

CHASED FROM HEAVEN OR ESCAPING TOURIST HELL? VENICE'S GRADUATE STUDENTS IN FOCUS

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ABSTRACT

This work addresses a key question for the construction and evolution of university cities: their retentiveness of the student population once they complete their studies. It so does with a focus on a distinctively tourist city like Venice, highly attractive for young adults in education, yet at the same time subject to strong pressures for displacement of stable residents. The balance between these two forcefields seems to be on the losing side in recent years. In our research we trace this evolution, through the life histories of a sample of graduates at local universities that resided in Venice in different periods over the last 30 years. We therefore tackle the experiences, motivations and perceptions that have either favoured their integration in this ‘dream place’, or triggered an eventual decision to leave, framed by the irresistible expansion of the city’s tourist dimension.

Key words: Student populations; retention; life histories; Venice; overtourism; housing market

INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this paper is to examine the capacity of retention of cities for a population of students in higher education (henceforth: HE), attracted temporarily during the course of their studies, and then facing crucial choices in relation to their future professional and life careers. Such decisions are embedded within life course cycles, however, they could also be influenced by contextual place factors in relation to the affordability of housing and access to labour (Imeraj *et al.* 2018), as well as by personal experiences lived during the period of studies. While especially typical college towns are likely to feature a ‘revolving doors’ social structure in relation to their student population (Gumprecht 2003), larger or more diverse cities are able to retain a sizeable share of their

graduates and stabilise them as part of their resident and working population.

This is a particularly pulling question for cities that are in need of attracting or retaining a high-skilled, talented population cohort to support transitions of the local economy (Russo *et al.*, 2007; Romein *et al.* 2011) or revert unfavourable trends (Sokołowicz 2019). Among these, notably there are tourist cities, tying into debates about touristification and its social impacts (e.g. Sequera & Nofre 2018), heated before the COVID-19 crisis, and surfacing again in the wake of an incipient recovery of tourism activity (Gössling *et al.* 2020; Milano & Koenigs 2021; Walmsley *et al.* 2021). The impacts of high tourist pressure on the residential displacement of the most vulnerable strata of residents are widely covered in research (see Valente *et al.* 2022, also for a

review of the literature), recent works also highlight the rising incapacity of overtouristed cities to offer secure life perspectives to young adults entering labour (Brollo & Celata 2023; Jover & Díaz-Parra 2022). In other words, it could be argued that the attractiveness of cities for graduates facing 'stay or go' decisions at the end of their study career is to some extent relationally and materially constructed over the course of their study period, and that rising pressure from tourism as an agent of transformation of the housing and labour markets could be an intervening factor determining a progressive loss of retentiveness for this population segment.

This research draws from the case study of Venice, whose main challenges for resilience lie at the crossroads of job diversification and the taming of the housing market. In this framework, we perform an in-deep examination of the city's retentiveness for HE graduates, considered a source of social and cultural capital that has arguably the potential to mitigate the population loss to which it is subject. This analysis covers the evolution of this landscape over a 30-year period span, in which tourism pressure has increased to the point of determining a sort of 'no-return' situation in urban dynamics. Specifically, we tackle the following questions:

1. what are the main pathways of integration of students in city's social-economic fabric, and how such integration matters for future residential choices within a life course perspective;
2. how are their living conditions evolving, under a rising tourist pressure that determines residential affordabilities and work opportunities;
3. what keeps graduates in the city despite the poor chances to find employment and decent housing, and how this is also changing in time.

Our methodology consists of a desk analysis of works and population data which serve to put the Venice case as a contested student city into context, and of deductive elaboration from primary data collected as in deep biographical interviews with a sample of 28 persons who have lived in Venice over the last 30 years.

Our insights could inform a broader understanding of the factors that may be preventing tourist places from bringing back a resilient social structure in the face of the disruptions generated by the pressure of the visitor economy. Despite the unique character of Venice and the extraordinary dimension of the challenges it faces, we argue that this case offers elements of generalisation for other cities in which the impacts of touristification are increasingly under scrutiny.

The next section briefly revises the literature on the residential careers and the role of student populations as agents and subjects of urban change. The third section provides an introduction of the context and evolution of Venice as a (student) city challenged by tourism pressure. The fourth introduces our research methodology, and the fifth presents the primary study materials and results. The last two sections offer namely a discussion of these results in the light of the conceptual departure points and some conclusions hinting at avenues of generalisation, recommendations for policy and a future research agenda.

STUDENT POPULATIONS, LIFE COURSES AND PLACE ATTACHMENT

The situation and role of young adults in higher education temporarily residing in university cities, and the retentiveness of cities for this population group after they complete their studies, can be introduced bringing together three literature streams.

The first one relates to conceptual frameworks and research into life courses, and in particular the residential behaviour and mobility of younger population cohorts in education. The life course approach can serve us to situate the question of how likely it is that students dwelling in a university city during their studies would eventually move on and relocate afterwards, and what factors affect those choices. Beyond the conceptual framing of residential mobility in life cycles (Leslie & Richardson 1961; Webber 1983) or life courses, the key issues of interest for our research are the characteristics of the first living arrangements of young adults (Mulder 2003), the influence of social status

and educational attainment on the range of residential displacement (Mulder & Hooimeijer 1999), the residential mobility of the college-educated population in relation to place amenities (Whisler *et al.* 2008), and the rising hindrances faced by younger cohorts in accessing the housing market (Calvert 2010). Although not specifically covering dwelling habits while in higher education, Clark (2017) discusses to what extent 'place attachment' plays a role in residential decisions, and introduces a distinction between 'stayers' and 'movers' as fluid groups whose motivations need researching using panel surveys or qualitative data. Community ties developed over a period of time in one place are presented on top of family relationships as factors motivating decisions to stay also when subject to life events. Clark and Lisowski (2018) further explore how intentions to move are formed and how or to what extent they translate in actual residential relocations. Among the younger cohorts, college graduates and the unemployed are the most willing to consider relocations; even if the likeliness of actual moves is higher with a stronger intention, more disadvantaged social groups are more stuck than others, or are forced to obliged relocations in spite of their unwillingness to move. Yet it is observed (p. 18) that "neither education, nor income, matter in whether nor not an intention is turned into a move", suggesting that contextual factors play a more substantial role. These factors, following Coulter *et al.* (2020), may include social norms, linked lives and institutional constraints.

