prohibited the passage through the San Marco Basin of ships with GRT exceeding 25,000 tons. This means that today, these ships call at Porto Marghera. As a result, many companies are re-directing their business in other North Adriatic ports, such as Trieste and Ravenna.

¹² Caroli and Soriani (2017), vii.

¹³ The Venice in Peril Fund, created in 1966, represents one of the most important private initiatives aimed to the restoration of Venetian monuments. Since its foundation, the fund has substantially contributed to the global spread of concern for the future of the city, confronting with the combined action of environmental and morphological upsets caused by large-scale industrialization, overtourism, demographic decline and sea level rise (www.veniceinperil.org).

The *second subsystem* of Venetian waterfronts (the “internal lagoon”) evolved through the industrial modernization starting in the first decades of the twentieth century at the internal border of the lagoon, leading to the establishment and development of Porto Marghera (Fig. 5). The establishment and expansion of the port and industrial complex, through the *continentalization* of the *Barena dei Bottenighi* (Bottenighi’s vegetated marshland), and the realization of a sharp and rigid separation between land and water meant that the Venice lagoon entered into the industrial modernity age. The process of modernization was also fed by the development of modern agriculture, the realization of new residential districts at the lagoon’s edges and the establishment of Marco Polo airport and related transport infrastructure. Modernization also meant that “amphibious” areas and places, which acted until the end of the nineteenth century as connective elements between land and water, became “peripheral” and marginalized.

Covering an area of approximately 2,000 hectares, Porto Marghera was considered during the period 1950-70 as a potential growth-pole capable of leading the industrialization of the Veneto region, whose economic and social structure was at that time still characterized by agriculture and small-scale industrial and artisanal activities. As with many other port and industrial areas in developed countries, Porto Marghera has suffered from severe economic decline since the 1980s, and it is currently experiencing a difficult postindustrial transition, with services, light industries and logistics leading the transformation process. It is worth noting that the area has witnessed very few urban redevelopment projects to date.¹⁴

The *third subsystem* of Venetian waterfronts is the “upper Adriatic coastal” waterfront (Fig. 6). This “linear tourist city” (from Chioggia-Sottomarina to Caorle) is part of Venice Province and represents one of the most important areas for the tourism industry in Italy, particularly for foreign tourism; in 2018, the area recorded approximately 24.4 million overnight stays. The development of this area has benefitted and still benefits from its proximity to historic Venice, which can be very easily reached via public water transport. This means that an important flow of daily visitors to historic Venice originates from resorts in this area.

Many efforts have been made recently to improve the environmental quality of the area through the designation of new protected sites, the restoration of dunes, the improvement of waste management, the realization of new green areas, etc. However, erosion and biodiversity loss are still important problems, and coastal defence and beach nourishment remain a common concern in the whole area, particularly in light of climate change.

¹⁴ Soriani (1996), 235-48; Soriani (2009), 147-69.

Finally, it is important to remember that according to many OECD studies and technical reports, Venice is one of the three main functional urban areas that constitute the Central Veneto Metropolitan Area (Venice, Padua and Treviso)¹⁵. Together, they define a medium-size polycentric metropolitan region, with approximately 2,600,000 residents (55% of the total regional population). With 3 universities, 2 seaports (Venice and Chioggia), 1 inland/dry port (Padua), numerous important fairs, more than 40 million overnight stays (65% of the total number at the regional scale), 2 international airports (Venice and Treviso), and many important SME systems, this metropolitan area accounts for 45% of the Veneto Region's exports and 55% of contracts in the regional real estate market. Moreover, it accounts for approximately 55% of "systemic" commuting flows in the Veneto Region (residents, workers and students; overnight and day tourist flows excluded). From a territorial and environmental point of view, the whole area is marked by urban sprawl, "soil consumption" and air, land and water pollution.¹⁶

