

ISLAND LANDSCAPES

AN EXPRESSION OF EUROPEAN CULTURE

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30 Tools for reading the landscape

The *briccole* in the Venetian Lagoon, Italy

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Introduction

The Venetian Lagoon is dotted with more than 50 islands, all of which have been inhabited at some moment in history (Figure 30.1).

Historically, each island had its own specific function within the lagoon and the urban system of Venice. Being able to travel from one island to the other was necessary for the survival of the entire complex system. The movement of men and goods was made possible by a natural network of underwater canals, invisible above the surface and in need of constant maintenance (dredging). They were made visible by wooden poles (*briccola*, singular; *briccole* plural), erected along the edges. This ancient method of marking the 'path', essential for understanding how to navigate the lagoon, is still used today.

Seemingly insignificant, *briccole* often go unnoticed. Yet the meanings they carry, spanning many time and spatial scales, allow us to appreciate the lagoon as a constantly evolving human landscape.

Landscape perception

From being a matter of purely aesthetic 'artistic' enjoyment, landscape has gained, over the course of the twentieth century, increasing legal status. The latest step in this process has been the European Landscape Convention (ELC) and the subsequent legislation in the European countries ratifying it. The Convention is remarkable in the scope of the issues it tackles. Thanks to the word *landscape*, it has had the merit to finally bring the issue of the quality of all environments into the European debate on territorial planning.

Not surprisingly, the part of the text that has aroused the liveliest debates is the definition of the landscape it proposes. If we follow the European Landscape Convention's definition of landscape as 'an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors' (Council of Europe, 2000: 9), to study a landscape we need to have a working definition of perception. We also need to define who these people are and whose perception is being taken into account. This is not a simple matter.

First, perception is involved in our ability to survive in, and make sense of, our environment. It is thus one of the most fundamental and complex questions that thinkers have been struggling with for millennia, up to the philosophers and scientists of our day.