The experiencescape framing student life and possibly tying to posterior residential decisions can be further scrutinised interrogating the equally rich tradition on 'town and gown' communities. Research on the collective and individual practices of student communities as a temporary population, and their agency in relation to the formation of 'student geographies' has been widely explored as enmeshed with dynamics of place-making (among other by Chatterton & Hollands 2002; Russo & Capel Tatjer 2007; Smith 2008; Hubbard 2009; Goddard *et al.* 2013; Zasina *et al.* 2023). Yet in our study, we take a more nuanced approach on student

geographies, following Sage *et al.* (2012) or Ploner (2017), and excavating on the social contexts and relational practices through which this population may get integrated and retained, or conversely on the borderings that eventually result in leave decisions (Barwick 2022). The awkward pathways of integration of international students and minorities are for instance explored by Holton and Riley (2013), who conclude calling for more research dissecting the boundaries between local and student communities, and how lived experiences of 'home' as spaces of kinship or marginalisation influence future mobility decisions.

A third stream of the literature helps to problematise the question of temporary mobilities as an agent of urban transformations. At the intersection between the two previous streams considered, Revington (2018) develop a critical analysis of the 'temporary' body of students in higher education in university cities in the urban structure and in neighbourhood transformations, focusing on housing transitions and the increasing reliance of private markets as a stratifying and often segregating factor. International students in particular tend to be considered a privileged group of temporary dwellers (akin to digital nomads, second homeowners and lifestyle migrants) that unsettles rooted social structures out of sheer material subversive power over place and urban rhythms (Malet Calvo 2018; Novy & Colomb 2019). The 'tourist context' as a forcefield framing such processes is examined among others by López-Gay *et al.* (2021) or Carvalho *et al.* (2019). Cenere *et al.* (2023), in this special issue, consider students temporarily living in university cities at the same time as gentrifiers or gentrified and marginalised subjects; this ambivalence pervades public discourses and policy initiatives to secure their attraction, which tend to become messier in implementation and do not ensure retention.

Our main take-out from this literature review is that determining factors into decisions to stay or leave after the completion of studies in a university city like Venice should be examined in a life course perspective, yet bringing in this enquiry the various experiential and contextual factors for which Venice

represents a special place. As we will argue in the next sections, this is at the same time a globally appreciated and unique cultural icon where the bubble of uncompromised student living is increasingly contested by touristification, where housing and job career aspirations are closing down even for privileged and educated acquired citizens, and where it is relatively easy to ‘make home’ – but less so to maintain this sense of integration over time, in the face of diluting social structures.

THE RETENTIVENESS OF GRADUATES AS KEY ISSUE FOR URBAN RESILIENCE IN VENICE

Tourism in Venice is noted at least since the 1980s as a source of economic and physical pressure contributing to the displacement of the local resident population (Zanetto 1986; Zannini 2014; Salerno 2022). While depopulation trends correlate almost perfectly with the growth of visits in the city, the relationship between these variables is complex, and a relation of direct causality is debated ever since (Osservatorio Casa Del Comune Di Venezia 2008; COSES 2009).

Now flagged internationally as a ‘worst-case scenario’ of overtourism (Seraphin *et al.* 2018; Bertocchi & Visentin 2019), the very survival of the city as a living entity is questioned, as the population of the historical city centre (henceforth: HC) is believed to have fallen below some sort of ‘no-return’ threshold: in 2023, the overall amount of tourist beds in the HC has surpassed the number of residents. The long-term destiny of the city may well that of becoming a visitor site, or a short-term city as in Salerno and Russo (2022), whose urban functions become increasingly geared to the needs and practices of transient populations like tourists, expats and digital nomads, and distanced from the needs of a stable community. This evolution, however, has gone through several stages, triggers and key moments of change, which we explore further in this section to situate the periodisation and spatialisation of our research into the student community.

Beyond the recognition that the material and social landscape of Venice have

historically been shaped by mobilities, as a place to be ‘seen’ and visited by strangers (Davis & Marvin 2004; Salerno 2022), it is only in the 20th century, and especially in its second half, that the grip of the tourist economy over the city scaled up, nuancing the emergence of a ‘tourist monoculture’. While first concerns and analyses of the progressive shift of the HC into an area of hypertrophic tourist specialisation are already noted in COSES (1979) or Prud’homme (1986), it is since the early 1990s that pressure from tourism pervades any aspect of the social and economic dynamics of the city. The main source of pressure was initially determined by the relentless expansion of day visits from holiday sites in the regional hinterland (Russo 2002). A further disruption came in 1999 with the abandonment of the cap on the total supply of tourist bedplaces in the HC, in 1999 (Barbiani & Zanon 2004), which paved the way for the growth of non-hotel lodgings (Salerno & Russo 2022). The process of population loss changed its characteristics collaterally, shifting from traditional trends related to poor housing conditions (‘50s–‘60s) and state driven regeneration policies (‘70s–‘80s) to what Zanardi (2021), in her periodisation of the so-called population ‘exodus’, labels as the neoliberal (‘90s–2010s) and properly touristic (2010s–present) phases – the former being related to the loosened housing regulations, and the latter a direct consequence of the boom of ‘platform hospitality’.

