NETWORKS OF HISTORIC HOUSES AS A STRATEGIC OPTION FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: THE VENETIAN VILLAS CASE

SABRINA MENEGHELLO & ERICA MINGOTTO
CISET (International Center of Studies on Tourism Economics), Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy

ABSTRACT
This paper aims to demonstrate the role of networks of historic houses as a possible strategic asset for territorial and tourism development, both for the diversification and innovation of the offer of mature destinations as well as for the development of minor ones. In particular, a specific case study will be presented, namely the system of over 4,000 Venetian Villas located in Northern Italy (specifically in the Veneto Region) around which an increasingly organized tourist offer is taking shape, based on experiential proposals that see the Villas as a base for the discovery of the landscape and the typical features of the surrounding area. This case has been studied in terms of the prevailing business conducted within the Venetian Villas and the reference market and has been related to other good practices in Italy and in Europe. The study has made it possible to highlight that the success of the development of a system of historic houses, besides the value of the residences from a network perspective, lies in the harmonious integration with the other local resources, e.g. the wine product in the case of the Venetian Villas, in order to achieve immersive experiences which are rich in meaning for tourists and create widespread effects in the area. The study has recognized that, given the specific tourism demand interested in this attraction and considering that such dwellings are generally inserted in a prestigious landscape, the only reasonable path to follow is sustainable development with the aim to safeguard authenticity.
Keywords: historical residences, tourist offer differentiation, minor destinations, cultural tourism, sustainable development.

1 INTRODUCTION

Historical residences in their different territorial meanings of villa, palace, castle, manor and other similar locations reaffirm their role as a centre of cultural-economic-productive interest, still in contemporary times. Even today, the historic house represents a productive and cultural system of local excellence able to promote sustainable development for the territory, generating significant impacts from an occupational and economic point of view, positively affecting the community at a social level and enhancing the value of the environmental context itself.

System of historic houses have received growing interest over the years, even from a tourism point of view, as an opportunity for differentiation and innovation of the offer in individual destinations. In fact, there are several cases in Europe which show an increase in both visitors and in the projects initiated by the various territorial stakeholders with the aim to position vintage residences networks as a tourist product which is available for, or in favour of, the development of tourism in little known places, or alternatively different offers of established destinations, with an approach oriented to sustainability in both cases.

Starting with a specific case of historical houses networks in Italy, this paper intends to discuss the tourist potential of these cultural resources present in many European territories, whose tourism development is often motivated by the following objectives: 1) the diffusion of the tourist flows of a destination towards less congested places, thus enhancing smaller villages and other beautiful lesser known locations; 2) the attraction of the "elite" clientele, with good spending capacity, in search of the excellence of the area; 3) development of off-

doi:10.2495/ST180191

season tourism, or the proposal of valuable experiences available throughout the whole year; 4) the sustainable development of destinations, consistent with the protection of the environment and landscape, with the ability to bring benefits to the local community; 5) integration with other sectors complementary to tourism such as agriculture, cultural and creative industries, and crafts.

The case study presented here, which will be compared with similar systems in Europe, is the Venetian Villas system, i.e. a heritage of over 4,000 historic houses (of which 27 recognised by UNESCO) built on the Venetian mainland between the end of the 15th century and the 19th century by the patrician families of the Republic of Venice. Spread over the entire territory of the Veneto region in Northern Italy, the Venetian Villas represent an architectural and artistic landscaping model unique in its kind, to which important architects such as Andrea Palladio have contributed. The Venetian Villa was usually part of a large agricultural property which not only functioned as a proof of the families' power and a summer holiday home, but also, and above all, as a basis for the management of the property by the Venetian patricians. The Venetian Villas were in fact real companies, widespread centres of economic, agricultural, craft and cultural development, thanks to the numerous architects and artists who worked there (from Palladio to Sansovino and Tiepolo).

