

FREEWHEELING

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VENICE

by Lucia Baracco*

Venice, the **cultural heritage of humanity**, has always been a magnet for tourists from all over the world.

Many people consider the **historic centre of Venice** to be one huge "architectural barrier" and its unique morphology (100 islands linked by over 420 bridges) contribu-

tes to the vision of this **splendid city** as a place where it is hard to get around and thus difficult to enjoy.

Bridges and steps are the greatest obstacle faced by **wheelchair** users as well as creating problems for the **elderly**, parents with pushchairs, people carrying

shopping, **tourists** weighed down by heavy baggage and anyone transporting any kind of object.

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE RIGHT INFORMATION FOR GETTING AROUND WITHOUT DIFFICULTIES? WELL IT'S VERY IMPORTANT, ESPECIALLY IN VENICE. SO HERE'S HOW TO OVERCOME THE OBSTACLES IN THIS VERY SPECIAL CITY.

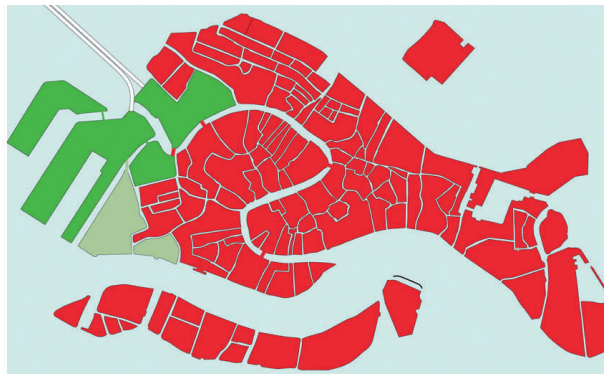
URBAN INACCESSIBILITY

Let's try to actually look at these obstacles.

Map A shows urban inaccessibility resulting from the city's unique morphology: red areas are **non-accessible** while dark and pale green areas are accessible.

The map clearly shows that the wheelchair users visiting Venice have access to barely **2% of the city**, limited to the immediate vicinity of the main tourist termi-

nals (railway station, Piazzale Roma and cruise terminal). But if we add to this map information on **public water transport** and relative to the removal of architectural barriers a far more satisfying accessibility situation emerges; almost **70% of the city** is accessible to the mobility impaired (**map B**).



Map A
A wheelchair user has access to a mere 2% of the city, limited to the immediate vicinity of the main tourist terminals (shown in green on the map).

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Thanks to public water transport the majority of Venice's **loveliest sights and areas with monuments** can be visited since they **are barrier-free**.

Public transport is guaranteed by boats **equipped for the transport of wheelchair users**: the larger vaporette which can hold several wheelchairs, and the "Giracittà" motoscafi which transport one wheelchair at a time. The **landing stages** (over 55 landing stages line the Grand Canal and along the fondamenta (embankment) around the historic centre) are



Map B
Using public transport almost 70% of the historic centre becomes accessible to the mobility impaired.

accessible to the disabled. The landing stage consists of a floating walkway and waiting area that moves up and down with the tides making it **easy for everyone** to embark and disembark. This is the only public transport system in Italy to be completely accessible.

The awareness of the great potential offered by this unique situation stems from discussions and close collaboration between several municipal departments that have been tackling urban accessibility for some years: **EBA - the municipal office**

responsible for the **elimination of architectural barriers** (tel. +39 041.274 8527, email: ufficio.eba@comune.venezia.it), the **Informahandicap** communication service (email: informahandicap@comune.venezia.it) and the **Facilitated Reading Project - Progetto Lettura Agevolata** (tel. +39 041.274 8050, email: lettura.agevolata@comune.venezia.it), coordinated by the recently introduced figure of the Mayor Councillor for the mobility impaired.

The City of Venice is proceeding along two parallel fronts that are complementary and synergical: communication and public works.

COMMUNICATION

Accurate information can even help you overcome architectural barriers. To this end the City of Venice recently published the "**Accessible Venice**" map which provides practical hints to help the mobility-impaired get around (detailed information on public transport, tourist terminals, information desks, car-parks, restrooms, etc.).

It was published together with a series of **accessible itineraries** with detailed information on access to the city's

Ramps
Ramps are considered a highly effective solution but in order to achieve the right degree of slope they need a lot of space, something that is at a premium in the historic centre of Venice. The only two existing ramps were built in outlying areas: on the Ponte dei Lavraneri on the Giudecca island (photo) and on the Ponte Zaniol on the Murano island.





Flat pedestrian bridges
Although easier to use and accessible this type of footbridge is not very practical because it blocks boat traffic. Two provisional flat footbridges have been built so far: one spanning the Rio della Crea, in the Cannaregio district, the other one in the centre of the Burano island (photo).

PUBLIC WORKS

Public works are intended to gradually improve **urban accessibility** by eliminating architectural barriers in various strategic points, thus implementing PE-BA, the specific planning tool unanimously approved by the City Council at the end of 2004. We are all aware of the **difficulties** involved in carrying out work in a fabric as fragile as that of Venice's historic centre. Its complexity and unique morphology demand the utmost caution.

