

THE TOURISM MANAGEMENT OF VENETIAN VILLAS. A MODEL OF REFERENCE FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE VILLAS OF CARTAGENA AS TOURISM PRODUCT

David Navarro Moreno

María Jesús Peñalver Martínez

Universidad Politécnica de Cartagena. España
david.navarro@upct.es, mjesus.penalver@upct.es

The villa represents an architectural type which has provided us with excellent buildings throughout history. A good example of this is the large collection of villas which exist in the Italian region of Veneto, built between the XV and XVIII centuries. In other places, there have also been peak periods in the building of villas. An example is Cartagena, located in the southeast of Spain. Here, a series of holiday homes, placed in the middle of the countryside, and constructed with architectural singularity, were built between the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century. Obviously, the Italian villas of Veneto and the Spanish ones in Cartagena have certain differences in building structure and style, due to their different chronological, geographic and social context. Moreover, they are examples of phenomena of differing magnitude and intensity, since while the Veneto group encompasses more than 4,000 villas constructed throughout the region between the XV and the XVIII centuries, the situation of the villas in Cartagena is more localized, encompassing some 75 villas built around the city between 1840 and 1920.

However, these two cases do present some similarities, not only because of their direct connection to a period of great local economic development, which had an important impact on the architecture of the time, but also, and more importantly, from the point of view of their touristic interest. This is due to their location, outside the city center, and their profound connection to their natural environments. To this we can add their predominantly residential use. In contrast to the recognized value that the Veneto villas have, the villas in Cartagena have fallen into abandon. This situation requires that measures be taken to restore them and provide them with touristic and cultural value.

This research is thus presented with the objective of eliciting the successful strategy of the Italian approach to the Veneto villas in terms of managing them for tourism. A look at the measures taken for their regulation and touristic use is enough for us to realize that we are making a comparison with a long-term project, with a solid legal culture and established social awareness. These advantages should be kept in mind.

In order to meet the aforementioned objective, the methodology used has been to make a compilation of the measures taken in Italy to safeguard this type of cultural asset. This information has then been examined, summarized and separated into topic areas. Then, with the objective of extracting ideas applicable to the Cartagena villa case study, a reorganization of the content has been carried out. This has permitted the clear identification of the criteria and procedures followed in the creation of the tourist product, *Ville Venete*.

The final aim is to identify the concordances and differences in respect to the current situation of the Cartagena villas. Undoubtedly, this is an essential step towards detecting the strengths and weaknesses of the ensemble of villas in Cartagena. Based on this information, it will be possible to propose a solid strategy for their recuperation, future maintenance and appreciation, taking into account not only the dissemination of knowledge about them, but also the promotion of their use and enjoyment by the community. From the perspective of the recuperation and promotion of the villas in the Italian region of Veneto, various phases were carried out which deserve detailed study. In this respect, after a long period of abandonment which began upon the decline of the Serenísima República de Venecia in 1797, and lasted until the end of World War II in 1945, the fight for the recuperation of the Veneto villas began in 1952 with the organization of a photographic exhibition about them. Undoubtedly, this event spread awareness of the importance of these villas among the local society, who quickly became conscious of their great historic and artistic value, and began to concern themselves with their conservation.

In this way, with the support of a public made aware of the importance of this issue, the Italian state and regional governing bodies decided to adopt measures to this respect. However, there were a great number of villas, almost all of which were of huge dimensions, constituting a main residence, occasionally containing valuable works of art, rustic adjoining cottages and gardens. Thus, the needs were enormous, and the means and tools available to the Administration were soon insufficient. Therefore, to cover such deficiencies, the “Ente per le Ville Venete” was established in 1958. Emanating from a consortium made up of various tourism organizations from the regions of Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, it was given the tasks of preservation, through economic assistance, loans and subsidies to owners, surveillance and control of the villas.

A second, important milestone took place two decades later when, in 1979, the aforementioned “Ente per le Ville Venete” was transformed into the “Istituto Regionale Ville Venete” (IRVV), to which were attributed the tasks of disseminating knowledge about the villas, and their touristic exploitation.

Years later, a new impulse occurred, this time, thanks to the UNESCO, which included the city of Vincenza in the World Heritage List in 1994, and two years later, expanded said recognition, incorporating a group of twenty-two villas designed by Palladio, giving this unique heritage enormous international visibility.

Another significant step in terms of the value enhancement of these villas, not only the Venetian villas, but of those all over Italy, was the forming of the project, *Touristic enhancement of a cultural asset: the villas*, in 2004, jointly set up by the regions of Veneto, Toscana, Sardinia and Campana, where this type of building is abundant. This project, which was developed within the framework of the national tourism legislation, was undertaken with the objective of designing and promoting activities for the institutional

development of the cultural heritage which these villas represent, in order to consolidate them as a cultural product, and integrate them into the most important tourist markets. Therefore, this comprises the first phase of the project, before proposing and carrying out promotional activities, and is directed mainly at finding out in what way the villa could be considered a tourist attraction.