It is therefore a heritage that, in addition to representing an invaluable wealth from an artistic and architectural point of view, qualifies as a significant part of cultural memory through which it is still possible to understand the territory from a cultural, urban and economic productivity point of view. Precisely for this reason, and given the widespread distribution throughout the Veneto Region, the Veneto Villas are considered an important resource for the differentiation of the regional tourism offer and the sustainable development of rural territories and minor locations, intercepting flows from the most famous, and often congested, destinations. Consider that more than 30% of the tourist flows of the Veneto Region is concentrated in the city of Venice alone [1].

To date, out of more than 4,000 Venetian Villas, about a quarter is used exclusively as for private home, while those remaining are used for one or more purposes - accommodation, culture, agriculture, commercial use, sports. In recent years, the system of Venetian Villas has brought in 600 new employees, the direct spending of visitors has increased (there are more than 350,000 visitors per year) and it is estimated that every Euro spent on "enjoying" the Villa generates an expense of between 4 to 5 Euro in the local production chain [2].

Starting with these considerations, several projects have recently been launched to organize a tourist offer around the Venetian Villas, including the new network of about twenty companies operating within the Venetian Villas, which is the subject of this paper.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

For many years, there has been discussion at European level on the potentials, including those related to tourism, that a historic residences system can offer to a given territory. Morrison et al. [3], for example, underline the important role that period residences, together with B&Bs, country houses and farmhouses, play in the development of rural territories. These are recognised as forms of accommodation which, as alternatives to hotels, are particularly appreciated by tourists who view such places as more consistent with the context and more able to transmit authenticity. Historical residences can also be of considerable interest to the conference industry in which, as recognised by Callan and Hoyes [4], over the years there has been a growth in the number of unconventional sites used to host conferences, business meetings and other such events, as the demand for alternative locations has moved from classical hotels and conferences centres to some more exclusive locations, such as museums, castles and precisely period residences.

The link between cinema and historical residences is also investigated in literature, given that these have often been chosen by directors and screenwriters to shoot films and TV series which have subsequently received great success among the national, and even international, public. As has been previously demonstrated by Tooke and Baker in the 1990s [5] or Busby and Klug [6], while on the one hand a historic residence can be used as an excellent film location, on the other the same film can become an excellent driving force for tourist promotion, not only for the residence in question but for the surrounding area in general.

In literature, the tourism product which is concentrated on, or otherwise linked to, the historic residence tends to fall within cultural tourism. McKercher [7], for example, associates the interest and visit of the period residences and castles to a cultural use and links it to the historical-architectural heritage of the destination.

However, by investigating more thoroughly the experience that a visitor can live in a historic home, especially considering that its significance tends to go beyond its architectural value alone, one can recognise that the tourism product of historic residences is related to the cultural theme in a broader sense, including that of the landscape, traditions, and food and wine. Therefore, by embracing a definition coined by CISET [8]–[11], historical residences can be traced back to the so-called "cultural landscape tourism".

This represents a macro type of tourism, a sort of "umbrella" that covers a series of tourism products which are distinguished based on the motivation and the type of concrete vacation experience had by the tourist (rural, wine, gastronomy, minor villages, environment, etc.) and the means of transport used to discover and experience the territory (house boat, bicycle, horse, etc.). The basic motivation that characterises cultural landscape tourism is not attributable to a single factor but rather to the set of environmental, socio-economic and cultural characteristics that identify and distinguish a given area. For example, a purely cultural visit to art centres and minor historical-art attractions does not totally fulfil the motivation and is also not detached from the presence of a landscape and/or other factors in line with the experience.

Cultural landscape tourism, as defined by CISET, presents certain specific characteristics which differentiates it from other forms of cultural tourism. In particular, it mainly, or exclusively, involves minor art centres or territories with well-defined landscape features which allow visitors to discover the authenticity of the place. It is practiced in the form of networks, itineraries or tourism hubs (overnight stays in a locality, from which you can then reach other surrounding centres), thus qualifying as itinerant tourism. It is based on hospitality with typical features, such as villas and historical residences, farmhouses, B&Bs or charming hotels. It is driven by a set of authentic aspects and experiences to be practiced in the territory. It is fuelled by tourists who tend to read up on the place before booking the holiday, in a more detailed way than is usual for other types of tourist consumption.

