

Latitude Platform for Urban
Research and Design

Living

with

Veneto 2100

water

CLOSED PARK, OPEN PARK

The region of the Po Delta is affected by the everchanging processes and rhythms resulting from the area at the mouth of the river, from where the river finds its way to the open sea. In the case of the Po Delta the river we are taking into consideration, the Po precisely, is the main Italian river. It is therefore understood how vast this region is and how the processes take a very high relevance. For this reason the Po Delta can be defined as an unstable area in its own nature. The processes taking place in the area at the mouth of a river, resulting from the meeting between the flow (plus the debris that pile up downstream and are conveyed to the sea) and the open sea, are processes as subsidence, salinisation, raising of the water level, accumulation of debris. Each of these factors may be looked at as a variable introduced by the ecological system of the delta, that adds more complexity and therefore more fragility and mutability to the system itself. To these "natural" factors, another type of variable – since many centuries ago by now – has been added: mankind. The processes brought by mankind (urbanisation, agriculture, fishing and fish farming, hydro electric power stations, etc.) have added more complexity and fragility to the Po Delta on one side; yet, on the other side, they have been trying to oppose this mutability through an extreme resistance, that has profoundly

transformed the land, with the aim of making it as static as possible (raising embankments, dykes, setting drainage plans, building artificial channels, water deflection, etc.). Today, the system-park (that is to say the regulations that protect the balance and the ecological processes of the Po Delta) is a system that tends to eliminate the physiological factors of mutability in order to stabilise the dynamics that concern it, adapting the rhythm of the region to the ones of the inhabiting population. The project wants to doubt this approach. The intervention plan presents itself as an attempt to transform this conflictual relationship, turning the bond nature/mankind into a relationship of non-imposition, of adaptation to the requirements of the land. However, this does not mean to abandon or to cancel the memory deriving exactly from that conflictual relationship, and that has founded and guided the communities and the population inhabiting the Delta. This historical and cultural heritage, if anything, has to be reconsidered and updated within the project itself, in order to preserve and maintain a vivid memory of local people and places. In this sense, the conflict between nature and mankind is not removed nor cancelled, it is turned into the forms in which it manifests itself. This is possible by substituting the concept of resistance with the one of resilience.

RESILIENCE, RESISTENCE

In its general meaning, resilience is defined as the quality of what is able to resist to a strong and sudden stress; therefore, referred to a material, it is the ability to resist to sudden impacts without breaking. But resilience may also refer to the quality of active adaptation and the flexibility it is needed in order to adopt new behaviours, once that is verified that the previous ones do not function. There are more specific acceptations, as for instance the one related to the field of ecology and biology (the ability of an ecosystem, including urban ones like cities, or of an organism to self-repair after a damage), of psychology (the capacity of the human being to face adversities in life, of getting over them and coming out strengthened

and even transformed in a positive way), or of geriatrics (capacity that some old and very ill people, in apparently serious conditions, show they have by responding to traditional treatments in an unexpected way. This quality is conceptually opposed to the frailty of the elderly). Each of these acceptations contributes to define the approach and strategies the project Living with Water intends to adopt in the case of the Po Delta. It is here appropriate to decline the concept of resilience to the physical region of the delta and to the social fabric within it. Communication designers will be called to take action in this latter aspect above all, by communicating and designing the identity in construction of the system-park.

COMMUNICATION OF THE SYSTEM-PARK

The communication of the system-park, and the construction of the identity of the same, will be directed primarily inward, with a shared communication that would involve the social fabric as an active part of the process. Secondly, such identity will be communicated outward, to organizations, institutions and individuals. The project will be shaped then as a communication device made of heterogeneous artifacts of diverse origin (paperwork, local events, museum spaces and facilities, online archives, various applications and artifacts) that interact on the basis of a single strategy. It will consist of two basic steps: communication and sharing of the project "system-park" with the local population; birth and growth of the park: construction of a shared identity and

an identity of participation. Each phase, in turn, will consist of sub-phases, characterised by individual interventions. Transversal to these steps, and parallel to the concept of resilience, the project will follow as a guideline the construction of a shared memory. Such memory seems, in fact, in light of interviews conducted by the team of anthropologists, highly fragmented and subject to a number of factors of interest. If it's true that the identity of an area is inextricably linked to the memory that it itself preserves, it is equally true that such identity is also based on the sharing of joint projects. The challenge will be to build a shared identity, in which the social actors present in the territory intervene in a dynamic manner to the definition and renovation of the same.

FRAGMENTED TERRITORY

For centuries the settlement of Monteforte d'Alpone has adapted to the geographical and climatic conditions that have hosted it, managing to find a sort of balance both in the urban conformation and the economic production. In fact, the historical centre of the town has developed near the hills, while the economic activities are focused in the production of wine, cultivating vineyards on a great part of the agricultural land and exploiting great quantities of water as well, made available by the numerous waterways. Since the twentieth century the pressure from the industrial economy has changed this balance: the processes of urbanisation have driven themselves beyond the hills, to areas that are more vulnerable to floods of the Alpone, the main river. Some residential neighbourhood have therefore been constructed (for instance the Aldo Moro neighbourhood) in areas under

the river level. This has led to a situation of fragmentation. In fact, the balance guaranteed by the previous urban form (the city centre and residences located in the elevated zone, agricultural production in the surrounding countryside and easily accessible by the waterways) has been replaced by widespread urbanisation, that has literally fragmented the territory into small living units and industrial areas. This new urban form has developed without taking into account the geographical details of the territory it was occupying. So that for example, the ever present risk imposed by the flow of the Alpone, for several decades has been erased from the perception of the civilians of Monteforte. Moreover, the new urban fabric has expanded removing the idea of the public, shared space: the tendency to build isolated houses where before there were paddy fields and vineyards is an example of that.