As far as the governance of the Venetian coastal region is concerned, administrative fragmentation, very poor vertical and horizontal coordination, poor cooperation, and a lack of a strategic vision for designing new sustainable development paths have resulted in an "incremental" approach to planning and management. The "piecemeal approach" in planning and the short-term economic interests that have dominated urban policies until today have not opposed the historic city's functional and demographic impoverishment, the dictatorship of mass tourism, the loss of economic activity or even the hydraulic and environmental crisis of the lagoon environment and the upper Adriatic coastal zone. Against this background, the Delrio Law, among other outcomes, established the Metropolitan City of Venice. The national government intended that the new body would function as a tool for developing new strategic approaches to planning and urban policy, with a clear focus on the issue of economic competitiveness, as well as for promoting new models of territorial governance through administrative coordination and territorial cooperation.¹⁷ Whether the introduction of this new level of government entails the effective design and implementation of new governance approaches and policy/administrative tools that are more capable of governing the complex Venetian waterfronts than the approaches and tools used at present is an open question. We address this issue in the next section.

¹⁵ OECD (2010, 2013).

¹⁶ Soriani *et al.* (2019).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

“Metropolitan Venice” as a new level of government

The need to establish a metropolitan government for the Venetian region has been acknowledged since the early 1970s. At that time, the metropolitan debate mainly focused on the problem of designing and implementing an environmental management framework capable of handling the complexity of the lagoon environment and its relations with the municipalities in the drainage basin.

Later, during the 1980s and 1990s, the metropolitan debate started to focus on the need to promote more coordinated urban policies to cope with the territorial problems caused by spatial diffusion (suburbanization) and to make public services (planning, transport, environmental utilities, etc.) more efficient. Moreover, particularly in the 1990s, establishing a new level of metropolitan government was increasingly regarded by a large number of local political and economic actors as a precondition for increasing the economic competitiveness of Central Veneto, consistent with the impact of globalization and the integration of small and medium-sized urban system dynamics in Europe in the 1990s.

Various suggestions (or should we say, wishes) for the spatial boundaries and functions of what was expected to become the new metropolitan government for the Venice area were therefore proposed and widely debated. However, none of them came into force. They remained on the paper, and no real changes in the institutional framework occurred. The picture changed again in 2014, when the Delrio National Law established the Metropolitan City of Venice, together with 13 other metropolitan cities (Table 1). The new metropolitan-level government suppressed the provincial body (Province of Venice). Today, the administrative boundaries of the new institution are those of the Province of Venice, which contains 44 municipalities (*comuni* in the Italian language), with a total population of approximately 853,000.¹⁸

In the national government’s view, this reform aimed to reorganize local governments in larger Italian cities, consistent with the evolution of functional urban systems, to improve the efficiency of public administration, for both citizens and firms (environmental utilities, transport services, etc.); to promote coordination in planning; to design strategic approaches to urban policy to foster economic competitiveness and social and economic development; and to improve ICT infrastructures and metropolitan connectivity.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Metropolitan city	Number of communes included in the metropolitan government	Area (km ²)	Population (ISTAT 2019)
Roma	121	5,363	4,342,212
Milano	132	1,565	3,244,510
Napoli	92	1,179	3,084,890
Torino	310	6,764	2,257,209
Palermo	82	5,009	1,252,588
Bari	41	3,863	1,251,994
Catania	58	3,574	1,107,702
Bologna	55	3,702	1,014,619
Firenze	40	3,391	999,224
Venezia	44	2,473	853,338
Genova	67	1,834	841,180
Messina	108	3,266	626,876
Reggio Calabria	97	3,210	548,009
Cagliari	17	1,249	431,038

Table 1: The metropolitan cities established by National Law 56/2014

As many scholars have recently pointed out, the reform shows many weaknesses.¹⁹ First, it resulted from a top-down government-driven approach, while many successful experiences, particularly at the European level, confirm that the establishment of a new level of metropolitan governance requires a very difficult-to-achieve mix of top-down and bottom-up (local-based) initiatives. Second, particularly in polycentric urban regions, the process of the “regionalization of the urban”²⁰ makes it difficult to fix clear spatial boundaries based on obsolete administrative delimitations (such as provincial delimitations). Finally, even though the logic of the administrative reform is based on a top-down government-driven approach, to be effective, it requires a very complex process of “*institutional tuning*” (the reorganization of functions and competencies

¹⁹ Bartaletti (2015), 389-400; Corò and Dalla Torre (2015); De Luca and Moccia (2017).

