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Cultural tourism pressure on historic centres: Its impact on public space and intervention strategies for its mitigation. Florence, Italy, as a case study

Abstract:

In recent decades, mass cultural tourism has imposed itself on European historic centres' various economies without planning or a clear direction. Today, it is evident that this specific development within tourism is not sustainable and has generated a series of problems. Public space is a mirror of these transformations – congested, dirtied, polluted and impoverished of its traditional richness of co-presences and plurality of uses, it clearly demonstrates the limitations and problems that plague tourist cities. Following the temporary cessation of travel due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, tourism is now among the economic sectors undergoing a major recovery. This paper first broadly outlines a theoretical framework of overtourism. Then, it presents a case study of Florence, Italy, exploring the possible ways in which to mitigate the impact of tourist flows in the historic centre by designing public space in a sustainable manner that caters to the needs of both tourists and inhabitants.

Keywords: public space, Florence, overtourism

1. Introduction: the historic city in transformation

Cultural heritage sites and historic cities constitute travel destinations for a large portion of global travellers. In recent decades, tourism and tourists have changed. The increasing and widespread diffusion of the 'sharing economy' has profoundly modified and, in some cases, irreversibly damaged the urban and social fabric of cities. As Celata and Stabrowski recall, anyone using the term 'sharing economy' inevitably steps into a giant definitional nightmare (2022); it has been highly investigated by scholars, practitioners, policymakers and individuals. Many are its definitions (Hossain, 2022) and although its ambivalence a balanced definition (Hossain, 2022) is "a socio-economic system enabling an intermediated set of exchanges of goods and services between individuals and organizations which aim to increase efficiency and optimization of sub-utilized resources in society" (Munoz, Cohen, 2017). Most European historic centres are undergoing a process of depopulation and a reduction of services and businesses for residents (Celata, Romano, 2020). In parallel, we are witnessing an impoverishment of the social fabric and its skills, with the according weakening of the hospitality sector's level of professionalism and reduction in number of employees. Indeed, many young people are now sustaining themselves by renting rooms.

Last, tourism flows have changed. On the one hand, seasonality is no longer markedly divided into 'high' and 'low' periods but is spread throughout the year. On the other hand, new technologies (including maps) and the sharing economy (including urban mobility), have eased tourists' movements to and within cities. This has accelerated the expansion of tourist accommodations to more peripheral areas, which are considered preferable because more they are more affordable and offer a more authentic travel experience. While this change in flows has contributed to the decongestion of historic centres, it has extended to a larger scale the problems induced by overtourism – such as pollution, the shortage of affordable housing and services for residents —making the tourist load even more unsustainable. The tourist city is thus geographically larger (Celata, Romano, 2020); as highlighted by Butler (2019), the real problem of overtourism today is its progressive and seemingly unstoppable penetration into the residential city outside the historic centre.

With the emergence of short-term rental and 'experience' platforms, residents themselves have become actors in the commodification of the city, orienting their real-estate offerings towards the more convenient tourist market and their private properties towards tourism-related uses. Moreover, to increase the attractiveness of tourist destinations, local culture is being commodified, forcibly exaggerating its specific identity (MacCannell, 2005) for utilitarian urban marketing purposes (Vescovi, 2006). Many European cities have already fallen victim to the dynamics of 'touristicification', in which local culture has been theatricalised and residents have become useful background actors, of sorts (D'eramo, 2022), impersonating themselves to complete the composition of the urban scene.

Nevertheless, residents are implementing survival strategies in their daily lives to defend against the invasiveness of tourist flows. According to a survey conducted by the Centro Studi Turistici, with the European Tourism Association (ETOA) and the Romualdo Del Bianco Foundation (2016), in Florence, Italy, citizens avoid passing through

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72 streets due to tourism-related problems – streets that are mainly located inside the perimeter of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site that has been designated within Florence's historic centre.