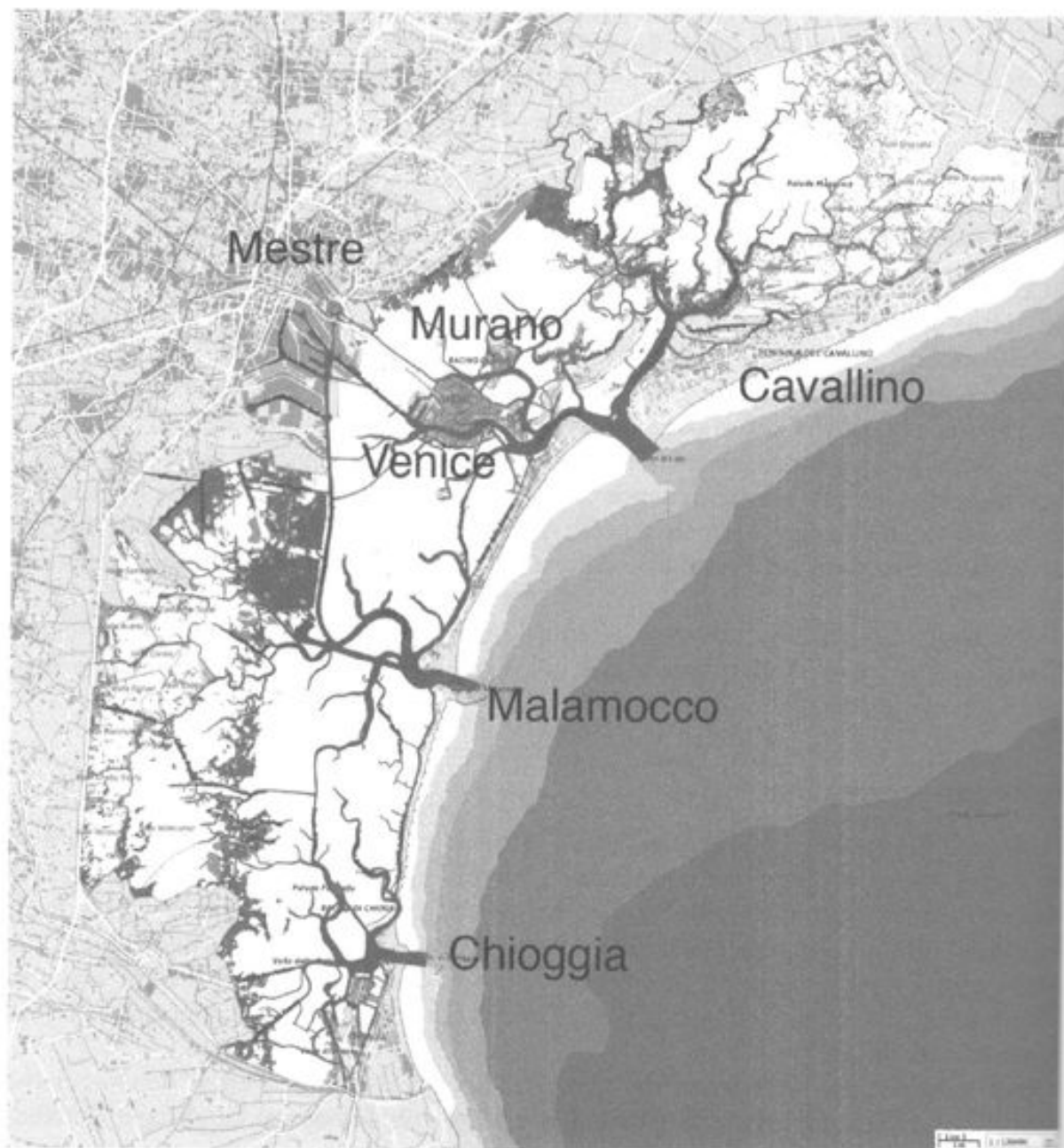


Figure 30.1 Map of the lagoon showing the underwater canals.

Source: Citta di Venezia Open Data: CC-BY-IODL2.

Second, many people are concomitantly involved in any given territory, with different and often conflicting goals. Whose perception is validated (and by whom) in order to turn an 'area' into a 'landscape' remains an open question, that the reference to 'identity' (Council of Europe, 2000) clearly cannot solve.

Third, a further caveat is that research or discourse on the 'perception of landscape' tends to overshadow research on the actual areas whose characters are the result of the interaction of natural and human factors that are being perceived (*ibid.*). However, the strength of the definition proposed by the European Landscape Convention is to insist on the fact that talking about a landscape is not neutral, it involves a possibly subconscious, often unstated and supposedly shared understanding, of the relationship between men and their environment in general and of the way it manifests itself in the specific landscape being discussed.

Without entering into these debates, what we are discussing here is how a first perception or first impression of an area by outsiders, in particular planners who may be called upon to intervene, can lead to a better understanding of that area. Rather than looking for a holistic view, when it is the result of indistinct generalisations, it is important to learn to recognise that specific character in a given landscape is the key to identifying the essential forces continuously creating and transforming it. Such recognition can be triggered by a larger landscape feature or by a specific artefact or object within the landscape. The ability to read the cues they provide, which can be called 'landscape competency', allows us to pass from a global sensory experience of perceptive totality to an articulated understanding of the physical space in which we are immersed.

This chapter looks at a specific example: the perception of the Venetian Lagoon. It shows how a characteristic artefact, the *briccola*, can render landscape intelligible; another is the *fórcola*, the oarlock of the traditional rowing boats. Both took shape over time, as a result of a continuous negotiation between nature and culture, and function as a kind of user's manual or guide for reading the landscape.

Landscape experience of the Venetian Lagoon

The first experience of the lagoon is often one of unexpected surprise. The narrow streets of Venice do not prepare the visitor for the sudden shock of reaching the edge of the city and encountering the lagoon as an infinite panorama. The wide and uniform water surface, expanding all the way to the horizon, meets the sky through a narrow channel bordered by a succession of wooden poles; here and there, the silhouette of some unrecognisable island stands out in the far distance in a slightly darker hue of blue; regularly spaced black dots follow the horizon line. In front of this, starting from the edge where one stands and receding towards the far distance, the wooden poles, generally in groups of three, dot the surface of the lagoon (Figure 30.2).

The most common maps of Venice show the lagoon as a uniform blue surface – corresponding to what first meets the eye – with the edges of the lagoon and the islands represented in more or less detail, according to the scale of the map. Such a representation does not, however, reveal the fundamental structure of the lagoon. It does not even give a hint as to what gives it life or made the development of Venice possible: a complex network of excavated underwater canals followed by the tidal waters, entering and leaving through the inlets (*bocche di porto*) connecting the lagoon to the sea (Guerzoni and Tagliapietra, 2006) (see Figure 30.1).



Figure 30.2 *Briccole* in the lagoon.

Once the visitor is made aware of the existence of the canals, a second look can be taken at the panorama offered by the lagoon, and one can begin to understand the meaning of the wooden poles – the *briccole*. They can now be seen not only as individual objects or as a series of objects giving vertical rhythm to the boundless horizontality of the panoramic view, but as markers of an invisible yet essential character of the surrounding landscape.

