

# Mobilities and Hospitable Cities

Edited by

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# CHAPTER EIGHT

## BEYOND VENICE: HERITAGE AND TOURISM IN THE NEW GLOBAL WORLD

### MARXIANO MELOTTI

#### **1. The Rape of Europe**

A beautiful but terrified girl appears to be clinging to the horns of a huge white bull cavorting in the waves. From a now distant beach, in vain her girl friends gesticulate and weep. It is the scene of a crime, but also a famous painting. In the form of a bull, Zeus, king of the gods, abducts Europa, daughter of the king of Phoenicia, and carries her off from the coasts of the Middle East to the island of Crete. When, at the end of the nineteenth century, an American socialite, Isabella Stewart Gardner, managed to buy this work by Titian (1422–1576), one of the greatest Italian Renaissance artists, she was probably unaware of its high symbolic value. That painting evoked the myth on which Europe was founded: an ancient Greek tale, revived by Roman poets, which was very popular in the seventeenth century European courts and is still celebrated as the starting point of the cultural history of the continent. This strange couple, a god in disguise and an abducted princess, gave birth to Minos, king of Crete and builder of the first maritime empire, regarded as the forerunner of Greek culture.

Titian's *Rape of Europa* (1562) (Fig. 8-1) is probably the most precious item in the collection assembled in Boston by Isabella Stewart Gardner: proof of her aspiration to acquire the best pieces available on the international market. Like other members of the American elite, she wished to create a high-quality collection as rapidly as possible. This fashion, which assumed the traits of a massive “raid” (Saltzman 2008), in a few decades led to the formation of world-class museums in the States, with a global redistribution of important items from the European cultural heritage.



Fig. 8-1 *The Rape of Europa* by Titian  
(The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston)

As American collectors raided the old continent in search of masterpieces for their mansions, Europe left Europe and moved overseas: an important step in world cultural history, reflecting the new transatlantic relationships. Zeus and Europa seemed to continue their fated trip from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic coast of North America. Once again *The Rape of Europa* marked a new beginning: the shift of the heart of Western culture to the States.

I will dwell upon one aspect of this process: the dialogue between Europe and the States in the emerging of a new global heritage system made of tourist resorts, shopping malls, themed parks, etc. A world of new monuments devoted to shopping, leisure and tourism.

In this system historical theming plays an important role: folklore, history and archaeology give a veneer of culture to consumption. This transforms it into an experience related to heritage and tradition and increases its authenticity and intensity. This practice, mainly connected with the processes of globalization and postmodernization, is characterized by the spread of “liquid” phenomena mixing leisure, shopping and education.

## 2. From Venice to Boston: the reinvented Europe of Isabella Stewart

*The Rape of Europa* was only one of the many treasures of Isabella Stewart Gardner's collection. It was probably acquired on account of its Venetian flavour and its princely pedigree: it was painted by a Venetian artist and was produced for a Spanish king, Philip II, and was later admired in Orleans' collection in Paris. She needed "authentic" Venetian items to decorate her Fenway Court (now known as the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum), the strange Venetian folly she built in Boston to host her collection (Fig. 8-2). Titian's amazing painting not only exalted the Venetian and Renaissance atmosphere of the palace, but also extolled its owners.



Fig. 8-2 Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston  
(photo by Nic Lehoux)

This Venice-style palace in the middle of Boston shows an interesting kind of transatlantic relationship between heritage and tourism. The building, completed in 1903, was created on the model of Palazzo Barbaro, an ancient Renaissance palace overlooking the Grand Canal, which Isabella Stewart and her husband used to rent every two years.

There they enjoyed behaving like real Venetian patricians and hosting friends and artists: a life, among antiques and canals, which was brilliantly defined as their “gondola days” (McCauley *et al.* 2004).

We are at the heart of the “American Grand Tour,” a well-known socio-cultural practice that spread in the late eighteenth century: many members of the wealthy American upper class visited Europe, in the wake of the European tradition of the Grand Tour, the educational trip that the North European elites used to take to complete their education by visiting monuments, museums and archaeological sites in Italy, Greece and other Mediterranean countries. Venice, together with Rome and Florence, was one of the main destinations.

For Europeans this trip was a sort of initiation rite. As Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) commented, “a man who has not been in Italy is always conscious of inferiority from his not having seen what it is expected a man should see” (Boswell 1791). With this temporary entry into a world perceived as alien and primitive despite its treasures, the members of the affluent ruling class confirmed their social role.

The American Grand Tour kept this educational and initiatory function, but with an emphasized status-symbol aspect. These rich Americans wished to show off their wealth, as well as their intellectual refinement, which enabled them to understand European history and heritage no less than the British aristocrats. According to a traditional approach, heritage was used to assert a social and cultural identity.

The novels by Henry James (1843–1916), a well-known American writer who spent much of his life in Europe and eventually became a British subject, despite some picturesque traits (which partially survive), depict the complex and often conflicting relationships between the “new” American affluent class and the “old” European nobility, including the fallen Italian aristocrats, obliged to sell their ancestral treasures to American collectors, and the decadent and haughty British aristocrats, fighting to avoid a similar destiny.

The American elites were divided between inclusion and distinction: a conflicting relationship shifting from the lure of being accepted as part of the old world and the desire to affirm a new independent and dominant role. Hence, despite any stereotyped representation, Isabella Stewart’s naïve habit of suggesting a connection between her family and the House of Stuart (also spelled Stewart in Scotland), which reigned in Britain in a period of flourishing court culture (1603–1714). But there is something else: these American “aristocrats” did not just buy valuable ancient European paintings to form important brand new collections; they even began to recreate that admired *old* European heritage in their *new* world.



Step by step, this led to a new system of built heritage, largely based on the European one and—particularly interesting—often constructed with original stones.

Isabella Stewart not only recreated a stunning fifteenth century Venetian palace in Boston, but she incorporated in it numerous authentic fragments from Renaissance structures, including Venetian mullioned windows. This building is something more than a clumsy replica or an architectural oddity: original pieces from the European past crossed the Ocean to form a new original American heritage. The “stones of Venice” (Ruskin) became stones of Boston.

### **3. A Museum with a view: Windows and the tourist gaze**

In any tourist experience “a room with a view” is a crucial element, as reveals the title of Forster’s famous novel (1908). The view is a cultural construction that cuts through the landscape and reshapes it in a series of frozen but vivid images, which often reflect other previous and anticipated ones, but also build an original memory. And this view often passes through a window.

The mullioned windows of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston are quite interesting. They are the symbolic gates connecting you with the landscape outside. Through these windows from Boston you see Venice; thus Boston itself becomes a piece of Venice. History, with its atmosphere, enters the building through the oriental shadows created by the Venetian windows.

These important elements help to give authenticity to heritage fruition and to transform a museum space into a tourist place. Here we discern a conceptual use of the window as architectural framework of what was called “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990; Urry and Larsen 2011).

The non-neutral role of these windows seems to be confirmed by a famous portrait of Isabella Stewart by Anders Zorn (1894), which is displayed in that building (Fig. 8-3). She is painted in front of a mullioned window of her “real” Venetian palace, from which you can get a glimpse of the Grand Canal.

Venice, with its shimmering waves and tourist memories, enters Boston through these windows, intertwining reality and fiction. We can single out an early seed of postmodern theming: heritage is used to create a cultural atmosphere. Any national approach is far away. What matters is the pleasure of the experience with its related identity issues, starting from Isabella’s desire to be a princess and live like a Venetian patrician.

With her museum we are already in a post-historical context: a place built on history and to show history, but where paradoxically history does not matter and the past and the present live together without problems, in a continuous flow of time where everything is contemporary.