2. Cultural tourism, an unstoppable global phenomenon

Over the last few decades, the lowering of costs and the simplification of booking services related to travel and infrastructure have generated a level of movement of people that has never before been recorded. The tourist offerings available have also moved towards standardised products that cater to the widest possible interests. The number and types of travel-related products on offer have turned hospitality into a new industry. In 2018, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) recorded 1.6 billion international travellers, a large portion of whom were cultural tourists. As early as 2017, the UNWTO predicted an annual growth rate of international travellers of 3.3% by 2030. Due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, tourism came to a forced halt in 2020. However, it immediately restarted afterwards—albeit gradually—first with domestic tourism flows within national borders and expanding abroad as restrictions were lifted. According to the UNWTO, tourism in 2023 is expected to continue its strong recovery, reaching 80–95% of its pre-pandemic numbers. In fact, more than 900 million tourists travelled in 2022, which is twice the number of the previous year but still only 63% of the pre-2020 numbers (UNWTO, 2023).

In most cases, local administrations did not anticipate the extent of the tourism phenomenon and wholeheartedly welcomed its positive economic effects. Therefore, most local administrations did not act in time to introduce careful planning or measures to contain the problems tourism induces. Likewise, residents have organised themselves to respond to the growing market demands linked to tourism without having a long-term strategy or vision (Del Bianco, 2015). In the years leading up to the pandemic, there were numerous citizen protests against mass tourism throughout Europe. According to the abovementioned survey conducted in Florence, residents have slowly abandoned the public space in their historic centre. The perception, functions and use of this space have changed, and the overlapping of the two populations (i.e., tourists and locals) has drawn a new urban geography.

3. The historic city of Florence: Old and new tourism – related problems
Introduction to the context

The historic centre of Florence has been on the World Heritage Site list since 1982, encompassing approximately 532 hectares located within the 14th-century walls and on both banks of the Arno River. In 2015, a buffer zone was established that includes a strip around the historic core, which helps to regulate the relationships between the urban system and its environment on a provincial scale, and protects its landscape value.

Florence is the capital of the region of Tuscany, in central Italy. It is a middle-sized city of approximately 368,000 inhabitants.[1] The city, founded in 59 BCE as a Roman settlement on an Etruscan site, reached the height of its splendour in the Renaissance period, between the 15th and 16th centuries, under the rule of the Medici family. The city is located in a valley and is entirely surrounded by hills except to the north-west, where a plain – with a mainly industrial character – connects the city to the neighbouring cities of Prato and Pistoia.

Florence's historic centre is divided in two by the Arno, which flows from east to west. Having been the capital of Italy from 1865 to 1871, shortly after the unification of the country, it was among the first Italian cities for which an urban masterplan was developed – namely, the Poggi Plan, developed in the 1860s. The Poggi Plan brought considerable changes to the original urban fabric, considerably transforming the public space in the historic centre. During World War II, the city – and especially the historic centre – suffered considerable damage. This led to the development of a succession of urban masterplans: the Reconstruction Plan (1951, adopted in 1958), the Detti Plan (1962), the Vittorini Plan (1992) and, last, the Zero Volume Plan (2010). The approval of a new structural and operational plan is currently underway (scheduled for March 2023).

Florence has a central position in the Italian connections network and features significantly in the mobility infrastructure system. It is served by its own small airport, whose receptivity is complemented by the international airports of Pisa and Bologna; by the Santa Maria Novella train station (the main station, located in the historic centre), which is connected to the high-speed rail network; and by the port of Livorno, which is approximately 90 km away. According to the UNESCO commissions, the historic centre currently faces five critical issues: mass tourism; conservation; mobility and air pollution; depopulation; and the Arno's risk of flooding (Francini, 2022).