²⁰ Soja (2011).

among state, regional and local administrations), which generates conflicts among different levels of government.

Against this background, it appears appropriate to frame the problem of governing the Venetian coastal region from a metropolitan perspective, but the first steps taken in implementing the national reform show important weaknesses. First, in the case of Venice, the choice to adopt the formerly provincial borders as the borders of the newly established metropolitan-level government has been highly controversial. As a point of fact, some communes belonging to the Metropolitan City of Venice have very few functional linkages with the metropolitan core (the Commune of Venice), while some communes of the Padua and Treviso Provinces, which are not part of the area covered by the new metropolitan government, maintain important spatial relations (in terms of commuting flows) with the metropolitan core.

Second, and more meaningful for our purposes, the current process of reform (and debate) appears to heavily favour “economic competitiveness” perspective, while less attention is given to the need to address important environmental and territorial problems at the metropolitan scale, such as land consumption, water, land and air pollution, and biodiversity loss. Little attention is given to climate change and to the harmonization of decarbonization efforts with new economic specialization for the region. This argument is particularly relevant for coastal cities, particularly Venice, where issues of adaptation/resilience on the one hand and the promotion of “economic convergence” measures on the other (aimed at achieving mutual benefits, economic and environmental),²¹ remain central.

Third, the current phase of organizational transition suffers from many problems, particularly regarding relations with the regional government and other local authorities. The old body (the province), which had important territorial and environmental functions, has been suppressed, but the new body is not yet fully operational. The risk, therefore, is that policy and administrative coordination is lower today than it was in the past. Finally, the planning system continues to operate through a hierarchic and administrative (top-down) approach, while little attention is given to local capacity building and to the development of problem-solving attitudes and procedures.²²

²¹ Mol *et al.* (2013), 15-30; Giddens (2009).

²² Soriani *et al.* (2019).

The waterfront(s), or the missing dimension in the debate on “metropolitan Venice”

When considering how the national metropolitan reform is being implemented in the Venice case, an even more important weak element has to be pointed out: water and the waterfront(s), not only as a problem to be managed but also as an opportunity for future development, do not receive the attention they deserve.

This is an astonishing conundrum since what truly distinguishes Venice from other metropolitan cities is the complexity of the relation the territorial system maintains with water and the system of waterfronts. In fact, the establishment of the Metropolitan City of Venice could represent an important opportunity to rethink and reorganize the system of Venetian waterfronts.

Failing to address the city’s intimate relation with water and waterfronts, in all their constitutive dimensions (economic, territorial, environmental and cultural ones), the current debate on “metropolitan Venice” appears to be nothing but a “metropolitan rhetoric,” focusing on the stereotypical goal of economic competitiveness and very little concerned with the distinguishing environmental and territorial characteristics of the Venetian coastal region. In such a way, the current metropolitan debate does not acknowledge the key role water and the Venetian waterfronts can play in metropolitan governance, both as a resource shared among different uses and actors and, particularly under climate change, as a resource facing a threat to which public and private actors must collectively respond.²³

One could argue that this goal is not a task for the new metropolitan-level government, since the issue of managing water and the system of waterfronts involves a variety of local, regional and national institutions and competences. However, according to the Delrio Law, the harmonization of urban plans and programmes and the design and implementation of new strategic approaches capable of reconciling economic competitiveness and sustainability represent essential elements of the new metropolitan government’s activity. From this point of view, the city’s relationship with water and the functional and spatial evolution of its waterfronts stand central. In fact, focusing on the relationship between economic development and environmental issues in the Venetian context means, above all, dealing with the intimate relationship that different activities establish with water. In fact, it is the very nature of these complex

²³ Hein (2016), 419-38.

economic, social and cultural relationships that, in our perspective, should be placed at the core of the process of metropolitan visioning.

Against this background, if we take into consideration the strategic plan of the Venice Metropolitan City government, issued in December 2018,²⁴ we can argue that it offers only a collection, differently labelled, of previous planning directions, with very little attention given to designing a strategic synthesis for the governance of waterfront systems. The plan does not provide a clear vision of the future of the Venice coastal region. It encompasses a list of very broadly and fuzzily defined actions, which obviously involve (and impact) the waterfront systems but offer no innovation in the way Venetian waterfronts are considered and culturally represented.