Fig. 8-3 Portrait of Isabella Stewart by Anders Zorn  
(The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston)

This relation with time is quite delicate. Isabella disposed that after her death nothing should be moved or removed. Thus she transformed the museum into a mausoleum and an architectural caprice into a heritage site.

The crystallization of the space is quite important in the formation of tourist highlights. As for Venice, we can also recall a quite interesting exhibition, “Picturing Venice” (2015), at the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Liverpool. It clearly shows how the tourist image of Venice has been created through a slow but continuous reproduction of paintings and photographs of the same places, monuments and objects (canals, bridges, gondolas), which has transformed the actual town into a system of tourist views.

The beginning of this process was strongly connected with the Grand Tour. Visitors, in search of souvenirs, induced local artists—the first of them the famous Canaletto (1697–1768)—to produce serial images of the town, with a progressive passage to a sort of postmodern iconic representation. The many views of Venice by John Singer Sargent (an excellent American painter, frequent guest at Palazzo Barbaro), which are displayed in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, are only a small part of

a phenomenon that still persists today, through iPhone pictures and Facebook albums.

The heritage and tourist places are dismantled and become a series of images supposed to transmit an atmosphere. The “view” is sufficient to recreate the place: if you reconstruct the view, you reconstruct the place. Any historical or philological element is superfluous. Thus you may have Venice in Boston or wherever you like.

#### **4. Towards a new themed heritage**

This process has encouraged the spread of a new hybrid heritage, mixing contexts and cultural sceneries. In just a few decades the American landscape was populated by an amazing number of buildings that recall or replicate ancient European monuments. A continent “without history,” largely unable to understand and enhance its own native culture, built a heritage system widely based on European history. Of course, there was a clear continuity between the new and the old world, which throughout the colonial period were part of the same political and cultural entity.

The affluent and refined members of the cosmopolitan elite were in search of a different cultural system, not based on colonial heritage or national rhetoric. Monuments and official buildings were frozen in stereotypical models, reproducing the neo-classical style prevailing in European capitals. In contrast, mansions and private buildings were spaces of freedom, where new individual needs were satisfied and new creative languages were tested. Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque styles seemed to offer a rich and alluring repertoire of images and atmospheres comfortably distant from the British colonial style. There they could foster their identity fantasies, cultivate their Grand Tour memories and live their sophisticated lives. Once again, as often happens in heritage relationships, space and time were compressed into the same dimension, founded on otherness and exoticism. It was in this framework that theming spread as reference language of the new American heritage.

The grand mansions along the coast of Newport, Rhode Island, in styles ranging from Tudor to Versailles, attest this new creative approach to the past. It is a system of princely history-themed mansions: a sort of gated community, which offers an early example of leisure-oriented and themed urbanization.

It was the same cultural context that led Isabella Stewart to build her Venetian palace in Boston: history was no longer conceived as the educational framework of national identity, but, rather, as leisure space where to pick and choose ambiances and implement fashionable lifestyles.

The only point in common with the traditional “national” use of heritage was its function of identity tool, marking a social status. The new little Versailles of Newport testifies to the new role of single families and individuals, who began to present themselves as a kind of aristocracy.

William K. Vanderbilt created the Marble House (1888–1892), inspired by Versailles’ Petit Trianon, at a cost of eleven million dollars, of which seven million was for the marbles. His brother, Cornelius Vanderbilt II, created The Breakers (1893–1895), a seventy-room Italian Renaissance-style building, inspired by the sixteenth century palaces in Genoa and Turin. The Berwinds created The Elms (1901), modelled on a mid-eighteenth century chateau near Paris, where they exhibited their collection of Oriental jades, Renaissance ceramics and eighteenth century French and Venetian paintings. Theresa Fair Oelrichs, the “Nevada silver heiress,” created Rosecliff (1902) (Fig. 8-4), modelled after Versailles’ Grand Trianon, the garden retreat of the French royal family.



Fig. 8-4 Rosecliff, Newport, Rhode Island  
(photo by Magnus Manske, public domain)

This history-themed heritage system was not limited to architecture. The new aristocracy also mimicked European elites’ immaterial heritage, hosting “lavish parties” and “fabulous entertainments,” as are nostalgically defined by the Preservation Society of Newport County (2015): from the “fête champêtre” at Chateau-sur-Mer mansion (an elaborate country picnic

for over two thousand guests) to the fairy tale dinner and a party featuring famed “magician” Harry Houdini at Rosecliff.

This approach to heritage was a mainstream tendency in America and was not limited to Newport’s “gilded age,” as attests the gorgeous Hearst Castle (1919–1947), built near San Simeon, California, by a press magnate, William Randolph Hearst. This building is probably the most fascinating example of this free relation with the past, leading to a new hybrid fantasy-style, intertwining ages and cultures: the Roman Empire meets the Spanish Cathedrals, in a mix where leisure and ostentation are the only common elements.

All these mansions have become part of American heritage. They are authentic monuments of American history, which document the marvelous lifestyle of its elites, and, as such, are now protected, restored and visited.

This acquired heritage dimension gives them the same ontological status as their European models: the trans-cultural, trans-temporal and trans-spatial perspective with which they were built is further enhanced by the trans-cultural, trans-temporal and trans-spatial perspective of their tourist consumption. Venice and Boston, Versailles and Newport, Renaissance and Romanticism, modern and postmodern coexist as part of the same tourist world. Furthermore, their original leisure dimension as summer resorts is reflected in their new dimension as tourist attractions. The new extended leisure-class visits them as archaeological sites: the birthplaces of the postmodern leisure and tourism society, of which their builders were the unaware hero-founders.

The Cloisters (1927–1938), in northern Manhattan, New York, is another interesting case. This branch of the Metropolitan Museum, devoted to the art and architecture of medieval Europe, was built with authentic pieces of Spanish and French medieval cloisters. Columns, capitals and frescoes were removed and remounted together in a fake medieval building made of concrete (Fig. 8-5).

In itself the reuse of ancient original pieces is not new. We can recall, for instance, the insertion of precious Roman and medieval columns and capitals in the upper cloister of San Fruttuoso Abbey, near Portofino, Italy, when it was rebuilt in the sixteenth century. But, in the New York Cloisters Museum, the diverse ages and cultures are levelled and homologated. The various elements of European heritage are not simply juxtaposed, as usually happens in museums, but are remounted to form a new coherent building. Heritage is not only exhibited, but created.

History and heritage are frozen in a precise way, according to the idea that everything may be reduced to a stereotype. But, at the same time, there is an innovative approach, due to the assumption that heritage is only

a cultural construction and may be freely reinvented. Owing to its inventive reshaping of the past, the Cloisters is an early example of themed space: history is used to create a pleasant environment making the cultural fruition more rewarding.



Fig. 8-5 The Cloisters, New York  
(photo by Marxiano Melotti)

In the same framework we may place another history-themed museum, the Getty Villa in Malibu, near Los Angeles, which a well-known magnate, J. Paul Getty, built in the 1970s to host his wonderful (though often contested) collection of Greek, Roman and Etruscan pieces. It is a replica of an ancient holiday villa by the sea, the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum, a magnificent example of the leisure-oriented lifestyle of the ancient Roman elite. Getty used that model to build a themed environment consistent with his collection and capable of recreating and transmitting a classical Mediterranean atmosphere. At the same time, this villa was a monument to the new dominant role of the American upper class. The gulf of Naples, with its elegant Roman mansions, moved to Malibu: the bull-like Zeus with his beloved Europa completed his crossing...

All these buildings, mixing cultures and eras, leisure and identity, tradition and innovation, testify to the *longue durée* of a particular cultural approach to heritage. From the late nineteenth century, it bridges the gap between the Romantic-age Grand Tour and contemporary tourism as well as between modern and postmodern culture. Heritage is used to create a pleasant environment and an inspiring atmosphere, without particular

attention to cultural contexts, and history is exploited to let you enjoy your leisure moments in a typical postmodern way.