Indeed, by taking a closer look at the *briccole*, one can find that they crystallise many of the questions and issues one needs to confront in order to understand the lagoon as a living and evolving landscape, at many superposed spatial and temporal scales.

The *briccole* and the lagoon

The Venetian Lagoon is probably one of the most intensively studied areas in the world. Although much is known about the history of the city itself, the geological and the human past of the lagoon has left more discrete traces that often need to be retrieved from under the water. The end of the last century saw a completely new vision of the human history of the lagoon, developed both by archeologists and historians, and a growing interest towards the intra-lagunar world: life on the islands, economic uses of the lagoon, the trade between the lagoon and the mainland, the intra-lagunar exchanges and the boats used (Caniato et al., 1995; Mancuso, 2009).

Indeed, historians insist that a historical understanding of the city should not be limited to what is now the historic centre but should be extended to the whole lagoon. For Venice, the lagoon played the role that walls played for cities on land, physically and symbolically: it protected it and marked its distinctive identity.

Since men first came to inhabit the area, they have worked to adapt it, at the stage in which they found it, to their needs. The governing bodies and the inhabitants of Venice had a strong awareness of the role of the environment in the development of their city and acted, always slowly despite a constant sense of urgency, to preserve the environmental characteristics they needed. The most ambitious human intervention to ‘save the lagoon’, that is to stop its natural evolution and prevent it from silting up, was the diversion of the rivers flowing into it, a continuous task from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries (D’Alpaos, 2010).

Of the *briccole* themselves, little is known. The only book published on the subject is a hymn to the landscape of Venice and its lagoon, seen as a continuous urban fabric, a manifestation of the coexistence of a human society with its patiently shaped natural environment (Stefinlongo, 1994).

Legend says that when the Genovese navy arrived at the Lido to attack Venice, the Venetians removed all the *briccole*, thus saving the city. Not knowing which way to navigate their boats, the Genovese were unable to go any further. The first official mention is in 1439 (Brusegan, 2003), while Bisà (2009: 24) indicates, without citing sources, the presence of '140,000 poles in the lagoon'.

However, early representations of the lagoon show hardly any *briccola* at all. Jacopo de' Barbari's famous bird's-eye view of Venice and the lagoon from 1500 shows only a few simple poles where the river from Marghera enters the lagoon. There is a grouping of poles in the first painting of Carpaccio's Saint Ursula Cycle from the same years, similar to one used today for the mooring of large boats on the Giudecca side of the Punta della Dogana. Eighteenth-century engravings of the islands show only very few poles in the lagoon, as do early nineteenth-century drawings and paintings.

This might not be so surprising, however. The large commercial and military vessels on which the city's wealth and power depended crossed the lagoon only from the sea entrance at the Lido to San Marco and the arsenal; smaller commercial boats going to and from the city and the mainland could moor along the outer quays and on the Grand Canal. Most of the lagoon was used only by local boatmen, fishers or inhabitants of the islands, familiar with the lagoon and its currents, who used many different types of small flat-bottomed boats, propelled by oars or sails. The boats were small enough and went slow enough for boatmen to feel their way around; getting into the water to help free their boat if stuck on a sandbank was not a problem. Indeed, many paintings, as well as some early photographs, show barelegged Venetians standing in the water near their boats.

Briccole in long rows appear more frequently in later paintings. Technical representations of *briccole* and various other vertical indicators in the lagoon were published only at the end of nineteenth century. The importance of *briccole* increased during the late nineteenth century, probably for several reasons: the rapid displacement of some of the canals following the transformation of the inlets and other hydraulic work in the lagoon (Folin et al., 2001: 150); the use of larger boats that could travel only along the canals; faster travel with engines, where speed did not allow time to correct mistakes, if one strayed from the canal; and navigation in the lagoon by more and more people who were not familiar with it. Technical maps from the beginning of the twentieth century already showed *briccole* aligned along the canals every 50 m, as they are today.

There are more than 6,000 *briccole* in the lagoon today. They require constant inspection and maintenance and need to be replaced every five to 15 or 20 years. Recent changes in the characteristics of water, e.g. currents, temperature, salinity and pollutants, have brought an increase in xylophage organisms, which have caused a drastic diminution in the lifespan of the *briccole* in certain parts of the lagoon (Figure 30.3).

In 2011–2012, a one-year-long experiment was conducted to try out a variety of materials for *briccole*, such as different types of recycled plastic, different types of wood, different chemical and mechanical treatments (stapling) of the wood. The aim of the experiment was to study the durability of different types of material and to prepare a protocol for the approbation of any new material or wood treatment.

