Tourism and conservation: a difficult relationship

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ABSTRACT:

Humans have both needed and enjoyed travelling around and discovering new places since antiquity. Cultural landscapes made of material heritage or intangible traditions have been a particular source of fascination. The advent of the society of mass has resulted in tourism becoming a significant source of economic wealth, often overshadowing most pre-existing industries. Tourism prompted by the fascination for a particular cultural landscape has become a powerful agency capable of modifying that same cultural landscape: this is a paradox. The predicted impact on tourism can play a role in the strategies related to the conservation of monumental and traditional culture. Moreover, competition between different cultural leisure resorts often produces the introduction of cultural (and even non-cultural) elements foreign to a particular culture, and new eclectic cultures may emerge as well as old cultures may disappear. The case of Italy, and particularly Venice, will be used to present some issues.

Leisure resorts have now a long history and a substantial diversity including Roman leisure centres, Medieval hunting grounds and modern resorts. Artistic towns and archaeological sites also attract tourists and have become cultural leisure resorts sometimes mocking their history with tacky souvenirs and holidaymakers and organised groups that can hardly understand histories long hundreds of years if not millennia in a few hours of visit. Tourism has grown to a mature industry, and many people rely on it as a major source of income. There are many good reasons to "open the doors" and welcome tourists as they are a major source of funding for the preservation and conservation of most existing heritage and often entire communities. How much tourists understand or learn from their visits to cultural leisure resorts is hardly a problem that should concern the public: it should be instead a private concern. A case not discussed here is also that concerning the problems of unregulated tourism spoiling delicate sites, whether natural or archaeological, since this concerns protecting delicate areas. In this paper, I concentrate on cultural leisure resorts that were not conceived and built as leisure resorts, but have since become exactly that. In such cases, the conversion of a centre, and especially a centre that is still inhabited, can affect the culture and identity of that centre. However, the opposite can also happen: centres built as leisure resorts have often grown to be proper centres. Because of this, a change in the main purpose of a settlement or centre cannot be considered negatively or a consequence of "modernity".

The urban landscape is as dynamic and diverse as the natural one. In a forest, every tree has a different age and history, and all animals, plants and stones in it make it a unique place. If we could observe a forest for a long enough time, we would see it change seasonally in the short term, but also more dramatically sometimes. Wildfires for example would burn parts of it or all of it at intervals, regardless of human intervention. In the same way, if we could take a snapshot of a whole forest at a given time, we would not have a memory of the forest, but just the record of an instant in the long life of a living place. The urban landscape is equally dynamic and diverse. A small settlement can grow and become an important centre, as is the case for most American cities; a settlement can also be built and destroyed repeatedly, and be rebuilt differently destruction after destruction, as in the case of Troy. And in case of taking a snapshot of a place at a given time, such as in the case of Pompeii, that instant can include as many moments of normal life as extraordinary moments, and each house has a different history. It can be difficult at times to think of an ancient centre such as Pompeii, with its houses still standing, as a place with a long history, but urban archaeology, although faced by the obvious limitation of having historical buildings hiding their preceding history, when could be applied has revealed the history of what survives. And it is a history as interesting as that told by the stones excavated by archaeologists in contexts in ruins. Fading memories of such places are in a way not less important than records produced by laborious and diligent archaeologists.

Hence, when we study any inhabited centre, it is critical to consider it as a dynamic place. In the particular case of leisure resorts, the changeable tastes of people and fashions make such centres or areas especially receptive of changes with marked dynamism rarely seen in other contexts. In fact, it can be generally observed that touristic sites have usually most amenities and services usually found in much larger centres and are often capable of setting trends and standards in leisure. The actual dynamism of leisure resorts can be subtle and difficult to detect in the archaeological record: a beach or Luna Park may change very little through a given period of time, but how people uses and behaves in certain areas may significantly change. Recording and conserving the memory of a leisure resort is therefore challenging because the material record forms only part of the record; the other part, and often the most important one, is formed by the physical presence (or absence) of other people, their behaviour, language, customs, popular culture and gestures.

The role of tourism in dynamic leisure resorts is very difficult to assess. Historical tourism connected with exploration and resting at a place different from the one in which a person normally lives is certainly a key reason for the development at any stage of an area to host foreigners or to entertain. Mass-tourism, however, has to be considered differently. Areas attracting large numbers of tourists may be considered by many tourists as a generic place. For example, a “beach” may be chosen ignoring entirely the local traditions and culture,

any direct knowledge, or peculiarity that may have arisen interest: tourists may just ask for and expect a beach, with anything else being optional. In other cases, a place may be selected because of "word of mouth"; if several people in a social network visit one place, it is likely that most people in that social network will eventually visit it, and some might do so only because socially compelled and not because they have any interests in visiting it. Increased access to ship cruises (for example in the Mediterranean it is possible to visit a different country or even continent hopping harbours overnight) and flights can result in people not realising where they are, or count its distance (and therefore exotic appeal) on the costs to reach it or the length of travel.

