Forte Marghera and the entrenched field of Venice: a participatory process of planning and valorization

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1. Cultural heritage and common goods¹

The progressive neglect of buildings and large urban areas, often historically valuable, brings about the necessity of thinking about how to reconvert these spaces. The answers given by those who have taken this problem into consideration do not seem adequate to ensure that the cultural heritage will last. The hard recession that is concerning our country has undoubtedly worsened the condition of our cultural heritage; as a matter of fact, resources have decreased and public administration hasn’t much power to positively affect on it. Anyway, thanks to recent contributions and experiences, new ways of facing this situation have emerged: this cultural heritage should be regarded as a common good, so that local communities may have the chance to become active participants, taking decisions about, and sometimes even managing, the heritage.

The participatory process of planning is new to our country, whereas in other places it has already spread and strengthened. Even more unusual is the direct participation of citizens in the initiative, without taking into consideration the will of public administration, or maybe precisely because of its inactivity. The importance of these experiences does not lie only in the achievements, but also in the citizens’ acknowledgement of the value of the area they live in, is the first crucial step to preserve and valorize it.

Furthermore, in the last decade, many groups and associations, committed to the defence of the local cultural and environmental heritage, have been founded, since people can’t rely neither on the scant will of the namesake Ministry nor on the scarceness of means and ideas of local administrations. In other words, people are more and more aware of the necessity of using the available resources, also in economic terms, starting from the architectural heritage, which is derelict or needs redeveloping, and from urban areas which have not been constructed yet, especially those where either natural or human features, important for the history of a community, can be found.

According to us, this gradual awareness, which is starting to give the first important signals, might be the new element which will mark a new strategic view of the cultural and environmental heritage of our country, which is universally regarded as an essential resource. Despite of this, nearly everybody has ignored it, especially from a strategic point of view. In this respect, the voluntary initiative of groups and associations seems interesting, since it has proved the ability to involve different and complementary skills, and to develop ideas and proposals. Moreover, each of these actions things include pragmatism, dialogue with public administrations and finding resources, also economic ones.
2. Forte Marghera: from speculative object to urban heritage

The entrenched field of Mestre is a defensive system built during the XIX century in order to safeguard the city of Venice. The entrenched field, assembled in 12 strongholds - of which the most ancient and important one is Forte Marghera, realized between Mestre and the lagoon from the French and the Austrians at the beginning of the 18th century - represents a relevant historical and environmental heritage. It distinguishes the venetian mainland, which has been object of the attentions of scholars and associations dedicated to its recovery since the early '80s. This attention coming from the "low" is characterized by the commitment for a social use of these structures, that brings the venetian administration to take care of these goods, demanding their restitution from the state property to the community, and that sees the associations of citizens as protagonists in their recovery and management.

In this scene, Forte Marghera constitutes the most relevant element because of its history, location and dimensions, and represents the heart of the system, the element of connection between the lagoon and the city of Venice. This relevance can also be proved by the bonds imposed by the Ministry of the Cultural and Environmental heritage already in 1980: one of monumental kind, as Forte Marghera is considered “the most important element of the mainland defensive system for the city of Venice” and as there are “a great number of buildings with architectural value”, and the other one of environmental kind, as Forte Marghera represents an “element of extraordinary environmental and landscape relevance, for it is part of the ecosystem of the lagoon”.

However, the Forte was not conceived as a potential strategic resource for the city until the international contest “A Park for San Giuliano”, in 1989. The Guide Plan for the Park, edited by the winner, architect Antonio di Mambro, was approved by the Municipality in 1996, a few months before the army abandoned the Forte. In this document we find a fundamental statement, that guided the actions of the citizens mobilized for the future of the Forte during almost the next two decades: For its actualization will require a long time, during which different city administrations might succeed, a clear vision of the future will have to be shared by all the members of the community².

A transient phase thus opens up: the Municipality of Venice is designated by the Ministry of Defence as a temporary authority and manager. In year 2000 the society Marco Polo System Geie (MPS) is established³. From 2004, this society has been charged with the task of managing the Forte, which will be purchased by the Municipality in February 2009 for nearly ten million euros. Nevertheless, its management is entrusted to MPS, a society lead at the top by an only administrator and which lacked an internal control authority for 13 years.

