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## Discussing MOSE with ILICA. Bringing Italian Technological Excellence to the US

Marina Melchionda (October 23, 2009)



Vincenzo Marra, President of ILICA, Anthony J. Tamburri, Dean of the Calandra Italian American Institute; Mary Ann Re, Executive Director of the Coccia Foundation; Cav. Joseph Sciame, Vice-President of the Office of Community Relations at St. John's University

The 5th Annual Conference of the Italian Language Inter-Cultural Alliance. A long, interesting day; an exquisite, delicate dinner. An original way to celebrate Italian excellence and culture in America. What may ILICA be planning next?

On Friday September 25 the Manhattan Campus at St. John's University opened its doors to the 5th Annual Conference of ILICA, the Italian Language Inter-Cultural Alliance. Just as every year, Vincenzo Marra, President and Founder of the organization, chose a theme that highlights Italy's excellence in a particular field

The MOSE (acronym for Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico, or Experimental Electromechanical Module)—is a high-tech project intended to protect the city of Venice from floods through rows of electronically operated mobile gates. The huge basin of water surrounding the city, in fact, is not only one of its main attractions, with its many tours on board of the traditional gondole; it also represents a serious threat to this huge open-air museum, since the water level is getting higher every year, often flooding the lagoon city in periods of heavy rain.

The title of the conference immediately suggests the international interest of the subject. In America, as we all know, there are cities and areas that face somewhat similar problems. One of them is obviously New Orleans, submerged in water after Hurricane Katrina hit it in 2005. The ILICA conference thus provided a platform to discuss unique solutions to internationally felt issues. Moreover, since Italy and the US are among the most developed countries in the engineering sector, an encounter between some of their topmost experts offered an opportunity to build stronger bonds between the two scientific communities and examine the possibility of mutual collaboration.

This was ILICA's primary goal, and we could see its effects right away when we walked into the Saval auditorium crowded with academics, researchers, engineers and scientists. In addition, there were representatives of the Italian community in the New York and New Jersey area as well as journalists, students, and people interested in the subject.



The first stepping on the stage, the Consul General of Italy in New York Francesco Maria Talò stated that the MOSE project is “just one of the several evidences Italy can offer to prove its extraordinary capacity to face environmental emergencies and issues.”

“From the earthquake that hit Messina a hundred years ago to the recent destruction of Abruzzo's city of L'Aquila and the recurrent water emergency in Venetia, our country has always tried to react through a collaborative net of civil, political, and public efforts. We must emulate this strong spirit of cooperation also here in the United States, and continue in the effort to build a wider and stronger 'Sistema Italia' in this country”, Consul Talò said before passing down the microphone to Cavalier Vincenzo Marra, President of ILICA, who started the conference opening session. Professor Anthony Tamburri, Dean of the J.D. Calandra Italian American Institute and co-sponsor of the initiative, was moderator and coordinator of a long and engaging series of speeches, roundtables and debates that conquered our attention throughout the day.

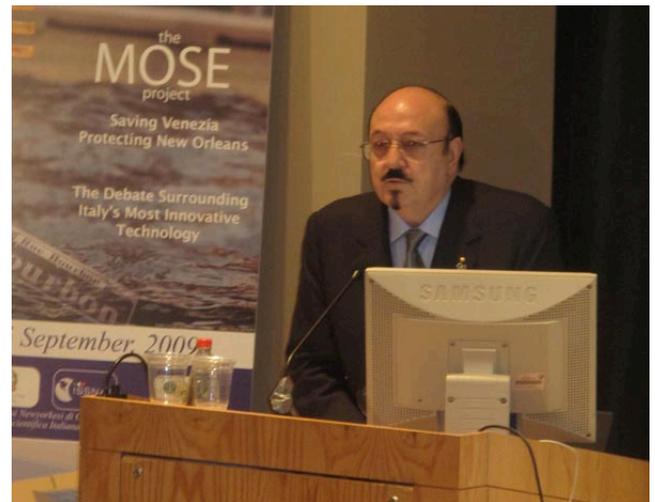


The conference, divided into two sections, was enriched by the participation of the main promoters of the MOSE project. Prof. Eng. Patrizio Cuccioletta, President of Venice Water Authority (Italian Ministry of Infrastructure and Transportation) started it with “The Safeguarding of the Venice Lagoon: From Paleocopa to Present Times,” in which he offered an historical account of how Venice has confronted its complex, multifaceted problems. Prof. Cuccioletta also examined the current legislative acts that regulate the question, and outlined the activities carried on by the Venice Water Authority and the MOSE Project.

Engineer Maria Teresa Brotto, Head of the Department of Design of the MOSE Project (Consorzio Venezia Nuova) explained in more detail the project's main technical features in her paper “Measures For the Safeguarding of Venice and Its Lagoon: The General Plan of Interventions,” while Eng. Giampietro Mayerle, Head of the Department of the Venice Water Authority, discussed its timing and cost in a speech entitled “The MOSE System: Main Features and Status of Implementation.”