These buildings, designed on European models, are examples of a new global heritage. They celebrate together novelty and tradition: the new role of the American elite and its roots in the European tradition and in the use of heritage by the old European elites, accustomed to living in princely palaces. But, at the same time, they testify to an original approach to the past, free from national conventions and increasingly oriented to leisure and individual identity issues. It is something similar to what has recently happened in China and in the Emirates.

This is a pivotal passage. European heritage is used in a traditional way to show the power, wealth and refinement of the new American elite and, indirectly, to assert its new “imperial” role. As Titian’s painting in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum metaphorically shows, heritage is used to prove the “passing of the baton” from Rome to London and from London to Washington. But, at the same time, European heritage is used in a different post-political and post-national way: the alien and distant European heritage becomes an instrument of leisure and individual self-celebration.

## 5. The Venice of America

Among the many themed reinventions, one deserves particular attention: the Venice of America near Santa Monica, Los Angeles (Fig. 8-6). This seaside housing-estate was built in 1905 by a tobacco magnate, Abbot Kinney. It mimicked Venice, with vaguely Venetian-style buildings and small independent villas along a system of artificial canals with gondolas and gondoliers, but it also comprised an auditorium, an amusement park, a miniature railway and some world heritage-themed attractions.

It was a pioneering project, but was derided as “Kinney’s folly.” Its presentation as “a veritable Coney Island” (the Brooklyn neighbourhood where the first Luna Park had opened in 1903) shows a new approach to theming: leisure consciously prevailed over historical and architectural aspects. Its model was not the City of Venice (unlike the coeval Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston), but the iconic amusement park in New York (Stanton 1987). Moreover, it was filtered through the new cosmopolitan expo-culture, due to the international exhibitions periodically recreating alien eras and alien cultures. In fact, this new Venice also included local attractions and buildings in Japanese and Egyptian styles. Gondolas and camels, mummies and belly-dancers, restaurants and opera-singers were the seeds of an innovative multi-sensorial approach, inspired by a picturesque

view of the world and a tourist gaze that were destined to flourish later in Las Vegas and other “fantasy cities” (Hannigan 1998). Exoticism and leisure prevailed over history and culture.



Fig. 8-6 The Venice of America in 1909  
(Metro Transportation Library and Archive, Los Angeles)

Its innovative approach confirms the rapid pace of socio-cultural change. It was not the figment of a millionaire willing to build a sumptuous palace to show off his wealth and refinement or to freeze history in an elite museum; it was the business project of another kind of millionaire, willing to create a new urban system able to meet the wishes of an emergent leisure-class.

Indeed, this Venice on the Pacific coast was a sort of “missing link”: it marks the passage from the Romantic approach of the Grand Tour to the new modern and postmodern orientation of mass-society, with its mass-consumption, mass-leisure and mass-tourism. It shows the often forgotten “modernity” of the 1920s, but was already out of fashion in the 1950s, when a new leisure-class was ready to populate Las Vegas hotel-casinos.

## 6. The “Gondola Days” reloaded: Venice in Las Vegas

Between the elite Venice of Isabella Stewart and the much more popular Venice of Las Vegas (Figs. 8-7 and 8-8) the distance is not as great as it seems, and even shorter is that between the Getty Villa in Malibu and the more or less coeval Caesars’ Palace Hotel in Las Vegas. Yet the socio-



cultural context has greatly changed: the happy few have given way to well-off masses in search of leisure, consumption and social recognition. Nevertheless, the principle is the same: you can use and mix together every historical and cultural period to enrich your leisure and your consumption experience and, at the same time, to demonstrate that you could be a king or, at least, live like a king.

Thus the Venice canals with their mullioned windows and their romantic gondolas pass from Venice to Boston and from Boston to Las Vegas. But the opulent reconstruction of Venice in Las Vegas is only one of the many attractions of this strange city, where you can also find an Egyptian pyramid, a Tour Eiffel, a Manhattan skyline and the Roman follies of the above-mentioned Caesars' Palace.

Theming is not a merely spurious and confused copying of alien cultural elements: it is a new original and coherent cultural system, of which the tourist resorts and the shopping malls are the new monuments. Its main trait is a substantial overcoming of a national view of history, where heritage is strongly connected with the country's cultural roots. Here, through hybridization, you may single out the supranational approach and the multicultural background of the new global system.

Theming is the main language of this fantasy city, conceived to serve gambling, leisure and tourism. The leading purpose was not to replicate monuments but to create an enjoyable and pleasant atmosphere, in order to further an integral experience of consumption. As Curtis (2000) sharply noted, "the experience of place has been replaced by the place of experience." It is a world apart, an alien space, where—between reality, fantasy, archaeology, tourism and media memories—leisure is immersed in a displacing flow of spatial and temporal quotations. We are beyond the traditional "staged authenticity" (MacCannell 1973). Mimicry is a playful and conscious experience: this is a real new world, offering a hyper-concentrated experience of urban life. "You go to Las Vegas precisely because you want to be overwhelmed by an excessive visual ordeal" (Fox 2005, 49).

Las Vegas' Venice does not claim to be a "unique" place: it is only one of the many intriguing attractions in the city, just like the real Venice is only one of the many marvelous attractions in the world. Yet, together with the other Las Vegas themed resorts, it offers not only a "virtual Grand Tour" (Franci and Zignani 2005), but also a new original "view" to be captured, consumed and remembered. It is a new highlight of global tourism, which allows an all-in-one postmodern experience.



Fig. 8-7 Las Vegas' Venice (Royal Geographical Society)



Fig. 8-8 Las Vegas' Venice (photos by Marxiano Melotti)

The Venetian Resort Hotel Casino (inaugurated in 1999 and enlarged in 2008), with its 4,049 rooms, 3,068 suites and 11,000 m<sup>2</sup> casino, claims to be the world's largest hotel. It is a real microcosm of postmodern culture, which provides a scale reproduction of some Venice tourist

highlights, such as St Mark's Campanile, the Rialto Bridge and the Ducal Palace, with its distinctive mullioned windows. The actual town is dismantled into a series of landmarks and reshaped in a hybrid multi-experiential postmodern way. Everything is as if it were portrayed in one of the hyper-realistic paintings that Canaletto "mass-produced" for his overseas customers, but with a touch of disenchanted cosmopolitan consumerism.

Inside the buildings there are imposing flights of steps, elaborate foam and urethane statues, over-decorated corridors and even ceilings reproducing frescoes by famous Venetian Renaissance artists, such as Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese. This completes the illusion and creates a continuum not only with Venice's Renaissance and Baroque palaces, but also with the elegant interiors of Newport's Versailles.

A system of canals extends the reconstruction and creates the conditions for a gondola experience. Tourists, as in Venice, can admire gondolas as part of the landscape and hire them to ride past the shops and the restaurants. Gondoliers, often Asian women, sing popular and romantic Italian songs (Fig. 8-9).

According to current cultural trends, where authenticity is primarily a sensorial experience and a playful deception aimed at enhancing customers' pleasure, brochures invite you to go for a ride on one of the resort's authentic Italian gondolas, though they are three metres shorter, have small trolling motors and hidden foot controls, and gondoliers "wear earpieces, like Secret Service agents" (Curtis 2000).

