

2 FROM PALLADIAN LANDSCAPE TO THE *CITTÀ DIFFUSA*: THE VENETO AND LOS ANGELES

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INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1980s, Italian urbanists and geographers have recognised and studied what they see as a new form of Italian urbanization that has emerged in the most economically dynamic parts of the peninsula, and to which they have attached the name “diffused urbanisation”. One such *città diffusa* connects the formerly distinct cities of Venice, Treviso, Padua and Vicenza, its urbanizing shadow stretching as far as Verona to the west, the Alpine foothills to the north and the Adige River to the south. To many of those who know and care for the rural landscape in this region, which bears in its field patterns, roads and farms the material evidence of settlement dating back to Roman colonisation, this urbanisation seems an utterly new phenomenon, a product of Italy’s successful post-industrial, late-twentieth-century economy (L. dal Pozzo, 2002). Many of its material structures certainly appear ultra-modern, thus representing a distinct rupture in a long evolution of landscape. The dominant response among cultural geographers to this landscape change has been declensionist, lamenting the loss of former agrarian and ecological structures and a growing “placelessness”, as formerly clear boundaries between city and country are erased (Vallerani & Varotto, 2005).

Having myself devoted much scholarly time and care to the “Palladian Landscape” that was inscribed across this same area in the mid-sixteenth century, their concern speaks to me very directly. At the same time, viewing the landscape of the contemporary Venetian *città diffusa* from my dual perspective as student of its late Renaissance geography and also a resident of the classic region of diffused urbanisation - Southern California - makes me cautious of too firm an embrace of their geographical interpretation. What follows is an attempt to use these joint perspectives to generate an insight into the emerging landscape that might be less apparent to those whose location and commitments make its evolution a matter of more immediate local concern.

THE MORPHOLOGY OF LA *CITTÀ DIFFUSA*

The characteristics of la *città diffusa* are fairly easily summarized. Within a physical geography of pre-Alpine slopes, outlier hills, dry plains, reclaimed marshlands and coastal lagoons that stretches some 150 km east to west, by 100 km north to south we observe a landscape of numerous, formerly independent, and now carefully conserved, historic urban centres whose dependent cities range in size from agglomerations of over

200000 inhabitants down to small cities of less than 30000. All are now expanded by suburban residential and industrial zones, and are increasingly interdependent economically and commercially. In the core region, between Venice, Padua, Treviso and Castelfranco there is a distinct physical coalescence of urbanization along a non-centric network of road and rail links whose infrastructural inadequacy is immediately apparent in the volume and congestion of traffic they carry daily. Between the historic cities has developed a promiscuous landscape mix of farming villages with their characteristic *campanili*, individual family farms often with new residential or industrial building located adjacent to traditional *villa* and *barchese*, high-tech. industrial, commercial and service units, and natural environments – mountains, hill slopes and wetlands - of high ecological and recreational value. The region's elevated levels of global connectivity are exemplified by such companies as "Benetton" and "Indesit" whose headquarters are located here, or by Vicenza's dominance within Europe's gold manufacturing sector. The regional per capita income is among the highest in the European Union and consumption values are elevated. Rapid and continuous economic development over forty years has significantly transformed land uses and generated formidable challenges to the traditional ecologies of biotic and human communities and to the heritage and aesthetic value of landscapes. These challenges are exacerbated by the tensions and inefficiencies produced by a tapestry of competitive, overlapping and differently scaled politico-administrative structures.

Increasingly, the Veneto offers the opportunity space of a single metropolitan area. In certain respects, its citizens operate within this space as if it were a unitary city, making choices about work, recreation and consumption that embrace locations across the single surface of the *città diffusa*. At the same time they retain a strong sense of local attachment and difference, what Italians call *campanilismo*. The Veneto resembles in some respects a number of polynuclear urbanised regions that have emerged within the new Europe over the past thirty years, both within Italy (for example in Tuscany or Emilia-Romagna) and beyond (Randstaad in Holland; "Transpennine" between Liverpool and Hull in northern England). As a pre-existing European geography of distinct urban and rural spaces within the relatively impermeable bounds of nation states de-territorializes, it simultaneously re-territorializes, along transport corridors and around constellations of interdependent activity centres that are becoming recognized as significant geographical spaces by EU planners and policy makers.