In other words, the issue of the “rediscovery of water,” in its various dimensions of relevance (environmental, economic, social, cultural and symbolical), that represents today a central stake for all cities on the water,²⁵ does not attract in the debate on “metropolitan Venice” the attention it deserves. A few examples can clarify this argument:

Porto Marghera and the evolution of the port–city relationship. The future of the port, as well as the industrial area (Porto Marghera), will be mainly driven by both endogenous factors and the decisions of the main players at the local (the local association of industries and the local Port Business Community) and international scales – that is, by liners, transnational companies, etc.²⁶ However, the strategic plan does not contribute to a conceptual framework for assessing the possible evolution of the port–industry–urban region relationship in terms of activity, spatial organization and functional linkages. In this regard, the importance of the evolution of the port–city relationship for the future of “metropolitan Venice” has clearly been underestimated.

The “blue economy”. The current strategic plan regards the “blue economy” as a strategic line of development. However, little attention has been given to the role that the “blue economy” can play in the development of a “maritime cluster” capable of involving activities and private/public actors in the Venetian coastal region and even in Central Veneto in promoting both competitiveness and maritime identity and culture.²⁷

Water transportation and metropolitan connectivity. The importance of water transportation and terminal logistics for passengers/goods in improving metropolitan connectivity is underestimated, although they

²⁴ Città metropolitana di Venezia (2018).

²⁵ Caroli and Soriani (2017), vii; Jinnai (2017), 1-14.

²⁶ Soriani and Calzavara (2016b), 259-80.

²⁷ Merk (2013).

should be some of the most important aspects for the harmonious development of the Venetian coastal region.

MOSE and coastal zone management. The MOSE system, which aims to protect the city from extreme high-tide events, remains mainly a massive and “insulated” coastal engineering work whose environmental, territorial and economic impacts, which extend far beyond the lagoon boundaries, have not been properly assessed within a wider and consistent program of integrated coastal zone management.²⁸ Moreover, the issue of how the MOSE will be governed and by whom remains unclear.

The system of small islands. The small islands in the lagoon can be extraordinary resources for future urban development. Recently, there have been good examples of the rediscovery of their potential; for instance, the reuse scheme adopted for Certosa Island, close to the Lido inlet, where a new marina for traditional boats cohabits with environmental education programs and research activities related to sustainable sailing. In other cases, in small, formerly abandoned islands, new agricultural activities have recently started and developed. However, a strategic vision for the development of new sustainable activities in the system of minor islands and the possible role they can play in the Venetian coastal region’s evolution is still lacking.

Traditional forms of navigation and recreation. In recent times, several initiatives aimed at rediscovering traditional forms of recreational navigation in the lagoon have been established. These initiatives are important for environmental reasons since they help mitigate erosion and oppose the further *maritimization* of the lagoon. At the same time, they are important because they fit side-by-side with the social and cultural rediscovery of those amphibious areas that were not *continentalized* under the twentieth century’s social and economic pressures to modernize the lagoon. They are therefore a factor that can help in rediscovering local practices and values and identifying more sustainable forms of recreation and tourism.²⁹ However, the concern for the traditional uses of the lagoon remains marginal in comparison to the most common developmental discourses on the future of the Venetian coastal region. Moreover, the potential linkages among traditional sailing, research and development activities, new entrepreneurial initiatives and the reuse and revitalization of abandoned areas are not as commonly considered as they should be.

The “urban waterfront”. Regarding a crucial area for the future development of historic Venice, the Arsenale, a shared strategic vision for its future that is capable of linking urban regeneration, the preservation of

²⁸ Buono *et al.* (2015).