Management of the historic centre's heritage

Florence's Management Plan of the Historic Centre was created following a 2002 directive of the World Heritage Centre that required all UNESCO sites to develop a Management Plan defining the main strategies for the site's management and conservation. In 2016, Florence initiated its first Management Plan; lasting only two years, it aimed to define the main actions in the protection, conservation and enhancement of the site and to increase awareness among citizens and visitors that the city's historic centre features on the World Heritage List. In 2016, the second plan was adopted, through which the buffer zone was implemented and tools were provided for the conservation of intangible heritage related to local crafts. The plan was presented and debated through a participatory process involving the local community, including both public and private actors. The third plan, published in 2022, is valid for a period of five years. In addition to extending the perimeter of the core zone, it adds a governance system, identifies a set of indicators for monitoring the site's conservation status and places

greater emphasis on risk management. The plan was developed by applying the Historic Urban Landscape approach (UNESCO, 2011, 2013), according to which the historic centre is envisioned from a multidimensional perspective, integrating the objectives of urban heritage conservation with those of socioeconomic development. This approach aims to respect the dynamism of the urban organism, promoting both its conservation and its development (Francini, 2022; Del Bianco, 2020).

Vision of the city

The local administration in Florence has predominantly focussed on the conservation of tangible heritage, neglecting the intangible features of the context (e.g. the economic, historical and traditional activities), which, if protected and valorised, enhance local heritage. The exponential growth of the tourism industry has therefore been accompanied by extractive policies applied to the monumental heritage, without any measures or devices being implemented to mitigate the degenerative and unsustainable phenomena caused by overtourism. The city was not treated (and was therefore not protected) as a complex and contemporary urban organism with its own aspirations and a wealth of skills to cultivate; instead, it was frozen in its past, to be promoted, preserved and commercialised. The city was thus fully surrendered to the logic of the market; it reaps only the fruits of an economy that arrived spontaneously, seeking to make the most profit (Del Bianco, 2020). Moreover, the tourism sector has imposed a travel culture based on increasingly short trips, aimed at 'distracting' oneself rather than at understanding, meeting and experiencing a new reality, and only this market demand has been answered (Del Bianco, 2017).

The problems and impact of tourism:
Excessive overtourism

In Florence, tourism peaked in 2019, with more than 4 million arrivals (Open Data Comune di Firenze) – more than 10 times the number of residents and constituting 11% of the local economy (Liberatore et al., 2022). The city's accommodation capacity has also grown exceptionally: in 2021, there were 73,830 beds available, compared to 43,170 in 2013 (Turistat data Città Metropolitana di Firenze 2021). For the consequent management planning that needed to occur due to this influx, sets of indicators were created to evaluate the tourism carrying capacity of the Florentine historic centre, with numerical thresholds set to measure the alienation of residents; impairment of the tourist experience; infrastructural overload; environmental damage; and threats to the city's heritage (Liberatore et al., 2022). The new Structural and Operational Plan (presented in January 2023 and in the process of being approved) could curb the commodification of the city by regulating the opening of new tourist facilities in the historic centre.

Certainly, the pressure and negative effects of an excessive number of people on a place of culture is not a new phenomenon. By the mid-19th century, John Ruskin had already underlined the dangers of this phenomenon in the case of Venice and of Thomas Cook's tours in Egypt (Dodds, Butler, 2019). Since at least the 1990s, awareness of the problematic dimension of large numbers of tourists has been spreading in various European countries, including Spain, Italy, Malta and France (Gössling et al., 2020). Yet, the state of affairs recently anticipated as a result of this phenomenon confronts us with an unsustainable scenario in the medium and long term that calls for forms of governance and containment policies. Florence's new Structural and Operational Plan is a first step in this direction.

The tourist's duty and flows

The tourist is a figure that has changed considerably over the last few decades in terms of age, economic availability, ability to access information, and sharing of the travel experience. However, some things remain

Ill. 1. Florence UNESCO World Heritage Site perimeter and main tourist axis. Source Google Maps' elaboration Del Bianco, C. 2023

unvaried, such as what MacCannell (2005) calls the tourist's 'moral duty' to see essential landmarks. This imperative makes the itinerary of a tourist's visit almost forced, electing certain areas to 'tourist' status; this has very significant implications on the uses of public space, as it generates areas of heavy congestion on an urban scale, crowded with tourists and deserted by locals.

