

THE RIGHT TO REMAIN A CITY

A Social Free Zone Proposal
from Venice to Europe's Historic Cities

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*« To Venice, fragile and timeless,
may it once again breathe with life.»*

Preface

During my professional activity, devoted to studying the international potential of destinations and urban economies, I came across — almost by chance — the experience of Free Zones in Europe: concrete instruments capable of restoring energy, attractiveness and new perspectives to fragile territories facing structural decline.

From that moment, a simple but inevitable question emerged: why not Venice?

The city's fragilities are visible to anyone: the continuous decline of the resident population, the gradual weakening of everyday urban life, the growing imbalance between tourism and the city's social and economic continuity. What once appeared as a temporary condition has progressively become

structural. Ordinary interventions are no longer sufficient. A different scale of action is required.

As I explored the mechanisms and legal frameworks of Free Zones more deeply, it became increasingly clear that such instruments could also be adapted to the Venetian context. The more I studied the subject, the more a concrete possibility began to emerge: restoring to Venice the conditions necessary to remain an inhabited, productive and socially continuous city.

The Social Free Zone proposal was born from this reflection. Not as an abstract utopia, but as a pragmatic framework grounded in legal, fiscal and administrative instruments that already exist within both Italian and European systems. A proposal aimed at rebuilding urban continuity through policies capable of supporting residence, local economies and long-term urban balance.

But Venice does not represent only a fragile urban reality.

Because of its historical structure, the international pressures concentrated within its urban space and the speed with which certain transformations become visible, the city today constitutes one of the clearest observatories of tensions affecting many historic European cities: the loss of residential continuity, the progressive weakening of local economies, concentrated tourism pressure and the increasing difficulty of maintaining a stable balance between urban life, cultural heritage and contemporary economic systems.

In this sense, Venice is not presented as an absolute or automatically transferable model, but as an emblematic example of a broader European urban condition that is becoming increasingly central to the future of historic cities.

For this reason, the Social Free Zone proposal is intended not only as a possible response for Venice, but also as a contribution to a wider reflection on how historic urban environments can remain socially alive, economically sustainable and structurally inhabited in an era shaped by global mobility, tourism pressure and demographic fragility.

This book brings together the reasons behind the proposal, the legal and institutional frameworks that could support it, comparisons with related experiences and the possible implications for Venice and for other historic urban contexts facing similar transformations.

It is neither a technical document nor a political manifesto. Rather, it is an invitation to reflect on how historic cities may continue to remain cities.

Introduction

Venice today represents far more than a local urban condition.

It has become one of the places where broader European transformations affecting historic cities appear with particular clarity.

Across Europe, historic urban environments are increasingly confronted with similar tensions: the gradual loss of stable residential communities, the growing pressure of global tourism, the transformation of local economies into temporary consumption systems, and the progressive weakening of the relationship between heritage, everyday life and urban continuity.

These dynamics do not concern only major international destinations. They increasingly affect smaller historic centres and urban environments that form a substantial part of Europe's cultural and territorial fabric.

Venice occupies a particular position within this wider context.

Because of its global visibility, its physical fragility and the intensity with which urban transformations become visible within its limited spatial structure, the city offers a uniquely revealing perspective on processes that are now extending well beyond the Venetian lagoon.

For this reason, the aim of this book is not simply to discuss Venice as an isolated case, nor to propose universally transferable solutions. Rather, Venice is used here as an emblematic urban example through which broader questions concerning the future of Europe's historic cities can be explored.

The Social Free Zone proposal emerges within this framework as a possible instrument for rebuilding conditions of urban continuity: supporting stable residence, productive local economies and a more sustainable balance between tourism, urban life and historic heritage.

The pages that follow are therefore intended not as a definitive answer, but as a contribution to a wider European reflection on how historic cities may continue to remain socially alive, inhabited and economically sustainable in the decades ahead.

1

Historic European Cities Facing the Same Transformation

Historic European cities are undergoing a profound transformation in the relationship between residence, tourism and urban economies.

Europe is characterised by an urban morphology unlike any other in the world: a dense network of historic cities, medieval centres, small towns and layered urban systems shaped over centuries. This urban structure represents one of the continent's most distinctive features and constitutes a cultural, social and economic heritage of extraordinary value.

For centuries, these urban environments maintained a relatively stable balance between everyday life, local economies, civic functions and external exchange. In recent decades, however, this equilibrium has progressively begun to weaken under the combined pressures of global tourism, digital platforms, financial

real-estate dynamics and the increasing transformation of historic urban space into temporary consumption environments.

Across many European cities, urban areas that historically represented the core of civic and residential life are gradually becoming more dependent on tourism-oriented economies and real-estate extraction. The result is a progressive decline in stable residential communities, the weakening of traditional urban functions and growing difficulties in maintaining a sustainable balance between inhabited city and visited city.

These transformations take different forms depending on the characteristics of individual urban contexts. In major international destinations such as Barcelona, Amsterdam or Prague, they emerge primarily through tourism pressure and the progressive alteration of housing markets. In smaller historic centres and minor urban settlements — which together form a substantial part of Europe's territorial and cultural landscape — the effects may appear less visible, yet no less significant.

Within this broader European context, Venice represents one of the places where such dynamics become particularly visible.

The fragility of its urban structure, the limited physical scale of the city and its exceptional international exposure make visible, with unusual clarity, transformations that elsewhere often unfold more gradually and less perceptibly.

For this reason, reflecting on the future of Venice also means reflecting more broadly on the future of Europe's historic cities and on the conditions necessary for them to remain socially alive, economically sustainable and structurally inhabited over time.

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Why Historic Cities Require Extraordinary Urban Instruments

For centuries, many European historic cities were able to maintain a relatively stable balance between residence, local economies, civic life and external exchange. Their urban continuity depended not only on the preservation of monuments and physical heritage, but also on the permanence of productive activities, social relationships and everyday urban functions.