Due to its characteristics and the type of users to which it is addressed, cultural landscape tourism can bring positive effects in terms of the diversification of tourism and the development of so-called minor areas. It presents itself as an innovative offer form, compared to classic cultural tourism in artistic cities, to be enjoyed by tourists eager to discover and delve deeper into the destination in all its most identifying aspects, including through the knowledge of lesser-known attractions which are highly representative and not easily traceable in other contexts, contact with the local community, etc. In this sense, cultural landscape tourism includes alternative products and experiences, such as those lived in historical residences, from which tourists can get a key to access the meanings of a territory.

3 METHODOLOGY

As anticipated, the case study described in this paper concerns the system of the Venetian Villas and in particular the emerging network that unites about twenty private villas in Veneto, managed at an entrepreneurial level and oriented to tourism activity. The member companies operate in the various businesses of accommodation, catering, event and banquet organisation (wedding banquets, congress events), wine production and other food products. The network aims to present itself in the national and international tourism market by clearly positioning itself as a cultural proposal connected to local production, primarily food and wine related, through the development and sale of experiential and sustainable tourist packages.

The methodology presented below, which is divided into three steps, references the analysis and evaluations conducted by the authors [12] specifically to support the network in defining the business model of the system and the products and the positioning in the market.

3.1 The analysis of business models referred to Venetian Villas

In order to fit the network's offer in the broader context in which it has been inserted, i.e. the entire system of the Venetian Villas, an analysis was carried out of the different business models of the Villas which are managed in an entrepreneurial form, i.e. those in which there is a company of some kind, specifically connected to tourist activity. The analysis has therefore served to understand how the twenty companies are in relation to the other local players (possible competitors), and under what terms any collaboration could be activated, also with a view to a future enlargement of the network.

The analysis was conducted starting with:

- interviews through in-depth talks with the managers of the twenty companies participating in the network;
- a survey on a sample of 50 owners/managers of Villas, active in an entrepreneurial form, through the administration of a specific online questionnaire.

The object of both interviews concerned: 1) the area or areas of business conducted by the company; 2) the main targets (residents, hikers, overnight tourists, Italians and foreigners, business or leisure); 3) the size of the company in terms of turnover and, depending on the case, in terms of number of beds and places, number of customers, etc.; 4) if more than one business, the weight of each activity on the turnover itself; 5) the relations and possible collaborative relationships with other managers/owners of Villas, tour operators and other territorial stakeholders.

The data collected were then analyzed and interpreted so as to define the main business model categories that characterise the companies operating within the Venetian Villas. The analysis was also conducted through the use of the Osterwalder business model canvas [13], [14]. It is a particularly suitable tool for defining a companies' business model since it focuses on the way in which the company creates its value, paying attention to the key resources, to the relationships between businesses and customers, and between businesses and other relevant factors (suppliers, partners, etc.) [15].

3.2 The market analysis

The analysis of the reference market was carried out in order to define the current level of knowledge and image of the Venetian Villas from the tourism demand and to correctly place the nascent network in the market, identifying the main target markets to which the offer should be directed.

The analysis was primarily based on what was theorised by CISET regarding cultural landscape tourism, given that it can also include the specific product of the Venetian Villas. The tourist of the cultural landscape is therefore the segment the network should target.

Secondly, a survey was carried out by administering an online questionnaire to:

- 500 potential Italian clients, in order to define the current level of knowledge and the perception of the Venetian Villas as a tourist attraction and the way in which they have, or would like to, experience a Villa.
- 20 Italian operators of tourist intermediation, in order to ascertain the level of knowledge and the perception of the Venetian Villa as a tourism product, the type of customers potentially interested, and the needs of the operators themselves in relation to the possible inclusion of the Villas product within their proposals.

3.3 The analysis of European and Italian big players of historical houses

In order to focus the positioning of the offer of the Venetian Villas network, an analysis was carried out of the main national and international big players, i.e. other networks and systems of historical houses – castles, villas, palaces, etc. – open to tourist use. This analysis is important in order to consider the direct competitors and to identify any good practices, or to otherwise obtain useful feedback from similar situations.