However, this was not the first time another material has been used for *briccole* in the lagoon. During the intense cold snap in the winter of 1929, the lagoon froze over for several days, and people living on the islands went out onto the ice to cut the



Figure 30.3 The sculptural shapes of rotting *bricole* are well visible at low tide.

bricole for firewood. Afterwards, so the story goes, it was decided to replace them by more permanent *bricole* in concrete. Some are still visible in the Canale Silone.

These concrete *bricole* may have been placed for other reasons and probably over a longer period of time; they can be found in several places in the northern lagoon. However, those found in the Silone Canal, in a state of more or less advanced decay, were later flanked by a parallel line of wooden *bricole*: the concrete *bricole* remained permanent as intended, but in the meantime the canal itself had moved (Figure 30.4).

This points to an essential character of the lagoon: it is in constant transformation, and human intervention, either directly responsible for some of the changes or simply going along with them, should remain coherent with the timescale of this evolution.

While the existence of concrete *bricole* is not generally known and the early experiment remained relatively unnoticed, official authorisation by the municipality to use material other than wood for the poles sparked a heated debate, reported in the local press, that went far beyond the issue of visual appearance. The role of the wooden poles was affirmed to be not only functional but also highly symbolic, linking today's Venice to her earliest history as a city built on wooden piles. The object itself, its materiality (wood), its specific shape (found only within the confines of the historic state) were offered as symbols for the unbroken temporal continuity of Venice. Such a confrontation of innovation (new material) with tradition (poles to mark the canals



Figure 30.4 Wooden and concrete *bricole*.

connecting the islands) raised interesting questions about the time and spatial scale of the web of meanings conveyed by the *bricole*.

Conclusions: the *bricola* as a guide towards landscape competency and scenario

This succinct overview of *bricole* hints at the many ways in which they reveal the landscape they are part of. Their mere presence indicates that the lagoon is not a purely natural environment but shaped by human actions. The lines of *bricole*, rhythmically dotting the wide horizontal panorama, are the visible signs of the existing invisible underwater canals, hinting at the complex hydrodynamic system of the lagoon. Through their materiality (wood), they partake in the oldest history of the city and indicate the essential role of commerce; wood had and still has to be imported, and canals needed to be marked for the transport of goods.

Their shape is a marker of identity and reflects a specific know-how. The strange sculptural forms appearing over time in the decaying central part of the *bricole* are reminders of the tides that can be thought of as the heartbeat, the living force of the lagoon. As carriers of other human-made signs, they reflect human care: the identifying numbers attached to the *bricole* are a sign of a management process that is heir to more than 500 years of history; the speed limit signs aim to reduce the waves created by boats in order to protect the lagoon's fragile natural equilibrium. These many signs point towards a fine web of meaning, combining knowledge and myth that engage in the spatial experience of the lagoon and the understanding of it as a landscape.

Yet reading this complexity is not immediately evident. First-time visitors lack the aesthetic and cultural knowledge needed to decipher the messages conveyed by the *bricole*; Venetians often regard them as mere road signs. The local debate sparked by the use of plastic poles brought other meanings of the *bricole* to the fore, but also showed the limits and dangers of any search for symbolic meaning in images or objects. Indeed, the debate centred around a mythical Venice and reflected a simplistic vision of historic evolution. It treated the *bricole* as a sign of timeless immutability

rather than as an indicator of change through continuity. It did not consider the possibility of alternative readings, leading to a different understanding of the connections between tradition and innovation.

For instance, *briccole* could also be seen as signs of a banalised knowledge of the lagoon structure – a physical predecessor of GPS! – replacing the intangible heritage of the slow use of the lagoon (rowboats) and experience-led knowledge of the flow of water. Indeed, the decision of the office in charge of heritage protection (*Soprintendenza per i Beni Culturali*) to allow experimentation with new materials only in a distant area of the lagoon, seldom seen by Venetians and visitors, reflected a similar, conservative bias and missed the opportunity for a healthier and more creative debate on the future of the city and the lagoon.

Landscape competency – the ability to read the landscape – is no mere luxury. But it is possible to understand, through the example of Venice outlined here, that it is no simple matter: landscapes always allow many different and even contradictory readings, both by visitors and by ‘connoisseurs’. The understanding of any landscape – of its history, character and identity – influences how one thinks about its evolution and the way one acts upon it. The issue is urgent in Venice: as it is facing new challenges, such as rising sea levels, subsidence, polluting human activity, and local and global economic reorganisation (Fletcher and Da Mosto, 2004). The understanding of this unique landscape, as it is mediated for instance, by the *briccole*, will undoubtedly have an influence on the scenarios imagined for the lagoon and its many islands.

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