Wellbeing and the urban environment
Venice and Mestre

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Postgraduate thesis
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How have post-industrial cities affected people’s wellbeing?

I looked in general at the influence of post-industrial cities’ circumstances on their citizens’ lives.
How have post-industrial cities affected people's wellbeing?

**Approach**

Find the general way post-industrial cities' context have affected people's wellbeing through:

- Desk research
- Interviews with experts

An Italian doctor and Professor at UNIITO who has studied how the socio-economic level affects people's life causing disparities in the population. "Disputed Neighbourhoods" by Mantovan, C. and Ostanel, E.

**Values crisis**

- Globalisation
- Immigration
- Marginalisation
- Anorexic society
- Quartered cities

**Fear of the different**

- Socio-economic imbalance in health - wellbeing disparities

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Quartered cities
Globalisation
Value crisis
Fear of the different
Disparities
Marginalisation
Anorexic society
Quartered cities
Studying and understanding a specific context is fundamental to design a city that is made for its citizens. In this way the outcomes are costum-made for that reality (Gehl Architects, 2015). For this reason, I decided to focus on a singular city - Mestre - for my Master Project.
Understand Mestre’s specific context

There are common principles to all the post-industrial cities, but which are the specific factors of a context that contribute to worsening or improve marginalisation and wellbeing? I decided to study Mestre, a place next to mine, as case study for my research. Mestre is a post-industrial city known to have a bad urban structure, crime issue, a big number of immigrants and marginal people.
A report explains that “the most worrying aspect of the Venetian population’s health is certainly its imbalance related to the division of the population into different socio-economic levels. [...] This evidence requires the increased commitment of health and civil authorities and should stimulate a coordinated action to contrast inequalities that actively involves more institutions and more solutions.” (Simonato, 2015, p. 2)
Approach

**Understand Mestre’s specific urban and social context**

*Desk research*
*Interviews with experts*

**Observation**
*Talking with people*

**Figure out which are Mestre’s specific needs**
**Past**

**Industrialisation**
especially after II world war

**Venice had not space to grow**

**Expansion in the mainland (Mestre)**
rapid Demographic increase from 10,000 to 200,000

**“bi-polar city”**
Mestre is at the same time both a city and the Venice’s suburb
social, cultural and political differences with Venice

**Disorientation**

**Rapid and messy urban development**
Quantity instead of quality

**No more balance between city and countryside**

**Loss of symbols and traditions, since now**

**Only people who could not afford something better stayed in Mestre and in its worst districts**
1980 people moved in the surrounding countryside

**Present**

**Early thoughts**

**Accessibility**

**Now marginal groups and immigrants live in the worst areas**
especially Piave neighbourhood - train station area

**Different behaviour**

**Degradation**

**Marginal and immigrants as scapegoats for the city and area’s issues**

**Fear**
Observation
Talking with people

Taking time to understand people’s use of public space is fundamental for a positive design outcome.
Gehl Architects
Open market

Understand Mestre’s specific context

Observation

Grey → Repetitiveness

Nothing to do

No green

No people

Plants

Stands

Stuff to watch/DO

More people around

Movement

Colours

Natural surveillance
Parks

Understand Mestre's specific context

Observation
Fear and perceptions
Urban regeneration projects (M9 district)

EMPTY

NOT TRANSITIONAL

DETACHED FROM THE CONTEXT

NO GREENERY

NO SHADOW
Urban regeneration projects (via Poerio)

People on NOT overdesign seats

Shade

Transitional space
Full of people

Natural trait

Urban regeneration projects (Anda Hostel)

Places to chill
Not overdesigned

Observation

Understand Mestre’s specific context
Bus and tram stops

Understand Mestre's specific context
Observation
I explicated the main insights of the citizens’ engagement reporting some people – with fake personal data - that are representative of the context. The purpose was to make the understanding of who are the Mestre’s “characters” easier. Indeed Gerry Grams - the Glaswegian architect I interviewed - explained that to design inclusive spaces it is fundamental to understand who are the users of a city.

**Luisa is an 83 years old local lady**

- No identification with the city
- Walk for a purpose (ex. shopping)
- Go to the park with shade-giving trees
- Do not attend empty places or where there are not local people
- Afraid of homeless and immigrants, she thinks that they ruined the city from how it was
- Knowing them can help to make her feel less scared

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**Anjan is a 42 owner of a kebab take-away in Piave neighbourhood**

- He is scared to go out in the night because of “the Moroccan drug dealers and homeless”
- They fault degradation
- He feels neither a Mestre’s citizens nor a Bengali
- He liked a lot the interventions to improve the aesthetic of the city
- He feels discriminated because of his origin

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**Alex and Melanie are 36 years old tourist**