NOTHING HAPPENED

This fragmented situation was made dramatically current following the flooding of the Alpone in December 2010. The towns that were most affected, including Monteforte, received in a relatively brief period of time a refund from the state, also intended towards the repair the damage of property belonging to private citizens.

A few months after the incident signs of what had happened had been successfully removed. At first inspection, we immediately noticed that the physical evidence of the flood (and therefore above all the deterioration of the exterior walls and plaster of the houses) were hardly still visible. While, when visiting

Monteforte in the spring of 2011 there was no evidence of such significant and dramatic event as the flood of the previous winter. This removal of the past and of a certainly frightful event, but still decisive for the history of Monteforte, seems then to be a sign of how the collective of inhabitants of the small town in Veneto has lost that cohesion essential to the social fabric in order to re-elaborate certain traumas. A necessary process so that, above all, the memory of the trauma can be internalised in the history of the town and then what has happened can give rise to a reaction able to prevent such an episode from happening a second time.

COLLECTIVE RE-ELABORATION

The project *Living with water* will try then to re-establish a conscious relationship between urbanity and the presence of the Alpone and of the waterways. From the point of view of the communication of the project, the intervention will be characterised both by the urban and anthropic aspect of this relationship. In particular, the key concept that guiding the intervention will be that of the collective. At a first stage, therefore, there will be an attempt to raise awareness in the population about the need to perceive its own territory as a resource from which the condition of all the inhabitants of Monteforte depend on. Specifically, public areas that encourage meetings and exchanges between the

population and the municipality will be re-evaluated, areas that find common symbolic and historical ground with the historical centre of town. A model of residence other than that of the villa will then be proposed, in which the same housing unit will be characterised by the opening, not the closure. In the second stage there will be an attempt instead to oppose the tendency to remove the social trauma of the flood, favouring a recovery of its memory and therefore a collective re-elaboration of the trauma itself. In this context, a physical and media archive will be conceived, in which to collect the testimonies of the flood on the architecture of Monteforte.

IDENTITY CRISIS, TERRITORIAL CRISIS

Historically a large part of the northeastern Italian territory has been heavily influenced by the presence of a river as important as the Piave, in particular in the relationship that came into being between the population, the urban landscape and the territory. The Piave, besides being the cornerstone of the local economic system, has become a strong defining element in the determination of a local cultural identity. The strong historical connotation (linked mainly to the role and to the symbolic connotation acquired following the first world war) has contributed to the construction of a 'mythic' narrative in which the social fabric was recognised, and which allowed the population a direct relationship with the river and its ecosystem. But this historical bond with the territory has weakened over the years, leaving room for private political-economic interests and conflicts that these have generated. With the economic development, we've witnessed on one side the social contrasts linked to the lack of a common vision about the use of shared areas, and on the other the establishment of a relationship with the territory based on appropriation. Such

relationship has generated a reckless exploitation of the river ecosystem, with heavy environmental consequences. The municipality of Vazzola, for example, has taken a direct interest in the passage of the Piave. The presence of the river has influenced the urban growth of Vazzola, decreeing the economic activities, and therefore the social composition, and the forms of social expansion; at the same time the urban territory of Vazzola "is classified as being of high environmental vulnerability for the protection of water resources, especially along the areas adjacent to Monticano, Favaro, and the stream Gleba" (<http://www.comune.vazzola.tv.it/>). It is possible to notice that the vulnerability of the territory has increased alongside the expansion of economic activities tied to the exploitation of hydrogeological resources. Activities such as the extraction of gravel, the drainage of areas subject to flooding, or extensive farming (such as corn) that needs a great amount of water, have drastically transformed the conformation of the river bed and the surrounding environment, increasing the risk of flooding.

TWO TERRITORIES, A SINGLE RIVER

Every economic activity, and with it the entire web of relationships and social compositions of the territory, revolve around the presence of the Piave. However this progressive thrust has not been able to find a balance with the needs of the river itself. That has transformed the presence of the river, that had previously been the "engine of civilisation", in an environmental risk factor. The setting devised within Living with water wants then to be an attempt to give to the Piave a central and "positive" role in the process of urbanisation as well as in the day to day life of the territory inhabitants. The setting proposed aims

to bind the surrounding territory, and the following urban forms, to the presence of the river, as well as its rhythms and processes. By means of the definition of two complementary landscapes (the "arid" and the "humid") that meet the structural requirements of the area, not only would the river regain some autonomy, but most of all a balance would be re-established between the presence of man and the surrounding territory. The image of the Piave (and therefore the entire constellation of meanings that revolves around it), would then return to be a point of reference for the entire population.

RECONSTRUCTING THE IDENTITY

The "mythic" narratives on the Piave seem emptied of the meaning today. The Piave has remained a center of human activities, but only on a productive level. It seems necessary, faced with the consequences of a massive exploitation of the territory, to restore a shared narrative, to consent the sharing of an identity beginning with the bond between man and the territory he lives in. To rethink his relationship with the territory (and its resources) not as a relationship of the appropriative kind, but as a mutual relationship, in which therefore the two elements of the relationship are essential to each other. It is imperative for the social fabric to

create its own receptivity to the river, to its timing and its needs. It is therefore essential that human activities find forms that are appropriate to the rhythms and needs of the Piave. Man is called upon then to adapt to the territory that he inhabits and its necessities. To do so, a greater awareness will have to spread first in the population about the risks the excessive exploitation of the river present even today. It will be important to clarify how a similar position does not coincide with the bucolic and conservative idea of the territory, but with an action that at the same time is receptive to the signals of risk that it itself presents.