In recent decades, this equilibrium has progressively weakened across many urban contexts.

The combination of global tourism, digital platforms, financial real-estate dynamics and demographic decline has increasingly transformed historic urban environments into spaces shaped by temporary presence and short-term economic extraction. In many cities, stable residential communities are shrinking, local economies are becoming more fragile and

traditional urban functions are progressively losing continuity.

These dynamics do not affect all cities with the same intensity. Some urban systems retain sufficient demographic and economic strength to absorb part of the pressure. Others — particularly smaller historic centres and physically fragile urban environments — are far more exposed to structural imbalance.

Within this broader context, Venice represents one of the clearest examples of how these transformations can progressively alter the internal equilibrium of a historic city.

The city's limited physical scale, its exceptional international exposure and the complexity of its lagoon structure make visible, with unusual clarity, processes that in many other European historic cities remain partially hidden or unfold more gradually.

The issue, however, is not limited to Venice itself.

Across Europe, many historic cities increasingly face similar questions: how to preserve stable residential life within highly attractive urban environments; how to prevent local economies from becoming entirely

dependent on temporary consumption; how to maintain urban continuity in contexts exposed to intense tourism pressure and growing real-estate concentration.

In this sense, the crisis affecting many historic cities is not merely demographic or economic. It concerns the capacity of urban systems to continue functioning as socially inhabited environments rather than progressively transforming into spaces dominated by temporary uses and external pressures.

The Limits of Ordinary Policies

The growing fragility of historic urban environments has also revealed the limitations of ordinary policy instruments.

In many European cities, measures such as housing incentives, tourism regulations, heritage protections or urban restrictions have produced partial results, but have rarely altered the structural trajectory of decline affecting residential continuity and local urban economies.

The reason is not necessarily the absence of political attention, but the fact that most existing instruments were designed for ordinary urban conditions, whereas many historic cities now face extraordinary structural pressures linked to their morphology, economic exposure and demographic fragility.

This is particularly evident in urban contexts where the balance between residence, tourism and local economies has become progressively asymmetrical.

For this reason, the question increasingly emerging across Europe is whether historic cities require not only stronger protections, but also new forms of long-term urban governance capable of intervening directly on the structural conditions that influence residence, economic continuity and urban balance.

Why Extraordinary Instruments Become Necessary

Invoking extraordinary instruments for historic cities does not mean introducing exceptional privileges or isolated emergency measures. It means recognising that certain urban environments now require frameworks

capable of addressing structural transformations that ordinary policies can no longer adequately contain.

The challenge is not simply to preserve historic heritage, but to preserve the conditions that allow historic cities to remain socially alive, economically productive and permanently inhabited.

Within this perspective, the Social Free Zone proposal is introduced not as a nostalgic attempt to restore an irrecoverable past, but as a possible institutional and urban instrument capable of rebuilding conditions of urban continuity through targeted fiscal, administrative and economic measures.

The objective is not to freeze historic cities, but to enable them to remain cities.

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From Free Zones to the Social Free Zone

The Logic of Special Regimes

The idea of a Free Zone has historically been linked to trade. It referred to a defined territorial area in which special fiscal, customs or administrative rules applied, allowing goods to be stored, processed or re-exported under more favourable conditions.

Over time, however, the logic of special regimes has progressively moved beyond the purely commercial dimension. In several European contexts, targeted regulatory and fiscal frameworks have been used not only to support trade or industrial activity, but also to stimulate investment, employment, urban regeneration and territorial recovery.

The underlying principle is clear: when a territory faces structural decline, ordinary measures are often

insufficient. Specific conditions may require specific rules.

This is the conceptual basis from which the Social Free Zone proposal emerges.

Its purpose is not to reproduce traditional free-zone mechanisms, nor to create a fiscal enclave. It is to reinterpret the logic of special regimes in relation to a different urban need: the continuity of historic cities as inhabited, productive and socially functioning environments.

Existing European References

European law already allows Member States to establish Free Zones within the framework of the Union Customs Code. Alongside these instruments, several countries have developed special fiscal, administrative or territorial regimes aimed at supporting areas facing economic, social or demographic fragility.

The forms vary considerably from country to country. Some are linked to ports and logistics. Others support industrial districts, urban regeneration areas, disadvantaged neighbourhoods or peripheral regions. What they share is the recognition that certain territories require dedicated frameworks in order to rebalance structural disadvantages or stimulate new forms of economic vitality.

Examples can be found in Spain, France, Italy, Poland, Croatia, Ireland and other European contexts, where special regimes have contributed in different ways to investment attraction, employment creation, district regeneration or the relaunch of declining urban areas.

These examples do not provide a ready-made model for historic cities. They do, however, demonstrate that Europe already possesses a legal and policy culture in which targeted territorial instruments can be used to address structural imbalance.

National Frameworks and Local Adaptation

Each European country has its own legal and administrative instruments that may complement the broader European framework.

In Italy, for example, instruments such as Special Economic Zones and Urban Free Zones have already introduced forms of fiscal relief, administrative simplification and targeted support for enterprises and territories facing specific structural difficulties.

The relevance of these precedents does not lie in their direct replication. Their importance lies in showing that special territorial frameworks are not alien to European or national legal systems. The challenge is therefore not to invent a completely new category, but to adapt existing principles to the needs of historic urban environments.

In the case of Venice, this means shifting the purpose of the instrument.

The issue is no longer the movement of goods, nor the attraction of generic business activity. The question is how to support residence, qualified work, local economies and urban functions capable of preserving the continuity of a historic city.

Venice and the Reinterpretation of the Free-Zone Logic

Venice has already had a relationship with special regimes, particularly through the customs free-zone experience connected to Porto Marghera. In previous decades, various proposals also imagined forms of fiscal advantage or special status for the city.

Those earlier approaches were largely centred on economic attraction, corporate presence or port-related functions. They were conceived within a different institutional and economic context and did not yet have the legal and urban-policy framework that exists today.

