

## DELTA LANDSCAPE 2100

*Delta Landscape 2100* is the third book of a series including *Delta Landscapes. Building Scenarios within Fragile Territories* (2010) and *Delta Landscapes. Geographies, Scenarios, Identities* (2011).

What will the Po river delta region look like in 2100? Envisioning such a scenario is the key endeavor of this volume. As with many other deltaic territories, the Po delta is a fragile region, with both social paradoxes and ecological dilemmas. *Delta Landscape 2100* argues that today, at the beginning of the 21st century, imagining the fate of similar territories, affected by the drastic phenomena of ongoing climate change, is of the utmost importance.

Collecting a range of empirical inquiries and theoretical reflections, *Delta Landscape 2100* provides an attempt at interpreting such a complex territory, which culminates in two visions for the future of the Po river delta region. The ensuing design project aims to become a reference for other fragile territories around the world.

*Delta Landscape 2100* gathers reflections and design proposals developed by an international research team based at the University IUAV of Venice, the University of Sheffield, the Vilnius Gediminas Technical University and the Ion Mincu University of Bucharest, with 'Latitude - Platform for Urban Research and Design'. The team has worked intensively with local institutions, organizations and citizens.

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# DELTA LANDSCAPE 2100

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# THE PERCEPTION OF TERRITORY

Valentina Bonifacio and Lianne Verstrate

Anthropological work is characterized by a bottom-up approach that could represent a valuable instrument in many interdisciplinary studies.

In our case, we decided to conduct a number of interviews with inhabitants of the Po delta. These interviews were then analyzed in accordance with the needs of urban design planning activity, and resulted in three different diagrams, each of them related to a specific issue.

The first difficulty to keep in mind when conducting this kind of multidisciplinary study is time. According to the method of 'participant observation' that is at the origin of anthropological fieldwork, the researcher should spend an extended period of time on the field (Malinowski 1922). The length of the fieldwork is linked to the necessity of gaining insight into the 'native' point of view through a deep involvement with the subjects of the study. At the same time, researchers should strive not to interfere with the social actors' interpretation of their daily life (Schultz-Lavenda 2010). On the contrary, they should engage in a dialogue with the local inhabitants without imposing their own interpretative categories. This task, which is not as easy, can be accomplished only through an attentive and disciplined listening of 'the Other'. If researchers can spend on site only a limited period of time, on the other hand, they have to adapt to the study conditions without losing the 'spirit' of the discipline. In our case, it meant to bypass the purely observational phase and to carry on interviews with a varied range of local actors trying not to impose our own way of 'reading' the area and our own interpretative categories. For example, in order to understand if the local power plant

was perceived as a problem by the interviewed, we avoided to ask directly "what do you think about the power plant?". In fact, this would have implicitly forced the interviewed to think about it as an issue. For this reason, we decided to engage in a dialogue with people through an open approach, for example by asking them to tell us about their life stories and daily activities. This modality of interaction is quite frequent in urban anthropology (Signorelli 2003). Because of this extreme openness in the structure of the dialogue, it is only while conducting the interviews that specific categories – such as the variety of social groups that are present on the territory – emerge. Therefore, researchers have to gradually incorporate the interpretative categories of respondents through an attentive and active listening.

In an interdisciplinary effort, we decided to translate the content of the interviews in a visual form in order to emphasize certain issues and facilitate transmission. Lacking the necessary technical knowledge, the translation process was done in collaboration with a graphic designer. Although the use of visual tools in the anthropology has increased over the last decade (Banks 2001; Pink 2006), it has never been done in specific relationship to urban design. On the other hand, this process of graphic translation is particularly interesting if we need to start thinking about the contents of the interviews in spatial terms.

As the following diagrams illustrate, the complexity that naturally arose from the interviews has been drastically reduced and 'distilled'. Special attention has been placed on 'distilling' the content of the interviews without shifting from an *emic* to an *etic* point of view,

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which is to say: without losing the point of view of our respondents. In this sense, it is important to underline that we tried to represent ‘perceptions’ and not ‘facts’, even when we decided to represent collective perceptions instead of personal ones. The condensation of singular perceptions into a collective one was a necessary step to incorporate the results of our study into urban design scenarios. The scenarios themselves are designed for the whole collectivity that inhabits the territory, rather than only a limited number of them, or from the perspective of one peculiar social group.

In the following diagrams it is thus possible to appreciate the kind of knowledge that arose from a series of interviews in the Po delta region. In particular, the interviews were realized with the following people: two fishermen (one along the river, and another one in a casual conversation), an old farmer, a municipal councilor for cultural issues (‘assessore alla cultura’), the president of the fishing consortium, a librarian, and two students.

## REFERENCES

- Banks, M. 2001 *Visual Methods in Social Research*, London: SAGE.
- Malinowski, B. 1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Pink, S. 2006 *The future of Visual Anthropology. Engaging the Senses*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Signorelli, A. 2003 *Antropologia urbana: introduzione alla ricerca in Italia*, Milano: Guerini.