In the period of time between the provisional assignment and the acquisition, the management selected some proposals, among the 200 arrived, for the trial of different modalities of reutilization of the entrenched field, with a particular attention for Forte Marghera. In parallel to the settlement of several small activities of cultural production first, and of food service after, some projects of feasibility were elaborated,
Guide Lines to a plan of reutilization and valorization of the entrenched field of Mestre, a plan of territorial marketing for the Forte and a masterplan for its possible reuse, all actions oriented to the consolidation of the position of MPS as the one and only manager of the Forte.

At the same time and against it, a group of 14 territorial associations starts to work on the realization of an organic and general proposal for the reutilization of the Forte. In March 2008, after 6 months of intense work, the Laboratory of collective planning for Forte Marghera FASE1 discloses the project Un-privatize the public heritage: for a participatory planning and management of the common goods. For a Fort Open, Supportive and Sustainable.

However, the Municipality of Venice, completely ignoring this contribution, also because of the forthcoming purchase, supports a few months later an advise for the research of subjects interested to concessions for the use and assumption of the obligations for the urban and architectural valorization of the outline ex Forte Marghera. In the announcement, the total cost of the recovery is esteemed of about 60 million euros, and a concession of use (without obligations) for a period of 40 years is foreseen.

Even so, the greater obligations remain in charge of the Municipality and thus of the community: the reclamation of the plots of land, the restoration of the banks and of the margins, and also the burden of the purchase of the area and of the failed collection of a concession rent.

Among the 12 proposals presented, mayor Massimo Cacciari asks to scrutinize the one suggested by Impregilo S.p.A, finalized to a realization in project financing of a “City of the child” which envisages huge growths of cubic capacity and 7 hectares of parking lots, for a substantial reconversion of the Forte in a thematic outlet and focal point of tourist attraction.

As a response to the announcement and to the related choice of the Impregilo S.p.A. proposition, in September 2008 various associations and thousands of citizens edit and subscribe a “Manifesto in defence of Forte Marghera and for its new planning in a participatory form”.

Between 2008 and 2011 the citizenship became active by organizing events and collecting signatures, thus blocking the administration, which in the end was forced to remove Forte Marghera from the list of the finance projects that would have re-opened the way to Impregilo S.p.A. and insert it among the projects of recovery linked with the Special Law for Venice. In this occasion the newly-elected mayor Giorgio Orsoni declared to the press that they would soon arrive to a participatory consultation in order to verify the proposals of recovery and management. Such a consultation was organised in the summer of 2011 by MPS, that in the meantime already had a new “Masterplan for the urban recovery of Forte Marghera”, in which it was claimed that only a resetting of the public uses and a doubling of the built surface could permit a “weak” economic and financial feasibility.

3. The Work Group for Forte Marghera... water star and the construction of a path in order to defence the Forte as a common good (from enclosure to open-field)

With these premises, the path to a partaken planning promoted by MPS wears
out in a short time, also because of the questionable choice of not defining open rules for confrontation. At this point a group of citizens gives birth to an alternative path; a path that has to be truly inclusive, assembled from below and self-funded, informally aggregated under the name of “Work Group for Forte Marghera: water star” (GLFM). 

The Group gathers representatives of territorial associations and many simple citizens, most of them lacking direct and economic interests about the Forte, in addition to the so-called “residents” of Forte Marghera, that are the associations and activities (artistic, artisan, cultural, recreational) that during the years of the MPS management obtained the possibility to make use of the spaces of the Forte, providing to their maintenance, but always with precarious agreements and this without the prospect of long-term investments.

The Group proposed to define the Guide Lines in times suitable with those pointed out by the Municipal Administration, which intended to decide for the future of Forte Marghera by the first months of 2012. The Group progressively opened-up to other subjects and organized itself in sub-workgroups in order to take care of all the aspects that the site of Forte Marghera presents. It promoted different meetings for public awareness with the citizenship and in schools, thus involving the citizens.

The choice of firstly promoting a meeting which makes use of the Open Space Technology (OST) technique and then a series of appointments inspired from the Creative Confrontation, corresponds to the will of giving voice to the many and different components of the population, of gathering and putting the greatest number possible of ideas and submit them to a further check at the round tables, where the feasibility of the proposals emerged from the OST and their possible synergies are evaluated.

The Department of Environment of Venice and the Municipality of Mestre also participate in the outreach and the preparatory encounters at the OST and support them: a path that pursues the involvement, sometimes smoothing the distances in the different views, but always avoiding exploitations and also
addressing to the middle schools and high schools of the city, in order to put
the young in contact with partaken democracy; in one of these schools, the
5th February 2012 the OST “Che forte.. decido anch’io!” took place7.
Such an initiative availed itself of the expert advice of the greatest italian ex-
pert on the subject, professor Marianella Sclavi, and also of the collaboration
of some interns of the post-lauream Course Local partaken action and sustai-
nable urban development at the University IUAV of Venice.