Starting with a desk analysis the following were selected:

- one European case, i.e. the network of the Loire Castles in France, as a good practice of organization and structuring of the tourist offer based on the use of historic residences and the surrounding area;
- three Italian cases as the best developed tourism projects in Italy with which the Venetian Villas system is competing: namely the area of Villas and Palaces in Lucca in the Tuscany Region (central Italy); the network of Castles of the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza in the Emilia-Romagna Region (northern Italy); the network "Innovative experiences of cultural tourism – Royal residences, villas, castles and historic gardens", launched in various Italian regions.

The five cases were then studied starting with available materials and documents (website, articles in specialised and non-specialised press, online content on blogs and social media, etc.), semi-structured interviews and focus groups with the managers of each network and, in the specific case of the Loire Castles, through a specific site-inspection with direct observation on the field.

4 MAIN RESULTS

4.1 The main business models referred to Venetian Villas [16], [17]

As anticipated in section 3, the first step of the study was focussed on that Villas acting as private company, in order to categorize the main business models and in particular those that are related to tourism activities. Indeed, it should be pointed out that several Villas are still agricultural farms and there are more than 200 local food and wine excellences produced inside Venetian Villas.

The analysis allowed authors to define the weight of the businesses on the overall turnover generated by the system of Venetian Villas. Accommodation is the business area that contributes most to the revenue, accounting for 28%. Restaurants and banqueting for private events are important too and they account respectively for 22% and 18% of the total revenue. MICE has instead a share of 14%, while the remaining 18% comes from other activities as farming, visiting, cultural proposals and commercial services.

On average, 38% of the clients of the companies located inside a Venetian Villa are leisure tourists, 35% business tourists and 28% visitors who live in neighbouring areas. However, this distribution considerably differs according to what is the main business area: accommodation totally address to overnight tourists, who have a leisure motivation in the case of Villas located near important cultural tourism destinations (such as Venice or Verona) or who have a business motivation in the case of Villas outside the main tourist circuits and near to industrial centres. Restaurants, instead, characterises themselves for an equal distribution between local residents and tourists (56% business and 44% leisure). On the contrary Villas devoted to conferences and cultural activities mainly address local clients.

With regard to the relations with partners and suppliers, the analysis underlined that 67% of companies is member of a trade association or network (for example the association of restaurants or of accommodation or of conference centres) and that 75% cooperates with other local operators. However, these relations and agreements are almost exclusively limited to wineries (84%) and tourist guides (70%), while the cooperation with other Venetian Villas is less developed. In this sense the main players of the Venetian Villa system seem still poorly coordinated together. The relation with tourism intermediaries, such as tour operators and travel agencies, is important too: on average 33% of revenue generated by Venetian Villas comes from these operators.

With regard to the main typologies of business models that characterises the companies managing Venetian Villas, the analysis first of all underlines that on average every enterprise carried out two businesses. As a consequence, the study identified four categories according to the activity that mostly contributes to the turnover of the company.

The first group – the largest one – is represented by Villas hosting restaurants and banqueting for private events (such as wedding feasts). Food service and catering are then the main business for these companies, since the interior and exterior (the gardens) of the Villa particularly adapt to these activities and allow to host on average 245 seats. This business is often integrated with little hotels or meeting rooms.

The second category consists of Villas where the main business is accommodation. They account for 28% of all companies. Hotels located in Venetian Villas have on average 90–100 beds many of them have a long tradition and experience in the local hospitality industry and they often complete their offer with a restaurant and meeting rooms. For these companies, 38% of their sales comes from tourism intermediaries.

The third group is represented by Villas hosting conferences and other meetings, which account only for 5% of the total companies. Due to architectural limitations, most Venetian Villas do not have large and flexible spaces able to host big events. Villas offer on average 3.5 rooms with 450 seats in total. The role of intermediaries is important also for these companies (27% of the sales).