The official website of the hotel presents this attraction as the core of the Venetian experience: "No trip to Venice—or The Venetian—would be complete without a graceful and romantic glide down the Grand Canal in an authentic Venetian gondola. Float beneath bridges, beside cafés, under balconies and through the vibrant Venetian streetscape as your singing gondolier sweeps you down the Grand Canal for a ride like no other" (The Venetian Hotel Las Vegas 2015). The leisure and consumption experience eliminates any difference between the two Venices. On Tripadvisor tourists seem to appreciate it. One of them even pointed out that in this little American Venice canals are not as dirty as in the Italian town. The comments by Italian visitors are quite interesting: "The finest Venice I have ever seen. Better than the original and that in Los Angeles. It is funny and modern, but it always recalls the original Venice" (Peppineddu10 2014). "Who has really visited Venice, like us, here may see the perfect and identical reproduction of the square, with bars, artificial canals, gondolas and gondoliers. Almost equal!" (Anto8678 2015). Some go even

further: “We have never been to Venice, but we enjoy this fake very much!” (Mario D 2014).

Here the canals are the nice “view” that accompanies your shopping, your eating out, your gambling, and, why not, your sexual adventures: exactly as in the real Venice.



Fig. 8-9 Gondolas and canals at the Venetian, Las Vegas  
(photos by Marxiano Melotti)

Like other Las Vegas resorts, the Venetian Hotel also offers cultural attractions: between 2001 and 2008 it hosted a Guggenheim Hermitage Museum, a joint-venture between two outstanding institutions with great international experience in art marketing and popularization. Something similar happens in Bilbao and Abu Dhabi (Melotti 2014).

In Las Vegas Luxor and Caesars' resorts also use arts, history and archaeology to make consumption a cultural experience and to build a sense of heritage and tradition around and inside leisure activities (Melotti 2008). According to Fox (2005), the commercial purposes of the resorts distort the mission of the museums ("faking museums" is the malicious title of the chapter). But Barbara Bloemink, managing director of the Guggenheim and Guggenheim Hermitage museums in Las Vegas, maintained that the glittering fake surfaces represented by the replicas do not overwhelm the authentic museum collections: "the Strip is about surfaces that seduce you, whereas paintings are in and of themselves real objects that draw you underneath the surface into meaning" (Fox 2005, 46).

Anyhow, these museums exert an important function: art exhibitions and historical items enter a world of entertainment and create the bases for a rewarding edutainment activity, consistent with the "liquid" experiential framework. At the Bellagio resort, you can even eat in a French restaurant adorned with authentic Picasso masterpieces.

A museum, especially if prestigious and media-connected, gives authenticity to the consumption experience. Therefore, despite its replicas made of concrete, resin and foam, the place becomes an "authentic" cultural site. At the same time, the "authentic" Renaissance masterworks in the Guggenheim exhibition and the replica frescoes on the ceilings of the resort create an attractive postmodern context mixing ages, places and objects with different ontological status. The authentic Titian on the wall of the fake Venetian building of Stewart Garden Museum is not that far away...

Among the many reinventions of Venice for tourist and shopping purposes, the case of San Marcos Premium Outlets, near the small town of San Marcos, Texas, is quite interesting. This Venice-themed mall offers a disproportional and clumsy reproduction of St Mark's Campanile and Ducal Palace; besides, the canals have been replaced by a large pool with gondolas. However, with its six million visitors a year, it is "one of the top attractions in the state" (San Marcos 2015). In 2006 an ABC's talk show bombastically named it "the third best place to shop in the world."

Once again gondolas and mullioned windows are used to recreate a Venetian atmosphere. But we are far from the opulent and accurate reconstructions of Las Vegas, and even farther from the memories of the Grand Tour and the imperial dreams of art collectors and magnates. Here the idea is not to give birth to a new Venice or to suggest the elegant lifestyle of the ancient and modern Italian towns, but only to provide a setting for the shopping, as do other Renaissance-themed malls in Italy and in China.

The most curious aspect of this mart is its relationship with the territory. The town was named San Marcos de Neve in 1808 by a group of Mexican settlers in the then New Spain. San Marcos was the evangelist Mark, the patron saint of Venice. Yet there was no direct connection between the Italian town and that settlement, apart from their common Roman Catholic religion.

It is not clear whether the mall was named after the local town or after Venice's patron saint, conforming to the international tendency to themed consumption. However, we can single out a surprising form of glocalism: that copy of Venice (or perhaps of Las Vegas Venice) is not a mere reproduction of a global pattern, but, rather, an invention reflecting both the heritage of the local community and its European roots.

## **7. Beyond Las Vegas. Dreaming of Venice in China**

Theming is a powerful and effective language. It enhances any activity by plunging it into the indistinct realm of "history" and transforming it into a sort of heritage experience. This reminds us that consumption and its places are the new heritage and the main identity tools of our age. Thematisation is the global bridge uniting eras and cultures and intertwining producers and consumers of any class, age, culture and value-system.

Theming is now a global practice. Some American inventions have become international models to be exported or imitated. Amusement parks, global events, tourist resorts, shopping malls and even entire urban centres are fertile soil for such developments.

The American taste for huge history-themed parks, hotels and malls has spread everywhere, with stunning results in some countries competing on the global stage to show off their new wealth and their new inclusion in international trends, from tourism to fashion, from shopping to finance.

The Chinese case is particularly amazing, owing to demographic and economic dimensions and the social and political context of the country. Theming has taken root in the regime's culture: big buildings celebrating nation's pride and power have been joined by others (malls, resorts, skyscrapers and gated communities) celebrating leisure, consumption and individual achievement. Themed parks, themed malls and even themed landscapes, mimicking or replicating European cities, villages, monuments and other tourist landmarks, are spreading around China, where postmodernity is flourishing along with modernity.

The new themed heritage marks China's entry into international tourism, business and mass-consumption, but, conforming to a national

(and nationalist) custom, the country presents this new global dimension as a national success. As was cleverly put, China, which once regarded itself as the centre of the world, is becoming the centre that contains the world (Bosker 2013). Alien cultures appear miniaturized in malls and urban systems, embedded in the galloping growth of a country able to merge modernity and postmodernity as well as communism and capitalism. This recalls an ancient Chinese saying: “One bed, different dreams” (*tongchuang yimeng*, 同床异梦).

The “moderately well-off society,” envisaged by Deng Xiaoping revitalizing an old Chinese expression (*xiaokang shehui*, 小康社会), now has its skyscrapers, villas, theme parks, and shopping malls, where the new upper-middle class displays its lifestyle, often modelled on European patterns. In particular, its younger members, “vanguards in consumption while laggards in politics,” show off individualist behaviour and hedonistic consumption, using top-brand products and expensive cars as effective status symbols marking the difference between the present and the previous (pre-reform) lifestyle (Tsang 2014). Many families of this class satisfy their aspirations by living in themed communities, where they can “imagine themselves playing starring roles in ‘pseudo-reality’ real estate, impersonating affluent cosmopolitan members of a Chinese-cum-European bourgeoisie” (Bosker 2013).

History repeats itself. The same happened in the States about a century ago, with the consolidation of an economic aristocracy, and, some decades later, with the formation of a larger wealthy class. There is a global language, crossing ages and cultures, which uses heritage theming as an identity tool. The fascination of old-time Europe, filtered by memories of the traditional Grand Tour and contemporary mass tourism, unites the world. Anyhow, this explains the spread in China of a number of theme parks, which, as was aptly noted, “are to East Asian capitalism what folk dancing festivals were to communism” (Buruma 2003).

Among the many Venice-style projects realized in China, we may recall the Venice Water Town in Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang: a real estate development with five-floor buildings, balconies and ogival windows overlooking canals and, of course, gondolas. It is more elaborate than the Venice of America in California and more serious than the playful and sumptuous Venetian resort in Las Vegas. Here Venice is the exterior skin of a residential area.