4. Forte Marghera: unique heritage and good that belongs to all
“What ideas for the future of Forte Marghera, unique heritage and good that
belongs to all?” The 400 people that participated the OST have been called
to give an answer to this question. The participants have promoted proposals
of discussions, giving form to the working schedule, organized in three con-
secutive sessions with a total sum of 20 confronting round tables regarding
different issues: from the Forte as a naturalistic oasis to the management mo-
dalities, from the possible contribution of artists and artisans to the relations
with the city, up to the ways of intervention on the architectural and environ-
mental heritage.
The picture emerged at the end of the day and recorded by the instant re-
port8, delivered to all participants, is that of a plurality of ideas, mainly mature
and well-structured, characterized by several key words and by a grounded
attitude towards the granting of a full usability of the Forte, perceived as a common good of the city, and the safeguard of the present aspects, refusing considerable modifications and operating for a flexibility of its ways and times in using its spaces.

From this outcome further technical round tables of creative confrontation took place, organized for specific subject matters of in-depth analysis and check of feasibility: from the accessibility and the relations of the Forte with the urban context, to the use of spaces, from the technical modalities and the costs of recovery to the financing and managing criteria. This confrontation has involved many people - not all of them already present at the OST but called to the round tables by the success of the initiative - in relation to the competencies and interests they could put into play in the definition of the Guide Lines.

Despite some moments of difficulty, created also by the presence of some participants less inclined to re-discuss their starting ideas, a nearly totally shared solution has been chosen, also related to the decisions which were object of contrasts. The final work of writing down the “Participated and shared Guide Lines for the future of Forte Marghera” was then conducted by some components of the GdLFM, and later verified and amended in a plenary assembly. The presentation of the Guide Lines, the 16th March 2012, in a meeting room crowded with enthusiastic citizens and curious administrators, constituted the most important moment for the GdLFM, but not the final phase: a work of pressure on the Administration for an actual consideration of what had emerged in the partaken path has been pursued.

As a matter of fact, during the same year, old and new “guests” presented themselves at the Forte with different proposals: a more “captivating” variation of the Impregilo S.p.A. financing project, an hypothesis for a cultural incubator and tourist-residential complex of the real estate Swiss-German society MIB-AG, a new Masterplan of MPS, maybe less impacting than the previous but always directed towards a substantial mono-functionality. All the hypothesis combined by the concession request, for long periods of time, to privates or public “specialized” actors, like the Fine Arts Academy of Venice (with minimal spaces preserved to a collective use) of a good that belongs to the public ownership and common interest at an extraordinary level.

There is no opportunity here to describe the often conflicting events of the last months, but it is possible to hint at the actual state of the situation, which sees the Municipality engaged in the adoption of a Recovery Plan by public initiative, as a definitive substitute to the solution of the project financing, and that adopts many of the directions emerged by the participate process, and that were never taken into consideration before.

Once the Recovery Plan will be approved, the next step will be that of defining a tender notice for the assignment of the area, but it is almost clear that a partially positive outcome has already been reached: unless last minute escamotages, the standards of intervention on the built and plant heritage, substantially conservative, the impact on the landscape and the defence of the opening of the Forte to the entire citizenship, seem indeed to be definitive decisions.

The issues about the management and the relationships between decision-
makers and shareholders still have to be resolved, issues that are rarely undermined by a partaken project “from below”. To the civil society thus only remains to monitor the evolution of the situation and to spread the information, in order to try and keep alive the capacity of citizens to become active and responsible for new and adequate paths to safeguard a common good of extraordinary historical and environmental value.

Entering now, even if briefly, in the merits of the Guide Lines, we may observe how they might offer different interesting starting points and advance concrete proposals, as they are the outcome, as said before, of a long work partaken by many citizens.

The first principle which has been affirmed is precisely the will of the citizenship to participate in the choices that concern the territory. This principle can thus be translated in a precious resource that might, or maybe should, be profitably used by the Administration, especially in this difficult historical stage. We thus believe that this principle, sanctioned also by the recent amendments to the Municipal Statute, should be now finally translated in concrete actions, that we still find hard to catch sight of.