Finally, the fourth typology of business model consists of Villas dedicated to cultural activities and in particular visiting. From a managerial point of view, this is the least developed category since the openings are occasional and there is not a clear intent to develop the business. As a consequence, sales and revenues are significantly lower than those generated by the other businesses. In addition, clients are generally local residents, with the exception of those Villas included in the main tourist circuits (for example the Brenta Riviera near Venice) that guarantee a more regular and structured activity.

4.2 The main market segments

4.2.1 The demand of the cultural landscape tourism [8]–[11]

Although the demand for cultural landscape tourism is a niche market, it is characterized by very positive trends: indeed, in the last few years, the demand has increased by +4% per year, in spite of the economic crisis. It is also a market that allows to obtain significant margins, since the average per-capita expenditure is high and well distributed over several and different services: not only traditional tourism services but also other local products and services. In Italy the demand for cultural landscape tourism accounts for 7% of the overnights and 7% of the overall expenditure generated by international tourists; the average per-capita expenditure is about 95€ for Italian tourists and 120€ for foreign visitors, compared to an average of respectively 80€ and 100€ refereed to the total demand.

The main countries of origin of the demand are UK, USA, Germany, Austria and France and in general North Europe. These are key and traditional markets for Italy and for the Veneto Region where Venetian Villas are located.

The tourists of the cultural landscape:

- are 36–50 years old and have a higher educational level;
- tend to be repeaters and to visit the destination more than once;
- look for many and detailed information about the location, through online research and special-interest magazines and blogs;
- independently organize their holiday, booking online the main services; they may alternative rely on travel agencies that are extremely specialized in the product/destination and that offer a “consultancy service” and not simply a holiday package;
- tend to tell and share their holiday experience with other travellers via web (social media and specialized blogs);
- are interested above all in locations that characterize themselves for an image related to cultural landscape tourism that very often is created by means of communication and sources different from traditional tourism media (literature, film productions, food and wine networks, etc.).

4.2.2 The findings from the survey among final clients and tour operators [2]

The survey carried out among 500 potential final customers revealed that the Venetian Villa is perceived as a place linked to history and art (73% of respondents gives this answer). Few people associate the Villa to the local traditional food and wine production; the Venetian Villa is instead considered for cultural events (60%) or visiting (49%). Only 33.5% of respondents associated the Villa to the opportunity to discover other important territorial aspects and local food and wine excellences. 30% stated that the opportunity to stay in a Villa is an option to be considered. According to the majority of respondents, the conditions under which living the Villa through engaging and authentic experiences are affordable prices and diversified and flexible opening hours. In addition, they consider important that the Villa ensures easy accessibility to the building and in general to the proposals and communication of clear and up-to-date information through the web and social media.

The survey among tourism intermediaries showed instead that according to 66% of respondents, for the success of the Venetian Villas product it is strategic to integrate the visit of these historic houses with engaging and amazing experiences that allow tourists to discover the authenticity of the destinations, such as cycling, boat excursions along rivers, tasting activities, etc.; in addition, 50% of tour operators suggests to associate Venetian Villas to small rural villages. On the contrary tour operators give less importance to the organisation of cultural events inside the Villa. 61% of respondents stated that an added value to the offer is to give clients the opportunity to choose the Villa itself as accommodation, making the holiday experience more original and exclusive. The last suggestion coming from tour operators is to systematically include in the package/itinerary at least two or three Villas, the lunch or dinner inside the historic houses and other experiences in the location.

4.3 The big player in the Italian and European context

4.3.1 The European case: the Loire Valley Castles, France [18]

The area of the Loire Valley Castles plays an important role for cultural tourism in France, since it is considered one of the main French destinations, second only to Paris. The whole territory, easy to access from the French capital and its airports, characterises itself for the presence of about 300 castles that were built starting from the X century as summer houses for the French Royals and their courts. In 2000 the central part of the Loire river between the Departments of Loiret, Loir-et-Cher, Indre and Loire and Maine and Loire was declared UNESCO World Heritage site for its “outstanding cultural landscape of great beauty, containing historic towns and villages, great architectural monuments (the châteaux), and cultivated lands formed by many centuries of interaction between their population and the physical environment, primarily the river Loire itself”. This justification summarises the success of this area also as tourism destination.