It is in this light that, in the 1990s, the ‘imported’ human and social capital represented by the Venetian HE students acquired a new focus in urban policy, under the belief that students represented a resource to challenge the city’s vicious socioeconomic dynamics and maintain a hard core of social capital in the historical core (Russo & Van Den Berg 2004, pp. 268–297). Together with the strategic reordering of university faculties in city campuses and with the provision of new high-quality student residences in the mid-1990s, the deregulation of the private rental market introduced in 2000 had, in a first stage, the effect of liberating a further stock of affordable housing options for higher education students, increasing their residential options in the HC.

This issue was noted by Russo and Arias Sans (2009), claiming that its student population, attracted into the city for study careers in its HE centres and by the perspective of living albeit for a short period of time in a 'dream place', represented acquired social capital breathing new life into the city's socioeconomic fabric, as a young community of creative consumers and producers. These authors underlined how the potential for their stabilisation as new residents could be at stake if dwelling opportunities would be hindered by a growth of tourist demand for homes, and if the city offered no attractive employment opportunities for this population segment. This is indeed what happened in the following years with the explosion of platform hospitality, and the relentless erosion of alternatives to tourism in the job market.

Venice has four public HE institutions (Ca' Foscari University, IUAV, the Venice International University, and the Fine Arts Academy), hosting a total student population of around 30,000 students and researchers. The data allowing to estimate the numbers of *fuori sede* (henceforth FS), that is, students temporarily living in the city during their study period but original from other locations, are meagre, as the greatest part of this population does not register as resident (voter) and is invisible to local statistics. However, several studies conducted in the last 30 years suggest a trend of modest growth of the HE students residing in the HC. Bonifacio *et al.* (1995) estimated 7700 FS students living in the whole municipality in the mid-1990s, mostly accommodated in private rooms and flats situated in the HC (73%). Mantovan *et al.* (2004) estimated that 23.5% of the student population found a residence in the city (79.4% of these in the HC), and Lazzarini's (2018) estimations indicate approximately 6000 student dwellings in the HC, catering for a potential demand of 10,000 students.

This is a remarkable number if compared with official population data, the most recent of which put the mark at 49,000 in 2023: the FS student population may well make for the 10% of the actual population of the HC. The most recent data (collected by the two major *athenea* in 2020 and handed over to the authors) corroborate the concerns about the

rising hindrances faced by students in residential decisions: the 24.1% of students found accommodation in the mainland areas in 2020, while just the 10.1% of them indicated that location as their preference. This process is recognisable also through general demographic statistics: the population exodus from the HC in 2008–2018 has been aggravated by a higher rate of abandonment of the 30–34-year-old population segment, precisely the young working age adults that to some extent the city was able to retain previously after completing their education.

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on the factors that in the last years may have lopsided the relationship between pull and push factors for graduates at the end of their study cycle. In this sense, living in a city that is increasingly under the pressure of the visitor economy, and the multiple negotiations of life spaces, opportunities for integration and access to housing that this involves, is our key domain of engagement.

METHODOLOGY

Our original data collection methodology is based on a survey with a sample of former FS students. These included people who finished their studies in the early to mid-1990s to people in their 20s who finished their studies recently, and either stayed in the city after the completion of their studies, or eventually left. Participants have been recruited through personal connections of the two researchers and a call to universities' alumni fora in Facebook, followed by further snowballing contacts and seeking for a certain balance in terms of age, gender, education domains and status of 'leaver' or 'stayer'. The size of the sample has been subject to rules of sufficiency (Young & Casey 2019): we stopped interviewing when we felt we had sufficient and abundant material to develop our narrative, and when the life stories collected started to repeat themselves.

Eventually the turnout has been of 28 interviewees (a short profiling of participants, ordered by the date in which the interviews were taken, is included in Table 1). The average length of the period spent in Venice as FS

Table 1. *Profile of participants.*

R#	Gender	Period living in VCE while studying	Currently living	R#	Gender	Period living in VCE while studying	Currently living
1	M	1991–1997	Venice HC	15	F	2007–2010	Rest of Veneto region
2	F	1993–1999	Rest of Veneto region	16	F	1994–2000	Venice HC
3	F	1993–2000	Venice HC	17	M	1992–2003	Venice HC
4	F	1991–1997	Other country in the EU	18	F	2013–2016	Rest of Veneto region
5	M	1987–1994	Other Italian regions	19	F	1995–2005	Other country rest of the world
6	M	1987–1993	Other Italian regions	20	M	2017–2019	Rest of Veneto region
7	M	1995–2000	Other Italian regions	21	M	2018–2021	Venice HC
8	F	2013	Other Italian regions	22	F	2007–2013	Venice HC
9	F	1991–1996	Other country in the EU	23	M	2007–2010	Rest of Veneto region
10	F	2001–02 and 2006–08	Other country in the EU	24	F	2011–2016	Other country in the EU
11	M	2008–2015	Venice HC	25	F	2000–2007	Other country in the EU
12	M	1986–1991	Venice HC	26	M	2005–2011	Venice HC
13	F	1987–1993	Venice HC	27	F	-	Venice HC
14	M	1990–1997	Venice HC	28	F	2016–2019	Venice HC

students in our sample is of 5 years, which corresponds approximately to the duration of a bachelor's course until the 1990s or to the duration of a 3-year BA plus a 2-year MA introduced by the Bologna Agreement regulations in 1999. These periods tend to become shorter over our study period, as the nationwide application of the Bologna Agreement has facilitated segmenting undergraduate and postgraduate formation between different universities.

Not everybody lived in the city itself for their whole period as students; in a few cases, the actual period spent in the city is very short, and some of the participants took time off between successive cycles. Thus, the periods of residence registered in our sample ranges from a few months to 11 years. In relation to their studies, participants were asked to indicate the first degree registered, even when they have accumulated more than one. Academic specialisations reflect the variety of the offer at Venetian universities. Six participants studied economics and management (all at bachelor

level), nine humanistic disciplines either at BA or MA level or both, 11 architecture and planning studies, from BA to PhD, and a smaller group of 2, art disciplines.

