

Venice Is Not Sinking – It’s Being Sold Off!

(A Brief Guide to the Crises in Venice)

“The reason Venice is dying is because it is like a cow that milks money...”

Many people around the world know that there is a crisis in Venice, but how does one explain that the crises are in fact many, and that none of them are the popular notion that Venice is sinking? We decided that a brief guide might serve well to provide an overview of the many real problems Venice and Venetians face. While by no means comprehensive, the following guide touches on many of the main crises playing out in today’s Venice, and gives some idea of why these long standing issues have only worsened in recent years.

And, you can read it in five minutes!

Please share, post, e-mail to any and all you care to. It’s time to ***spread the word!*** Thanks!

The Crises in Venice:

Housing: In a vicious cycle that has been exacerbated by a regional law and AirBnB, real estate costs in Venice are rising dramatically, the result of an accelerating conversion of residential and other property in to hotels and b-and-b’s. This has created a serious lack of housing that forces people to leave the city and live on the mainland, then commute to the city; some 30,000 people a day cross the bridge to work in Venice. Mayor Brugnaro wants to build more hotels and resorts and has done nothing to address this problem.

Work: There are very few jobs to be found in Venice that are not connected to tourism in some way. This is forcing many, especially young people - who would prefer to remain in their home city- to leave the city in order to pursue their careers. The only jobs Brugnaro seems to want to save, however, are those that he always claims would be at risk if any changes were made to his plans. Under Brugnaro public spaces and buildings, rather than being developed into locations where well qualified jobs could be housed, are instead being sold off to become hotels or used for expensive private parties.

The Lagoon: Historically Venice has held the Lagoon to be as important, if not more, than the structure of the city itself. Now, unfortunately, the Lagoon is dying from its overuse and abuse as a pathway for cruise ships and countless motorboats, as well as the badly aging fleet of vaporetti. The motor traffic has also generated some of the worst air quality in Italy for the citizens of Venice. Mayor Brugnaro’s response is a plan for a new boat terminal, a big parking garage, and a plan to dig a new canal to bring the cruise ships in.

Tourism: with over 30 million visitors a year and climbing, the pressure of mass tourism has made life extraordinarily difficult for the residents, and is straining the very structure and infrastructure of the fragile city. These pressures are at the heart of the aforementioned crises, and there is a critical need to actively manage the flow of tourists. Many ideas have been presented to the city government, including

'spreading out' tourists to lesser occupied areas of the city (which approach is the one favored by the city government), tickets for admission to San Marco, and limits on the number people entering the city daily, with or without fees for visitors. None has been acted upon as of this writing. A Commission on tourism management has been set up by the city, but again only the tourism industry itself is represented. No citizens groups will take part.

Depopulation: In the 1950s over 150,000 people lived in Venice. That number today is just over 54,000 and is shrinking at the alarming rate of 3 per day. The preceding items tell the story of why. Worse still, Mayor Brugnaro essentially denies that this is a problem, calling it a "physiological" process, while at the same time declaring that 'the future of Venice is Mestre' and touting the superiority of the suburbs – and the people who live there.

The Main Actors:

The Citizens: The citizens of Venice have organized many groups that are working, meeting, lobbying, researching, organizing and publishing in defense of their city. Most citizens groups, however, have been systematically excluded from policy decisions and deliberations, running counter to the present Mayor's campaign promises for a 'revitalization' of the city that would be built on citizen input and 'participatory democracy'. Meanwhile residents live with cuts to services, libraries and schools, while paying higher taxes and fees for things such as waste removal, and all this in addition to the stranglehold that mass tourism has on their home and their lives.

UNESCO: In July 2016, alarmed at the deteriorating situation in Venice, UNESCO issued a request to the Government of Italy and the City of Venice, setting a deadline of six months for the presentation of a plan to address a range of problems in the city (see all of the above). After reviewing the plan, which was presented to UNESCO by Mayor Brugnaro in Paris on Jan. 24, 2017, UNESCO will announce in June if they will place Venice on the Endangered World Heritage Site list. The plan itself, made public only after weeks of delays, appears to contain nothing new at all, and much talk of work that will be done later.

Mayor Luigi Brugnaro: Brugnaro is a wealthy businessman who is not from and does not live in Venice. He ran a big money campaign, throwing lavish parties for the public and getting advertising from companies whose contracts he would soon manage as Mayor. Brugnaro is the owner of several large businesses connected to industry and tourism; his many potential conflicts of interest, with businesses he owns profiting from official city contracts, have been well documented recently. Luigi Brugnaro proclaims himself a fan of Donald Trump, and like his hero, Brugnaro is ever seeking the spotlight. He is also just as quick to hurl insults at all who cross him. His government's policies are perhaps the biggest obstacles to making any progress on all the crises listed above.

The Tourism Industry: While too large and complex to describe here, this alliance of developers and investors that value only maximum profit at any cost plays the most destructive role of all in Venice, and they do so not only unchecked by government but actually encouraged and enabled by that government. And why not? Brugnaro is making his own little fortune from it all.

Conclusion:

The crises and actors described here are locked in a struggle for the life of the city. While there is always room for debate over specific policies and solutions, one thing is abundantly clear from this brief summary:

VENICE DESERVES BETTER!

Text by **Campaign for A Living Venice**, 2017