The Social Free Zone proposal takes a different direction.

It does not aim to turn the historic city into a privileged fiscal space. It proposes instead to use the logic of targeted regulation to address a specific urban condition: the progressive weakening of residence, local economies and civic continuity within historic cities under pressure.

In this sense, Venice becomes not merely the beneficiary of a special regime, but the place where the very meaning of such a regime can be redefined.

The transition is therefore conceptual as much as institutional: from goods to people, from customs advantage to urban continuity, from trade facilitation to the preservation of the city as a living civic environment.

Here begins the idea of the Social Free Zone.

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The Paradigm Shift: The Social Free Zone

The Social Free Zone proposal is based on a relatively simple principle: instruments originally conceived to support economic regeneration can also be reinterpreted to protect the continuity of historic urban environments.

The issue facing many historic cities today is not limited to heritage conservation or tourism management.

Increasingly, it concerns the capacity of these urban systems to remain permanently inhabited, economically diverse and socially functional over time.

Within this perspective, the Social Free Zone is conceived not as an exceptional privilege, but as a targeted urban framework designed to intervene on the structural conditions that influence residential continuity, local economic vitality and long-term urban balance.

The proposal therefore represents a shift in perspective.

Traditional free-zone mechanisms were largely designed to facilitate the movement of goods, trade and investment. The Social Free Zone reorients this logic toward people, urban continuity and the preservation of civic life within historic cities.

Its objective is not to create isolated fiscal advantages, but to establish conditions capable of encouraging stable residence, productive local economies and forms of economic activity compatible with the social and cultural structure of historic urban environments.

In practical terms, this implies a framework combining targeted fiscal measures, administrative simplifications and urban policies linked to concrete and verifiable objectives: stable residence, qualified employment, recovery of residential buildings, support for local economic activities and long-term urban permanence.

Within such a framework, benefits would not be disconnected from responsibility. Public institutions, residents and economic actors would participate in a broader process of urban co-responsibility aimed at

preserving the city as a living environment rather than reducing it to a space of temporary consumption.

The proposal is therefore not limited to attracting new activities. It also concerns the reinforcement of economic and social functions already rooted in the urban fabric: local craftsmanship, neighbourhood services, cultural production, knowledge-based activities and economic sectors connected to the specific identity and environmental structure of historic cities.

In this sense, the Social Free Zone is not conceived as a temporary intervention, but as a stable regulatory framework capable of generating long-term structural effects.

The Scale of the Transformation

The broader significance of the proposal lies in its attempt to redefine the relationship between historic cities and the economic forces that increasingly shape them.

Many contemporary urban policies remain focused either on conservation or on tourism management. The Social Free Zone instead starts from a different premise: that historic cities require conditions allowing them to continue functioning as complete urban systems rather than progressively fragmenting into spaces dominated by temporary economies and declining residential continuity.

This implies a transition from reactive policies to structural urban strategies.

The objective is not simply to mitigate decline, but to rebuild the conditions necessary for demographic stability, diversified local economies and a more balanced relationship between tourism, urban life and economic activity.

Within this perspective, Venice is not presented as a nostalgic image of the past, nor as a city to be frozen in time. Rather, it becomes an example through which broader European questions about the future of historic cities can be explored.

A Broader European Perspective

For centuries, Venice functioned as a place where commerce, international exchange, civic life and urban complexity coexisted within an exceptionally fragile environment.

Today, the city once again raises a broader European question: how can historic urban environments remain socially alive and economically sustainable under conditions of global mobility, tourism pressure and demographic fragility?

The Social Free Zone proposal attempts to address this question through an institutional rather than purely symbolic approach.

Its ambition is not to reproduce the past, but to explore whether historic cities can develop new forms of urban balance capable of preserving continuity without renouncing economic openness, international exchange or contemporary urban life.

In this sense, Venice may become not an isolated exception, but one of the places where Europe begins to rethink the future of its historic cities.

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Venice as a European Laboratory for Urban Innovation

Among Europe's historic cities, Venice represents one of the places where the tensions between global tourism, residential decline and urban transformation become most clearly visible.

Precisely because of this condition, Venice can also function as a particularly significant environment in which to explore innovative urban instruments such as the Social Free Zone: not as a universally transferable model, but as a concrete urban experiment capable of generating broader reflections for other historic cities facing structural fragility.

A Particularly Fragile Urban Environment

What makes Venice especially significant within the European urban landscape is not only its symbolic

visibility, but the convergence of multiple structural vulnerabilities within a limited and clearly identifiable urban space.

Its lagoon morphology creates logistical, infrastructural and environmental conditions unlike those of ordinary continental cities. At the same time, demographic decline, tourism pressure and the progressive weakening of local economic functions have combined to intensify the fragility of the urban system as a whole.

The result is not simply a tourism crisis or a demographic problem. It is the progressive destabilisation of the relationship between residence, economy, services and everyday urban life.

Although Venice represents a particularly exposed condition, many historic European cities increasingly experience comparable tensions: shrinking residential continuity, weakening local economic functions, increasing dependence on temporary economies and growing difficulties in preserving socially balanced urban environments.

For this reason, Venice becomes relevant not as an isolated exception, but as a particularly visible urban condition within a wider European transformation.

The Social Free Zone as an Urban Innovation Framework

The Social Free Zone proposal is conceived as a regulatory and institutional framework capable of transforming structural fragility into an opportunity for controlled urban experimentation.

Its purpose is not simply to introduce fiscal advantages, but to test whether targeted urban instruments can help rebuild conditions of continuity within historic urban environments.

The proposal is structured around several interconnected principles.

Selective and Conditional Measures

Any advantages linked to the Social Free Zone would be conditional rather than automatic.

Fiscal incentives, administrative simplifications or urban benefits would be connected to verifiable objectives such as stable residence, long-term economic presence, qualified employment, recovery of unused buildings and participation in local urban life.