- They stay in the Piave hostel
- They are afraid of the drug dealers who bothered them
- The receptionist told them that the drug dealers do not hurt anyone
- They were quite disappointed because in Mestre there is nothing to see except for the main square

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**Giulia is a 23 years old Italian waitress in Piave neighbourhood**

- She would like that area to be nicer because she that it will bring more “respectable” people there to feel less scared to go outside
- She avoids immigrants and homeless because she is scared
- She do not hang out in Mestre in the night because it is empty and scary

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**Martin is an East European homeless**

- He stays in Piave area because there are many facilities for him and its accessibility
- He become depressed and affected by mental health issues
- He is afraid of the drug dealers
- He has some behaviour that are not common and considered uncivil, so other people avoid him.
Understand Mestre’s specific context

Talking with people

Wish of urban renewal

No belonging

Fear of some specific groups of people

Nothing to see and do in the city

Fear in some specific places and situations

Areas that are a place to survive for others

Discrimination

The scheme is useful to realize in a visual way how the issues are shared between citizens independently from their socio-economic context, backgrounds or ethnic group.
**Interviews with experts**

- **Venice council for integration**
  - Knowing better each other can help to be less scared
  - Different is not dangerous
  - Through social mix
  - Facilities for marginal groups in the city centre, to encourage them to move to an area that is more attended by locals
  - Courses whose targets are people's issues instead of their social condition

- **Professor at IUAV, department of architectural and urban composition**
  - Urban strategies that can improve health and wellbeing in the citizens
  - Design dynamic streets and multifunctional spaces that bring to sharing, social interaction and integration through cultural mix.
  - The extension of wellbeing to all the city, not only to some parts.
  - Green spaces have a key role to determine health and wellbeing increasing interaction.

- **Architect and town planner in Glasgow**
  - How do you make a city that is inclusive? Not overdesign: let space develop during the time, do not design with a particular purpose in mind. Multifunctional and accessible spaces to different groups of people. Do not think only for some of them and understand who are the different groups of citizens.
  - Safety during day and night
  - Familiarity and memories increase the sense of belonging in the citizens.

**Desk research**

- **“Happy City” by Montgomery, C.**
  - How do you design a city that makes people feel happy? The two key points are greenery and socialisation.
  - Green interventions are connected also to low levels in crime rate, happiness, health and feeling of safety.
  - Therefore urban density has to correspond to plant density.
  - Proximity, involuntary attention, and plants complexity and daily exposure to green are necessary to make the interventions work.
  - All sizes of green are important to ensure the plants spread across the city.

- **“Disputed Neighbourhoods” by Mantovan, C. and Ostanel, E.**
  - To decrease the fear of the different, and the idea of marginal groups as scapegoats is necessary to encourage interaction through the social mix - “mixophilia” –. People from different ethnic group, social and economic level should know each other.
  - Councils should find citizens’ shared issues or needs, independently from their backgrounds, and provide common solutions. In this way, the connection through the population can be enforced.
Insights

Urban issues
- Degraded areas
- Mestre's ugliness
- Absence of sense of belonging (lack of symbols and traditions, ruin of natural traits)
- Criminality

Associated to Marginal groups Immigrants

= Scapegoats
Because they and their behaviour are different (uncivil...)

Fear

People do not mix

Marginalisation ← Disparities

How might we break this vicious cycle?

Encouraging integration (discouraging marginalisation) through Mixophilia (social mix, knowing each other) to Increase feeling of safety (fight the fear)

When and where do people feel afraid in Mestre?

Piave neighbourhood Night/dark hours Empty streets (no people around, or only people who seem dangerous) No familiarity

When and where Mestre is not alived or lived
When and where is Mestre lived and lived?
Survey

Understand Mestre’s specific context

PLANTS ABUNDANCE
PLANTS COMPLEXITY
VEN

VENICE PICTURE
SYMBOL

DENSITY

MESTRE’S TRANSITIONAL AREA

SAFETY
LIGHTS
PEOPLE
HMW make Mestre alive and lived through urban interventions that combine the findings?
Design response

Make Mestre an alive and lived city

how

Bringing people in public spaces and encouraging them to spend more time outside

how

Encouraging social mix in transitional/waiting spaces
Places inserted in the context that citizens involuntary frequent and where there is already casual people collision (social mix).

why

Tram and bus stops

Offering an experience
A structure at every bus or tram stops that people can experience. These interventions will be designed with the features I found that made people gather and enjoy while making the city alive and lived.

Accessibility
Everyone can go independently from their socio-economic level or background.

Widespread
Stops are everywhere around the city like a sort of symbol and they are familiar

Mestre’s need of symbols and familiarity
As links between different neighbourhoods
To increase social mix it is necessary to bring people outside their district. Design a common solution can increase integration rather than an intervention made only for the “worst” areas.