In this reinvention, the suspension of reality is permanent and not temporary, as in Las Vegas (Bosker 2013). But, just for this reason, this imitation is paradoxically closer to the real contemporary Venice than

other replicas. It is no longer the Grand Tour Venice of the “gondola days” but, unwittingly, the everyday Venice behind the tourist stage.

We have to remember that the floating towns, made of intricate small canals and romantic stone bridges, belong to the Chinese tradition. Yet, to gratify the tourist gaze, the new town was named after Venice.

The Grand Tour was a powerful tool of collective-imagery building, able to reshape the self-representation of the local communities. Italy itself, which became a political entity only in the second half of the nineteenth century, has largely built its own rhetoric of “nation of beauty” on the admiration by the “Grand Tourists” and has often rebuilt its towns and monuments pandering to that alien gaze.

Similarly, China, well-aware of the mechanisms of international tourism, presents and promotes its ancient canal towns, such as Tongli, Suzhou and Zhouzhuang, as “little Venices”: a definition clearly inspired by the tourist imagery.

Thus an American tourist visiting Tongli was “very surprised to find a town of this type on *his* tour through China”; and, while its pedestrian area seemed to him too “noisy,” he found its canal area “quite lovely and interesting,” also since “gondolas give rides down the canals, just like in Venice” (IgolfCA 2011). Similarly, another American described Zhouzhuang as “charming,” “lovely,” “picturesque,” and “photogenic.” But his comment, when faced with “the sides of the canals lined with restaurants and gift shops,” was lucid and disenchanted: “Sure, some would call it cheesy... but then, so is the real Venice of today’s Italy, with its hyper-commercialization.” Gondolas confirm their function: “The only good way to experience it is via a boat ride. The ‘gondolier’ is typically a woman, and—yes, like real Venice—many of these women would belt out a Chinese folk song for the promise of a tip” (Globalist3000 2011).

But sleeping in the same bed not always entails different dreams, especially when you stay in a huge resort hotel-casino... Thus, in the global play, following the new financial and tourist flows, the Las Vegas Sands Corporation, which manages The Venetian in Las Vegas, in 2007 opened another Venetian Resort Hotel Casino in Macau, another capital of gambling. It has the same large-scale replicas, the same canals and the same gondolas. But what really is it? Another mimicry of the Italian town, a duplicate of its Las Vegas copy or an original expression of the new global heritage? For certain it is one of the most successful tourist highlights in the town, unfailingly present in any tourist photo-album.

The Venetian Macao was considered the first step of an “Eastern touristic imagination” of Italy and the simulacrum through which Chinese



tourists “experience and learn about Italy” (Hom 2015), and are inspired to travel to Italy (Pearce et al. 2013).

Hom (2015) thinks that “these built environments give rise to a hyperreal Italy that encapsulates the ideological forces of a globalized consumer society.”

Theming culture, global consumption patterns, multinational business companies, international tourism and transnational flows have created a *new heritage system* that meets these global challenges with a trans-cultural and trans-temporal approach, where everything is playfully moved and playfully moves.

But this Chinese parallel world, despite its young age, already has its ghosts. The fast growth is not always successful. The New South China Mall, which opened in 2005 in Dongguan, Guangdong Province, with its 9.51 million square metres and 2,350 retail outlets, could claim to be the largest mall in the world, at least until the opening of the Dubai mall (it was nicknamed the Great Mall of China). Its seven wings, themed on different cities, nations and regions of the world (Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, Venice, Egypt, the Caribbean and California), included a St Mark’s Campanile, an Arc de Triomphe and an Egyptian Sphinx. The project was completed by an amusement park, featuring a great indoor roller coaster, a multiplex cinema and 2.1 km of artificial canals with gondolas for hire. The owner, an instant-noodle king, apparently wanted to leave a visual document of his achievements and to build a monument to his native town (Shepard 2015).

According to the Chinese usage, canals were designed to form a real transport network. Gondolas had not only to create a picturesque view, but also to carry the customers between the various wings. Unfortunately, when it was opened, 99% of its shops were unoccupied. The place, which “never had the chance to die for it wasn’t born to begin with,” rapidly became “a monument to the irrational resolve that China is willing to put into its large-scale projects” (Shepard 2015).

Now this mall is almost completely abandoned and has become an archaeological site of present-day society, but anyway worth visiting. It is difficult to say if this will be the future of other themed spaces and a sort of destiny of contemporary society. But, of course, tomorrow’s archaeological sites are nurtured today, and the present consumer society, once surpassed, will be only a nostalgic memory. On the other hand, the wretched status of this mall may be regarded as something more than an occasional failure. In fact, it seems a sign of the coming crisis of postmodern society.



Fig. 8-10 Florentia Village, Wuqing, China  
(photos by Marxiano Melotti)

However, most Chinese themed malls enjoy good health. Among them, we can mention the Florentia Village in Wuqing (between Beijing and Tianjing) and its later replicas in Shanghai and Guangzhou. This brand, which has planned other malls in Qingdao, Wuhan, Chengdu and Chongqing, belongs to a Sino-Italian joint-venture, promoted by an Italian group working with McArthurGlen, Europe's leading company of designer outlets.

As its name suggests, Florentia Village offers an Italianate experience (Fig. 8-10). Its website describes it as “the first authentic Italian shopping centre” in China. It is an interesting case, showing an Italian heritage self-thematization in an international context. In this reinvention every aspect of cultural heritage is interchangeable and mixable: it uses the name of Florence but it mimics Venice, with canals and bridges, and hosts a sort of Colosseum, the well-known landmark of Rome. Despite a prevailing high quality of the reconstructions and a surprising attention to details, the likeness to its Italian models remains rather vague. Yet the diffusion of Italian songs around the streets helps to create a pleasant Italian atmosphere.

Once again, in the wake of the Las Vegas model, history is used as an exotic “sign,” to insert the shopping experience in a spatial “otherness” with recreational and tourist purposes. Florence and Venice are only nominal brands and Italian Renaissance is exploited to inspire an idea of tradition, style and luxury, enhancing the shopping experience. The fake Italian squares and Venetian canals (Fig. 8-11) are enchanting tourist “views,” worthy of being photographed; but, as also happens in the “real” heritage places, they are often photographed together with the signs of

some global brands, which are the “views” of the new world heritage. This entails a crucial change in the tourist gaze and, more broadly, in the cultural behaviour: shopping and heritage fruition are closely interrelated practices which form one rewarding activity.



Fig. 8-11 Photographs on the canal and in front of a Gucci shop. Florentia Village, Wuqing, China (photos by Marxiano Melotti)

The main global luxury brands, such as Armani and Prada, represent important icons in the social and cultural imagery of a large part of the world population and help to form consumer’s identity, so important in present-day societies. Shops and stores, with brand labels and luxury items, are real “monuments” of the contemporary global society, worthy of being regarded as “views” and heritage places. Their insertion in brand-new themed spaces, as well as their presence in traditional heritage towns or ancient buildings, creates a cultural loop between the past and the present, history and consumption, stones and goods, which boosts this function. The Gucci shop in a Chinese fake Venice and the Gucci shop-museum recently opened in a Florence medieval building are both equally “real” and are parts of the same global heritage.

In such a context there is no need for philological correctness: atmosphere is more than enough. This Venetian Florence is a system with references to tourist and heritage icons, relating to international shopping and tourist imagery. Michelangelo’s *David*, which is present on its posters and brochures, does not necessarily imply a reference to Italian heritage. It simply labels a generic international shopping culture. Therefore, he may even wear American blue jeans: another example of the global transatlantic cultural relationship.