²⁹ Visentin and Vallerani (2018).

naval heritage and maritime identity, and local community participation is still absent.³⁰

Environmental management and metropolitan visioning. To improve environmental conditions, various initiatives aimed at cleaning up polluted industrial lands and restoring the lagoon and coastal morphology have recently been approved and launched. However, a shared and coherent vision of the future of the area and of the role the above measures can play in this regard, from the environmental and social/economic points of view, is still lacking. Two examples are recalled here:

- Erosion represents a very important problem for the “linear tourist city,” and climate change is expected to exacerbate it in the near future.³¹ In this regard, after decades of coastal defence schemes mainly based on engineering and “hard” infrastructure, environmental management is currently focusing increasingly on the reconstruction of coastal morphology, particularly through the reconstruction of dune systems. However, these initiatives are very often inconsistent with land use schemes and expected changes. This reduces the effectiveness of the morphological restoration efforts.
- The cleaning-up of Porto Marghera’s redundant industrial areas can be regarded as a basic condition both for improving the lagoon’s environmental conditions and for attracting new investments to the area. In this regard, many environmental restoration projects have been recently approved. A worthwhile example is the environmental plan for the “Vallone Moranzani,” an abandoned area in the industrial zone, through phytodepuration and other nature-based initiatives (Figs. 7-8). The plan has developed through a complex process of stakeholder involvement. However, the planning system does not provide a clear and shared picture of the future destination of the area when cleaned up, and this is slowing down the entire process. It is also important to remember that the strategic plan issued in 2018 for the Metropolitan City of Venice pays too little attention to the temporal dimension, despite the fact that it is widely acknowledged that the definition of temporal “windows” for monitoring and assessing achievements is crucial for promoting an effective strategic approach to metropolitan governance.

³⁰ Cizler and Soriani (2019), 229-51.

³¹ Torresan et al. (2012), 2347-68.

The above examples confirm that a conceptual metropolitan framework that acknowledges the strategic role of the Venetian waterfront systems, both as a connective dimension among different economic uses and actors and as a catalyst of technological, economic and social innovation, is still absent. From this perspective, Figure 9 summarizes the most important dimensions around which a strategic vision for “metropolitan Venice” and its complex waterfront systems could be designed.

Conclusion

After 40 years of debate on the need to establish a metropolitan-level government, the Venice coastal region is today an official metropolitan city, according to National Law 56/2014.

This provision can be an important lever for reforming the governance system to promote more sustainable and harmonious forms of territorial development. However, the first implementation steps confirm that the reform process is mainly driven by a stereotypical narrative centred on the idea of economic competitiveness, while little attention has been placed on territorial and environmental issues and their relationship with socioeconomic development.

The current strategic plan appears to be a list of single and independent projects resulting from previous plans and programmes rather than a strategic synthesis aimed at clarifying ways to promote new spatial and functional linkages among different economic uses. From this perspective, little attention is given to the role that the waterfront, as a problem that must be managed and as an extraordinary resource for the future development of the area, can play. In our view, this creates a paradox, since the most important element in distinguishing the territory of metropolitan Venice from other Italian metropolitan cities established by the National Government is the intimate relation the city has with water and the fragility and complexity of its waterfront system.

A strategic vision capable of making the waterfront a connective dimension for designing and implementing new, integrated development plans and programmes is still absent, and the potential of the waterfront as catalyst for technological, economic and social innovation is not sufficiently considered. From the analysis of the strategic plan issued in 2018, one can see that Venetian waterfronts are represented as the stage where decisions and actions take place, a sort of “out there” that activities and actions impact in various ways, instead of being acknowledged as the strategic dimension that should inform the decision-making process from the very beginning.

Considering the waterfront as the strategic dimension of the metropolitan process entails rediscovering the city’s intimate relationship with water, the constitutive element and cornerstone of Venice history and identity, and making water and the waterfront the lever for new sustainable development paths.

Developing a metropolitan vision for the future development of Venetian waterfronts could also help define a specific and clear role for the Metropolitan City of Venice at the regional, national and international levels. In this regard, the Metropolitan City of Venice could play a leading role in strategic thinking on the vision that should inspire urban governance, particularly with regard to the evolution of Venetian waterfronts.