Take care of plants

Green

Plants density

Plants diversity

Spaces to add plants participation and ownership

Not overdesigned

Let them develop in the way people want let people use them as they prefer

Lights in the night

Seats

Shadow
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Luisa and Anjan are going to the bus stop, while Martin is looking for a shade-giving place where to sit. Alex and Melanie are walking around.

Luisa and Anjan reach the bus stop. Martin and the German couple notice it casually while they are walking and they decide to go and see it.
MULTIFUNCTIONALITY
- NOT OVERDESIGNED

LIGHTS
IN THE NIGHT

PLANTS
DIVERSITY

ADD
PLANTS

PLANTS
DENSITY

DYNAMISM

SHADOW

PLACES
TO SIT

INFROGRAPHIC
The four people arrive at the stop. There are already people who are enjoying the structure.

Martin sits under the shadow, the guys next to him start talking, the same happens for Luisa and Anjan even if Luisa has always been scared by the immigrants: the context is friendly and there are many people around so it seems safe. Alex and Melanie noticed a sign and go to read.
Luisa and Anjan take the same bus, they decide to sit nearby to finish the conversation about the plants. She feels a little bit less scared by immigrants and Anjan more integrated by the local community.

Martin decides to stay at the stop to enjoy the plants and the structure. He is very happy that someone talked to him today and he hopes that it will happen again.

Some day after they come back at the stop because they wanted to put their plants on the stop and they casually meet again and start talking.

Martin decides to come back to take care of the plants because he feels that the stop is also his property. He hopes also to meet other people again.
Alex and Melanie see on the sign a map with the indications regarding the other “green” bus stops around Mestre. There is also a QR code that shows the information online. They are surprised by the city that they considered ugly and without attractions. They decide to visit an other one that they find on the map.
Implementation

"I WOULD LOVE A PLACE AROUND WHERE TO CHILL AND SIT."

"THE GREEN SHOULD SPREAD AROUND"

"LOOK AT AUSTRIA AND ZAGREB."

"SOME NORMS TO INCREASE PLANTS DENSITY"

"THINK TO A VOLUNTARY SYSTEM TO TAKE CARE OF THE PLANTS"

"COOL! WHEN WILL THE WORKS START?"
Design your stop!

At every stop, there is a sign that shows a map and the explanation of the “Design you stop!” initiative. This latter consist of citizens themselves can design a bus or tram stop and send the concepts to the council that will arrange the realization. In this way, people will find across the city the bus and tram stops designed by themselves.

There are some guidelines to follow to ensure that the stops will have all the characteristics I found that are necessary to make a city alive and lived. The instructions can be found online or at the stop.

**Design your stop!**
Follow the given instructions and design a bus stop.

- Insert as many plants, vegetal walls and vegetal pavement as possible. If you can also think about free spaces for plants that can be added by the citizens in the future.
- Make sure there are spaces where people can sit.
- Make sure the structure or part of it is shade-giving.
- The stop has to be illuminated in the night.
- Try to design abstract and simple shapes that can be used in many different ways.
People can work together for example in community groups or as a school project - interacting -, or alone as a hobby.

The ideas can be sent to Mestre Council online or put inside mailboxes - accessibility - at the stops, for the ones who do not have a computer.

The council will check the concepts and provide their realization. Finally, Mestre will be full of many different bus stops that will increase the dynamism and green contamination.
Workshop
Experts feedbacks

**Venice council for integration**
- Interesting and modern idea
- There is a risk to offer sheltered and secluded places that can create conditions for the homeless to take over these spaces. As a result, citizens can feel insecure and unprotected.
- He suggested to make transparent structures to check the situation and avoid people to hide.

**Social scientist and psychologist**
- It seems a nice idea, certainly positive in a “grey” concrete area.
- She underlined that the main aspect of my project should be engagement with citizens. It is important that the initiative will be supported by at least a part of the residents. Then the care of the plants by the residents really takes place and therefore also the “social” purpose of the project is achieved - to increase the mixité and participation of the residents in the care of their territory -.
Future perspectives
Conclusion
Conclusion

The next step in this project can be to try to build two stops and let the “Design your stop” initiative begin.

A possible pitfall, in my opinion, is, as Alberto Favaretto said, that the structures will become “victims” of vandalism and illegal appropriation rather than public interaction points. After all, bringing more people outside increases natural surveillance discouraging illicit behaviour.

I had some difficulties in approaching people, some of them because I was afraid because of the neighbourhoods where I was, others because pandemic has caused more diffidence in talking to strangers.

I would have taken more time to focus on Mestre since the beginning rather than looking at general information about post-industrial cities. But I could not stop myself reading and in any case, it was useful to understand the Mestre’s context in a more complete way.
Thank you.