I present here just the case study of Venice that can help in understand some of the challenges faced by the archaeology of leisure resorts; however, many more case studies could add at least as much. Venice, like many other Italian cities, is a place with a millenary history that was once the centre of a micro-world. Surely leisure activities took place in Venice at all times. However, it is since the decadence of the Republic and the discovery of the city by English Romantics Venice has started to attract foreigners primarily for leisure purposes. Decadence and easy love-affairs "sold" Venice to the world and created the fundaments for its touristic development.

However, Venice is far more delicate a city than any other in the world for the fragile balance between its unique culture and ecosystem. It is impossible to build anything new without affecting significantly either the cultural or natural landscapes, or often both. When something new is built, it is normally built following the existing tradition, attempting to "blend it in". "Modernity" is confined on the outskirts, largely because the usable area has been saturated by the existing urban area rather than for some philosophical principle or political policy. This arrangement has succeeded in preserving the historic area and keeping the dynamism within the city in countless other historic towns, but in Venice. Sometimes the modern periphery is all but appealing, but that does not change the fact that there is the potential for people to enjoy better facilities and services in a modern house than in an ancient palace. In Venice the distinction between "modern" and "ancient" has the name of the two local towns, Mestre (the modern centre) and Venice (the ancient one), which are clearly separated geographically and yet part of the same social network that we can call the "city of Venice". Mestre is not the result of a rebellion of modernists against Venice, nor Venice is a fortress manned by art historians and archaeologists.

The resident population of Mestre is growing, as in most modern cities, whilst that of Venice is shrinking, now it is below the 50,000 mark. Yet, just spending a few days in the area will demonstrate that there is more people roaming in Venice than in Mestre, and that a considerable part of the traffics and businesses in Mestre involve in some way Venice.

Thus, Venice remains the heart of the Venice-Mestre economic and social systems. The extraordinary imbalance in the ratio between resident population and visitors is that typical of a leisure resort during peak time, though in Venice such imbalance is particularly evident and constant. As we have seen, Venice has become a "leisure resort" quite some time ago, and now the entire local productive economy is funded or benefits from tourism. Tourists want to see the historical city of Venice, and many are prepared to pay to preserve it, including popular culture. So it could not be any better for Venice, which appears to be capable of sustaining its status of frequented leisure resort for the foreseeable future.

The key problem is that Venice was not a leisure resort in origin, and with exception of the artistic and architectural heritage, the living and thriving city, with its language, customs, and material culture is disappearing without most noticing. Already decades ago it was proposed in the not too distant future Venice would become a museum; this catastrophic vision was born as soon as the decrease in the resident population became clearly irreversible. And the reason for all this is that Venice is seen as a set of monuments and artistic masterpieces, well illustrated in the many guides for tourists. In other words, Venice has become for all what the tourists consider it to be.

Tourism has become an agency capable of modifying Venice, and actually it is the prime agency for strength. For instance, carnival, a manifestation of great semiotic interest and with a precise historical meaning, is running all time long. Masks are produced and consumed (i.e. worn) at any time of the year "just for fun". The restructuration of buildings favours the opening of hotels and other accommodations for tourists and temporary visitors over the increased availability of homes for residents. The increase in availability of temporary accommodation depends on the abandonment of homes by residents. New infrastructure is conceived for tourists, not for residents. For example, the infamous fourth bridge crossing the Grand Canal, the one by Calatrava, is being built to improve the facilities for tourists on arrival, and it has been designed to appeal to them. The vast majority of shops now cater primarily for the tastes and needs of the tourists (and this is obvious just considering the plain numbers), and this is becoming a serious problem for the resident population that has to look harder and farther for the staples of their life. Gondolas are built for tourists and are no longer a traditional way of crossing the channels. And this means that fewer people know how to build them, fewer people know how to drive them, and most sadly, fewer people consider them as an efficient means of transportation built on centuries of experience instead of a "toy-boat". Even at weddings and funerals, some of the most traditional and "ritual" ceremonies that should be more resistant to changes, the fast motorboats traditionally used as taxis for tourists are increasingly replacing gondolas.

Tourism is the agency driving the change towards the "leisure resort of your dreams", and it does so on the understanding that Venice is being discovered, appreciated, and conserved. This is a paradox. The competition among different leisure resorts for what is now a "market" in which tourists are sold places to visit is also accelerating homogenisation, a further problem that is driving some people to visit more rural and hopefully more genuine places. However, accusing tourism per se of anything is meaningless as tourism has not a mind of itself, and often not even the individual tourists seem to have one. As a result, tourism cannot be held accountable of anything, nor it should be demonised as a negative force. Instead, it should be regulated.

Because of the increasing importance of tourism to fund the conservation of the artistic and archaeological record, many places once ordinary or extraordinary for the most different reasons are becoming leisure resorts for the modern world. Perhaps, the whole world is becoming a leisure resort, with all places being a leisure resort for somebody with the right taste or somebody that happens to have bought a cheap ticket to that destination, or even somebody that just has some free time to relax in that area. All this is not necessarily bad. But it is important and very urgent that those concerned with the preservation of heritage start understanding what the heritage of a place is, and this can be both material (i.e. archaeological and artistic) and semiotic. Only when it becomes clear what needs to be preserved, appropriate policies can be developed. Otherwise, anything, including mindless tourism, can become a destructive force not just by ruining monuments and driving changes but also becoming a clueless agency attempting to transform a place in a Dreamland, as fictitious as any Neverland.