Yet, beside the triumphant press-office presentations, customers’ comments differ considerably. On Tripadvisor an Italian visitor wrote that

“the structure is similar to an Italian outlet, built by Italians but with fakes of the Italian monuments that strangers like” (Mauro S. 2015). Interestingly, he detected an imitation of other Italian malls rather than a recreation of Italian heritage. As other Italians, he recommended the Italian restaurant, offering “typical meals prepared with Italian raw food.” On the contrary, Chinese visitors, increasingly accustomed to international experiences, detect the fake Italian flavour of the outlet and do not conceal their disappointment for its sloppy thematization.

But we have also to consider another element: the “alien” character of the themed space. This Italian-style shopping mall, as usually happens in the Chinese heritage-themed towns, spread in a hyper-consumed urban development area, in the middle of a serial system of residential skyscrapers hosting thousands and thousands of new city dwellers. We are beyond exoticism (Hendry 2000) and also beyond the bourgeois aspirations of the rising middle class described by Bosker (2013). There is a new urban population destined to live in giant buildings, monuments to the growing power of the new China but also expressions of a dull individual life and lifestyle.

In contrast, the urban-themed spaces, like the themed parks of the past, offer a dream (and a space) of freedom, and, perhaps, despite the global patterns of international consumption, also a dream of individual achievement and differentiation: blue canals instead of grey condos; two-store shops instead of forty-store skyscrapers; romantic two-people gondolas instead of crowded undergrounds. From this point of view the Florentia Village is an oasis, offering a supposed different urban and lifestyle model, which, owing to its “otherness,” becomes a heritage experience. Here we find the same Grand Tour fascination that induced the “urbanized” British and American elites to visit the “primitive” Italian towns, with their odd canals, narrow streets, and old buildings.

These Venice-themed malls do not seem to mimic Venice but, rather, the Chinese interest in it. The Italian designers have developed their picturesque view of what Chinese consumers might think of Venice, as the Chinese were unable to recognize the poor quality of their reproductions. Anyway, the success of these malls is not due to the quality of their mimicry but to the sense of displacement that they induce.

But, perhaps, there is also another reason, subtly related to the ancient ties between Venice and China. Venice, which was for a long time the dominant naval power in the eastern Mediterranean, was one of the main European trade centres and an important point of arrival for Chinese goods. Marco Polo (1254–1324), his father and his uncle, who went to China in the late thirteenth century, were Venetian itinerant merchants.

Marco Polo was not the first European to visit China, but he was the first to leave a detailed description of it, which seems to have inspired even Christopher Columbus. On the other hand, Marco Polo, who worked in the service of Kublai Khan for many years, informed the Chinese about European religion, culture, uses and traditions. Moreover, Venice, after the conquest of Byzantium by the Turks (1453) and before the establishment of the sea route around Africa, exerted remarkable control over trade between Europe and Asia.

In modern China Marco Polo, above suspicion of colonial or imperialist mindset, has become an acclaimed hero and is ritually mentioned in political speeches, media messages and tourist brochures, to strengthen friendship ties with Italy. And in Venice Marco Polo's house is quite popular among the Chinese tourists and seems to be one of the reasons why they visit the town, of course besides its traditional appeal.

In this light the Venetian theming of many Chinese shopping malls has also a subliminal function: recalling the ancient commercial relationships between China and Italy. In postmodern global society the slow trade along the Silk Road has been replaced by fast shopping in Venice-themed malls.

## **8. Back to Italy. Meta-thematization and self-heritagization**

Theming has become a global language and, thanks to its effectiveness, has reshaped large part of the heritage system. The Europe-themed heritage, after the States and China, has even thematized its European model, which seems to have become a *thematization of a thematization*, i.e. a sort of *meta-thematization*. This retroaction is a good example of the dynamic character of transatlantic relationships.

The Venice-themed shopping malls are not confined to the American and Chinese new worlds, far away from Italy. Even around Florence and Venice there are now themed malls, built as little Renaissance towns, with walls, towers and statues, or decorated with heritage signs.

The above-mentioned McArthurGlen chain, among other themed outlets, manages a Florentine-style mall in Barberino del Mugello, near Florence (opened in 2006), and a Venetian-style mall in Noventa del Piave, near Venice (opened in 2008). The style is the same as in the Chinese Florentia Village.

This is in no way surprising. This similarity shows the contemporary convergence of cultural heritage, commercial activities and tourist policies, due to the processes of globalization. But there is something else,

which is worth mentioning: tourists increasingly combine their visits to Florence or Venice with visits to these themed shopping malls and tour operators have begun to include them in their trips. This creates a continuum between heritage and tourism, shopping and leisure.

The website of the Barberino shopping mall informs that from this outlet “you can reach the historical centre of Florence in just half an hour” (McArthurGlen 2015). The new themed mall becomes the core of the tourist experience and Florence, the real heritage town, a side attraction that may be visited afterwards (Fig. 8-12).



Fig. 8-12 A new Renaissance at the Barberino Outlet, near Florence  
(photo by Marxiano Melotti)

In the mall near Venice there are no canals, but a gondola is placed as a landmark in the middle of a square. According to a tourist blogger, “the buildings are laid out along streets, plazas and squares, some of which are lined with covered archways to give you the Venetian feel while you shop. There is even a gondola to remind you of where you are” (Page 2012). But what does the fake gondola remind you of? That you are in a *fake* Venice but in a *real* mall or simply that you are in a *new* Venice, mixing the past and the present?

Theming has gone even further: it seems no longer necessary to build themed malls around heritage towns. Owing to the increasing flows of international tourism and the rising expectations of their administrators, historical villages and heritage towns tend to assume the aspect of shopping malls: real heritage assures “view” and “atmosphere,” favouring

cutting-edge experiences of tourism, shopping and leisure. In Italy this is still a relatively recent process, but has already provoked heated debates. In particular, it has drawn the naïve criticism of the defenders of a mythical past when the country was not affected by mass tourism, commodification and globalization.

In Venice, however, self-heritagization is not a new phenomenon. Its famous Carnival itself, often regarded as a distinctive element of its intangible heritage, is a recent reinvention mainly due to tourist purposes (Melotti 2010).

Even earlier, when the emblematic St Mark's Campanile collapsed (1902), the town decided to rebuild it, in order to preserve one of its landmarks. That reconstruction was also a form of freezing its cultural landscape, in a period of incipient touristization.

The reconstruction (completed in 1912) aroused vast interest and inspired many replicas worldwide, including that on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley (1914). Really, St Mark's Campanile in Venice, though absorbing the cultural and historical influence of the town, is not more authentic than its coeval towers in Denver (1909–1911) and Boston (1915) and its later replicas in Las Vegas and in the Epcot theme park of Walt Disney World in Florida. All of them are modern constructions.

Yet, in Venice, the cultural resistance to tourism has a long-standing tradition. In 1910 a well-known poet and political activist, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, one of the founders of the Futurist movement, speaking at the Fenice Theatre against “the Venice *passatista*” (as he defined it, in contrast with his advocated Venice *futurista*), called its inhabitants to “repudiate the Venice of strangers” [*forestieri*], to “fill its small stinking canals with the rubbles of the collapsing palaces” and to “burn the gondolas, rocking chairs for cretins” (Marinetti et al. 1910).

The same year there appeared the Italian translation of *The Stone of Venice* by John Ruskin (1851–53). This seminal work criticized the culture of reconstruction and suggested that the city should be left in its decaying state. Two years later, in a short novel, *Death in Venice* (1912), Thomas Mann depicted a decadent image of the city, a prototype of a crystallized and dying town.

The debate on the “Disneyization” (Bryman 2004) of Italian heritage is growing and Venice has inspired many reflections on the effects of modernization and global consumerism (Molledo 2007; Somers Cocks 2013; Scappettone 2014). According to Settis (2014), too many people “succumb to the rhetoric of a Venice lagging behind the world; a town that should be made worthy of the twenty-first century with megabuildings, megaships and awesome technologies.” But, at the same time, he remarked

that “the mere passive preservation of the city frozen as a tourist attraction and its reduction to theme park of itself decrees and prepares its death.”