The second principle is that of transparency, which unfortunately, as we have already seen, has not always characterized the management of Forte Marghera. As a matter of fact, the citizens have many times tried to understand which were the selection criteria that gave consent only to some to avail themselves of the Forte’s spaces, consent that has been denied or even removed to many others, as for example in the case of the Civil Protection of Venice, that had in the past guaranteed interventions of maintenance of the buildings, of pruning of trees and the realization of some improvements, like the pontoon on the dock, all without any cost for the community. The same citizens would also like to understand how have been used about five millions euros of public funding (regional, provincial and municipal). The money was destined to Forte Marghera which, unlike other forts of the entrenched field held in trust by voluntary associations, finds itself today in a deplorable state of degradation.

The third theme, which is emphasized in the Guide Lines, is that linked to the environmental, naturalistic and landscape value of the area. The Recovery Public Plan, in course of approval by the Municipality, still expresses itself in a very ambiguous way about this theme. On the contrary, it is highlighted in the Guide Lines how the landscape, environmental and naturalistic value of Forte Marghera, also in light of the general conditions of the venetian territory, should be the first one to be recognized and valorized, constitute moreover this area the extension, or rather the true heart of the San Giuliano urban park. The last aspects to remember, among the many presented in the Guide Lines, are the economic and the management ones, elements that are seen each other strictly connected. In this regard are shows several possible routes, which have certain aspects in common, of which we here draw just the three main ones:

- the public government, repeatedly assured by this administration, unlike its predecessor, which must now be translated into concrete acts, without blank proxies to anybody and therefore within the maximum transparency and participation;
- the use of tools related to real economy and not the financial one, firstly inviting and enabling citizens to play a proactive role, as for example in the case of other forts entrusted to voluntary associations. And this certainly before searching consultants or investors from time to time Arabs, Chinese, Swiss-German or Dutch;
- the progressiveness of the interventions, which will dilute over time the need to obtain economic resources, according to a model that has been found maybe in Forte Marghera, at least in part, its early roots, where the only buildings that today are not degraded are precisely those which have been entrusted in recent years to private entities, but always operating in our territory, and most of which without view of profit.

Finally, we recall the words of Professor Marianella Sclavi, who defines three essential elements which can lead to a successful outcome of this kind of decision-making process:
- transparency, participation and creative planning in civil society;
- universities and research institutions that offer training in both general and professional culture centred on these new skills;
- a public administration that warns the usefulness of these new tools and which is willing to encourage experimentation.

5. Conclusions
The participatory process we have marked, is one of the very few in Italy that has been promoted directly from citizens\textsuperscript{11}. It is an initiative that fits into that new feeling which has also inspired the recent publication by Salvatore Settis Popular Action. Citizens for the common good, in which he stresses how the majority of associations operating today: was founded over the past five to ten years, indisputable symptom of a new awareness that has a double root: the growing seriousness of our environmental and cultural problems and the growing disinterest for them of who governs us.

These volunteer groups come from indignation, are formed by reacting to environmental destruction, pollution, neglect of monuments, closure of theatres, degradation of historic centres, debasement of archives, museums, libraries, sales of public heritage, privatization of common goods ... The thickening of this new associationism shows that individual feelings are by piping in collective motivations, looking for a common area of complaint and civil action\textsuperscript{12}. It is in this new perspective that the case of Forte Marghera may be emblematic, as well as recent ones of theatres Valle in Rome and Marinoni at the Lido of Venice. Emblematic of a will of more sensitive citizens to oppose the cultural abandonment, before physical, of the signs of our history, that characterize the Italian landscape, its cities, its territories.

And it is for this new sensibility, at least quantitatively and for the ability to affect the choices of administrators, that today we can and must turn our attentions, which can no longer be elitist and hermitical, but instead need to find a meeting point to give back some hope for the future of our priceless cultural heritage.

This action refers also to the European Convention of Faro on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, of 2005, which identifies the local communities
as the main actors in the processes of valorization of the cultural heritage (cf. Section III - Shared responsibility for cultural heritage and public participation). In particular, where it is claimed, under article 12 - Access to cultural heritage and democratic participation, which:

The Parties undertake to:

a) encourage everyone to participate in:
- the process of identification, study, interpretation, protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural heritage;
- public reflection and debate on the opportunities and challenges which the cultural heritage represents;

b) take into consideration the value attached by each heritage community to the cultural heritage with which it identifies;

c) recognise the role of voluntary organisations both as partners in activities and as constructive critics of cultural heritage policies;

d) take steps to improve access to the heritage, especially among young people and the disadvantaged, in order to raise awareness about its value, the need to maintain and preserve it, and the benefits which may be derived from it.