Conditionality is therefore central to the legitimacy of the proposal: benefits remain connected to measurable contributions to the continuity of the city rather than becoming new forms of passive rent extraction.

Administrative Simplification and Urban Compatibility

Historic cities often face structural rigidity not only because of economic pressures, but also because of administrative fragmentation and procedural complexity.

The proposal therefore includes simplified governance mechanisms capable of facilitating activities considered compatible with the long-term continuity of the urban environment: local craftsmanship, cultural production, knowledge-based activities, research, neighbourhood services and forms of innovation adapted to fragile historic contexts.

The objective is not indiscriminate economic expansion, but the strengthening of urban functions coherent with the social and cultural structure of the city.

Residential Continuity

A central objective of the proposal concerns the rebuilding of stable residential conditions.

This may include targeted housing policies, recovery of unused buildings, forms of accessible residence for younger populations, researchers or qualified workers, and mechanisms linking benefits to actual long-term urban permanence.

The broader aim is to preserve the demographic and social critical mass necessary to maintain schools, neighbourhood services, local commerce and ordinary urban life.

Monitoring and Measurable Outcomes

The effectiveness of a Social Free Zone framework could be evaluated through measurable indicators monitored over time.

These may include demographic stability, the number of active local businesses, qualified employment, the balance between residential and tourism functions, administrative efficiency and broader indicators related to environmental and urban sustainability.

The importance of monitoring is not merely technical. It is what allows extraordinary instruments to remain accountable, reversible if necessary and adaptable to changing urban conditions.

Venice as a European Urban Laboratory

Experiences developed in different European and international contexts suggest that special territorial frameworks tend to function effectively only when they combine targeted regulation, dedicated governance and rigorous conditions of access and permanence.

In this sense, Venice offers particularly favourable conditions for experimentation.

Its clearly identifiable urban perimeter facilitates monitoring. Its international visibility gives broader significance to local outcomes. Its structural fragility creates urgency. And its symbolic role within Europe amplifies the relevance of any attempt to rethink the relationship between historic cities, urban continuity and contemporary economic pressures.

For these reasons, the Social Free Zone should not be understood merely as a local intervention for Venice, but as part of a wider European reflection on the future governance of historic urban environments.

A Gradual and Verifiable Process

The implementation of a Social Free Zone would necessarily require a gradual and carefully monitored process.

A first phase would involve defining the scope of application, measurable objectives, governance structures and access criteria. Only afterwards could limited experimental phases be introduced, progressively evaluated and eventually expanded according to observed results.

This gradual approach represents one of the essential elements of the proposal itself: transforming urban innovation into a process that remains measurable, adjustable and institutionally accountable over time.

Comparative Table – Selected European and International Precedents of Special Regimes

Location	Instrument	Main Outcome
Bilbao (Spain)	Integrated urban and economic regeneration plan	Post-industrial urban regeneration through culture and infrastructure
Marseille (France)	<i>Euroméditerranée project and Urban Free Zones (ZFU)</i>	Regeneration of degraded districts and attraction of new businesses
Italy	Urban Free Zones (ZFU)	Fiscal incentives for micro and small enterprises in urban crisis areas
United Kingdom	Enterprise Zones	Tax incentives and simplified regulations to attract investment in depressed areas
Canary Islands / Madeira	Special fiscal regimes (ZEC, IBCM)	Business development and job creation in peripheral regions
Poland, Croatia, Ireland	Free Zones and special territorial regimes	Attraction of investment and regional economic development

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How the Social Free Zone Could Function in Practice

The Social Free Zone proposal is based on the adaptation of instruments and regulatory principles that already exist within European and national frameworks, reinterpreting them in relation to the continuity of historic urban environments.

The objective is not to create a generic system of fiscal advantage, but to establish targeted conditions capable of supporting stable residence, qualified economic activity and urban functions compatible with the long-term social and economic balance of historic cities.

Within this framework, fiscal measures, administrative simplifications and selective access criteria would operate together rather than separately.

Any advantages introduced through the Social Free Zone would be linked to concrete and verifiable objectives: stable residence, qualified employment, productive local activity, recovery of unused urban spaces and long-term participation in the life of the city.

The proposal therefore relies on a principle of conditionality. Benefits would remain connected to measurable forms of urban continuity rather than functioning as unconditional incentives or speculative advantages.

Financing and Institutional Sustainability

The proposal does not necessarily require the creation of entirely new financial instruments.

Across Europe, several mechanisms already exist within cohesion policies, territorial development frameworks, urban regeneration programmes and targeted fiscal instruments that could potentially support experimental urban initiatives of this kind.

Different countries also possess their own national instruments capable of complementing broader European frameworks through administrative simplification, selective fiscal measures or targeted territorial policies.

In the Italian context, instruments such as Special Economic Zones, Urban Free Zones and the Special Law for Venice already provide important institutional precedents. Their relevance lies not in direct replication, but in demonstrating that differentiated territorial frameworks are already compatible with existing legal systems.

What changes in the Social Free Zone proposal is the purpose of the instrument itself.

The focus shifts from purely economic competitiveness toward the rebuilding of urban continuity through support for residence, local economies and socially sustainable urban functions.

In this sense, the proposal should not be understood simply as an extraordinary measure for Venice, but as part of a broader European reflection on how historic cities may develop new institutional tools capable of responding to structural urban fragility.

The deeper significance of the proposal lies precisely here: not in preserving historic cities as static heritage environments, but in enabling them to continue functioning as living urban systems.