The idea of the diffused city as a wholly new phenomenon, of a rupture with past forms of spatial organisation and landscape formation, may however be in some measure deceptive. Here, I examine the *città diffusa* in the Veneto from two perspectives. The first is historical, exploring the past organisation of the region itself, drawing on studies of the sixteenth-century "Palladian" landscape to construct a prehistory of contemporary diffused urbanization (Cosgrove, 1993). The second uses the geography of another zone of diffused urbanisation, Southern California, often regarded as the model post-modern urban space, and one that few would think comparable to the Venice region, to explore

some of the processes and possible futures for the Venetian *città diffusa*. Studying the history and geography of landscape suggests deeper roots and greater coherence than is commonly attributed to the seemingly chaotic spaces of diffused urbanisation.

PALLADIAN LANDSCAPE

Processes of landscape change in the twenty-first-century Veneto appear to threaten very directly a unique regional cultural geography. By Palladian landscape I mean more than simply the architectural and artistic monuments constituted by the villas and *pallazzi* that Andrea Palladio, Vincenzo Scamozzi and their successors designed in locations scattered throughout the Venice region. Today, these are, with a few exceptions, remarkably well restored and maintained as heritage sites, whether by public agencies or private owners. This was not the case half a century ago, when many were in an advanced state of physical decay, the victims of post-war Italy's single-minded pursuit of modernisation at the cost of much of its past. The phrase "Palladian landscape" serves to locate those distinctive architectural elements within a complex cultural geography that developed within a distinctive physical, economic and political milieu during two centuries of political control and economic investment by the Venetian Republic.

The main features of the Palladian cultural landscape can be quickly summarised. Physically the region comprises geomorphic and ecological zones arrayed from north and west to south and east: from the pre-Alpine *altopiano*, through piedmont slopes and hill outliers, including the limestone Monti Berici and volcanic Euganean Hills, watered plains, riverine marshlands and tidal lagoons. They offered diverse natural resources in the early modern period for pastoral, mixed agriculture, proto-industrial and commercial economies. The medieval region had a dense concentration of urban centres dating from the period of independent communes. Larger cities such as Padua, Treviso, Vicenza, and Verona took early control of surrounding feudal territories and the scatter of smaller urban centres introducing an early land market dominated by urban capital. By 1450 these larger cities had in turn been subordinated to Venetian authority, although they retained strong identities and a high degree of administrative autonomy throughout the period of the republic that lasted until its destruction by Napoleon, followed by a half-century of Habsburg rule before incorporation into a united Italy in 1860. The forms of Venetian administration encouraged a degree of economic and cultural competition among them, and even with Venice itself.

Nonetheless, the region was dominated commercially and politically in the formative early modern centuries by the lagoon city and its capital. Venice's trading and geopolitical position as a hinge between northwest Europe and the eastern Mediterranean (and beyond) gave the Veneto as a whole high levels of external connectivity by land and sea. The republic's more local concerns, including military defence against the volatile political world of early modern Italy, protection of the lagoon from flooding, and forest protection conservation for naval supplies in the

Alpine forests, all tied Venice ever more closely to its mainland empire. Ties were strengthened further as capital investments previously directed towards maritime trade shifted increasingly from the mid-sixteenth century into mainland agriculture, for urban food supply and more secure investment. The mainland thus experienced intensified commercialisation through large-scale land appropriation (often by means of debt peonage) and estate consolidation by urban capital, new forms of labour contract, private irrigation and consortium drainage schemes, as well as new crops such as rice and American corn. This was achieved in large measure through the sophistication of Venetian banking and bureaucracy, land measurement, survey, mapping and cadastration (Cosgrove, 1993).

The architectural heritage of Venetian mainland grew out of this commercialisation process. The villas and palaces that mark its tourist routes today were part of a new culture of nature, articulated through an ideology of “holy agriculture” and expressed in the architectural forms of the Palladianism, in landscape art of Giorgione, Titian, Bassano and others whose commissions often came from patrician landowners, and in the practices of *villeggiatura*.¹ This culture was not purely a local phenomenon; it was nurtured in the context of an emerging globalization of European life and culture, many aspects of which touched Venice very directly, including religious reformation, humanism and the new science, and geographical discovery. Venetian trade and diplomacy, its printing and publishing industries, and the University of Padua’s leading intellectual role in Europe all contributed to the region’s position at the forefront of modernisation.