The Florentine main tourist axis includes Piazza San Marco, the Accademia Gallery, Piazza del Duomo, Piazza della Signoria, Ponte Vecchio and Piazza Pitti (ill. 1). The anthropic pressure of tourists creates areas of saturation, where the space for relationships and well-being is deeply compromised (Francini, 2022). Often, long queues form at the entrances of important museums (e.g., on Via Ricasoli, near the entrance to the Galleria dell'Accademia, or on the northern side of the cathedral), making the spaces crowded and unvisitable (ill. 2).

The depopulation of historic centres

In this already deeply compromised framework, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a return to less urbanised areas due to the need for a qualitatively better and healthier way of living. This acted as a catalyst to a phenomenon that had already been occurring in Florence since 2001 (Celata, Romano, 2020) – the depopulation of the historic centre by residents. In 2019, there were 66,447 residents in the historic centre, while in 2021, this number had dropped to 64,427. The trend of the abandonment of the city can be seen in all neighbourhoods of the city; in fact, the total population decreased from 376,450 in 2019 to 365,315 in 2021 (Open Data Comune di Firenze 2021).

In addition to the difficulty of living in overcrowded and congested areas, the local population has also been confronted with a strong impoverishment of the services offered to citizens. Indeed, entire urban districts have been completely reconverted to focus on the tourist economy, catering only to the needs of tourists. For these reasons, communities have moved to the suburbs, leaving a void within the historic centre and entailing a loss of traditions and customs that are closely linked to the urban form (e.g., craft workshops) and that are an essential characteristic of the city's cultural identity.

This process is difficult to reverse (Celata, Romano, 2020), as it involves the destruction of a network of relationships formed and consolidated over several generations. It should be emphasised that local culture, with its intangible component of traditions and traditional socio-economic practices, is part of the reason why a site is placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List to begin with. Therefore, the loss of these characteristics jeopardises its position on the list.

An abandoned historic and sold-off real-estate heritage

Following the pandemic, many residents moved to other urban or peri-urban areas, increasing the availability of real estate in Florence's historic centre for short-term rental. In Italy, the latter is still poorly regulated (Celata et al., 2020). Since the arrival of Airbnb in 2011 – the most influential

Ill. 2. The congestion in via Ricasoli mainly due to the crowd queuing to enter in the Galleria dell'Accademia (Photograph by Del Bianco, C. September 2022)

short-term rental intermediary platform – the phenomenon has grown exponentially and spread throughout the city, beyond the historic centre, dramatically expanding the urban accommodation capacity. According to the Inside Airbnb website, in February 2023, there were 10,727 accommodations on Airbnb available in Florence, of which 8,052 were located in the historic centre. According to Celata and Romano's (2020) study, within the city's 2.3 km2 area, 77% of the real-estate stock was allocated to short-term rentals in 2022. Consequently, the negative impact on the local community has increased. In addition to not having been guided by a tourism industry Management Plan until recently, the city has been subjected to a process in which its historical heritage sites are being sold to giants of the international economy, generally to become new tourist destinations. According to a survey and mapping carried out in 2020 by the architect Antonio Fiorentino as part of the activities

Ill. 3. Night view of the Piazza del Duomo: the monumental heritage as a theatrical scene of social life (Photograph by Montedoro, L. 2022)

of the political laboratory Per *Un'altra Città*,[2] 22 historical sites within the UNESCO centre and its vicinity have been sold to large international groups and allocated to become luxury hotels and wellness centres or luxury student residences (Fiorentino, 2020). This deprives future generations of the ability to choose and to recognise themselves in their heritage, as well as compromising the fairness of the use of cultural heritage, producing the effect so call "solastalgia" (Albrecht, 2005; Lalicic, 2019).

