

TeMA

Journal of
Land Use, Mobility and Environment

The climatic, social, economic and health phenomena that have increasingly affected our cities in recent years require the identification and implementation of adaptation actions to improve the resilience of urban systems. The three issues of the 15th volume will collect articles concerning the challenges that the complexity of the phenomena in progress imposes on cities through the adoption of mitigation measures and the commitment to transforming cities into resilient and competitive urban systems.

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THE CITY CHALLENGES AND EXTERNAL AGENTS.
METHODS, TOOLS AND BEST PRACTICES

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1 (2022)

Published by

Laboratory of Land Use Mobility and Environment
DICEA - Department of Civil, Architectural and Environmental Engineering
University of Naples "Federico II"

TeMA is realized by CAB - Center for Libraries at "Federico II" University of Naples using Open Journal System

Editor-in-chief: Rocco Papa
print ISSN 1970-9889 | on line ISSN 1970-9870
Licence: Cancelleria del Tribunale di Napoli, n° 6 of 29/01/2008

Editorial correspondence

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The cover image shows redeveloped building in the Garibaldi neighbourhood in the city of Milano (Picture by Fastweb, retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/Fastweb/photos/10158794132149472>).

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TeMA 1 (2022) 157-161
print ISSN 1970-9889, e-ISSN 1970-9870
DOI: 10.6092/1970-9870/9033
Received 7th March 2022, Available online 30th April 2022

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www.tema.unina.it

REVIEW NOTES – Urban practices

European cities embracing digital nomads

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Abstract

Starting from the relationship between urban planning and mobility management, TeMA has gradually expanded the view of the covered topics, always following a rigorous scientific in-depth analysis. This section of the Journal, Review Notes, is the expression of a continuous updating of emerging topics concerning relationships among urban planning, mobility and environment, through a collection of short scientific papers. The Review Notes are made of four parts. Each section examines a specific aspect of the broader information storage within the main interests of TeMA Journal. In particular, the Urban practices section aims at presenting recent advancements on relevant topics that underlie the challenges that the cities have to face. The present note provides an overview of the policies and initiatives undertaken in two European cities to attract and retain digital nomads and remote workers: Venice (IT) and Madeira (PT). The contribution discusses the effectiveness of such initiatives and the benefits to designing specific programs and facilities to welcome digital nomads.

Keywords

Digital nomads; Remote workers; Urban policies; Venice; Madeira.

How to cite item in APA format

Angiello G. (2022). European cities embracing digital nomads. *Tema. Journal of Land Use, Mobility and Environment*, 15(1), 157-161. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6092/1970-9870/9033>

1. Introduction

The term 'digital nomad' refers to professionals who perform work digitally over the Internet to enable a lifestyle of constant traveling and expat living (Schlagwein, 2018). Compared to traditional workers, digital nomads are not geographically bounded to the constraints imposed by organizations and have the possibility to choose where to work and live. Digital nomadism is a modern phenomenon of the network information-communication society that has emerged due to mobility and digitalization (Kuzheleva-Sagan & Nosova, 2016). The practices of location independence and remote work that characterize their lifestyle were growing already before the Covid-19 pandemic, but the pandemic itself has further amplified this phenomenon by normalizing remote-working, fostering the adoption of technologies to support virtual collaboration, communication, and work from a distance (Herman et al., 2020).

2. Digital nomads and the city

As a large population of highly skilled people has embraced this modern lifestyle, scholars have started analysing the impacts of digital nomadism on cities, communities and the urban environment. For instance, according to Lee et al., 2019, the exponential growth of digital and creative workers in the late 2000s has contributed to spread of co-working and co-living spaces, as well as related shared spaces such as makerspaces and hackerspaces. The latter have had a profound impact on the contemporary process of urban regeneration and urban economic growth, in particular in terms of community building (not just within the workspaces), improvement of surrounding public spaces, and ultimately urban revitalization (Mariotti et al., 2017). Other researches have started analysing the positive impacts that digital nomads may make on the local economy of the cities where they tend to cluster. Digital nomads indeed tend to be - on average - young, well-educated and globally connected people (MBO Partners, 2021), with one out of five digital nomads earning more than 100.000 USD per year (Flexjobs, 2020) and spend more than 35% of their income locally in their destinations (MBO Partners, 2021), thus stimulating travel, restaurants, shopping, consumption, and services in general, resulting in a greater reactivation of local jobs (Cotella & Boverone, 2020). Finally, recent studies have analysed the leading factors in choosing a location for digital nomads. While the cost of living, the presence of a large expat community or a temperate climate are the most valued elements, other "urban" factors also play an important role in digital nomad's location choices. These include the presence of co-working and co-living space, high-quality public transport, excellent internet infrastructures, good air quality and abundance and quality of public spaces (Orel, 2020; Nash et al., 2021; Chevtaeva, 2021).