The survey consisted of a 'closed answers' section, referring namely to demographics, life courses in Venice during the period of studies and afterwards, and residential experiences; and of an open interview section, arranged along discussion themes (differentiated for stayers and leavers): (i) the process of landing in the city, exploring it and making social and affective bonds with it; (ii) dwelling and the projections of home on social bonding and the navigation of the venetian community; (iii) decisions to leave or stay at the end of the study period: determining factors, regrets, opportunities that made a difference; (iv) current perceptions of Venice as a place to live in, personal aspirations to this regard and major challenges. While scores attributed to the closed answers section allowed some ordering of the main characteristics

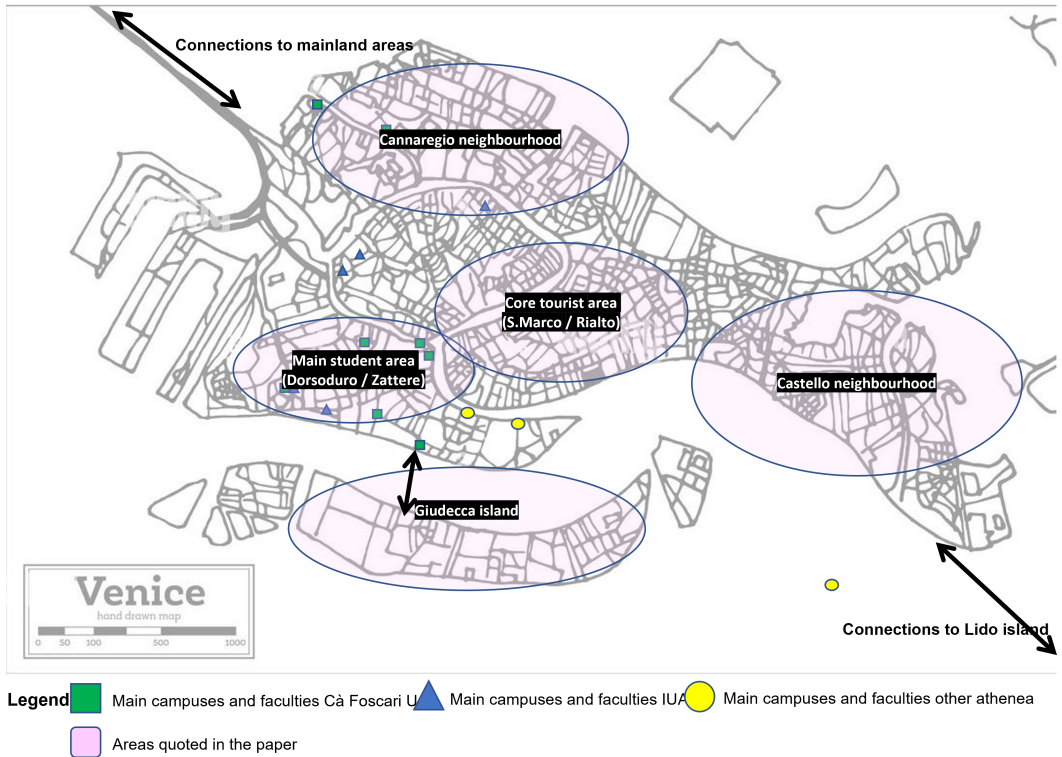


Figure 1. Students' geography of Venice's Historical Centre. Source: own elaboration.

of the sample in terms of their residency in Venice and the most valued trigger factors in their decisions, responses to the open section were used to develop a memoir of their experiences matching against their profile. Interviews were transcribed and the material rearranged thematically along the above topics, with no use of software. Participants have signed consent forms in line with GDPR regulations and their identity is anonymised through coding in the presentation of results below. To orient the reader in what follows, in Figure 1 we include a map of the HC of Venice including the location of the various places mentioned.

RESULTS

The data collected depict a choral narrative, bringing to the fore common patterns, elements of contrast and stratification, and changes over time in regard to making roots,

inhabiting and staying in or leaving at the end of the study period. These included reflections on dwelling experiences and on private homes as a gateway both for forming bonds with inmates and their acolytes beyond the community of HE students, or for becoming integrated in neighbourhood life and the wider socio-economic fabric of the city.

The majority of participants agree about fair features of their homes, although six of them report lousy housing conditions 'being the norm'. Yet, the closer the period spent in Venice gets to actuality, the more we heard about deteriorating experiences, as good houses became unaffordable or went to the short-term rental market. R22 for example recalls living with other 11 people in an open space with "no heating, no windows and it snowed inside", and R23 moved out of his first apartment mainly because there was "moisture on the walls, broken windows on the stairs, and in another apartment of the building a lead wall fell".

There seems to be agreement about rental prices exacted being average or on the high side. Prices in the late 1980s and 1990s would compare well with what they would pay in other cities in those times. R10 recalls that even in the early 2000s, a room in Venice would cost less than in Barcelona, which at that time was booming as a haven for Erasmus students. Yet, most of our participants agree on the fact that you paid a lot for what you got in terms of quality, following with considerations of what could have been 'fair' in relation to the overall high prices of the city. R21 and R26 needed to rearrange their apartment to host one more resident in order to meet the expenses, the first one by sub-letting the common room when the rent was raised, the latter by dividing a room in two through the self-construction of a wall.

The experience of sharing the dwelling was reported as excellent or altogether positive for most participants, only three of them reporting bad experiences. Most participants were sharing home with other FS students. The reported relationships with landlords are varied, with negative experiences taking the lead. Episodes of intrusiveness and abusive control have been reported, also in relation to co-dwellers that were playing the role of middlepersons. Even when landlords behaved correctly, a grain of diffidence and control is repeatedly disclosed, or the incapacity to keep boundaries in these relationships. R6 was sent out from his rented apartment for a month when the landlord was renovating the house: "a common practice when you don't have a contract". R24 reports that she only met the landlord when she "had to pray her to let us stay", as "she wanted to evict us two months before our graduation" in order to transform the house in a tourist rental, in 2016. The pressure from the transformation of student housing into short-term rentals for tourists is reported as exacerbating in the late 2010s: R26 remembers how he has "always been kicked out [of the places he lived], because those houses always became something else", and R22 regrets that her former house is now "restored and rented to a Chinese agency for wedding montages".