The environmental issue

Last, the mass movement of people to tourist destinations contributes heavily to climate change, through gas emissions – particularly linked to airplane and cruise ship travel – waste production, and water pollution, among other things. On a local scale, according to the Ufficio Firenze Patrimonio Mondiale, the impacts of overtourism on the Florentine context include noise and air pollution, such as carbon dioxide emissions linked to the increase of tourist coaches (Francini, 2022). However, the environmental issue also extends to the surrounding areas; for example, cruise ships – which have a high environmental impact (Li et al., 2022) – docking at the port of Livorno organize day trips to Florence for passengers, using buses as the means of transport.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, there is a dual hydric risk linked to tourism. On the one hand, the city is subject to the risk of the Arno River flooding; in relation to this, tourism is actually an important resilience catalyst for the post-event recovery as it facilitates it with the revenues generated from tourism activities and for the city's mediatic coverage (Arrighi et al., 2022), as was proven by the 1966 flood. On the other hand, the city is at risk of not being able to provide for the water needs of all its tourists and inhabitants.

### The contribution of public space design

As we have Historic European cities have developed with great attention to public space, including streets, squares and gardens, in response to specific communities' needs related to representation, social gathering

Ills. 4-7. The monumental areas of the Duomo Square and the Uffizi Square in the days right before the complete closure due to the pandemic. Photographs were taken on March 6-8 by Del Bianco, C. 2020 and are part of the Fragile Florence photographic project. Source: www.corinnadelbianco.com/fragileflorence (accesed: 04/04/2023)
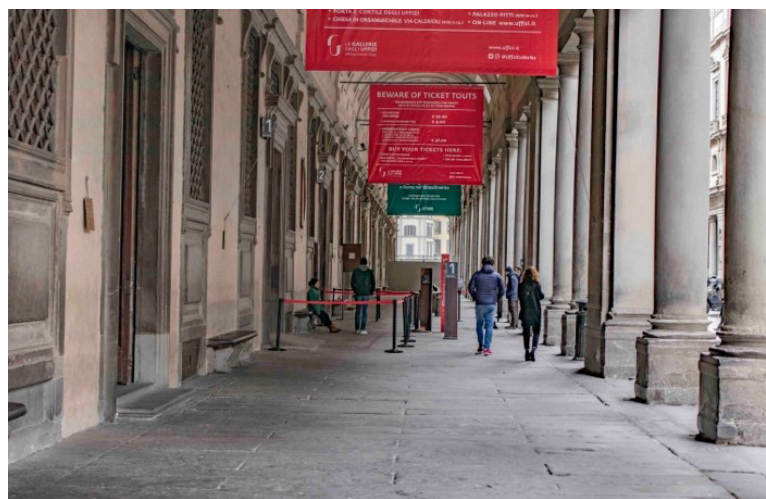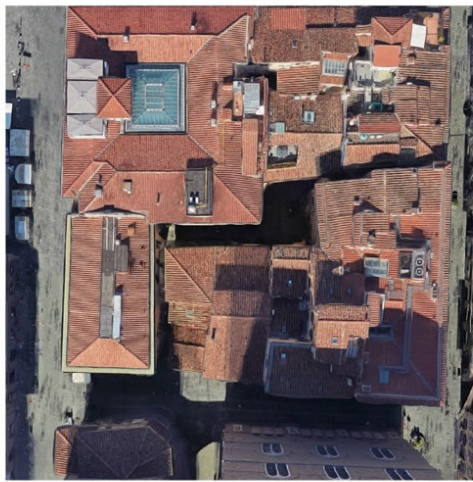
Piazza San Felice   Piazzetta dei Tre Re   Piazza de' Cerchi   _____ 10m

Ill. 8. Three examples of minor squares, Piazza San Felice, Piazzetta dei Tre Re and Piazza de' Cerchi, and their location in respect of the main tourist axis. Source Google Maps' elaboration Del Bianco, C. 2023.

and commerce. Moreover, hosting a great plurality of actors and practices (Montedoro, 2017) is an indispensable characteristic of urban public spaces and is necessary to maintain its exceptional polysemous quality (Lotman, 1985). The residents of the most visited sites have lost, perhaps temporarily, the connection with their own places of identity, as these spaces have been invaded by tourists. Given that people's attachment to places develops from personal experiences (Gossling et al., 2020) and that new generations have grown up avoiding specific areas of historic centres, it is likely that in Florence, the local community's attachment to the most iconic places in its historic centre will diminish over time. The impoverishment of the monofunctional space, completely flattened by the economy of tourism, seems unstoppable.