Since: (i) attracting digital nomads might have positive impacts on the local economy and (ii) most of the factors that influence digital nomads' location choices can be – within a certain extent - worked out by local authorities, some cities around the World have started developing specific plans or initiatives aimed at attracting remote workers on their territories. This contribution provides an overview of the initiatives taken in two EU cities: Venice (IT) and Madeira (PT).

3.1 Venice



Venice is a city in northeastern Italy and the capital of the Veneto region. It is built on a group of 118 small islands that are separated by canals and linked by over 400 bridges. Although the city is facing some challenges (including problems caused by pollution, tide peaks and cruise ships sailing too close to buildings), it remains a very popular tourist destination and a major cultural center. Tourism in Venice has become one of the main driver of the city's economy; at the same time tourism represents today one on the main source of gentrification (Transaco Gonzales, 2018). As a consequence, the city population has dwindled by two-thirds over the past 50 years to fewer than 60,000 people.

As part of the city's plans to address this issue, local authorities have partnered with private companies, academics and non-profit organizations to explore new ways of attracting and fostering a thriving ecosystem of remote workers. In particular, in December 2021 the city has launched an ambitious initiative named "*Veniwhere*". The initiative is designed to entice people who can work from anywhere, like freelancers or remote office workers.

However, it is also looking to get companies to send entire workforces to Venice for short periods. Beside addressing the issue of shrinking population, the initiative also aims to: (i) enrich the city of Venice with new and bright talents; (ii) integrate remote workers with the local community and (iii) contribute transforming Venice into a city of contemporary work.

The focal point of the initiative is a web portal (<https://www.venywhere.it/>), a sort of "one stop shop" where individuals and companies interested in settle their home or headquarter in Venice can find relevant information and access a number of specific services such as:

- *Soft Landing*. This service is aimed at making digital nomads landing in the city of Venice as smooth and frictionless as possible. To this aim the platform provides support on different issues that might arise when a foreigner-born person takes the decision to life and work in the city. In particular, support is provided for visa and tax compliance, for setting up a health insurance, for creating an Italian banking account or for getting familiar with city's logistics and transportation options.
- *Workspaces*. This service is about providing digital nomads with historical and unique spaces in the Venetian landscape adapted as modern workspaces. Thanks to the partnership between the municipality of Venice, no-profit foundations and private actors, the city has managed to secure eight main work environments that provide different types of facilities including Wi-Fi, desks, meeting rooms, private offices, auditoriums, bars and refreshment areas. The portal provides a dedicated service to book such places in advance for both short and long term booking.
- *Becoming Venetian*. This service offers the opportunity to participate in unique activities of local artisans, associations and small entrepreneurs that will open the doors of their shops and activities to digital nomads. The overall idea behind this service is not only to offer alternatives for nomads' free time, but also give them the possibility of experiencing the real Venice and to connect them with local residents and local business.
- *Accommodation*. This service helps digital nomads finding a home in Venice that satisfies their needs of work from anywhere. Finding a home in Venice is indeed not an easy task with prices that can greatly vary according to seasons and location. In order to making Venice an attractive place for remote workers, the city has established partnership with private home owners that can provide transitional contracts of 3 or 6 months at a price compatible with a long-term rent for local inhabitants.

3.2 Madeira



Madeira – officially the Autonomous Region of Madeira - is a group of Portuguese islands located in the Atlantic Ocean just under 400 kilometres north of the Canary Islands. Madeira sits in the region known as Macaronesia and is just 520 kilometres (320 miles) west of Morocco. Although Madeira is technically located on the African Tectonic Plate, it is widely considered European as it is part of Portugal and shares similar cultural aspects to Europe. The archipelago has been a top remote workers' destination for years thanks to the near perfect climate and abundance of outdoor activities, culture, and more. The arrival of many EU and US young, well-educated and affluent remote workers has greatly contributed to the archipelago's economy and it is seen by local authorities as an important asset to diversify the island rural economies, where tourism and rural/agricultural activities are the main sources of income for the local population.