How the Social Free Zone Would Work

Area	Key Instruments	Expected Impact
Legal framework	Adaptation of existing instruments (SEZs, Urban Free Zones, Special Law for Venice, EU framework)	A clear regulatory basis tailored to Venice's specific conditions
Residents	Tax incentives linked to permanent residency; support for housing access	Increased stable population, especially families and young residents
Businesses and employment	Incentives for local enterprises, craftsmanship and innovative activities; support for qualified jobs	Economic diversification and creation of stable, high-quality employment
Housing	Incentives for long-term rentals; regeneration of vacant properties; co-housing and student housing programmes	Greater housing availability and return of residential continuity
Administration	Simplified procedures, single access point, faster authorisations	Reduced bureaucracy and lower entry barriers for residents and businesses
Funding	Reallocation of existing resources (SEZs, EU cohesion funds, Special Law for Venice)	No need for extraordinary public spending; efficient use of existing tools

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The Concrete Effects of the Social Free Zone

The effects of a Social Free Zone framework would not be limited to fiscal or economic measures alone. Their broader significance lies in the capacity to influence the structural conditions that shape everyday urban continuity within historic cities.

The proposal therefore concerns several interconnected dimensions: residence, local economies, investment patterns, urban services and long-term social balance.

Residential Continuity

One of the primary objectives of the Social Free Zone is to strengthen stable residential presence within the historic urban environment.

Targeted fiscal measures, regulatory adjustments and housing policies could contribute to reducing the structural imbalance created by the excessive concentration of short-term tourism-related uses, while facilitating forms of long-term residence accessible to families, younger populations, students, researchers and qualified workers.

The significance of residential continuity extends beyond demographic numbers alone.

Historic cities depend on a sufficient resident population to maintain schools, neighbourhood commerce, local services and the ordinary social interactions that allow urban life to function beyond temporary consumption.

In this sense, residence becomes not merely a private condition, but one of the central components of urban equilibrium.

Diversified and Qualified Urban Economies

The proposal also aims to support forms of economic activity compatible with the long-term continuity of historic urban environments.

This includes locally rooted activities such as craftsmanship, cultural production, neighbourhood services, knowledge-based sectors, research, creative industries and forms of innovation capable of interacting coherently with fragile historic contexts.

The objective is not to eliminate tourism, but to reduce excessive dependence on economic models based exclusively on temporary flows and low-value extraction.

A more diversified urban economy increases resilience, stabilises employment and strengthens the relationship between economic activity and everyday urban life.

Responsible and Long-Term Investment

The Social Free Zone also seeks to redirect investment toward forms of urban development compatible with long-term continuity rather than short-term speculative extraction.

This may include incentives linked to the recovery of residential buildings, support for productive local activities and financial instruments capable of encouraging stable and socially compatible urban investment.

Within this framework, public institutions, private actors and financial systems become part of a broader urban strategy aimed at preserving the long-term functionality of the city.

Systemic Urban Effects

The broader effects of such a framework should not be understood as isolated benefits, but as interconnected structural transformations capable of influencing the urban system as a whole.

Potential effects may include:

- greater demographic stability and gradual residential recovery;
- reinforcement of local economic diversity;
- improved continuity of neighbourhood services and everyday urban functions;
- stronger interaction between historic urban heritage and contemporary productive activities;
- greater balance between tourism, residence and local economic life;
- improved institutional capacity to monitor and manage urban fragility over time.

In this perspective, the Social Free Zone proposal is less an extraordinary measure than an attempt to rebuild conditions of urban continuity capable of allowing historic cities to remain socially alive, economically productive and permanently inhabited.

Possible Urban Effects of a Social Free Zone

Dimension	Potential Effects
Residence	Greater residential continuity and demographic stability
Local Economies	Diversification of urban economic functions
Employment	Increase in qualified and long-term urban employment
Housing	Recovery of residential use within the historic city
Urban Services	Reinforcement of neighbourhood services and schools
Urban Balance	More sustainable relationship between tourism and urban life
Culture and Knowledge	Strengthening of cultural, research and creative activities

8

From the Myth of Inconvenience to the Right to Urban Continuity

One of the most persistent assumptions surrounding Venice concerns its supposed unliveability. Yet this perception is not simply the consequence of the city's lagoon morphology. It is largely the result of long-term social, demographic and economic transformations that have progressively weakened the ordinary continuity of urban life.

A City Made Increasingly Fragile

Until only a few decades ago, Venice still functioned as a relatively complete urban environment: neighbourhood schools, local commerce, cinemas, everyday services, public spaces and ordinary social relationships remained integrated into the daily life of the city.

The growing perception of inconvenience emerged progressively as residential continuity weakened and many ordinary urban functions were replaced by temporary and tourism-oriented activities.

What is often interpreted as the inevitable difficulty of living in Venice is therefore, to a large extent, the consequence of an urban imbalance that developed over time rather than the unavoidable effect of the city's physical structure.

The Loss of Urban Continuity

The reduction of the resident population has affected not only the demographic dimension of the city, but also the broader equilibrium of its urban functions.

When residential continuity weakens, local services, neighbourhood economies, social interactions and everyday urban infrastructures also begin to decline. Over time, this process tends to reinforce itself: the more ordinary urban life becomes fragile, the more the

city appears difficult to inhabit, encouraging further residential decline.

This dynamic is not unique to Venice.

Many historic European cities increasingly face similar tensions whenever residential continuity falls below the threshold necessary to sustain ordinary urban functions.

Beyond Demographic Recovery

The issue, therefore, does not concern demographic growth alone.

The deeper question is whether historic cities can maintain sufficient urban continuity to support stable social, economic and civic life over time.

In this sense, the challenge is not simply to increase the number of residents, but to restore the conditions that allow residence, services, economic activity and everyday urban functions to remain interconnected within a balanced urban system.

Venice and the European Urban Form

Paradoxically, Venice still preserves several characteristics that many contemporary European cities are now attempting to recover through urban regeneration policies: pedestrian continuity, proximity-based urban life, reduced dependence on private vehicles and a dense relationship between everyday functions and public space.

The city's structural problem therefore does not lie in its urban form itself, but in the progressive weakening of the equilibrium that historically sustained it.