## PERCEPTION OF POWER DISTRIBUTION

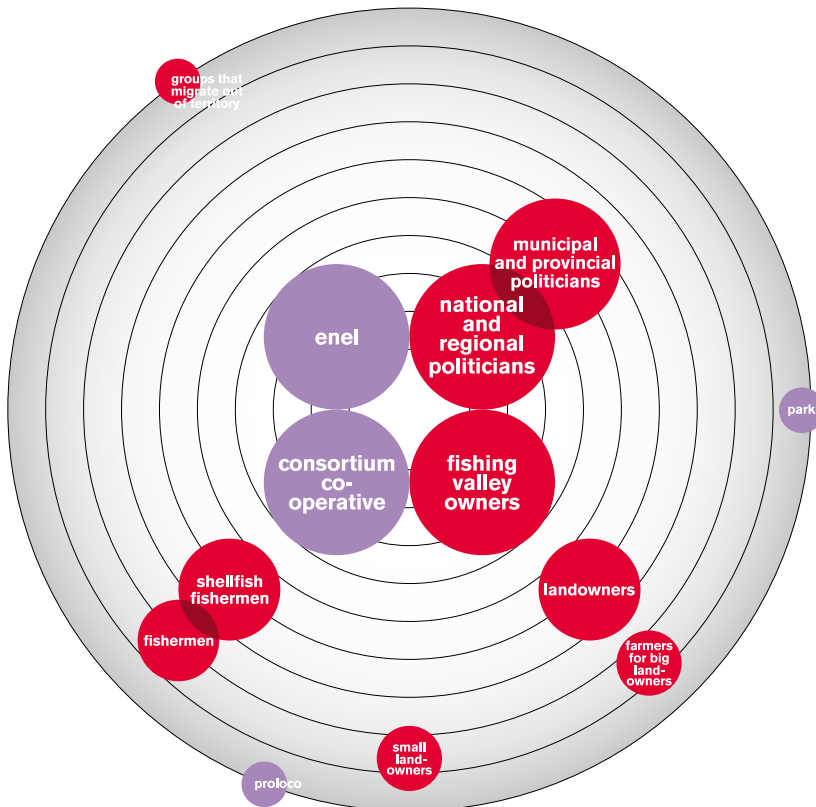
The first step has been to identify, from an *emic* perspective, institutions and groups that are present in the territory, to understand how local people perceive them in terms of access to decisional power on local issues. Instead of focusing on the perspective of a single institution or

actor, we decided to condense the content of the different interviews into a 'shared perception'. This generalization was made possible by the fact that all the interviewed subjects have shown a similar perception on these issues.

On the other hand, this strictly *emic*

perspective has generated some anomalies. Indeed, an important local institution, the 'consorzio di bonifica' (reclamation consortium), is strangely absent from the scheme. The reason for this omission is that the institution was never mentioned during the interviews.

This anomaly could be attributed to the relatively small number of interviews.



- socio-economic groups
- institutions

## PERCEIVED PROBLEMS

This diagram presents an overview of the problems in the area as they are experienced by the relevant actors; all these issues were described by interviewed locals as problematic to their future and that of the territory in general.

### Power plant pollution

**Heating lagoon water**  
The factory pours hot water into the sea to cool down the machines.

**White coal pollution**  
The boats carrying white coal to the factory are (illegally) washed in the sea.

**Cancer**

### Illegal shellfish fishing

**High degree of conflictuality among fishermen (low social capital)**

Some people earn more than others thanks to illegal activities provoking their neighbours' jealousy; it is impossible to denounce for fear of retorsions.

### Hunters in fishing valleys

There is a lack of regulations inside the fishing valleys; as a result, rich hunters kill an enormous and indiscriminate quantity of birds.

### River pollution

Eels do not hibernate in the bottom of the river anymore because the sediments that the river brings from the north of Italy are too polluted.

### Sediments accumulation

Accumulation of river sediments at the entrance of the lagoons ("sacche"); the Province, the institution that should excavate the sediments, is not doing its duty.

### Diminishing number of fish species in the river

The "pesce siluro", which was introduced by mistake in the Po river, has eaten most of the fish species in the river, and is now its main inhabitant.

### Reduced mobility

Children who live in dispersed areas have difficulties in getting to school.

### Role of 'political godfathers' in the cooperative system

In order to get access to licenses and permits you need to have some political godfather ("santolo") who is going to promote your candidature. It is impossible to transmit one's permits directly to family members.

### The park is not bringing any improvement to the territory

There are no clear consequences – either negative or positive – of the implementation of the park in the area; the park authorities earn money without doing any good to the territory. They have no power to influence other decisions concerning the territory (for example, the power plant).

### Depopulation

Young people emigrate in search for new opportunities.

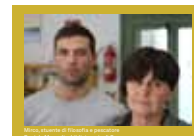
FISHERMAN

FARMERS

COOPERATIVES

PRO-LOCO

STUDENTS/  
LIBRARIANS



## IDIOMS

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This diagram aims at highlighting the main 'idioms' – we could call them '*emic* concepts' – that emerged from the interviews. These idioms were chosen because they conveyed a particularly thick and unusual (to a non-local point of view) network of connotations. Following local categories and connections, we aimed at achieving a

deeper understanding of how people give meaning to their territory. Once again, we decided to create a single diagram for all respondents, giving the sense of a 'shared perception' of the territory.