Digging deeper in the process of making roots in the city, for some that was inscribed in the engagement beyond the university

landscape, but at the same time highly influenced by the field of studies and by the personality of mentors and colleagues. Some of our participants actively pursued an exploration discovery of the city upon arrival, and many report this as a process facilitated by the nature of the city fabric. However, not everybody was interested to seek for an active engagement, and some participants acknowledge a certain gap between getting adjusted and comfortable with university life in the city and integrating to the venetian society. As outsiders, it proves easier to connect with fellow transients: for instance, R21 claims to never having developed an affection for the city in itself, and feels "more attached to situations and people [he] met".

The path and scope of this exploration is allegedly influenced by the location of the dwelling. Living in peripheral areas of the city (Castello, Cannaregio) in some stage of their stay, some of our participants were faced with a strong sense of community that the most central areas did not provide. R22 recalls indeed that the major changes in her relation to the city took place once moved to the Giudecca island, and R26 highlights "a feeling of belonging which is particular, deeper than anywhere else I lived, a strong social bond". R19 recall the same feelings about Cannaregio in the 1990s, where she experienced a sort of pleasant 'village mood', which can be confronted with the opposite feeling of R16 for the Rialto area, where "there was no neighbourhood, it was already ravaged by tourism, even 15 years ago you already couldn't perceive any social tissue". Those who went directly for dwelling locations in university areas in the Dorsoduro-Zattere campus area had a more direct exposure with student life and mostly mingled with colleague students, predominantly FS as them. R22 goes as far as saying that "at the beginning, living in the student bubble was an obstacle to create contacts with the 'real' city", underscoring the sometimes-thick boundaries between the student community and the autochthonous social environment.

In this sense, participation in culture and sports seems to have played an important role to reach out to the locals. Local basketball teams did this trick: R17 recalled having bonded in this way with Venetians, "of all social

extractions and ideologies”. A similar role is played by the *remiere*, the glorious venetian rowing clubs. The location of such entities in areas removed from the beaten track of the student community also played a role in this sense, helping strangers to get a different feel of the ‘authentic’ city and its community, around a practice that is closely connected with its unique geography. The relation with the lagoon landscape has constituted, for the participants who experienced it, a strong factor of rooting, that R26 described as his real “epiphany of venetianness”. Volunteering in local benefits played a similar role; for R3, collaborating at the municipal migrants’ office has been a way to get to know a different social reality of the city, and equally relevant, which may have influenced her future professional career in the academia.

Political participation has been reported as well to have been a key vehicle to make bonds, which in some cases were translated to an assumption of responsibilities in matters of local concern. Relatedly, some express a deep regret for what they consider a political debacle of the city since the mid-2000. The interest for local politics is apparently more present in the most recent experiences, probably a sign of a rising concern about the city’s survival: for R22, “opening the eyes on the city’s problematics and getting passionate about the city itself as

a living organism” became one of the major reasons for remaining in Venice. Activism in feminist collectives is reported by R27 and R25. As the latter explains, “sticking posters and the like are experiences that make you live the city in a different way, they put you in touch with different people and prompt you out of the student bubble”.

In the last part of the interviews, we enquired about decisions to leave or stay at the end of the study period. For those who decided to remain in the city as workers and residents, the enchantment for this city and the connections created during the study period, the perspectives of getting a good job which would allow affording the high costs of a residence in Venice, or the expectations of parenthood and the perception of Venice as an ideal place to raise children, emerge as the most important questions noted (Figure 2). Yet, many long-term stayers also report a perception of deterioration of the quality of residential life in the city that could eventually lead them to revise their choices.

Among stayers, we could identify approximately two subgroups: those who have developed deep ties with the city during their experience as students, which became their elective choice for a life project; and those who have been blessed with favourable material conditions, such as a work opportunity or

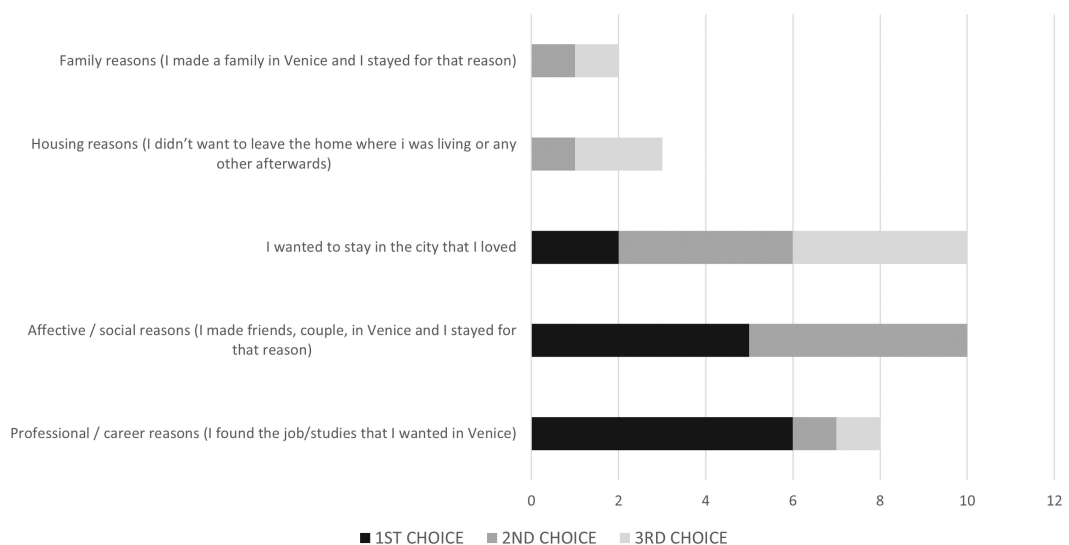


Figure 2. Reasons cited for staying in Venice after the completion of the studies. Source: own elaboration.