Notes

1 We are aware of the ambiguity of the term used, which can arouse some perplexities. To avoid simplifications, inevitable in a short text, we refer to the recent text by Erman-no Vitale, *Contro i beni comuni. Una critica illuminista*, published by Laterza.

2 And again: To be redeemed and succeed, the Park will need to fully reflect the aspirations of its users. In other words, it will be an expression of a bottom-up, participatory design and shared by the public, not the result of the conviction of a few individuals (Di Mambro A., 2005, p. 52).

3 Formed between the city of Venice and the Central Association of municipalities and communities of Greece, with the subsequent adhesion of the province of Venice in October 2006, then retired in June 2010 (though having guaranteed a financial commitment of more than half a million euros in the three-year period 2007-2009).


5 The choice is made to organize these meetings as a simple presentation of the projects that were already processed, supported or otherwise allowed by MPS, as e.g. the proposal “Parco del Contemporaneo”, excluding the possibility of producing a broad and creative dialogue on the future choices to submit to the administrators.

6 An experiment in participatory bottom-up democracy, which supported, among others, from reality as the Co-ordination I Decide, which in 2010 was constituted among numerous Venetian associations, pressing for the Administration to involve the citizens in the decision-making processes affecting the main strategic choices of land management.

7 This is the Liceo Classico Franchetti in Mestre, which will also host some lectures and an exhibition of the designs produced by Venetian school students on the topic of Forte Marghera.

8 The Instant report was made available to the rest of the citizenship, and anyone interested, as downloaded from the GdLFM site (http://www.fortemarghera.it/), like all other materials: audio, video, documents, reports.

9 It also makes note that the Guide Lines, result of this course, have got a favourable
preliminary opinion by the Superintendence for the Architectonic and Landscape Heritage of Venice and the lagoon. In that opinion, among other things, pointed out that Forte Marghera:
- represents the most important element of the defensive system of the city of Venice, named “Mestre’s entrenched camp”, and therefore subject to protection with specific Decree;
- is a very important element for the environmental and landscaping interest, which is part of the lagoon’s eco-system, protected with specific Decree;
- represents an exceptional opportunity to enhance the mainland of Mestre, in need of service facilities especially for reasons of cultural and recreational purposes;
- is in a deplorable general degradation, caused by neglect and lack of maintenance.

The Plan has been adopted on the 28th of March 2013. In this plan, elaborated in collaboration with the competent Superintendent, GdLFM presented a dozen comments aimed in particular to clarify some choices at least ambiguous and to make the signs on the treatment of open and built spaces more adherent to what has been shared during the course of the participatory process. At the time of this writing the counterclaims have not yet been made known.

And this experience has had a certain resonance, on the local press, a well at national level, e.g. in the weekly L’espresso, in the magazine Urbanistica Informazioni, in the last book of the journalist Luca Martinelli, titled Save the landscape!, and it has also been covered by a dissertation, at the Iuav University, author the Dr. Ilaria Zambon.

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Abstract

In 1996 the system of fortifications of the venetian mainland was given up from the Army, and gradually acquired by the local administration. This situation has entailed the public accessibility to a wide compound of remarkable historical and landscape value, distributed around the entire municipal territory, along two concentric semicircles. The heart of such system is Forte Marghera: placed nearby the venetian lagoon, it has been built since the beginning of the eighteenth century by the French, followed by the Austrians and the Italians.

On that area, which is nearly fifty hectares broad, a common decision procedure has been spontaneously started by the civil society, trying to address the choices of public administration, which have been frequently contradictory as far as the present moment. It is a matter of a participatory process which has involved hundreds of citizens, during a period of six months. Through the application of tested methodologies, such as the Open Space Technology and the Tables of Creative Comparison, this group of citizens has come to a definition of shared and participated Guide Lines for the future of Forte Marghera. This document establishes some essential principles to operate on this area, and defines the actions which aim to an utmost safeguard and a general valorization on both the historical-architectural and the environmental-landscaping point of view.

Moreover this workgroup faces the questions connected to the management of the area and the buildings of Forte Marghera, which are recognized as a common heritage. The workgroup also claims an active role in the future choices of the public administration about it. This action refers also to the European Convention of Faro on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, of 2005, which identifies the local communities as the main actors in the processes of valorization of the cultural heritage (cf. Section III – Shared responsibility for cultural heritage and public participation).