Before the lunch break, film producers Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno presented their new project “Watermark,” a love story set in both Venice and New Orleans. “Our movie is not meant to discuss or promote the MOSE. We started our researches on the issue in 2004, when we first heard about the project, and just before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. Then we attended a conference by John Day, Professor of Oceanography and Coastal Sciences at Louisiana State University [also present among the speakers at ILICA], and we realized the extraordinary similarities between the two cities. True, technically their problems with water are different - New Orleans, for instance, is already below the sea level - and thus need different solutions. But still, we thought that the lives of their inhabitants were affected in a similar way.” When New Orleans was destroyed by the Hurricane, Marylou and Jerome started working on a plot set in both cities. “We wanted a love story, something suitable to every kind of public. I wanted my grandma to watch it, and spread the voice on this particular environmental issue to the most numerous number of people possible,” Jerome told us while descending the stairway that leads to the main Hall of St. John's Manhattan Campus.

Here, sitting at the plastic and metal tables normally occupied by students, we tasted the exquisite creations of Chef Andrea Tiberi of Eatalian Corporation: a finest selection of traditional recipes from the Veneto and Piedmont regions, a perfect Mare e Monti combination ranging from the Lasagna with White Asparagus and Tortino di patate e alici (Anchovies and potatoes gratin) to traditional Pizza al Testto with chicory and Asiago cheese.



*Cav. Vincenzo Marra*



*Consul General Francesco Maria Talò*



After spoling ourselves with Tiberi's homemade icecream, chocolate cake and apple tarte, we were ready to go back to the Auditorium

The afternoon session included speeches by professors John W. Day jr., of Luisiana University, and Fabio Carrera, of the Worcester Polytechnic Institute. The Oceanographer, who is a leading Post-Katrina, Mississippi Delta restoration expert and has also spent several years in Italy studying the impacts of climate change on wetlands in Venice Lagoon and in the Po, delivered a paper on "Climate change, energy scarcity, and the future of New Orleans and Venice." According to Prof. Day, environmental devastations and the gradual erosion of the lagoon eco-system have weakened Venice's natural barrires against high waters. Like in New Orleans, besides building gates a long-term effective strategy to save Venice should tackle these problems too.

Fabio Carrera, an Italian and a Venetian who teaches Interdisciplinary & Global Studies at the the Worcester Polytechnic Institute, elucidated for the audience the nature of the many technical, political and even ideological controversies that accompanied the MOSE project for three decades. Having stated that many of the controversies are now closed and that the MOSE "will be built, will work, will spare Venice from acqua alta, and is a great public work all Italians should be proud of," he also stressed that there are many other things that need to be done to "Save the Venetians." These include measures to control the impact (he said, the "flood") of tourism on the city and its citizens, improve everyday quality of life, ensure the diversification of the city's economy, and keep Venice to become "a dead museum city."

Day's and Carrera's remarks—and the somewhat heated dispute that followed, as scientists and engineers from Venice felt that their approach was being questioned and rose to defend it—demonstrated what Consul General Talò repeated in his speech at the evening reception: "MOSE is a very big and ambitious project and it is only natural that it be a controversial one." The fact that it was chosen by ILICA as the subject of its 5th Annual Conference, only adds to the merits of its courageous founder.

"My greatest personal satisfaction," declared in fact Cav, Vincenzo Marra in closing the conference, "was to see how deeply interested and active was our audience today. This year we made a difficult choice by picking up this theme, we know it is not one of the most popular, and people usually expect to discuss different issues in a conference organized by Italians. In this sense we have been 'courageous,' and the proceeding of the conference proved we were right. We are proud to bring Italian technological excellence to the attention of the Americans. Our country's primacy in the field is not always recognized, because it is not promoted enough. Since at ILICA we are committed to spotlight every aspect of our national culture, I believe we have reached our goal today. I am very satisfied."

ILICA's annual celebrations did not end with the conference. About 400 people were expected to join the members of the association for an exquisite dinner prepared by Chef Tiberi. Again, Piedmont traditional dishes, dominated by savory cheeses and locally grown truffes, accompanied Venetian seafood recipes, prepared with more than 2000 pounds of fish coming directly from Chioggia, a small sea town near Venice.

When the celebrations finally ended, a new day had already started. No guest left the hotel without having tasted at least three different kinds of authentic Italian pastries displayed in the order of hundreds on the huge dessert bars set in different corners of the dining room.

A long, interesting day; an exquisite, delicate dinner. An original way to



***Prof. Anthony J. Tamburri***



***Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno***



***Prof. Eng. Patrizio Cuccioletta***



celebrate Italian excellence and culture. One doubt was left in our mind though: What may ILICA be planning next?



*The Public*



*Eng. Maria Teresa Brotto*



*The Debate*

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***Lunch Buffet by Chef Andrea Tiberi***

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