a convenient accommodation, eventually a decisive factor for an unplanned permanence in the city. For R13, a job opportunity after graduation made her decide to stay, but an owned property has been the enabling factor. For R14, being able to access an affordable rental through his expertise with the housing regulations, was key. In the late 1990s, the municipality opened a funding stream for new young residents, subsidising a share of the purchase cost. The tender was directed to young married couples or “committing to marry”; thus, access to affordable housing for him was also an important step in family life. “We paid for a home in Venice – albeit in the then degraded western Dorsoduro area – what we’d pay elsewhere in the region”. R17, who finished his studies 2003 and has been living in Venice intermittently ever since, draws a similar portrait of his reasons for staying: in the aftermath of his student experience, affective and social reasons, combined with a lucky find of “a rental flat at a good price”, helped him overcome the feeling that “professionally there was no future” for him in town. In the first years after his PhD, he recalls “struggling a lot to stay living in Venice”, to the point of depicting it as “an obsession... a magnet, it’s the only city where I feel at home”.

Things get more complicated with our younger subjects, whose career development is still less defined and also less promising for global reasons, or even with members of social strata who are unable to access affordable housing. Housing ownership in Italy is increasingly related to the capital value of inherited assets then on salary levels (Filandri *et al.* 2020), and in Venice this is further exacerbated by the average high price values. In their interviews, R22, R26, R27 and R28 shared the concern that the housing–work relationship would turn unfavourable as they enter adult working age (and would end up fleeing, just like R25). For this group of younger interviewees, the dwelling–tourism nexus gains more relevance in their answers about the perspective on staying in the city, as tourism is perceived as a direct competitor for their chances to access decent housing in a context of precarious working conditions.

R26 also explicitly mentioned increasing touristification as a push factor for his eventual departure, not just in economic terms, but also as it undermines quality of life, which is,

in turn, one of the main reasons why he is still there. In his words, what is “really kicking me out of Venice against my will, and is now really getting me teed off, is mass tourism”. In 2019 he was maturing the decision to leave, then the pandemics made him have second thoughts: he described the last 2 years as “a kind of ‘state of grace’ of the city”, which “certainly, took us away work opportunities, but on the other hand it reminded me once more how cool it is to live here, going around by boat, rowing without water-taxi etc...so I decided to stay some years more”. Still, he feels uncertain about the future, not so much for his chances of employment but rather because he fears that his landlord would eventually evict him.

For R27, the major threat to her permanence is economic: as she explains, she lives “in a super-favourable condition, absolutely out of the market, and if I would have to turn to the real estate market to look for a house to rent or buy, it will be totally impossible for me to stay”. Encounters and relationships are then not just a leeway to making bonds with the city and its daily life, but in experiences like that of R27 also configure a network of solidarity and a source of subsidiary informal welfare. Without such connections and benevolent friends, life in the tourist city would be certainly harder, even unbearable to someone.

Conversely, concerns with the possibility of developing a life career in a place offering far more opportunities and diversity dominated among ‘leavers’, even in the case in which departure has been painful. Most leavers did not have the interest or the practical opportunities to develop the rooting that would eventually lead them to find a way to stay in the city (Figure 3). Anyway, the housing affordability issue came out strongly especially for the more recent graduates, in the face of the shrinking labour opportunities. Most participants in this group, and increasingly so the recent graduates, observed an irreversible degradation of the city, including the quality of community life, and did not see a future for themselves in it.

Except for a group of participants who were not really considering options to stay and had been naturally driven to continue their education or professional career elsewhere, precarious working conditions have been a direct push factor for most leavers. For

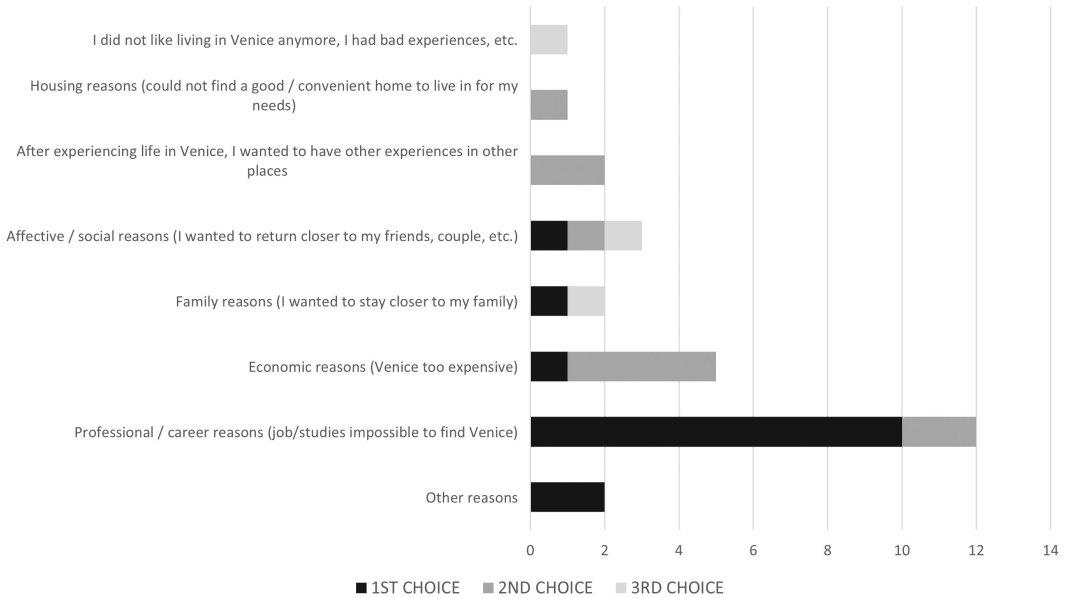


Figure 3. Reasons cited for eventually deciding to leave residence from Venice. Source: own elaboration.