Today, much of this Palladian landscape is obscured by the palimpsest of erasures and rewritings across the Veneto during the intervening centuries. But its buildings, many magnificently restored, such as the villas and *barchese* at Maser, Fanzolo, Pojana, and the evidence of property boundaries or hydrological patterns mark its existence. A trained eye for landscape morphology, archival, art and architectural study, and a dose of imagination are required to hear the streams that irrigated a *brolo* below the windows of the Villa Barbaro, to view the open fields of irrigated rice stretching beyond, to witness the sawmill and paper manufactory in the Astico valley immediately below the Villa Godi at Lugo, or to relive Hieronimo Godi’s drunken and murderous fury over the rival Piovene family’s claims on those mills (Cosgrove, 1993).

However, it is only by imagining the region’s art and architectural heritage within a broader conception and scale of landscape that we can begin to understand the contributions that it makes to the contemporary *città diffusa*. Palladianism was a product of Venetian expansion onto the mainland and an extended period of security and relative prosperity between 1530 and 1620. This established a tradition of political, economic and cultural coordination between formerly independent and often warring

¹ *Villeggiatura* signifies a mode of life and culture centered on the patrician villa. While including productive agriculture, Venetian villa life in the early modern period also involved escape from the city, philosophical debate, theories of ‘holy agriculture’ poetry and art. Its origins were as much urban (or rather sub-urban) in the *delizie* or open villa houses of the Giudecca as they were rural.

provinces. Venetian appointees in the subject cities sought to regulate trade and certain markets in the interests of the *dominante*, coordinate the construction of urban defences and supervise an effective hydrographic planning system across the *terraferma* in order to protect the lagoon and secure the provisioning of Venice with cereals. But they had to work very closely with local elites, who continued to exercise considerable autonomy in all areas of daily life. This economic, political and environmental balancing continued through Austrian and Italian administration, up to today.

THE LEGACIES OF PALLADIAN LANDSCAPE

The physical evidence of former Venetian control is apparent in the historic centres of cities and small towns across the region, in symbols such as St. Mark's Lion in their central piazzas, in the Venetian gothic windows of their patrician houses and in the fortifications of cities such as Padua and Treviso. These are now part of a common material heritage of the *città diffusa*. The Venetian pattern of control left local statutes and social hierarchies largely unaltered in a government structure of political complexity. This still works against large-scale, coordinated planning initiatives, for example in transportation infrastructure and management, but produces equally significant advantages of flexibility in local initiatives that have been critical for the economic success of small businesses within the Venice region. The villa, which lies at the heart of the Palladian landscape, was a phenomenon of modernization. Architectural historians have commented on Palladio's success in combining functions of the *delizie* (leisure retreats) of the Venetian lagoon and the Classical *belvedere*, alongside the mundane functions of the agricultural estate centre. That novel type of production space, set among highly managed commercial fields and serviced by a combination of small tenant farmers and day labourers, was a focus of innovation, new agricultural management techniques and artisan skills. It could evolve into a broader production base, as in the eighteenth-century villa *cum* proto-industrial and planned settlement complex established by the Contarini family at Piazzola sul Brenta. Such structures anticipate today's pattern of agro-industrialization in the Veneto. Finally, and most obviously, the Palladian landscape has left a rich heritage of art and architecture, which remains a significant element in the cultural quality of the environment, in sustaining local identities, and more practically in the tourist economy of the *città diffusa*.

Both the social and the environmental characteristics of the twenty-first-century Veneto as a dynamic and economically successful region owe a debt to the coordinating efforts of the Venetian empire in the prosperous sixteenth century. This is not to discount the significance of other historical interventions, including the pre-existing competitive autonomy of medieval communes, the bureaucratisation of administration under Austrian rule (which included the first systematic cadastral mapping and property census of the region), the Italian State's land reforms that returned large estates to family farms, and the light regulatory hand of the Italian State in the post-war period. But the historical significance of Venetian rule lies in its powerful landscape expression

in so many of the elements that characterise the contemporary *città diffusa* and provide historically continuity within its apparent ultra-modernity.