The decline of stable residence, the transformation of economic functions and the increasing dominance of temporary urban uses have gradually eroded the continuity necessary for ordinary urban life.

If a new balance between residence, local economies, services and cultural functions could be re-established, Venice might once again represent not only a historic heritage environment, but also one of the most advanced examples of sustainable urban continuity within the European context.

Conclusion

Venice is not in crisis because of its urban structure.

Its fragility stems rather from the progressive dissolution of the social, economic and demographic equilibrium that historically allowed the city to remain continuously inhabited and functionally alive.

The challenge today is therefore not to reinvent Venice, but to rebuild the conditions that can allow its urban continuity to exist once again.

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Qualified Tourism: From Rapid Consumption to Cultural Urban Experience

Tourism and Urban Identity

Across Europe, historic cities are increasingly confronted with a central question: what type of relationship should exist between tourism and urban continuity?

Tourism is never an isolated phenomenon. It reflects broader economic, political and urban choices that progressively shape the identity of cities and influence the balance between residence, local economies, public space and everyday urban life.

Historic urban environments organised primarily around rapid consumption and temporary flows tend to attract increasingly transient forms of presence. Conversely, cities capable of maintaining cultural

vitality, productive continuity and strong relationships between visitors and local urban life are more likely to encourage forms of tourism characterised by greater economic integration, cultural engagement and urban sustainability.

The issue, therefore, is not whether historic cities should receive visitors. Their historical and cultural significance naturally places them within global systems of mobility and exchange.

The real question concerns the type of relationship cities establish with tourism and the extent to which tourism remains compatible with long-term urban continuity.

Within this broader European context, Venice represents one of the clearest examples of how tourism pressure can progressively reshape the economic and social balance of a historic city.

Excursionism and Urban Quality

One of the central issues concerns the growing concentration of short-term excursionist flows organised around extremely compressed periods of urban consumption.

In Venice, this phenomenon is amplified by the city's physical structure and logistical constraints. Large concentrations of visitors entering the city for only a few hours place significant pressure on public space, urban services and everyday urban functionality while encouraging economic activities oriented toward rapid and standardised consumption.

Over time, urban environments dominated primarily by short-term flows tend to experience increasing commercial standardisation, weakening of locally rooted economic activities and gradual reduction in the diversity of urban functions.

By contrast, forms of urban presence characterised by longer permanence, greater cultural engagement and stronger interaction with the local environment tend to support more diversified urban economies: qualified

hospitality, cultural production, local craftsmanship, specialised services and activities connected to the specific identity of the territory.

In this perspective, tourism can contribute positively not only to economic activity, but also to the broader quality of urban life.

Congestion and the Loss of Urban Value

There is also a delicate relationship between urban quality and the composition of tourism flows.

Cities characterised by permanent congestion, logistical saturation and accelerated consumption of urban space progressively risk losing attractiveness precisely for those forms of presence capable of generating greater cultural and economic value over time.

When urban systems become excessively dependent on concentrated excursionism and compressed periods of stay, economic activities themselves tend to adapt to increasingly standardised demand, gradually reducing the overall quality of the urban experience.

This dynamic concerns Venice, but it becomes even more fragile in smaller historic centres lacking the international visibility, institutional density and cultural infrastructure capable of partially compensating for these pressures.

Many smaller European historic cities possess neither Venice's global symbolic power nor its ability to attract large-scale cultural production and international networks. For these urban environments, excessive dependence on rapid and low-value tourism models may more quickly undermine economic sustainability, local identity and residential continuity.

In this sense, Venice functions less as an isolated exception than as an amplified example of broader European urban dynamics.

Transitioning Toward a Different Urban Balance

Historic cities cannot modify their urban equilibrium through isolated corrective measures alone.

The transition toward more sustainable forms of urban tourism requires gradual processes of economic, logistical and regulatory rebalancing capable of reducing excessive dependence on concentrated excursionism while strengthening residential continuity, diversified local economies and forms of tourism more integrated with the everyday life of the city.

The objective is not to eliminate tourism, but to restore balance between temporary presence and permanent urban continuity.

Conclusion

Within this broader perspective, the Social Free Zone proposal could contribute to supporting a more stable relationship between tourism, residence and urban life.

Combined with long-term strategies aimed at rebalancing urban economies and regulating excessive concentration of temporary flows, such an approach

may help historic cities preserve both their openness and their continuity.

In this sense, tourism ceases to function primarily as a force of urban destabilisation and becomes once again part of the broader civic and economic equilibrium of the city.

Tourism Today vs. Qualified Tourism

Aspect	Today	With the Social Free Port
Length of stay	Short visits, often limited to a few hours	Longer stays, linked to cultural, educational and experiential activities
Average visitor spending	Low spending, concentrated on standardised consumption	Higher spending, oriented towards culture, craftsmanship and quality experiences
Social impact	Overcrowding, pressure on public spaces and reduced quality of life for residents	Balanced flows and improved coexistence between visitors and residents
Economic impact	Limited added value, concentrated in low-margin activities	Higher value creation through diversified and quality-driven sectors
Employment	Seasonal and low-skilled jobs	More stable and qualified employment linked to culture, innovation and services
International image	Perceived as a mass tourism destination	Repositioned as a cultural, creative and experiential destination
Sustainability	High environmental and social pressure	More sustainable model, with lower impact and better resource management

European Experiences in Tourism Rebalancing

Several European historic cities have already experimented with policies aimed at reducing the structural imbalance generated by overtourism and excessive dependence on concentrated excursionist flows.

Barcelona has progressively strengthened regulations concerning short-term rentals while investing in more distributed cultural infrastructures. Amsterdam has introduced measures intended to reduce excessive concentration linked to mass tourism and encourage a more balanced relationship between visitors and everyday urban life. Dubrovnik has adopted access-management systems and broader cultural strategies aimed at reducing pressure on its historic centre.