In 2021, the Regional Government of Madeira created a tester project called "*Digital Nomads Madeira Islands*", with the main concept being to attract digital nomads to Madeira by providing a unique experience in the form of what is titled the "*Digital Nomad Village*". The concept is to provide living, co-working, and community for digital nomads on the island. The project began in February 2021 and was on trial until June 30th, 2021, to see if it was appealing to the digital nomad community. Following the success, more digital nomad villages are opening across the island and, as of January 2022, three new villages have opened their doors to remote workers. The experiment is considered a success by the Regional Government that is investing further resources in it. The main lines of public interventions cover the following aspects:

- *Free working spaces*. As a digital nomad hub, Madeira offers several community co-working spaces, equipped with offices, conference rooms, and other resources for small businesses. These facilities are provided at no cost for digital entrepreneurs who can demonstrate to set their business on the island for a month or more.
- *Reduced taxation*. Taxation also play an important role in attracting business and firms. For this reason, the Regional Authority established the "*Madeira Free Zone*" scheme, a regional aid scheme providing operating aid in the form of corporate income tax reduction on profits resulting from activities performed in Madeira.
- *Adequate internet infrastructures*. Having a fast and secure internet connection is a must in a digital nomad way of life. For this reason, the Regional Government has recently developed a submarine cable station, hosted in the Madeira Datacentre, operating several international optical submarine cables, allowing interconnectivity with national and international SDH networks and providing, as such, significant advantages in terms of quality, cost, bandwidth and scalability. Thanks to this investments, Madeira has nearly 100% broadband Internet coverage on the island, and a fairly high and consistent download speed. Furthermore, the entire historical area of Funchal offers free Wi-Fi access.

According to the EU Interreg Europe Project (2021), the approach adopted by the Madeira's public authorities can be considered a good practice that – taking into account local conditions – can also be transferable to other European cities. According to the same report, the project can be considered successful for the following reasons:

- Since November 2020, the project received over 7.570 registrations from 105 countries;
- The popularity of the project is expanding at an exponential rate. In the past 10 months over 2.600 new digital nomads registrations have been received;
- The project has been covered in multiple international-news outlets for more than 80 times (Cable TV, newspapers, magazines, online news sites).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The enthusiasm around remote and independent working has rapidly gained momentum in the last few years. However, only recently EU cities have started developing specific plans or initiatives aimed at attracting remote workers on their territories. These efforts have become more common since the benefits of attracting remote workers have become more evident. Indeed, there are many benefits to designing specific programs and facilities to welcome digital nomads. Remote workers tend to have diverse work portfolios having worked across several countries, cultures and industries. They tend to be young, motivated and affluent individuals that spend a large portion of their annual income in the city where they decide to settle. Attracting them, can thus be an effective way to bolster local economy, especially if reduced tourism revenue has led to a loss of income. The present contribution analyzed the policies and initiative undertaken by two EU cities to embrace digital nomads. The case study of Madeira represents one of the most consolidated experience in this direction. The popularity of the Madeira's project and the high number of registrations occurred since its inception can be both considered signs of a successful initiative. The project elaborated by the Municipality of Venice is still in its early stage and the impacts of this project on the city's economy can only be assessed in the long term. In both cases however, the initiatives have developed actions targeting important factors that can influence the location choices of digital workers as identified in the scientific literature. Interventions in particular have focused both on the "physical" infrastructure of the city, as well as on the "immaterial" infrastructure. Interventions following under the first domain have been focused on providing places for digital nomads that are suited for their expectations and needs, such as co-working and co-living spaces equipped with all the facilities required to sustain a nomadic life style. Again on the "physical" infrastructure of the city, actions have been also taken to secure a fast and convenient internet connection. Other initiatives, on the contrary, have been developed with the aim of facilitating the landing of digital nomads, such as support on visa and tax compliance, support on setting up a health insurance or creating a banking account. Finally financial incentives also represent an important ingredient of a strategy aimed at attracting remote workers. Another common trait that seems to be an indispensable asset for this type of initiative is the partnership between local authorities, private firms, the academia and NGOs. Indeed, only a strong cooperation between these actors can leverage the benefits of embracing digital nomads in EU cities.

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