The Loire Valley Castles represents an interesting and good practice in terms of management and marketing, thanks to the creation of a coordinated network of many of the most prestigious and architecturally important castles and to their integration with the local tourism supply, the main traditional products and other strategic projects carried out for the territorial development. The area is then able to answer the needs and requests of very demanding tourists looking for high quality, through innovative, thematic, tailor-made and experience-based tourism products.

In particular, the brand “Châteaux de la Loire – Finest France” brings together 39 castles in the form of an integrated and organised tourism offer. These are the most well-known and visited castles able to ensure high quality. They act as catalyst for the other minor castles and territorial resources and they enrich the offer targeted to different typologies of tourists (cycling tourists, food and wine tourists, etc.). In addition to cycling tourism, that is favoured by the “Loire à Vélo” (an 800 km cycling itinerary that involves two French Regions and six Departments and that is connected to Eurovelo 6), a strategic integration is the one with the wine production, which is represented by 70,000 hectares of vineyards and 68 labels.

The results of this teamwork are tangible: for example, the Touraine Department, where Tours is the capital, accounts for 3.5 million visitors to its castles, monuments and museums. In addition, 13% of the 10 million wine tourists visiting France, are in the Loire Valley, second only to the Champagne area.

4.3.2 The Italian cases [2]

Among all systems of historic houses in Italy, the cases presented below represent circuits where the tourism linked to historic houses is a key asset and where stakeholders have already implemented strategies and actions for the territorial and tourism development based on this important heritage.

The first case is the circuits of Villas and Palaces in Lucca in the Tuscany Region (central Italy): palaces in the countryside, built by the local noble families starting from the 15th century. There are at present 24 historic houses on the entire Province of Lucca that are open to the public for visiting and, in some cases, they offer accommodation, restaurants and banqueting, events, etc. The association that brings together these castles is extremely active and dynamic in the organisation of cultural events, such as the Biennial National Award "Ville Lucchesi Marino Salom" that wants to stimulate the specialist training in the field of historic gardens in cooperation with national and international academician institutions.

The second case is the circuit of Castles of the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza in the Emilia-Romagna Region (northern Italy): 24 private or public castles which are open to the public according to a quality agreement that ensures common opening hours, basic services and quality standards. In addition, 14 castles provide accommodation too, giving visitors the opportunity to stay in the historic houses; they offer 300 beds altogether. The castles of this area represent a case in which the tourism offer is already organised in terms of governance, it is positioned in the market and able to monitor the number of visitors (in terms of tickets sold) and the typologies of experience requested by tourists. This is possible thanks to the strong cooperation around a common mission of a network of private owners and public bodies that have ensured the opening to the public of the castles since 1999. In addition to the differentiated offer of catering, coffee breaks, lunches, dinners, buffets, etc., some castles propose picnics, thematic lunches, naturalistic excursions, guided visits in the rural villages, workshops and learning activities.

The third and last case is the project "Innovative experiences of cultural tourism – Royal houses, villas, castles and historic gardens": this is an institutional project, based on the cooperation between different Italian Regions, Emilia Romagna, Lazio, Liguria, Lombardia, Valle d'Aosta, Veneto and of which Piemonte is the lead partner. The project, financed for 50% by the Italian Cultural Minister, is developing an interregional and integrated tourism circuit that brings together the main historic houses of the different areas. The aim is on the one hand to promote this precious heritage, by addressing selected segments of the Italian and international market, such as families, affluence and MICE; on the other hand, to reinforce the visibility of Italian historic houses and gardens as locations for big events, film productions, photo shoots, etc. In addition to the creation of concrete itineraries and travel packages, the project is organising an ad hoc event calendar, new information material in four languages and an interactive and smart map.

5 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results coming from the three steps of analysis allow authors to actively support the Network of Venetian Villas, by defining its positioning in the market and by developing a marketing strategy for the short and medium-term.