In all these cases, the objective has not simply been to reduce visitor numbers, but to rebalance the relationship between tourism, urban continuity and local economic sustainability.

Even smaller and more fragile environments increasingly demonstrate similar dynamics. On the island of Comino, in Malta, limitations on access to the Blue Lagoon contributed to reducing environmental pressure and improving the overall quality of the visitor experience, showing how carefully regulated flows can generate broader urban and territorial benefits.

These experiences do not provide identical models for historic cities. They do, however, confirm a broader principle: the long-term sustainability of tourism depends increasingly on its compatibility with urban continuity, local economies and the quality of everyday life.

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Historic Cities and the European Challenge of Urban Continuity

Across Europe, historic cities are increasingly confronted with a common challenge: how to preserve urban continuity under conditions of demographic fragility, tourism pressure, economic transformation and growing dependence on temporary urban functions.

For decades, European policies concerning historic urban environments have focused primarily on heritage conservation, physical restoration and tourism development. While these interventions have often been necessary and valuable, they have not always addressed the deeper structural issue affecting many historic cities: the progressive weakening of permanent urban life.

The central question today is no longer limited to preserving historic buildings alone. It concerns the capacity of historic cities to remain socially inhabited, economically functional and civically continuous over time.

Beyond Heritage Preservation

The preservation of historic heritage cannot be separated from the preservation of the urban communities that give meaning to that heritage.

A city may remain physically intact while progressively losing the residential continuity, local economies and everyday urban functions that historically sustained it.

In many European historic centres, the growing imbalance between temporary uses and stable urban life increasingly risks transforming historic environments into spaces of accelerated consumption rather than functioning urban systems.

For this reason, the future of historic cities requires not only conservation policies, but also urban strategies capable of supporting demographic stability, economic diversity and long-term urban continuity.

Urban Continuity and Structural Fragility

The challenge concerns both large international destinations and smaller historic centres.

Some cities experience these pressures primarily through concentrated tourism and real-estate dynamics. Others face demographic decline, economic marginalisation or the gradual weakening of local services and productive functions.

Although the forms vary, the underlying issue remains similar: maintaining sufficient continuity between residence, economy, public space and urban life to allow historic cities to remain socially and functionally alive.

In this broader context, Venice represents one of the clearest and most visible examples of these tensions.

Its physical fragility, global visibility and limited urban scale make visible with unusual clarity dynamics that increasingly affect many historic urban environments across Europe.

For this reason, Venice is relevant not only as a singular case, but as a particularly emblematic urban condition within a wider European transformation.

Toward New Urban Instruments

The growing structural fragility of historic cities increasingly raises the question of whether ordinary urban policies alone remain sufficient.

Many existing instruments were designed for urban environments operating under relatively stable demographic and economic conditions. Historic cities under intense structural pressure may instead require more targeted and integrated frameworks capable of

intervening directly on residence, local economies, urban services and long-term urban balance.

Within this perspective, the Social Free Zone proposal should be understood not as an isolated measure for Venice, but as part of a broader reflection on how Europe may begin to rethink the governance of historic urban environments.

The proposal attempts to explore whether targeted fiscal, administrative and urban instruments can contribute to rebuilding conditions of continuity within cities exposed to progressive residential weakening and excessive dependence on temporary economic flows.

A European Opportunity

The European Union already possesses important institutional principles capable of supporting broader reflections of this kind.

Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union recognises the need to support territories affected by permanent natural or demographic disadvantages. Increasingly, historic urban environments exposed to structural demographic decline and economic imbalance may also require forms of differentiated attention within future European urban policies.

In this sense, historic cities are not merely heritage environments to preserve. They increasingly represent strategic laboratories for reflecting on the future relationship between urban continuity, sustainability, economic openness and social cohesion in Europe itself.

Conclusion

The question raised by Venice ultimately extends far beyond Venice.

It concerns the future capacity of Europe's historic cities to remain inhabited, economically productive and

socially continuous within a rapidly transforming urban and economic landscape.

In this broader perspective, the Social Free Zone proposal is not presented as a definitive solution, but as a contribution to an emerging European reflection: how historic cities may continue to remain cities.

A Possible Institutional Pathway

The implementation of a Social Free Zone framework would require a gradual institutional process built largely upon regulatory and administrative instruments that already exist within European and national systems.

The proposal does not depend on the creation of entirely new legal categories. Its feasibility lies rather in the coordinated adaptation of existing instruments to the specific challenges affecting historic urban environments.

Institutional Coordination

A first step would involve the creation of an institutional coordination framework capable of bringing together local authorities, national institutions, European bodies and relevant urban actors.

Given the complexity of historic urban systems, the process would also benefit from the involvement of universities, research institutions, economic sectors, cultural organisations and representatives of local communities.

The objective would not simply be administrative coordination, but the construction of a sufficiently stable and authoritative framework capable of supporting long-term urban continuity strategies.

Legal and Economic Feasibility

A second phase would require the development of a detailed feasibility study aimed at identifying how existing regulatory instruments could be adapted to historic urban environments.

This process would involve the integration of fiscal, administrative, urban and territorial measures already available within European and national legal systems, while evaluating their possible impact on demographic

stability, local economies, employment, housing and urban sustainability.

Universities and research institutions could play an important role in analysing the legal, economic and urban dimensions of such a framework.

Defining the Scope and Measures

The application of a Social Free Zone framework would necessarily require clearly defined territorial boundaries, governance mechanisms and access criteria.

Measures could include selective fiscal incentives, administrative simplifications, support for locally rooted economic activities, housing-related instruments and targeted policies aimed at strengthening residential continuity and urban balance.

The objective would not be indiscriminate economic expansion, but the reinforcement of urban functions compatible with the long-term sustainability of historic environments.

Gradual Experimental Phases

Because of the structural complexity of historic cities, implementation would necessarily need to proceed gradually.

Initial pilot phases could allow institutions to evaluate concrete effects over time, monitor possible distortions and progressively adapt the framework according to observed urban, economic and demographic outcomes.

