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A VENETO PERSPECTIVE: LEARNING FROM DIVERSITY

Maria Chiara Tosi

Because of the many substantial differences between the two territories, looking at the Zona Franca from a Veneto Region perspective might seem to be a contradiction in terms. While the Barcelona metropolitan area is one of the most dense and concentrated in Europe, the Veneto region is one of the most dispersed and extensively urbanized. Despite this, a more in-depth knowledge of the relation between productive patterns and the territory in different territorial contexts, such as that of the Veneto region, can help to better address the on-going transformation of the Zona Franca in a way that could help it to be economically sturdy, socially inclusive and environmentally resilient.

The central plain of Veneto, dotted with a few small cities, several urban centres, numerous small towns and villages, many medium-size industrial areas, and finally many isolated houses scattered all over the territory, is an area of sloping land between the Alps and the Venetian lagoon, characterized by an extensive system of infrastructures and a pervasive process of humanization of the landscape. During the last decades of the 20th century, new ways of living and patterns of settlement emerged in this region, distancing themselves from the traditional image of the city or town. For this reason it is necessary to think of these territories not as a city to be qualified by an adjective (dispersed, fragmented, scattered, etc.), but rather as more vague 'inhabited territories'. These are regions where people live, work and spend their leisure time in a multiplicity of scattered widespread locations, and where

the traditional city is only one of the urban patterns, and not necessarily the principal one. Territories, societies and economies that also include towns and cities, but that are not culturally dominated by them: these territories embody their own leadership.

In the Veneto region, dispersion is an enduring characteristic, traditionally rooted in the territory and its history. Paradoxically, the dispersion of houses and factories that occurred throughout the last three decades has led to a densification of this phenomenon, taking place in a territory that was already clearly moulded by human hands, where an extensive infrastructure of waterways, roads, underground networks, and urban patterns was built over time, and has become predisposed to continuously accommodate new uses. In particular, focusing on some productive areas, we can see how innovative activities, new facilities and social practices arise within these spaces, changing them profoundly: the addition of new opportunities for artisanal works, collective services and facilities such as kindergartens, parks for town festivals, playgrounds and informal areas for games for children, canteens, spaces for open-air sports, wooded areas, bicycle paths connecting neighbouring towns. At the same time new ways of dealing with energy consumption and water management are arising, strongly contributing to change in these areas. These include the construction of water lamination tanks to collect the rain that falls on the vast impermeable surfaces, covered by photovoltaic panels, capable of limiting the evaporation of the water in order to reuse it in the closed-loop system of businesses or for irrigating nearby farmland.

In general, we can say that these activities and facilities are created in productive areas because they provide a large amount of surface area (both paved and green, according to the planning standard law). As a whole, they are an indication of some profound changes in the practices and ways of interpreting the territory, where the productive areas

represent an opportunity for new inclusive contexts, spaces with amenities to re-imagine.

Those characteristics, together with the capacity to withstand the recent economic and global financial crisis, albeit with decreased performance compared to the previous decades, move us to devote renewed attention to the organization of productive areas. Generally speaking, the Veneto region settlements, which are characterized by an important diversity even within productive areas, provide evidence that it is possible to produce and sell goods, take advantage of collective facilities, and spend leisure time without major conflicts arising between these different kinds of activities. Today coexistence and the compatibility of various functions within the same production area have improved the social inclusion and liveability of the region, and the presence of different actors encourages innovation and creativity in increasingly competitive fields.

Can anything be learned from the Veneto region experience? Perhaps this case study can contribute something about how to find a new form of diversity, how to make compatible different functions that articulate space, time and practices. This approach could enrich the huge number of open spaces that characterize the Zona Franca, offering the city new opportunities for collective activities that need large areas with good public-transport connectivity, where for example noise at night need not be a problem. At the same time this kind of approach can present an opportunity for young people to find space for new artisanal forms of production, which can complement and enrich the typical standardized processes of industrial production.

To sum up, learning from the industrial areas of the Veneto could result in focusing on mixed-use areas, in a more innovative and socially inclusive way than at present, and with a multi-level relationship with the surrounding territory.