LOS ANGELES: DIFFUSED CITY

In the opening chapter of *The Palladian Landscape* in 1993, I compared the modern Veneto to Orange County south of Los Angeles. Orange County represents, of course, merely a recent stage in the urbanisation of Southern California that is today proceeding most rapidly in Riverside and San Bernadino counties well to the east of the Orange County. But I think the comparison between the modern Veneto and Southern California is instructive, at least at the broad level of urbanized landscape morphology. The Los Angeles region covers a somewhat greater geographic area than the urbanised Veneto, stretching some 200 km from the Pacific Ocean to those “Inland Empire” cities of Pomona, Ontario, Riverside and San Bernadino, and for 120 km from the northern Antelope Valley and Ventura County to the southern parts of Orange County, and its population of some fourteen million people and urban densities are greater. But Southern California does bear some notable similarities to the Veneto. Both regions are complex jigsaws of urbanized spaces on open floodplains, interspersed with remnant agricultural zones (many family farmed), with hill and mountain environments up to 3000 m elevation that remain vital as water catchments, ecological reserves and recreational spaces. There is a parallel complexity of administrative structures, so that with 88 independent cities in Los Angeles County, the City of Los Angeles is merely *primus inter pares*, rarely able to impose political will or global solutions over the urbanized region it commands economically and culturally. That Los Angeles region cannot be treated as a unitary metropolis in the manner of New York, Chicago, London or Paris has long been recognised: Los Angeles was characterized by post-war writers who first began to remark upon this new urban phenomenon as “seven suburbs in search of a city”.² If we were to take Venice, Mestre, Padua, Treviso, Vicenza, Pordenone, and Rovigo as the seven “suburbs” of *la città diffusa*, we might say the same of the Veneto. The diffuse pattern of urbanisation also accounts for a similarly non-hierarchical transportation network in Southern California, which offers high levels of interconnectivity but experiences serious problems of congestion, especially in road transportation from the complexity of intersecting flows. As in the Veneto, the majority of Southern California’s population enjoys exceptionally high levels of personal affluence, education and consumption that place heavy demands on all aspects of the natural and human infrastructure while displaying a comparable propensity for fiscal conservatism that militates against public investment in its improvement.

By far the United States’ largest international port at Los Angeles/Long Beach combines gateway shipping for manufactures, oil terminal and refining capacity, and tourist cruising. Los Angeles international airport (LAX) is among the ten busiest on the

² The standard post-war attitude to Los Angeles is summarized and challenged in Rayner Banham’s highly influential study of the city Los Angeles: the architecture of four ecologies, originally published in 1991 (Banham, 2000).

globe. Both of these transportation facilities are located uncomfortably close to highly vulnerable cultural, recreational and environmental resources. While both facilities are significantly larger than the port and industrial complex at Venice-Mestre-Porto Marghera, and Venice's Marco Polo airport, the role of international transport within both regional economies is similarly large, and the demand for goods shipments to and from the ports, obliged to cross the entire urbanized region, increases the pressures on regional transport infrastructure.

Both the Venice and Los Angeles regions have global significance as centres of culture, tourism and recreation. Venice's cultural heritage is largely historical, based on the art and architecture of the Venetian Republic that ended with the 18th century, although the Biennale makes the city a major European centre for aspects of contemporary culture. That of Los Angeles, centred on Hollywood, is principally focused on celebrity culture today, although its historical dimension is increasing with a century of film making represented in its landscape. In both regions the natural environment plays a significant role in generating widely recognised and powerful place images: the lagoon and waterways in Venice, the beaches, hills and sunny climate in Los Angeles. But in both too, the environmental image is manufactured as much as "natural", the product of large-scale human intervention in landscape change. Venice itself is a product of complex hydrological engineering schemes: not simply the piles driven into the mudflats of the lagoon that support the city's architectural existence, but regulation and diversion of the watercourses entering the lagoon, and land drainage and reclamation on the mainland that date back at least six centuries. The environment and ecology of the Los Angeles region are equally engineered, principally through water transfers, either for fresh water supply or drainage. Southern California depends upon canals to an even greater extent than the Veneto, but uses them to introduce water into a semi-arid environment rather than to ensure its unthreatening flow through the region.