The analysis of business models underlines that Venetian Villas acting as private company already constitute a tourism offer around this heritage, although this offer does not cover the majority of 4,000 Venetian Villas and although it seems still too fragmented and poorly coordinated. The present Network, built by the cooperation of about twenty companies around a common goal, may as a consequence be considered a source of added value, thanks to the development of a well-defined product based on the offer of different services and the integration between Villas and territory. In line with the characteristics of cultural landscape tourism and with the historic and social meaning represented by Venetian Villas, the Network is positioning itself in the market through high quality proposals based on slow and experience-based tourism and on the relation with the surrounding area, in particular with the food and wine component, while pursuing the sustainable development in order to preserve the environmental and landscaping context in which Villas are located.

The good practice of the Loire Valley Castles is without doubt a reference point in terms of organisation and attention to detail characterising the offer, development of thematic experiences and integration with other territorial resources.

The tourism product of the Network of Venetian Villas underlines the concept of “quality of life” and of “good living”, conceived in its meaning of quiet, aesthetic research, beauty contemplation, harmony with nature and sustainability. In particular, the focus is on the value of “good life linked to the quality of food and wine products that is ensured by sustainable and organic farming, the respect for environment and landscape, the recovery of traditional dishes that the companies of the Network propose to their clients during the experience in Villa. As a consequence, by offering an “escape” from the most popular tourist circuits of well-known destinations of the Veneto Region (Venice in primis) and by promoting slow mobility, the Network contributes to the differentiation of the regional offer and to tourism sustainable development.

According to the survey carried out among tourism intermediaries, it is evident that the connection with the local excellences, and in particular with traditional food and wine products, is consistent with the intermediaries’ opinion who, for making the Venetian Villas product more appealing, ask for active experiences based not only on the historic houses themselves but on local productions.

In addition, since for tour operators the accommodation inside the Villa is an important component of the product, the Network will have to improve this business – in harmony with the architectural and artistic context of the building – promoting the exclusive opportunity of staying in a historic house as the ancient Venetian nobles. In this sense, it will be possible to enlarge the demand of overnight tourists, whose positive impacts on the destination in terms of expenditure are greater than those brought by same-day visitors (local residents and excursionists on holiday in neighbouring locations).

However, the opportunity to stay in the Villa and the connection with the traditional products and in general with the surrounding territory, must be better communicated since, according to the survey among final customers, there is still no clear perception: people seem to conceive Venetian Villas as a stand-alone place, ignoring the close link that they have had and currently have with the surrounding area, and as a place simply to be visited and not in which living other experiences.

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The Venetian Villas case and in particular the network discussed in the present paper, together with other analysed circuits, allows to focus the role that historical houses systems have as strategic asset for territorial and tourism development. In fact, many territories defined by this kind of heritage are structuring forms of management and promotion focusing on a more resolute positioning towards the domestic and international market and fostering concrete results in terms of sustainable tourism development.

The present paper can be appreciated because it illustrates a methodology that could be adopted to define similar projects supporting the creation of tourism network development. Some limitations of the present paper are not hidden; first of all, the necessity to extend the demand survey from domestic market to international final clients and tour operators; secondly the need to investigate more in details other European circuits other than the Loire Castles system, in their strengths but also possible weaknesses.

Nevertheless, the paper has the merit of revealing some important aspects regarding management and promotion of historical houses as a tool for sustainable tourism development for both mature and emerging destinations.

In fact, different analyses and evaluations allow to propose some important considerations on how to lead a development strategy being more structured and focused on the medium-long term and addressed not only to single circuits but also to whole national historical houses systems. It has been underlined the presence in Italy, and also in other European destinations, of local historical houses networks focusing on specific territorial areas. Nevertheless, only an overall national vision based on a cooperation strategy could favourite more circuits together.

First of all, due to the unclear knowledge and perception on historical houses circuits and their link with the territory from the demand side, it is necessary to promote a well recognizable brand, possibly a national one unifying all different circuits. In this way, it is possible to pursue a more incisive penetration into different markets, most of all the international ones.

Secondly, it is observed the necessity to promote more relations among different circuits of historical houses at regional level, namely in the form of "horizontal integration". This framework could facilitate tourist operators in planning interregional itineraries and packages counting on shared and well-defined quality standards and variety of services.

