

# Campaign For A Living Venice

In support of a sustainable future for the Citizens and City of Venice

A Project For Rialto: Experiences, Food and Crafts Offer a Way Forward

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***A three day conference at the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti in early November brought together a unique group of international markets, scholars, artists, local artisans and the Rialto merchants themselves to continue working on a project for revitalizing the suffering Rialto Market.***

By Paul Rosenberg

*“Venice is Alive and Asks for Help”*. So goes the title of a small book about the history of the Rialto area, which was published by Associazione Progetto Rialto in the midst of the pandemic, in response to the growing crisis at the Rialto Market. When it comes to historic markets in need of support and

renewal, though, Venice is definitely not alone. This clearly emerges from the list of participants at Progetto Rialto's recent three-day event, "Historic Markets and Urban Regeneration in Europe", which brought together an international panel of speakers and contributors from a variety of sectors, including representatives from other historic European markets which remain vital (Munich, Thessaloniki, Brussels, Zagreb and Florence among others), Rialto market operators (fish, spices, vegetables, spirits), local artisans who work in specialized productive fields (building restoration, restoration of paintings and works of art, paper, textile and fashion, glass, leather), and important cultural institutions, including the three major universities (Ca' Foscari, IUAV and University of Padova), Warwick University and other local initiatives such as the Venice Urban Lab.

Venice is indeed alive, and the event's main organizer, Donatella Calabi, suggests looking beyond the demographic numbers when considering the population of Venice. The number of registered residents is undeniably falling. However, if one looks at data from Veritas, (the local waste management company), the 'standing' population of the city is 100,000 people. Taking into account the many people who visit the city for transitory periods related to work (whether they are students, researchers, 'digital nomads', or instead any of the many people employed seasonally for the Biennali, the Film Festival and many other initiatives in the city), it is clear that the city is alive with people, culture and activity. Calabi suggests that the issue of population loss should be viewed "not from the perspective of registrations in the municipal registry, but rather the opportunities that the city is able to offer different types of inhabitants".

That said, the demographic decline in the city has had a devastating effect on the historic Rialto market, now reduced to a fraction of the many sellers and operators that once sold goods there. Those remaining are in serious financial difficulty. This part of Venice, Rialto, the heart of the city, definitely needs help. However, it seems that help cannot be hoped for from the city government. The local administration has ignored the problem, along with the fish market operators' request to be able to sell ready-to-eat prepared foods to both locals and tourists to help support themselves. Unfortunately, given that the administration will not even open the public restrooms in the area for the market operators to use, the sense of being left to their own devices is very tangible.

Help, therefore, must come from other quarters, and that is where Progetto Rialto has stepped in to try to find ways to fill the void. As Donatella Calabi explains, "we believe that today the only way to revive a historic market is first of all selling quality food products. However, this alone is not sufficient. In order to be vital these days, a market must also be able to offer multiple experiences that involve products and artisanal skills not easily found elsewhere. The market must offer cultural initiatives that can attract the interest of both tourists and locals; for example speakers and activities involving specific productive craft sectors such as building restoration, art, tableware and paper, as well as fashion and style. Markets should be a place for the mixing of languages, cultures and contacts. Now even supermarkets are trying to organize their offerings in terms of experiences."

The idea, then, is not to try "competing" on equal terms with more modern and successful commercial mechanisms (be they supermarkets or online vendors), but rather to create a unique experience not available at those outlets. Indeed, these large commercial operations could possibly help the traditional market by working in synergy with the Rialto merchants. As Calabi explains, beyond selling food and goods, the market becomes a place "where the opportunities for encounter, the high level of unique artisanal skills and the architectural surroundings make the real 'difference' when visiting the Rialto market, displaying the wealth of experiences that a city like Venice can offer to everyone – citizens or not – in terms of quality of life."



There is certainly plenty of space available for such a project. In fact, there are two important public buildings at Rialto that currently stand empty and unused – the Pescheria, which is municipal property, and the Fabbriche Nuove, which is state property. These buildings are products of different eras, and their location, facing the Canal Grande, along with their architectural characteristics make them important parts of the city’s monumental heritage. They are also ideal spaces for the revival of activities and the kinds of market experiences that can revitalize Rialto. However, this requires that these valuable assets be managed in such a way as to prevent them from falling into the real estate speculation that has been the driver behind so many restoration projects in recent years. These public buildings should remain public and be placed back in the service of the city, as they were designed to be. Whether or not the political will to do this exists, however, is another question.

This brings us back to the question of the Administration and its complete lack of action to help the thousand-year-old Rialto Market and its millennial traditions in the heart of the city. Clearly there is no lack of ideas, energy and projects for revitalizing Rialto, and yet the local government has declined to act on any of them. This leadership vacuum is why Venice needs help so badly, and why scholars like Donatella Calabi and the others who voluntarily run and organize Progetto Rialto have stepped in to fill that void, with determination, passion, intelligence and commitment, proving that no matter what, Venice is most definitely Alive.

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