Los Angeles' twentieth-century canals bring fresh water from the Central Valley, Northern California and the Colorado River. This water not only supports the industrial and domestic needs of the population, but also allows the scattered city to boast the most globalized plant ecology of any region in the world. The iconic palm trees, for example, that line Los Angeles' boulevards date from the 1932 Olympic Games; they are not the native Californian *Washingtonia* variety but imports from the Canary Islands. They compete with Roman pines, Brazilian jacarandas and Australian eucalyptus, among others, as street trees, and with a constantly increasing variety of other exotics in public and private gardens. This landscape ecology has been selected largely for decorative purposes with an emphasis on dramatic shape, colour and flowering characteristics. A similar reworking of the traditional species range is increasingly apparent in the Veneto where fast-growing *Lelandiae* evergreens are being introduced to provide privacy around suburban villas, and ancient olives grubbed from unprofitable groves in Puglia or Murcia are replanted as decorative trees in its moist soils.

The significance of the engineered hydrological landscape faces both regions with similar challenges to protect fragile native ecologies in dry mountain and hill regions, wetlands, and inshore marine spaces that are increasingly fragmented and disconnected. Diffuse urbanisation results in both the domestication of natural environments and the incorporation of a patchwork of artificially conserved but equally urbanised “nature spaces” within the urban region. Two examples in Southern California are the patches of wetlands conserved along the coasts but under continuous threat from housing development, such as the Ballona wetlands near LAX, and the fragmenting *chapparel* habitat of mountain lions whose very wildness now depends on the careful gardening of their remaining and increasingly fragmented ranges. Better known and longer recognised are the air quality problems associated with petrochemical smog in the Los Angeles basin. Like Venice-Porto Margera, Los Angeles is an important location for the oil refining and petrochemical industry with its attendant pollution, although this is now declining in both scale and output of air particulates. More significant in both regions is the combination of automobile and truck emissions with local topographies and microclimates that hold stable air for extended periods, frequently producing dangerously high levels of photochemical pollutants.

EVOLUTION OF A DISPERSED CITY

It is worth reviewing briefly how Los Angeles developed into a new kind of city in the twentieth century, one that at mid-century seemed unique and exceptional, but that now seems more and more obviously an early example of a much broader phenomenon of post-modern urban space. In Southern California some key elements were critical. Among these was a privatized land tenure system with restricted public ownership of development land and thus limited evolution of public space, despite various attempts at large-scale urban and regional planning (Hise, 1997). The Spanish colonial pattern of land tenure that divided Southern California into large *ranchos* provided the cadastral basis for early Anglo land purchase and appropriation. There was no intermediate stage of public lands and systematic survey that occurred in much of the United States, with its democratic attempt - however flawed in execution - to offer opportunity for small-scale agricultural homesteading. California’s state constitution that allowed any community to incorporate as a municipality with a minimum of five hundred persons was a second leg upon which a fragmented urban structure was built into the region. *Rancho* lands were rapidly divided and sold speculatively from the 1880s for small-scale citrus and tree crop farming to middle class Midwesterners who had amassed some capital and sought the advertised benefits of climate and a leisured lifestyle in Southern California.

A series of land development cycles generated a scatter of politically and socially distinct communities across the lowland basins from Los Angeles to the coasts south and west, and inland along the well-watered slopes of the mountain ranges. Much of this development was actively stimulated by the extension of light rail connections (the

Red Line system) across the region. By the 1920s light rail was acting as an integrated transit system, connecting such discrete communities as Pasadena, Santa Monica, Riverside, Anaheim and Hollywood into a single urban region extending nearly one hundred miles inland and centred on the city of Los Angeles. It would be more correct to call this a suburban system as densities were low, with houses set in individual plots often with a smallholding attached. These smallholdings, many of which proved agriculturally uneconomic, could be easily and cheaply subdivided for housing, especially in the years after 1945 when a combination of demobilization, industrial growth, federal housing loans and industrial house-building techniques produced suburban expansion of formerly separate communities into an increasingly undifferentiated urban field.