One final highlight in the evolution of the Venetian villa from cultural asset to touristic asset can be found in the work carried out by the Venetian government, based on the results of the aforementioned inter-regional project. This consisted of the elaboration of a *Plan for the Venetian villas touristic value enhancement*, in 2008.

This plan anticipated the development of five strategies, which channeled all the touristic promotional activities centered on the villas in an ordered and precise manner:

- establishment of a Service Charter to offer tourists, with a corresponding list of villas which are open to the public.
- dissemination network, through the implementation and management of specific portals.
- creation of a center of information and promotion of the villas.
- organization of informative and training activities, directed at the owners of the villas.
- promotion of various activities for the value enhancement of the villas, such as the elaboration of informative material in different languages, adapted to different types of tourism, and closely linked to the other singularities of the area.

Of all these measures, special attention should be paid to the Service Charter, intended to establish a number of rules and principles for the creation of a new product for the tourist market, and centered on the Venetian villas. In this charter, the minimum standards of quality and service which the owners wishing to take part in the project are required to provide, are defined. Therefore, the charter serves as a means of identifying the availability of the villas to tourists, and also promoting a quality tourist product, regulating and guaranteeing its enjoyment by the community (Canato, 2013:20).

In parallel, by recommendation of the regional Administration, the “Coordinamento Veneto ville e dimore storiche” was created, with the purpose of establishing an owners’ representative, who could act in the name of all the owners in matters having to do with the touristic promotion of the Venetian villas.

Therefore, the Italian experience in the management of the Venetian villas provides the definition of a basic methodology for the value enhancement and management of the villas as heritage resources, and their transformation into tourist products.

Hence, in Italy, in the beginning, the assets associated with the villas were considered to be natural, ethnographic and heritage resources, but not touristic ones, as heritage and touristic resources complemented each other, but they weren’t considered to be the same. Subsequently, a process of evaluation, planning and value enhancement was carried out, which as Ávila (2008:229) points out, constituted an intermediate stage, in which heritage resources were transformed into tourist assets. Finally, a touristic enhancement plan was undertaken, using a number of strategies aimed at the promotion and dissemination of the tourist product *Villa*.

While keeping in mind the enormous beneficial possibilities which touristic development can provide on a cultural as well as economic level, by their very nature, the villas have a number of characteristics which make their management especially complex. On the one hand, their location outside the city center makes it difficult to include them in the city tourist offering, making it necessary to find a group of elements in the immediate proximity in order to organize an itinerary around the villas. On the other hand, and this is the greatest challenge to be faced, their principal use as private residences calls for strategies of approximation which don't disturb the peace of the residents, while respecting the heritage and allowing the enjoyment of the community.

Considering such premises, the district of the Campo de Cartagena is an area with great potential for touristic development, since it offers an evocative frame of reference, both from an architectural and an ethnographic point of view. It is characterized by farmhouses, or groups of rural houses, and at the same time, by striking villas immersed in an unusual densely wooded area, surrounded by farmland. These unique villas, dispersed throughout the surroundings of the city and nearby villages, have become reference points for the esthetic perception of this countryside, and in architectural highlights of its cultural landscape. Beyond their recognized artistic and esthetic value, they still preserve perceivable ethnographic and anthropological traces which deserve to be explored. These traces are the legacy of a bourgeois society from the previous century which was able to transform their farmland, balancing the economic and productive requirements of the land with those of the landscape, respecting nature.

The recognition of the villas as a cultural asset constitutes a key factor in converting them into the principal part of a cultural tourism proposal. However, this possibility can only be developed if the villas are incorporated into a project with greater scope, a project which values them not only as attractive buildings from an artistic point of view, but also for their multiple aspects: as landscape, as culture, as history, and as a way of life. The challenge is great, and the Administration can't meet it alone. The collaboration of the owners is necessary. As the main financial supporters of this initiative, they must participate in a broad and active way. Only once this premise is achieved, will the tourist product, *Villas del Campo de Cartagena* be created and be available to the tour operators and travel agencies who will manage it.

Therefore, if it is possible to advance with precaution, but in a steady fashion, to involve private citizens in the recuperation and opening to the public of the Villas of the Campo de Cartagena, we will achieve not only the conservation of this heritage, but we will also boost the area's economy by amplifying the tourist offering and providing visitors with unique experiences.

It's unquestionable that this is an initiative which will require a costly infrastructure, but it is also true that the study carried out shows that the group of villas encompasses a great opportunity for attracting tourists. It would even be possible to generate international synergies with other tourist destinations which are already established. The Veneto villas provide a model of reference in useful strategies to follow in order to achieve this.