But this difficulty should not become an excuse for failing to do things. Whoever approaches these themes, whether architect, administrator, public or private body, will find themselves faced with the **stimulating challenge** of safeguarding a unique historic and monumental heritage while respecting the **rights of citizens**.

Most of the handful of projects carried out so far has been limited to **research** and **experimentation**; they have not yet succeeded in paving the way for a definitive solution. After difficult gestations the various approaches adopted have frequently led to **highly debatable results** that have sometimes met with the reservations of the Soprintendenza, the office responsible for cultural heritage, or with lack of enthusiasm on the part of the locals.

monuments and heritage sites. The **first six itineraries** cover areas in the historic centre which are extremely rich in monuments (St Mark's Square, Rialto, Dorsoduro, Frari, S. Stefano and SS. Giovanni e Paolo), but others are being prepared.

These materials (also in English) are available at the City Council Public Relations (**URP**) offices and at the Tourist Information Points (**IAT**) in the Province of Venice; they can also be requested from the Informahandicap service. They can be **consulted and downloaded** from the Accessible Venice page of the Informahandicap site (www.comune.venezia.it/informahandicap).



The platform lift

This "device" consisting of two mechanical platforms mounted on a rack fixed to the side of the bridge parapet has led to heated discussions and debate among the experts. The keys required to operate Venice's platform lifts are available from all tourist information points (IAT), Informahandicap and City Council public relations offices (URP) together with the instruction kit. Photo: Platform lift on Ponte Goldoni (Bacino Orseolo).

The stepped ramp
The stepped ramp is created - upon condition the bridge has treads deep enough - with low steps and rounded edges and allows wheelchair users and their attendants to cross it without difficulty. Stepped ramps can be found on the Ponte delle Guglie in the Cannaregio district and on the Ponte delle Cappuccine on the island of Burano (photo); other stepped ramps are due to be built soon.



STRATEGIC PROJECTS

Although urban accessibility is **already satisfying** (as described above almost 70% of the city can be visited without encountering architectural barriers) the next step involves identifying priorities with the aim of **increasing this percentage** as well as paying increasing attention to the quality of projects, bearing in mind that Venice will never become entirely accessible.

VISUAL IMPAIRED

The Venice Council administration has looked carefully into the mobility needs of the visually impaired whose safety and independence requirements differ vastly from those of wheelchair users. Our conclusions and the projects launched so far will be examined in these pages in the near future.

Integrated policies, such as the “**special transport**” service to improve the mobility of the disabled, must be oriented in this direction. Equally important is the excellent relationship of collaboration that has been built up over time with the **Soprintendenza**, the cultural heritage department. Further round tables were recently launched with the University, Province, **Biennale** and tourist operators.

Local citizens have proved very open to a series of initiatives carried out in the past two years to increase awareness on urban accessibility. The following are some of the most innovative:

Aperto per lavori (Works in progress): **walkways over bridges** undergoing restoration make certain areas of the city temporarily accessible. The initiative involves providing real-time information on the possibility of visiting the areas concerned. Basically, rather than causing disruption work in progress becomes an **opportunity for increasing the mobility** of the disabled and for raising public awareness.



The “**caregòn**”
The “**caregòn**” (the photograph shows the “**caregòn**” on Ponte Ognissanti in the Dorsoduro district) is a kind of mobile platform moving horizontally along a track mounted on the bottom of the canal. This prototype was subjected to much criticism because it was hard to use, visually intrusive and cumbersome as well as expensive to run.



The elevator
The solution adopted for the Ponte Longo on the island of the Giudecca. Two elevators at either end link the embankment level to the long iron bridge. The result is visually intrusive and fairly costly to run. It would also be difficult to use in other contexts.



Temporary ramp
The classic ramp made from wooden planks laid over a tubular structure is visually intrusive therefore not very popular with the Soprintendenza. The solution adopted for the Ponte della Paglia beside the Doge's Palace in the St. Mark's district (photo) is far more appealing. The ramp consists of a series of non-slip plastic wedges.
It can only be used on bridges with deep treads.

Venice Marathon: for two years this major sporting event has not only become an occasion for creating a planning workshop providing young architects with training on urban accessibility, it has also made it possible to **leave ramps in place on 13 bridges** for no less than two months (a sixth of the year!), thus allowing wheelchair users to reach areas that are not normally accessible.

VENICE - A SPECIAL CITY

Venice is a very special city and not just because of its **cultural and environmental heritage**. According to Giuseppe Toso, Venice's Accessibility Councillor, "In no other city in the world is the role of the **public transport system so crucial** to urban accessibility. But we must not forget the equally important role of the City of Venice which is responsible for urban maintenance and public works". Obviously the organisation of such works must take **everyone's needs** into account, whether individuals or groups.

We would like to thank architect Franco Gazzarri, head of the Venice Council Office for the Elimination of Architectural Barriers for his collaboration. ■