Anglo immigration onto Southern California in its first half-century was relatively wealthy and educated, and it sought exclusivity from both existing Spanish speakers and the significant black immigration by the use of restrictive covenants governing residence and use of retail and recreational facilities. The further wealth created for some (a minority to be sure, but a significant one) by land development, natural resource extraction (principally oil), infrastructure and service provision, has left a significant cultural patrimony in the form of art and educational institutions, estate houses and gardens that might be compared to the villas of the Veneto, themselves built out of the profits made from capital investment in land development. In both regions the fragmented local political geography produced competitive administrative units and weak central planning. Individual promoters were able to sell off or develop individual plots of agricultural land for oil exploration, industrial or housing purposes with minimal consideration for infrastructural development or public service provision. Los Angeles emerged as America's second city only through its use of a water monopoly to force surrounding independent municipalities to accept annexation if they were to achieve the benefits of sustained growth that only cheap water could provide. The politics of water provide some interesting, if historically distant and superficial comparisons between the L.A. region region and Venice with its *terraferma*.

There are also some significant differences between Los Angeles and *la città diffusa* of the Veneto. Among them is the absolute necessity to import water into the semi-desert of the Los Angeles basin, initially to support intensive agriculture, later to provide for industrial and residential demands. Pumped from as far afield as the Sierra Nevada and the Colorado River Los Angeles environmental "footprint" is considerably larger than that of the Veneto. The discovery and exploitation of oil in the Los Angeles basin had significant impacts on the evolution of the urban area that have no parallel in the Veneto. Oil production shaped the pattern and timing of residential development for much of the 20th century, along the Pacific coast, in Long Beach and at points across the basin, at least until wells were exhausted. In the case of Venice Beach, a recreational and residential community promoted by the developed Abbot Kinney in the teens of the last century, discovery and exploitation of oil seriously undermined the vision of

planting an *ersatz* Venice, complete with Piazza San Marco, canals and Doge's Palace, for more than half a century. There are still active oil fields pumping within ten kilometres of downtown Los Angeles, in both Baldwin Hills and Beverly Hills.

The population structure and its diversity is perhaps the most significant distinction between the two urban regions. As a great port city Venice has a long cosmopolitan tradition of ethnic diversity, long regulated by laws on dress and residential location (the word *ghetto* itself is a Venetian word for the iron foundry that occupied the closed island in Canereggio that was allocated to Jews when the industry was relocated outside the city as a fire hazard). Turks, Germans and Moors were other groups who had their own residential zones. The mainland population however has always been more culturally homogeneous and only very recently has the region had to come to terms with growing diversity as its prosperity attracts economic migrants from Africa and Eastern Europe. Los Angeles, by contrast, while possessing a long and undistinguished record as a centre of exclusionary practices on the part of its white majority, is now a region with no ethnic majority and home to a truly global range of ethnic communities.

Finally, it is obvious that the historical evolution of Los Angeles is very brief when compared with that of the Veneto. Southern California's cultural heritage cannot be traced back much more than two centuries; any earlier cultural evidence has been largely destroyed by European settlement.

THE PROCESS AND FUTURE OF DIFFUSED URBANISATION

The value of placing Southern California alongside the Venetian *città diffusa* in a comparative discussion of contemporary landscape derives in part from juxtaposing what seem at first glance utterly different geographies but which actually reveal some significant similarities in form and evolution. Recognition that the shock of the new may mask long-standing historical processes might suggest markers for understanding and even managing diffused urbanization. I am not suggesting that Southern California represents an urban future for the Veneto, but the sheer speed with which the Los Angeles region urbanized, and the specific nature of its (sub)urbanisation allows us perhaps to identify forces governing twenty-first century landscape development.

Among the keys to diffused urbanization are a pre-existing pattern of poly-nucleation and a delicate balance of central authority and local autonomy, individual property, an active real estate market and sufficient private affluence to allow the widespread desire for suburban living to be realised, and a non-hierarchical communications surface for individualized mobility.³ Diffused urbanisation privileges the private over public realm and thus private over public space. These social aspects have been widely noted in the case of American urbanisation, especially in the West, but they are not generally associated with Western Europe, especially its historical cities. It is indeed true that the

³ For recent comments on 'sprawl', the colloquial American term for diffused urbanization, see Ingersoll (2006), Hayden (2004) and Bruegman (2005).

