

RECYCLING CITY

Lyfecycles, Embodied Energy, Inclusion

Lorenzo Fabian, Emanuel Giannotti, Paola Viganò



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LISTENING TO THE TERRITORY

Small explorations of Mestre and Fusina seen from
the inhabitants' point of view

*Valentina Bonifacio**

The first days of the Intensive Programme a few interviews were carried out in two of the field sites in order to get a glimpse of the local dynamics and highlight ongoing conflicts.

Fusina – Residual industrial site or urban beach?

On the 6th of July a small group, comprising three students and an anthropologist, engaged in an exploratory trip to Fusina. Given the lack of public transport in the area, we left Venice by car. Our field-trip began with an exploration of the surrounding area. A small settlement, Malcontenta, is in fact located in proximity of the ex-industrial area. We wanted to first of all explore how the nearby settlements faced the question of environmental pollution in the area.

In Malcontenta we headed straight for the main bar, where we informally interviewed the waiter and the bar owner. The latter told us of the close ties the local people had with the lagoon for recreational and fishing purposes, and that people on weekends often go out in their boats to hunt for shellfish and wild asparagus that grow on the small surrounding islands. He added that many local people kept boats with powerful engines despite the fact that people are more wary of consuming lots of gasoline due to the crisis. He also directed us to an area by the sea where a series of boathouses were located (a place which we never found), which by his accounts was very beautiful. When directly questioned as to the extent of the pollution of the lagoon, he said that local people would never give up their weekend recreational pursuits in the lagoon area. Nevertheless he also seemed to imply that the activities there were a "boyish" or "family" affair, and that young people in general turned to other pursuits.

As we continued towards Fusina itself, we encountered a camp site, a small kiosk and a *vaporetto* stop on the lagoon. The kiosk owner told us that in

summer a huge quantity of people visited that place for recreational purposes during the weekend, and they all came by car (often forming a long line of cars). We then decided to look for the place indicated as the local 'beach', which turned out to be a small rectangular area covered with dry grass and located just next to the *vaporetto* stop. There actually were a few people sunbathing there, even if we visited it on a weekday, and to our surprise some of them had even brought sunbeds and beach umbrellas. Therefore, the fact that the sea was hidden behind a balustrade and that it looked dark and polluted (to our eyes) wasn't an impediment to the perception of the place as a beach. Talking to a beachgoer sitting on his towel in the small rectangular area we learnt that alternative beach locations required at least a 40 minutes car-ride, and that this beach was the best option for local people if they only had little amount of time available. Furthermore, we were told that the number of younger people frequenting the area was waning, and particularly so over the last three years. This was attributed to the opening of new night-life areas such as the 'Molo 5' (located midway between Fusina and Mestre) and the Marghera Estate Village, a cultural and social venue.

La CITA

Our small exploration also brought us to the LA CITA housing estate. The peculiarity of this estate is that it hosts a mixed population of middle-class ex-employees and groups of immigrants (especially from China and Bangladesh). The first encounter was with the director of the immigration office in Venice, Gianfranco Bonesso, who explained to us that he became involved in the area due to a dispute between Italian citizens and sectors of the immigrant population. The dispute revolved around the (non) payment of service bills in some of the buildings, and required the mediation of a third party that could negotiate with the municipality. The encounter took place inside a room that was the only communal space inside the entire housing estate, and that was used for meetings amongst the inhabitants. These meetings though were not spontaneously organized by the inhabitants but were promoted by the immigration office. The only form of local organization relied on the figure of a "stair-keeper" for each of the buildings composing the estate. The immigration office was trying to promote a better integration of the different categories and nationalities living there in order to prevent further conflict. During the meeting we got to know the coordinator of a local mosque that the Bangladeshi community had finally managed to open despite the initial hostility on the part of the local non Muslim population. By promoting encounters between Catholics and Muslims living in LA CITA, the immigration office managed to create an atmosphere of greater tolerance

and acceptance.

A further encounter took place with a mediator of the immigration office in Mestre. Mohammed Salhi described to us the difficult situation of the immigrant population in Italy (citizenship is very difficult to attain), but highlighted the fact that in Venice the situation was perceived as better than in other municipalities, because of the encouraging approach adopted by the local authorities. He also said that there are about forty associations in Mestre that represent a variety of immigrant groups: Ukrainians, Bangladeshis, Senegalese, Chinese, etc. Not all of them are fully active, but some of them truly stand as a point of reference for the community they represent. Salhi also presented the fact that the local immigrant population had gathering spots in different part of the city according to ethnicity or nationality. For instance he showed us a shop on the map in a small square where Africans meet up and drink beer together, and a park where Eastern European old-people carers generally gather. Parks were widely used by most of the groups and people expressed the need for a place where they could organize parties and celebrations.

Later on during the Intensive Programme, we put forward the hypothesis that a market would be a good occasion to boost the local economy and facilitate reciprocal knowledge and interaction. We subsequently visited the offices in charge of giving permission for this kind of activities in Venice and we had the confirmation that it was quite easy to get a permit for certain kinds of markets, but only if the markets were mobile.

Conclusions

Our small explorations in Fusina and LA CITA raised very different questions. This difference – apart from being dependent on the different dimension of the two settlements - is mainly due to the social composition of the two places. LA CITA seemed in fact to feature a juxtaposition between “new” and “old” inhabitants, a theme which catalyzed our attention and that of the people we listened to. In Fusina the main theme was the creation and conservation of a recreational area in close relation to the lagoon.

Before drawing a few conclusions, I consider it important to underline that the time of the year when the field trip was carried out – a very hot summer – deeply influenced the content of our ‘discoveries’ around Fusina. All the interviews, in fact, happened to be focused on recreational activities that could be carried on in summer. Moreover, summer was perceived as a period of intense recreational activities and time for nightlife and entertainment. In every way the “leisure season”.

Our main topic of enquiry in Fusina, the existence of a very polluted ex-

industrial site in the area, was not at all perceived as a problem by the local inhabitants. Despite the fact that people were surely aware of the former industrial character of the area and its related problems of pollution, local people still thought that the products of the lagoon (shellfish and plants) were safe. The relationship with the lagoon seemed to be untouched by the proximity of an industrial site, and was valued as one of the main 'identity making' activities.

A big surprise was the discovery of 'the beach', and more in general of Fusina itself as a popular leisure area. On the other hand, young people were losing interest in the 'beach' and were drifting over to the more lively places such as night clubs and cocktail bars elsewhere, structures completely absent in the area under examination. The way we saw it there was a complete lack of leisure infrastructure – apart from a tiny kiosk – and the area had a general rundown feel about it and that of having been abandoned by the local authorities. It is thus remarkable that far from being an isolated and forgotten place Fusina is frequented by a mixed population of tourists (there is a camp site close to the *vaporetto* stop) and people living in the surrounding settlements. Therefore, the place would deserve a greater attention on the part of local authorities and urban planners in order to boost its capability to host a variety of leisure infrastructures.

From the experience in LA CITA we learnt that there is an ongoing tension between local population and migrant groups in different parts of Mestre and Marghera. Our main research question was then how to improve the interaction between migrant and non-migrant population by transforming the "periphery" (LA CITA can in fact be considered to be on the outskirts of Marghera) into "centre". In particular, we ended up focusing on the connections between LA CITA, Mestre and Marghera and on the possibility to open an informal and flexible market in this area that could function as a connection between the two cities and the adjacent green areas.

Notes

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