The centre of Venice—like that of other heritage towns—is a broad system of hotels, food streets, souvenir shops and luxury outlets. Tourists and consumers, accustomed to themed spaces and perhaps aware of its American and Chinese replicas, in Venice find exactly what they expect: the usual goods to buy in pleasant surroundings with canals, gondolas and mullioned windows. But, despite any “apocalyptic” views, there is still a great difference between Venice and its replicas: a lively local community, though increasingly involved in tourist activities. Besides, many shops are situated in authentic medieval and Renaissance buildings, where shopping itself becomes cultural tourism.

Many Venetians seem to fear the transformation of the town into a tourist resort and periodically rise up to defend the “local culture.” In 2010, when a Venetian authority ruled against the introduction of fibreglass gondolas, the main newspaper of the town proudly headlined: “Venice says no [...]: here only traditional boats by our artisans” (Gazzettino 2010). The same year gondoliers were harshly criticized for singing Neapolitan songs instead of local ones. A politician, willing to defend Venice not only against the effects of globalization but also against the meddling of other parts of Italy, made a vibrant protest: “The gondoliers singing ‘O Sole mio’ show lack of culture and scarce attention to Venetian identity. They decrease the quality of our tourist offer and give a warped image of Venice: that of a new Disneyland, hardly related to the territory” (Materi 2010). But it was a battle against the windmills. The gondoliers continue to sing what tourists like and to give them what they are in search of: a sensorial picture of Italy, where everything is mixed, as at the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas or the Florentia Villages in Wuqing. At the global level, the “local” is Italy, not Venice.

Also, in Florence the process of commodification has become quite evident. Among the many tourist activities, there is one that deserves mentioning: Florence boat tour. That is how it is advertised: “Come aboard a Florentine gondola for a romantic and unique cruise on the River Arno!” (Florentetown 2015). Once again experiential and sensorial tourism overcomes historical correctness: gondolas (generically presented as “traditional wooden boats”) are moved from Venice to Florence. A new tradition is invented, with the same trans-cultural and trans-spatial mechanisms that had transplanted these typical Venetian boats to the Chinese “Florentia Village.”





Fig. 8-13 Cruise ship in Venice  
(photo by Andrea Pattaro, *Telegraph*, November 1, 2012)



Fig. 8-14 A “big ship” in front of St. Mark’s Square  
(photo from Phil Lambell’s blog)

We have gone even further. International trends, in an increasingly ageing society, have enhanced cruise tourism. In a sort of revitalized Grand Tour, huge cruise ships stop in Venice and cast their anchors in its harbour (Figs. 8-13 and 8-14). When arriving and departing, they pass along the ancient town, including St Mark's Square. This has aroused a lively political and cultural debate on the future of these cruises, bringing enticing figures of tourists (between 1.8 million in 2012 and 2013 and 1.4 million in 2017). Among the many interventions against the presence of "Big Ships" in the Venice lagoon we can recall Settis (2014), Tattara (2014) and Testa (2014).

Over and above the local tourist policies and the struggle in defence of the natural and cultural landscape of the town, this new maritime Grand Tour is quite interesting. Most of these ships are substantially higher than the town: the "Divina" is 67 m high, twice the Ducal Palace, and 333 m long, twice St Mark's Square. The visual relationship between steel and heritage is quite uneven. These giant floating hotels recall the imposing buildings overlooking Venice's replicas in Las Vegas and Macau, and their passage near the real monuments recreates the dichotomy between hotels and replica monuments in those resorts.

Cruise ships represent not only an up-to-date version of Las Vegas hotels but also a further postmodern version of the gondolas in a world where the decadent (and expensive) "gondola days" have become more efficient (and more affordable) "cruise weeks."

Venice has become a sort of giant postcard, frozen in its self-heritagization. From the ship you see the whole town, with its monuments and its tourists. From the town you see the ship: the new cultural landscape of Venice. It is a double mirror, reflecting the new mutual relationships created by tourism and the global market.

### **9. A floating Disneyland?**

The passage of these giant ships endangers the stability of the buildings (we must not forget that Venice is an "old" delicate city largely built on the sea) and the huge quantity of cruise visitors, together with the many other tourists coming from mainland, deeply impacts on everyday life in the city. The Municipality (*Comune*) of Venice has about 263,000 inhabitants, but only 56,000 now live in its centre, the most visited part (where in 1951 they were 175,000). In 2015 the arrivals numbered 4.5 million and 10.2 million stayed overnight (Città di Venezia 2016; IUAV 2017) while the total number of visitors was calculated as 28 million (Tebano 2017). It is obvious that the narrow streets and bridges of the

town, not designed for such an amount of people, are crowded by masses of tourists. The tiny and picturesque public transport service, operated by water-bus, is constantly packed with tourists: a critical situation, worsening during the recurrent special events, such as the Carnival, the Biennale Exhibition and the annual Film Festival.

The city centre is facing a fast process of touristification, crossing and overlapping other ongoing processes, widespread in many Italian towns: the gentrification and retailization of city centres. Local shops, including local handycraft shops, are replaced by tourist and consumption-oriented shops: “typical” restaurants and wine bars; shops selling Chinese-made souvenirs, from miniaturized resin gondolas to fake Murano glasses, from Carnival masks to plastic fans; and, of course, retail shops of the main Italian and international fashion and luxury brands. From this point of view you cannot perceive any substantial difference from the Venice-style shopping spaces inside the Venitian resort in Las Vegas or the Venitian atmosphere of the Chinese Florence Village shopping malls, with their Prada and Tommy Hilfiger shops along the artificial canals: the same global luxury shops and the same Chinese-made souvenirs. This is a kind of transnational and experiential shopping authenticity overcoming boundaries and any traditional ideas of authenticity based on place and history.

In such a context the case of Fondaco dei Tedeschi is particularly interesting. It is a brand-new shopping mall, open in 2016 inside a thirteenth century building, renovated during the Renaissance and now transformed by a famous Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas, into “a lavish, high-end shopping centre,” as *Vogue* has defined it (Bobb 2016). The “redesign of the four-story Fondaco is nothing less than extraordinary, as Koolhaas and his team have created a space that brilliantly balances the old with the new, like exposing the old brick walls in certain areas, maintaining the original archways and untouched corner rooms.” It is a textbook operation of theming: history is used to culturalize the consumption experience. But, at the same time, it is a marketing tool, capable of re-enhancing some authentic aspects of the history of the city, whose richness along the centuries was built on international commerce and luxury retails. The Fondaco, which was a “commercial trading centre,” “celebrates authentic Venetian culture and its richness, vastness, and dedication to luxury and commerce. Historically, people came here to trade, buy, and sell. Today, people travel here to take a piece of Venice home with them, and now they can, thanks to this retail renaissance.” The commercial and tourist reinvention of Renaissance is a sort of historical

output of a *long-durée* process that has created what we now call globalization.

The Fondaco is a space of effective convergence of touristification and gentrification: different layers of city-users consume the same space where they find a different but convergent answer to global issues. Residents—including the affluent ones—find a tool of modernization of their city centre overcoming its touristification, and an alluring space where to affirm their identity of modern, fashionable, up-to-date consumers. Tourists find an effective shopping space where they can perform their consumption experience in a sophisticated and safe urban context, which is also serial and therefore recognizable, since remind them the gentrified retail spaces where most of them usually perform their usual urban consumption activities.