Gradual implementation is not merely a precautionary measure. It represents one of the essential conditions for ensuring compatibility between innovative urban instruments and the fragile equilibrium of historic urban environments.

Community Participation

Long-term urban continuity cannot be rebuilt exclusively through administrative measures.

The involvement of residents, local economic actors, cultural institutions, universities and social

organisations would therefore represent an essential component of the process.

Participation is important not only for democratic legitimacy, but also because historic urban environments require highly adaptive frameworks capable of responding to the differentiated realities that coexist within the city.

European Integration

The proposal could also be integrated within broader European frameworks already dedicated to territorial cohesion, urban sustainability and demographic resilience.

Existing European programmes linked to urban innovation, cohesion policies and sustainable territorial development may provide institutional and financial support without necessarily requiring entirely new extraordinary mechanisms.

In this perspective, historic cities increasingly become part of a broader European reflection concerning the future relationship between heritage, residence, urban continuity and economic sustainability.

Monitoring and Governance

Any Social Free Zone framework would require stable monitoring structures based on verifiable indicators related to demographic continuity, economic activity, qualified employment, environmental sustainability and urban balance.

At the same time, the project would require forms of dedicated governance capable of coordinating fiscal, administrative and urban instruments over time while progressively adapting them to evolving urban conditions.

The effectiveness of extraordinary instruments depends not only on their introduction, but also on their long-term capacity for adjustment, accountability and institutional continuity.

Conclusion

The Social Free Zone proposal can largely be developed through instruments and regulatory principles that already exist within European and national systems, provided they are coordinated within a coherent long-term urban strategy.

Its implementation would require gradual adaptation, institutional coordination and stable collaboration between public authorities, local communities, economic actors and European frameworks.

More broadly, the proposal raises a wider question concerning the future governance of historic cities: whether Europe is capable of developing urban instruments able not only to preserve historic environments, but also to sustain the social, economic and demographic continuity necessary for them to remain living cities over time.

Possible Institutional Development Path

Phase	Main Objective	Possible Actors
Institutional Coordination	Creation of a shared governance framework	Local, national and European institutions
Feasibility Study	Legal, economic and urban assessment	Universities and research institutions
Definition of Measures	Identification of applicable instruments and criteria	Public authorities and urban stakeholders
Pilot Phase	Gradual experimental implementation	Local governance structures
Community Participation	Long-term urban legitimacy and adaptation	Residents, cultural and economic actors
European Integration	Connection with EU cohesion and urban programmes	European institutions
Monitoring and Governance	Evaluation and long-term adjustment	Dedicated governance bodies

Postface

Continuing to Remain Cities

Historic cities are not merely collections of monuments to preserve.

They are complex urban organisms shaped over centuries through the interaction between residence, labour, culture, exchange, social relationships and everyday life. Their historical value does not reside only in their physical form, but in the continuity of the civic, economic and human structures that have allowed them to remain living cities over time.

Today, many historic urban environments across Europe are increasingly exposed to pressures capable of weakening this continuity: demographic decline, tourism concentration, speculative real-estate dynamics, temporary urban economies and the progressive transformation of urban space into environments primarily organised around consumption and transience.

A city gradually ceases to remain a city when continuity begins to dissolve: when stable residence weakens, when everyday urban economies are replaced by temporary functions, when social life becomes residual and the urban fabric progressively loses its capacity for internal regeneration.

Venice makes this condition particularly visible.

Because of its fragility, symbolic power and international exposure, the city reveals with unusual clarity tensions that increasingly affect many historic urban environments throughout Europe.

For this reason, the question raised by Venice ultimately extends beyond Venice itself.

It concerns the future capacity of historic cities to remain socially inhabited, economically productive and civically continuous within an increasingly unstable urban and economic landscape.

The Social Free Zone proposal emerges within this broader awareness.

Not as a privileged exception, nor as an attempt to preserve the past unchanged, but as a possible urban instrument through which Europe may begin to rethink the conditions necessary for historic cities to remain living urban environments.

The challenge is not simply to conserve historic heritage.

It is to preserve the possibility that historic cities may continue to generate everyday life, stable communities, productive economies, cultural exchange and urban continuity across time.

In this sense, the future of historic cities is no longer only a local or national question.

It has become a European urban question.

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Author's Note

Giancarlo Leporatti, a native of Venice, has worked for more than forty years in the fields of tourism and the international meeting industry. His career has been dedicated to market analysis, the study of tourism flows and the development of strategic frameworks for destinations, with particular attention to urban dynamics and regeneration processes linked to qualified tourism.

Founder of Eureka MICE International, he has conceived and directed innovative territorial marketing projects and European platforms bringing together institutions, businesses and scientific communities, contributing to the international positioning of cities and regions.

In this essay he introduces the concept of the Social Free Zone, an original model of urban and community regeneration designed for Venice, with the ambition of making it adaptable to other historic European cities facing similar challenges. His vision combines technical expertise, international experience and a deep connection with Venice, offering a concrete and innovative contribution to the debate on the future of historic cities.

*“ The crisis of historic cities is no longer only a question of heritage preservation.
It is a question of urban continuity.”*

Across Europe, historic cities are increasingly exposed to demographic decline, tourism pressure, speculative real-estate dynamics and the gradual weakening of everyday urban life.

Venice represents one of the clearest expressions of these transformations.

But the questions raised by Venice now concern many historic urban environments throughout Europe.

This book proposes a different way of looking at historic cities: not as static heritage environments, but as living urban systems whose continuity depends on the relationship between residence, local economies, cultural life and urban balance.

Starting from the idea of a Social Free Zone, the book explores whether new institutional and urban instruments may help historic cities remain socially inhabited, economically sustainable and structurally alive in the twenty-first century.

More than a proposal for Venice alone, this book is a reflection on the future of Europe's historic cities.

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