As we have pointed out, the impacts of overtourism on the functioning of the city as a whole (reduction in the availability of housing for residents, congestion of certain areas, homologation of the range of goods on offer, progressive tendency towards a monocultural economy) can only be mitigated and managed by prudent urban policies that promote virtuous behaviour of private sector or discourage, by making it less convenient, harmful behaviour. Some attempts are being made in this direction, but the prevailing neo-liberalism pressure makes it very difficult and challenging to steer the market (or the private sector). Within this framework, however, urban design can contribute to the improvement of public spaces through qualitative projects aimed at: avoiding the trivialisation ('disneyfication' – lack of surprise or 'Mcdonaldization' – lack of risk) of places (Koens, Postma, Papp, 2018; Novy, 2019;); offering multiple and diversified paths possibilities (Jacobs, 1961); enhancing neglected or underused areas; offering environmental comfort; including as many types of citizens as possible in the use of space; making different experiences possible — cross, stay, play, observe, etc. (Gehl, 1971).

Observing the Florentine case, it is evident that the historic centre's public spaces are now marked by profound disparities: some streets and squares are constantly visited, monitored and represented, while others, being excluded from the main tourist routes, are left in a state of neglect. This is the case in minor squares (Francini, 2019), which represent a network of potential additional public spaces and are a resource for both tourists and, more importantly, residents. These spaces (such as Piazza San Felice, Piazzetta dei Tre Re or Piazza de' Cerchi, ill. 8) – which currently are often left in a state of degradation or, in any case, receive marginal attention from the local administration – represent potential spaces in which to implement urban projects such as adding greenery or areas of shade for rest. Such projects could contribute to the redevelopment of the historic centre without touching its most iconic parts, working instead on a widespread and capillary de-paving strategy that would also contribute to the reduction of heat islands.

Conclusions

The framework outlined in this paper highlights complex problems arising from global dynamics that affect and disrupt historic cities, as in the case of Florence. As Celata (2020) pointed out during the pandemic closures, 'it is easier to think about the end of the world than the end of mass tourism'; as the same author predicted, the Airbnb model emerged from the crisis stronger than ever. The dynamics of tourism-related processes are difficult to control, but by acting in a timely manner

and at a specific scale of intervention, urban design can contribute to an improvement in the quality of public space in historic centres.

Contemporary urban design in these areas must necessarily consider both environmental sustainability and tourism flows. Innovative and quality solutions can be implemented by focussing on changing the function of these spaces to allow them to cater also to the needs and uses of a new user category: the tourist. In these spaces, tourists walk and contemplate the built heritage; they learn by reading travel guides or interacting with tourist guides; they take breaks to photograph the heritage or to photograph themselves in the setting; they rest and eat; they wait, often in long queues without shelter, to access the main monuments; they buy souvenirs and food. The public space design must respond to these new needs with specific projects. Contemporarily, it must minister to the needs of residents, who—while they avoid the main tourist axis in Florence—have not stopped frequenting the historic centre, even if only for work reasons, and who are therefore drawing a new geography of the city. Hence, it is also necessary to meet their needs along these new routes, enhancing underused places (such as Florence's minor squares) and encouraging sustainability-centred projects.

This paper is the result of the joint and balanced work of the two authors, who consequently must both be considered "first authors"

ENDNOTES

[1] As of 30 April, 2022, the city has 367,874 inhabitants, of which 57,563 are foreigners (Comune di Firenze, 2022).

[2] See www.perunaltracitta.org.

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