This process defines the urban lifestyle of the “chic cities,” which contributes to the global success of tourism as one of the main meaningful socio-cultural experiences (Prentice 2009).

The same *Vogue* observer, deeply intrigued by the operation, remarks on an interesting conceptual aspect: the Fondaco “is a place of discovery for those in desperate search of the real Venetian treasures after weeding through the fakes and phonies in the city’s bustling souvenir stores.” As explained by the CEO of the company owning the store: “We wanted to bring back the authentic crafts of Venice,” since “those things you see in the streets are mostly made in Asia. We wanted to sell the best of the best, to pay homage to the real beauty and artistry that exists here” (Bobb, 2016). In other words, the themed store, inserted in the very city centre in order to use the history and the context to create authenticity and enhance the pleasure of the shopping experience, becomes a kind of paradoxical island and fortress of authenticity inside the touristy environment that is at the basis of its existence.

The city centre, too costly and touristy, is left by residents, who sell or transform their homes into b&b’s: 7150 on Airbnb with 27,648 bed places (Tebano 2017). We are facing a huge and fast process of tourist crystallization of the whole city centre, whose economy is now largely tourism-driven. The contradiction has been clearly pointed out: Venice “cannot stand the attack of tourists, but without them it cannot live” (Cappelletto 2017).

For a long time, scholars have underlined the difficult coexistence of residents and tourists in Venice and the necessity of new rules for tourism (Costa and Martinotti 2003, Quinn 2007). Yet, only recently, after UNESCO threatened the exclusion of Venice from the World Heritage List or its inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger (2014), there

developed a serious discussion about the role of tourism and the future of the city. UNESCO delivered a detailed report on the state of Venice and its lagoon pointing out the various socio-economic dynamics affecting them (UNESCO 2014) and proposed some measures to contrast the degradation (UNESCO 2014 and 2016). Therefore, the Italian Government, together with the City of Venice, was obliged to issue a report on the state of Venice with some actions aimed at the conservation of the site (Rapporto 2016) and to launch a “Pact for the development of Venice” (Presidenza del Consiglio 2016). UNESCO reiterated its request to update the Management Plan of the site in order to sustain it in the long term (UNESCO 2017). Despite a lot of political rhetoric, this was a useful debate, showing how it is difficult to manage large-scale heritage sites like Venice and to find a satisfactory balance between local and global dynamics, as well as between heritage conservation, economic development, and socio-cultural issues.

Meanwhile, the constant growth of tourism in Venice (as well as in all Italy) and the substantially unchanged pressure of cruise tourism, despite some minor attempts of regulation, are creating a dangerous context. The patience of the residents, in the face of the obvious economic advantages entailed by tourism, seems to have reached a point of no return: there are often protests and petitions against tourism and cruises; citizens have formed associations against the “Big Ships” and some environmentalist groups even staged attacks against them. In June 2017, in an unofficial referendum, almost 18,000 Venetians voted against the arrival of “Big Ships” in the lagoon. Disquieting posters and labels against tourists (“Tourists not welcome”, “Tourists go home”) are spreading along streets and canals, and T-shirts showing cruise ships with shark teeth threatening fishermen are sold around the town.

Owing to the fame of the city and its major role in global tourism, international media are paying increasing attention to these processes. In magazines and on websites, Venice is more and more often referred to as a huge theme park: for instance, *L'Espresso* defined it as “a sad Disneyland” (Di Caro, 2016) and the *New York Times* labelled it as a “Disneyland on the sea” (Horowitz 2017). This contributed to the popularization of the sociological concept of “Disneyization” and to enhance a concern about the effects of tourism on urban centres, already affected by other new fears.

Furthermore, the media amplifies the discontent of the population by publishing photos of “disrespectful” tourists who go around in bathing suits, wash completely naked at public fountains, plunge into canals from bridges, swim in St. Mark’s Square when flooded, do stand up paddle

boarding along the canals, eat and camp in front of churches and historical monuments, and defecate in the streets.

Not rarely, and not by chance, these images mix up tourists and migrants. They are, of course, two expressions of the present global mobility, but they are quite different groups, with different impact on towns and society. Bauman (1997, 1998) pointed out this clearly: in spite of the vanishing boundaries between the phenomena in the “liquid society,” there exist two distinct groups of travellers: those “high up,” who travel for pleasure in an attractive world, and those “low down,” who flee an inhospitable world as drifting vagabonds. Nevertheless, both tourists and migrants sometimes meet the same mistrust and the same hostility.

The reaction against tourists often reflects an age-old suspicion towards the strangers, regarded as potential threats to space, resources, and lifestyle. Not by chance in Latin *hospes* (host) had the same root as *hostis* (enemy). At the same time the strangers are sacred guests to be hosted and dangerous enemies to be diverted. And in an age of fears and crisis every *hospes* could hide a *hostis*.

What occurs in Venice is not surprising: it is part of a more complex and general process of the renegotiation of the relationships between local and global, as well as between quality of life and economic dynamics. In such a context, residents, exacerbated by years of economic crisis and betrayed by the phantasmagorical promises of the golden-age of globalization, have begun to contrast international tourism, now regarded as the main incarnation of a demonized globalization. The same happens in many other European tourist cities, from Rome to Barcelona. This increasing anti-tourist stance can be read as one of the signals of the crisis of that kind of urban experience related to globalization and postmodern culture, in a general context of reassessment of globalization and passing of postmodernity.

Even if we are slowly overcoming the liquid society, some main issues, related to the postmodern patterns of space consumption and mobility behaviour, seem not destined to disappear. We have to recall that a significant part of the emergent tourism is composed of Chinese people, who are now discovering that kind of mass tourism, based on a mix of culture and shopping, that we have begun to overtake. Yet, even if they mimic Western monuments and cities, they do not necessarily mimic Western tourist behaviour. Nevertheless, with their own approach to authenticity, heritage and tourism, as well as to globalization, they will foster that model of tourism based on ludic reinventions and happy forms of consumption we roughly define as postmodern. Furthermore, in certain cases, like Venice, we can single out a number of local policies involuntarily

destined to enhance some aspects of today's postmodern tourism. City administrators, in order to face the main problems related to tourism (such as overcoming of carrying capacity, degrade, and Disneyization) and to meet the fears and the hostilities of the citizens that they govern (and are voted by), tend to define governance models based on increasing controls of mobility and tourism. In such a context, for instance, the Mayor of Venice is contemplating ways to limit the number of visitors to the city, its central area or St. Mark's square, including numeri clausi, entrance tickets, and turnstyles (Di Caro 2016). A local expression, perhaps, of the renovated political culture of walls.

Yet, such tools, far from protecting the city, its inhabitants and its supposed identity, risk increasing that Disneyization that worries many intellectuals, politicians, and ordinary citizens. Tickets, fences, and turnstyles are powerful instruments that transform the space and the ways of consuming and even thinking about it. Paradoxically, the entrance ticket could be the final element in the process of transformation of the city into a theme park. Something consistent with the self-heritagization process of the whole country. Difficult times for hospitable cities...

Tourist cities like Venice have to govern tourism and fears, but they should also accept their new (or renovated) global role of leisure and consumption districts. They should accept that they are elements of the complex worldwide network defined by and defining a "new global heritage," made of old and new monuments, stones and resins, originals and fakes, inhabitants and travellers. A transnational and transtemporal system that, in a kind of global "stretching"—to quote Giddens (1990)—interconnects and hybridizes Venice, Boston, Las Vegas, Wuquin, and many other places. A system made also of malls, "Big Ships" and, why not, flip-flops and plastic gondolas, where everything enters and fosters not only the tourist gaze and the tourist behaviour, but also the normal urban life and urban culture.

Venice is not dying, as many fear, but it is giving birth with pain to a new phase of the global culture.

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