island city of Venice, regarded today as the paradigm walking city, with a dense construction of residential and commercial properties focussed on parish *campi*, and connected by canals all linked to the Grand Canal - the “freeway” of the medieval city - was also a highly managed, collective social space (*terra sancta nostra*), with a strong public life of organized ritual, focused on the vast public spaces of San Marco. But much of the management of ritualized public life and space in early-modern Venice was designed precisely to regulate the centrifugal tendencies of a highly mobile and individualistic mercantile culture. And the desire for suburban life, free from the claustrophobic densities of the city was manifest early in the construction of patrician *delizie* with their extended gardens that are visible on the island of Giudecca in Jacopo de’Barbari’s famous woodcut map of the city in 1500. The Palladian villas themselves reflect the same urge, one that today is within the grasp of significant numbers of middle class Italians and no longer simply its nobility. Mainland villas became accessible to the Venetian patrician class in significant measure because of public investment in river regulation and canal construction intended to preserve the lagoon, drain wetlands and transport goods; today it is the private automobile that creates the mobility surface of the suburbanized *città diffusa* across the Venetian plain.

Parallel competitive individualism and public investment in transportation infrastructure underpin diffused urbanisation in Los Angeles. The region evolved as a mobility surface principally by means of light electric rail lines that did not connect pre-existing and distinct agricultural settlement centres, but actually brought these into being. The mobility and connectivity thus created encouraged further speculative development of housing in environmentally favoured zones, while the introduction and rapid adoption of the automobile in the climatically favourable environment of Southern California further stimulated development beyond the station stops on the light rail system. The scattered pattern was intensified by the interpenetration of basins and steep slopes and by the removal of large land blocks from residential development by oil drilling and movie studio lots.

By the 1940s the scatter of settlements and their growing intercommunication, the need to connect valley basins across hills and mountain passes, and the high levels of automobile ownership among a highly affluent population, as well as the failing infrastructure of a light rail system built more to develop land than as an integrated urban transit system, suggested the need for a system of freeways to connect the region as a single urban area. Freeway development was in fact part of an attempt to control the evolution of an already diffused city and to stimulate an ailing downtown that its supporters believed was being strangled by traffic congestion and lengths of commuting times. The Los Angeles region has actually been the subject of repeated attempts at comprehensive planning, but the freeway system was virtually the only one of these to be realised. Its consequences, as we now recognise, were to exacerbate virtually every process it was intended to restrain: lowering residential densities, expanding the spatial extent of the urbanized landscape and further reducing the significance of the traditional

central business district while stimulating the “edge cities” of polynuclear urbanisation. While never fully completed, the freeway plan was the single most important action permitting Southern California’s diffused urbanisation to further evolve. Even today, despite its congestion, the freeway system of the Los Angeles region allows a higher degree of connectivity than any comparable urbanized area in the United States. It is the one unifying element that cuts across the continued, disaggregated mosaic of political, administrative, functional and environmental boundaries that characterize the diffused city. Little wonder it is one of the most iconic elements of the urban landscape of Southern California.

This is true not only in terms of the freeway as a functional communications link. The freeway interchange has famously become a symbol of the collective, public culture of this new type of city. Not only are Southern Californians famous for the ways that they conduct their social life on the freeway (phoning, preening, flirting) but the freeway represents the most significant expression of public landscape in a highly privatised and fiscally conservative urban community. Despite the huge public expense of constructing and maintaining the freeway system, there are no tolls; there is a ban on all forms of advertising and commercial development near rights of way, high levels of design and planting to landscape the driving experience, and careful regulation of emissions and air quality. Their regulation suggests that the space of movement is the public space of the diffused city.

The Venice region clearly lacks the system of individualized mobility available in Los Angeles, although subsidized rail, light rail and bus services compensate in part without attracting the social stigma that public transit has in Southern California. Issues of communication, the public realm, heritage and environmental protection remain central to debates within the *città diffusa*, and all of these revolve to some extent around landscape and the spatial merging of formerly separate activities.

CONCLUSION

The differences between these two city regions are considerable, and I have no desire to diminish them. By juxtaposing them as historically formed landscapes, however, some longer-term processes are revealed. In their differences the Veneto and Southern California remind us that landscapes and places remain distinctive in the twenty-first century, even when subject to similar pressures. In their similarities they force us to confront the power of social and economic processes changing the landscapes in which we live and work. No part of those landscapes is more sensitive in a time of population increase and affluence and of global environment change than the delicate balance of land and water. Venice has a long iconographic tradition of figuring the city as a balance between struggling elements. Southern California might easily adopt the same motif. In the long run it may be this aspect of their geography more than any spatial process of diffusion and communication that determines the longer-term sustainability of diffused urbanisation.

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