R25, for example “the wages were too low in relation to the cost of the city, and jobs were always intermittent”. She had been working both in the restoration sector (mostly without a contract), and in her own field of expertise (architecture), but after trying for a few years she finally “couldn’t handle it anymore: between what I paid for rent and living and what I gained, at that point it was more convenient to do nothing and go back home with my parents... if living costs 700€ and your salaries amount to just that, you get tired of all that”. Also for R10 professional aspirations were stifled, which also meant that she could not support herself anymore in Venice, although she did not have a problem with the housing cost. She recalls that on the long run her “gaze was different, not anymore that of a student but that of an adult who had to move through (sometimes degrading) professional circles. I had to terminate traumatically this empathic relationship with the city, I was driven away. I had to give up my daily life in Venice, the friends, and this took a long time for me to assume”.

To all our leavers we asked whether they are still considering a possible return to the city, or what should change to make them take this decision. Responses also vary considerably in

relation to the motives for leaving and their current professional status; the general sense of the responses is that although this could have been in the back of their heads for a long time, pragmatically that will not happen. R10, for example, told us that she would love to go back and affirm herself professionally, and is still following closely the evolution of her professional field in Venice, but she is aware that opportunities are scarce. R19 still recalls the quality of everyday life in Venice as unique. However, besides the hindrances of housing and working, she also points out the lack of diversity of the city as a possible constrain: “having a daughter who is not white and is used to be in an English school, where bilingual or trilingual kids, with different skin colours, is the norm... I guess that for her the passage to a place that is still very white, very Italian, would not be easy”. R25 also presents this lack of diversity as problematic, as she recalls how in Paris, where she now lives, “even if life is tougher, there are many more opportunities to understand some mechanisms of the world, that in Venice are kind of muffled... you could get in touch with a lot more different people (...) and not because they are tourists”.

Indeed, this perception of unrealness, for some one of the main attractiveness of the

city, could turn undesirable. For example, also R23 “often think[s] of coming back” but highlights his need of “living in a place with all the characteristics of a city”. When asked to further expand on his claim, he gave us a clear picture of how the short-term city, besides its well-known housing issues, could inhibit the social reproduction of the urban organism: “I would like Venice to be more ‘real’, populated not just in the summer or during the big events. I don’t know how it was in the 60’s or 70’s when there were more residents, but I think that a situation like that would be very interesting as an experience. The feeling [when I was in Venice] was that it was becoming more of place of transiency, and that’s why it seemed to me harder to create something there, also at a professional level”.

DISCUSSION

The overarching question raised in this material is the codetermination of aspirations to access to the work and housing markets. Some common elements can be traced along the evolution of Venice as an ‘attractive’ place, and not only for tourists. On one hand, houses have become scarcer and more expensive over the years, in the context of the tourist hyper-specialisation of the venetian economic and physical fabric. It is only in interviews with participants that have finished their studies in the last 8–10 years, that the question of having to compete for dwelling and services with the visitor population is raised strongly. On the other hand, the professional landscape that is proper of a world class destination, an art city and a regional capital, has been rarefying in the HC, also in relation to the demise of public institutions.

Thus, in the beginning of our study period, the majority of our participants indicate that it might have been relatively easier to find an affordable decent housing even while studying, and therefore after the completion of the studies, when the city would still offer good work opportunities and decent salaries to make housing options affordable. Even in the large variety of situations encountered, the attachment to the city – built during the

study experiences by some at the margins of the ‘student bubble’, in a landscape which invited exploration and bonding – justified seeking jobs that would allow one’s stabilisation to build a professional and social life. As time went by, striking this balance has become increasingly awkward, as housing and work opportunities got scarcer. Venice continues to date to offer plenty of jobs in the tourism and cultural sector, but they tend to be low paid and precarious, hardly compatible with a life project in the city for ambitious and educated workers. In perspective, the predominance of professional factors reported among reasons for residential decisions, for both stayers and leavers, is arguably related with the centrality of this element in evaluations of life courses for the population segment targeted: high-skilled, highly educated young adults, and possibly, for the most part, backed up by substantial economic capacity. These considerations are even more relevant if we consider the continuous cuts to public funding for education and the growing internationalisation of Venetian athenaeums, which has transformed the internal composition of the student community (Censis, 2021).

In the second place, dwelling and homing experiences during the study period emerged as strong factors in building an attachment to the city and its community, which could explain why even in an awkward and uncertain perspective of fulfilling personal aspirations, a share of our participants expressed reluctance to leave. While positive experiences of inhabiting the city as students show to have had a decisive weight in future decisions, the process of finding an ‘ideal home’ or sharing this ambition within groups of people serendipitously befriended through an initial cohabitation, could be a powerful channel to navigate the city’s physical and social landscape to the points of making bonds with it. As in Blunt and Sheringham (2019), the dwelling experience extends to the experience of the city, determining a process of ‘domestication of the urban’, which in Venice – as noted by various participants – is heightened by the porous boundaries between interior and external spaces. However, the increasingly impervious path for finding affordable homes becomes a vector of destabilisation in

regard to residential choices. The extreme rarefication of flats or rooms for rent and the perspectives of being obliged to share, even when entering the job market as young adults, are offsetting factors when evaluating the possibility of staying in Venice, especially for the younger cohort. The heightened condition of 'temporary dwellers' of a student population progressively more mobile between different cycles of HE of education could also have played a role in making it harder for newcomers to root in the city, besides allowing landlords to curtail the cycle of rent extraction.