Thirdly, it is indispensable to push for a stronger relationship among historical houses owners/managers and other tourism operators, also those belonging to the "broaden tourism supply chain", i.e. entrepreneurs of the agricultural, cultural, craft, botanical, gardening sectors who can enhance the whole tourism experience for visitors through experiential learning proposals.

Finally, starting from the consideration that in Italy an observatory of historical houses is still lacking, it can be useful to create national observatories for this specific sector, which by monitoring activities and performances of networks and single houses could underline the role and weight they have in the different tourism destinations, facilitate the exchange of good practices among different areas and could also drive future strategies focusing more and more on sustainable approaches.

REFERENCES

[1] Regione Veneto, Regional Statistic System. http://statistica.regione.veneto.it/index.jsp.

[2] CISET, *L'offerta turistica di ville venete: caratteri, percezione della domanda e linee guida*. Findings from the survey carried with the cooperation with Associazione Ville Venete and collaborazione di Associazione Ville Venete and in the field of the training course "Tourism Network Specialist. Promotion of Venetian Villas and tourism offer", 2016.

[3] Morrison, A.M. et al., Specialist accommodation: definition, markets served, and roles in tourism development. *Journal of Travel Research*, **35**(1), pp. 18–26, 1996.

[4] Callan, R.J. & Hoyes, M.K., A preliminary assessment of the function and conference service product at a UK stately home. *Tourism Management*, **21**, pp. 571–581, 2000.

[5] Tooke, N. & Baker, M., Seeing is believing: the effect of films on visitor numbers to screened locations. *Tourism Management*, **17**(2), pp. 87–94, 1996.

[6] Busby, G. & Klug, J., Movie-induced tourism: the challenge of measurement and other issues. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, **7**(4), pp. 316–332, 2001.

[7] McKercher, B., Towards a taxonomy of tourism products. *Tourism Management*, **54**, pp. 196–208, 2016.

[8] Furlan, M.C. & Meneghello, S., Il turismo culturale dalle città d'arte al territorio: nuovi fattori di attrattiva e forme di fruizione. *IV Rapporto Federculture*, pp. 305–334, 2007.

[9] Manente, M. & Meneghello, S., Turismo culturale e valorizzazione del territorio, *Il turismo culturale: nuovi orientamenti di sviluppo economico-sociale*, Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali Direzione per la Valorizzazione del Patrimonio Culturale, 2010.

[10] Manente, M., Meneghello, S. & Montaguti, F., Turismo e cultura: per un approccio experience-based e Strumenti di integrazione per la governance: casi di studio e buone pratiche. *Ripensare il turismo. Turismo e cultura,* Regione del Veneto & Fondazione Mazzotti, 2011.
[11] Montaguti, F. & Meneghello, S., L'ascesa del turismo del paesaggio culturale. *XX Edizione Rapporto sul Turismo Italiano*, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, to be published.
[12] Meneghello, S. & Mingotto, E., Le dimore storiche come driver di sviluppo territoriale e turistico. Esempi di progettualità nei diversi contesti nazionali. *XX Edizione Rapporto sul Turismo Italiano*, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, to be published.
[13] Osterwalder, A. *The Business Model Ontology: A Proposition in a Design Science Approach*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, 2004.
[14] Osterwalder, A. & Pigneur, Y., *Business Model Generation: A Handbook for Visionaries, Game Changers, and Challengers*. Wiley: Hoboken, 2010.
[15] Zott, C., Amit, R. & Massa, L. The business model: recent developments and future research. *Journal of Management*, **37**(4), pp. 1019–1042, 2011.
[16] CISET, Ville Venete e Castelli: domanda, tipologie di offerta, contesto competitivo e prospettive. Report of the research carried out for Associazione Ville Venete e Castelli and Regione Veneto, 2005.
[17] CISET, Eventi culturali nel sistema delle ville venete e relative ricadute economiche. Report of the research carried out for Regione Veneto, 2014.
[18] Babou, I., *Cultural Tourism in the Loire Valley*. Presentation discussed in Blois, France, 2 Sep. 2017.