Placing the intimate relation with water as the core of the metropolitan reform is the basic precondition for transforming fragility into resilience by identifying new sustainable development paths for the coastal region. Placing the waterfront at the centre of the strategic thinking about “metropolitan Venice” could also help in opposing the wider and wider social perception of water as an “antagonist” of the city and the North Adriatic coastal region, as well as in widening the scope of the current debate on the relevance of metropolitan governance for the future evolution of the city and region.

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Fig. 1) A temporary control gate for regulating tourist flows near the Santa Lucia train station, Venice (by S. Soriani).



Fig. 2) An example of the actions aimed at restoring the lagoon morphology and ecosystem (by S. Soriani).

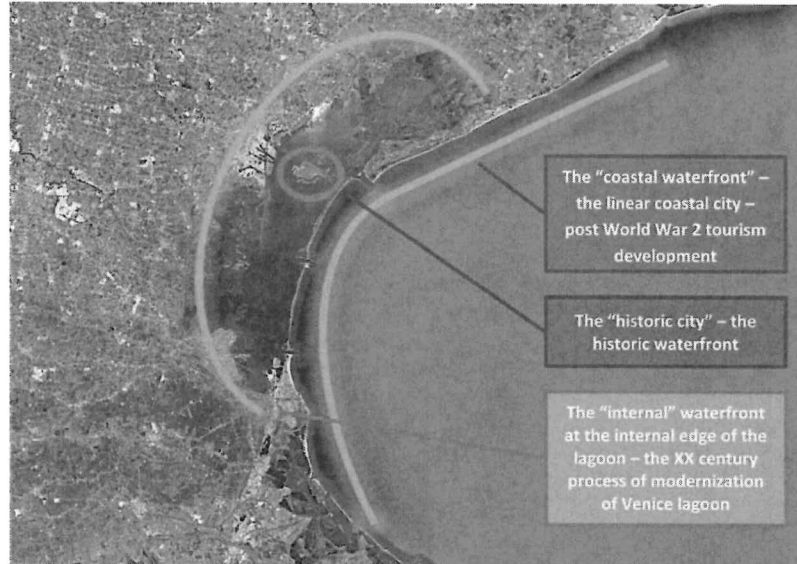


Fig. 3) The subsystems of Venetian waterfronts (Magistrato alle Acque di Venezia – Consorzio Venezia Nuova; Commons Licence; www.salve.it/wiki; and authors' elaboration).

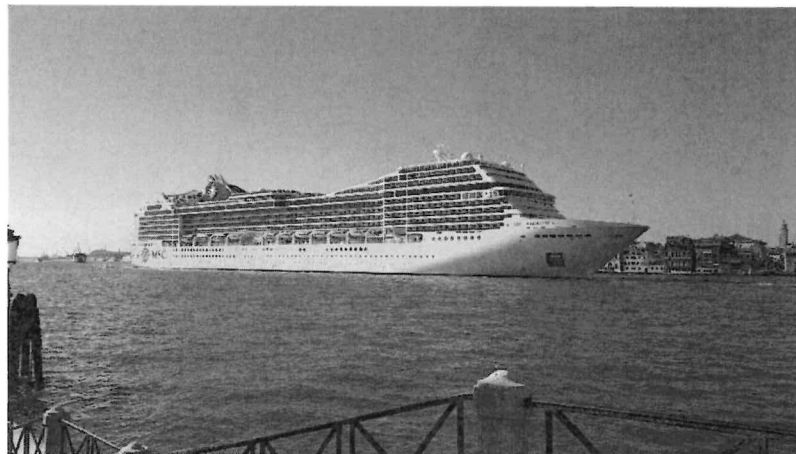


Fig. 4) A cruise vessel passes through the Giudecca Canal, historic Venice (by S. Soriani)