Aside from home, the process of rooting in the city is also constituted as an assemblage of encounters, engagements, concerns for the local community and its institutions. In the past, FS students felt they had evaded the student bubble when they broke in local circles, be it sports, or cultural activism, or just a collection of friends inviting them over to venetian houses for dinner parties; or engaging in political activities through which they could share their concerns with that of a 'resisting' community. While that very community is subject to a relentless process of erosion, its fundamental weaknesses come to be exposed as well – too undifferentiated, too thin, too disenchanted with the development of the city to exert a binding force for mobile newcomers. In this sense we found quite telling the evolution in relation to parenthood, among mothers in particular: from an enthusiastic perception of Venice 'as a great place to raise kids' (also incorporating an appreciation of its cultural prominence) to the more recent acknowledgement of the ambivalence of the 'small scale', a safe environment on one side, an unbearably limiting one on the other.

Thus, there seems to have been an important change in perception from Venice as an inclusive place for newcomers, to an exclusive and excluding place, where you are only welcome, and for a very short time, if you have money to spend in it. Even among our long-term stayers, who have witnessed the deterioration of the quality of life in the city – and, relatedly, of its cultural, political and social dynamism – this could lead to a decision to leave after many years. For our younger participants, the feeling of living in

a tourist city (with all its hindrances) tends to prevail over the enduring enchantment of the landscape, which they are prone to relegate to structuring element of their 'student bubble' experience, and it is likely to drive them away eventually. Perceptions in this sense are grim: Venice is not a place to 'come back to', however attractive, and most our participants are utterly sceptical about a tide change in the future. The ensuing changes in constituency and social capital hint at an endogenous erosion of the city's capacity to provide for itself and arrest such trends, fathoming a catastrophic evolution by which Venice would become exclusively a tourist attraction and would lose any dimension of urban community.

These results relate back to our conceptual departure points: in relation to life course theories, the characteristics of the local job market tend to present an unfavourable condition for the retention of the student population, while the porosity of the city and the general appreciation of its attractiveness still seem to work the other way around. Yet the weight of this factor is thinning towards the end of the reference period, and particularly in relation to the growing touristification of the urban environment, which further disrupts the housing and labour markets. Current residential choices seem then strongly context dependent rather than dependent on individual trajectories and aspirations.

From this point of view, town–gown relations become skewed: claims in favour of the realisation of a campus city are not actively supported by actual policies, so that Venice could still be considered a 'city with universities' rather than a 'university city' (Russo & Van Den Berg 2004; Savino 2016). Market trends nudge towards the short-term city model, and poor housing and work opportunities tend to expel rather than retain the former student population. From being feared as gentrifiers, students increasingly are 'gentrified' and crowded out from an HC increasingly devoted to the tourist monoculture. Urban resilience is therefore challenged by the relentless expulsion of the population segment that represents a potential antidote to its tourist destiny. It could then be argued that what affects the most Venice's future scenarios is the mobility regimes in which

the city is entangled: the high exposure to different mobilities flows, namely the extremely short-term of incoming tourists but also the privileged medium-stay mobilities of digital nomads and international students, exerts a pressure on the urban environment that tends to out-compete the city's retention capacity by frustrating the residential aspirations of the student community.

CONCLUSIONS

This piece of research has provided an examination of the construction and evolution of a student city, embodied through the choices, experiences and negotiations of its student community, and contextualised against the canvas of a specific trajectory of place change driven by touristification. In that way, we contribute to the broader debate on place resilience, encapsulated by the loss of alternative development pathways and sources of human and social capital under the pressure of tourism mobilities. The case of Venice, a city for which the attraction and retention of 'new blood' could be one of the only options left to deviate from a grim future as an exclusively tourist place, but also one in which the challenges for stabilisation faced by graduates are hardest, may be an extreme one; yet the trends observed are today recurrent many other European cities.

As opposed to the literature that analyses the role of student populations in universities cities as agents of urban change and gentrifiers, we have instead focused on their role as mobile subjects and source of human and social capital. This collective represents constantly around the 10% of the dwellers in the HC, in a 'revolving door' social structure, becoming enmeshed with the production of urban space for a short period. A part of them transitions to become long-term residents, but the share of those who in spite of their intentions to stay are forced to move residence at the end of their study period is at all accounts increasing. In our analysis, we directly related the rising shares of leavers to the disruptive transformations of the housing and labour market under the relentless pressure of tourism. This is nuanced as a form of social exclusion through residential change,

by no means comparable to that of vulnerable communities – we are indeed talking about a (mostly) privileged population that has options and mobility skills to find their way elsewhere –, yet uncovering a sensible issue of untapped potential and being stuck in path dependence that needs more policy attention in the urban policy agendas.

Similar issues have been debated extensively in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing the vulnerability of places over-reliant on tourist mobilities. It was suggested that the temporary release from tourism pressure would facilitate some kind of reset, a unique opportunity to realign local development models with the imperatives of the fight against climate change (Ioannides & Gyimóthy 2020) and explore avenues of degrowth (Higgins-Desbiolles & Everingham 2022). Again, the case of Venice is quite telling in this sense: although the hindrances related to the pandemic were not revealed as a key change factor in our interviews – if anything, most participants noted that it was great to enjoy life in a city temporary emptied out of the usual frenzy – the previous problems with overtourism, bordering emergency situations in peak days, are back for good and so is the reactivation of the pressure from the temporarily idle short-term rental market. During the pandemic, the city administration launched in agreements with landlords to widen the offer for higher education students while the usual visitor markets were absent, but the following rebound of tourism arrivals has left it dead letter – a far from unpredictable outcome. In the last months, an initiative has been launched by a cultural foundation, aiming to attract 'digital nomads' in the city and so counter depopulation trends, however, with poor results. Yet a real integral strategy to rebalance the weight of the tourism economy and make space for alternative development pathways is missing, and does not even seem to be in the radar for a city government bent between the increasing political and social irrelevance of the HC and the facility with which tourist attraction is cashed in by an ample range of economic interests.

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