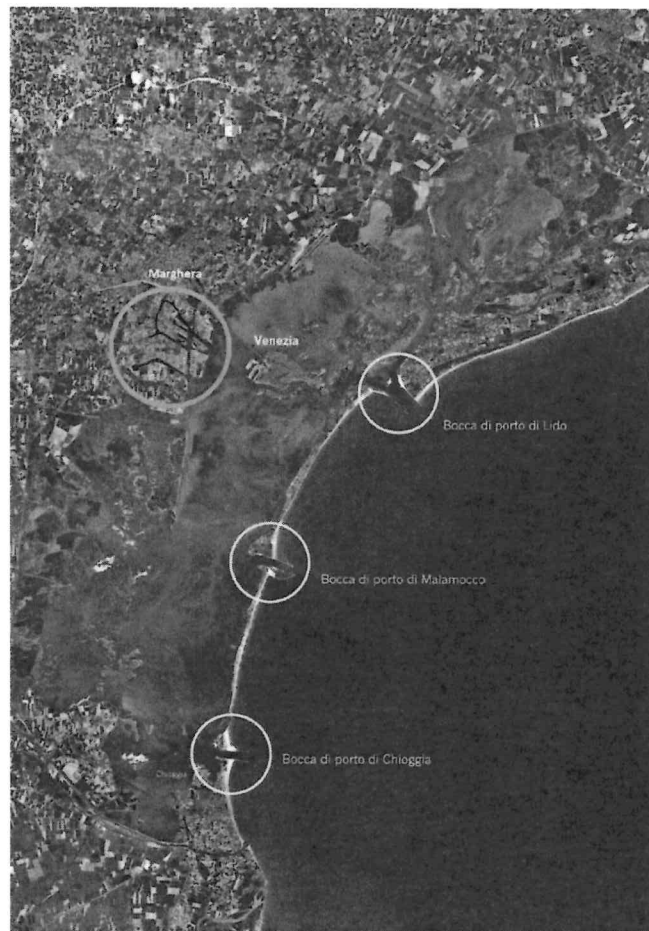


Fig. 5) The Lagoon of Venice: the three lagoon inlets, historic Venice and the industrial port area of Porto Marghera (Source: Magistrato alle Acque di Venezia – Consorzio Venezia Nuova; Commons Licence; www.salve.it/wiki; and authors' elaboration).



Fig. 6) Example of the “linear tourist city” in the Venetian coastal region, Jesolo Lido (Google Earth: Map data ©2019 Google).



Fig. 7) The plan for nature-based engineering solutions and renaturalization in Vallone Moranzani, Porto Marghera (Regione Veneto, Accordo Moranzani, March 31, 2008, <http://sistemavenezia.regione.veneto.it/content/accordo-di-programma-moranzani>).



Fig. 8) Phytodepuration in Cassa di Colmata A - Vallone Moranzani (by A. Calzavara).

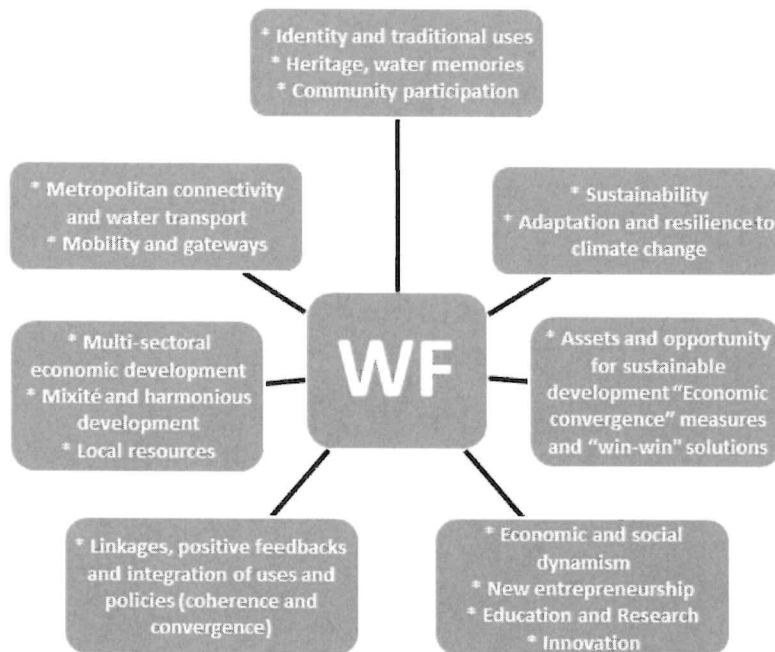


Fig. 9) Relevant dimensions for the design of a metropolitan vision for the Venice coastal region.