

Residences of the Dukes of Este (Italy)

No 733bis

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Ferrara: City of the Renaissance and its Po Delta
<i>Location</i>	Province of Emilia-Romagna
<i>State Party</i>	Italy
<i>Date</i>	29 June 1998

Justification by State Party

[**Note** This text is an abbreviated version of the text appearing in the nomination dossier.]

The residences of the Dukes of Este in the Po delta have for centuries exerted great influence over the development of land-use strategies and landscape in the Mediterranean region.

The shifting landscape of the Ferrara region, sometimes under water, sometimes dry land, which has seen great changes not only in its hydrogeology, but also in its ability to support human populations, is a unique illustration of man's struggle to occupy the land and master the conditions of his environment.

Men have built this environment over the millennia, and have succeeded in marrying their presence, along with the construction of works of immense value, with a profound respect for the natural beauty of the area. The marriage of architecture and nature witnessed here is outstanding, and marks out this cultural landscape, harmonious in its equilibrium, from all other similar examples. **Criterion ii**

The nomination may be considered as a unique, or at least an essential testimony to vanished civilizations (Spina, Pomposa, Este, etc). **Criterion iii**

The nomination constitutes an outstanding example of a type of structure illustrating a significant stage in history (land-reclamation projects and the network of villas in the area). **Criterion iv**

The residences of the Dukes of Este offer a fine example of the introduction of a culture subsequently rendered vulnerable by indirect and irreversible damage. **Criterion v**

This heritage has, however, direct and perceptible associations, both negative and positive, with events and ideas of extraordinary universal importance. **Criterion vi**

Category of property

In terms of categories of property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the residences of the Dukes of Este in the Po delta are a *group of buildings*. In addition, however, they constitute a cultural landscape as defined in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (1998), paragraph 39.

History and Description

History

At the dawn of the Iron Age, two main arms of the river dominated the delta: the northern arm which later became the "Po d'Adria", and a more southerly arm occupying a number of different beds around the town of Bondeno. Towards the 8th century BC, hydrological changes created new courses of the river, and on one of these grew up, around the 7th century BC, the Etruscan city of Spina, from whose remains important archaeological finds have been unearthed in excavations.

Spina used its privileged position to become a major trading centre into the hinterland and was also linked to the sea by a canal built in classical antiquity. Excavations have also uncovered Etruscan objects, Greek vases, and all manner of items produced around the Mediterranean, testimony to the wealth and diversity of the city's trade. The rapid silting up of the delta led to the city's decline, however, and by the reign of Augustus it had sunk to the status of no more than a village.

During the Roman period, the coastline had already extended some way out to sea and certain areas on the banks of the delta began to develop. The Romans continued the pattern of earlier occupations, but settlements shifted in response to the alluvial variations of the river.

Aerial photography and archaeology have identified the sites of buildings, brickworks, villages, and some traces of a shipping industry, as witnessed by the discovery of wrecks such as the famous *Fortuna Maris*, found near Comacchio.

By the early Middle Ages, Adria, Classe, and Voghenza (elevated to a diocese in the 6th century) had become centres of population in the delta. Gradually an extensive coastal belt formed, followed by an influx of population and the creation of religious foundations such as Pomposa. Once again, however, the waters shifted, submerging inhabited land and wiping out much evidence of this period.

Comacchio was founded in the 5th century, a dating made possible by archaeological excavations. It became an episcopal see in the 8th century and developed rapidly as a trading centre, enjoying similar geographical advantages to Spina in classical times. Comacchio was a major salt producer, but its expansion was halted by the

depredations of the Venetians. Forced to reconstruct its economy, it invented fishing equipment, the *lavorieri*, and developed a significant fishing industry, especially in for eels.

At the same time as Comacchio was growing, the monastery of Pomposa was founded. The monastery contributed considerably to the work of land reclamation and good land management, as well as to the cultural repute of the region, through a devotion to study which made the Benedictine abbey famous.

Ferrara had based its commercial activity on the river. Venice reigned over seaborne trade with the East, while Ferrara traded with northern Italy, Tuscany, and even into France. After long drawn-out struggles between conflicting families, the Este arrived in Ferrara in the 13th century.

The Este created a state which they were to govern for three centuries. Local agriculture was encouraged and developed. They undertook vast irrigation and reclamation projects to increase the amount of land available for farming, using the most advanced techniques of the period, as expressed in the work of Galileo Galilei and Leonardo da Vinci. Tracts of land were thus reclaimed from the waters to become rich farm land.

All the waterways were kept under supervision and managed by the construction of attractive villas, known as *delizie*, at key points in the network, often associated with hydraulic equipment or a farm building. The hydrological balance of the delta was finally improved by diverting the mountain streams descending from the Apennines.

When the Church took over the former Duchy at the end of the 16th century, it continued the programme of improvements with the invention, most notably, of crop rotation. Modifications insisted on by the Venetians at this period to prevent the possible silting up of the entrances to the lagoon altered the geography of the delta and made further hydraulic work necessary. This work continued up to the end of the 18th century.

The French occupation and new administrative demarcations imposed in the early 19th century had a negative effect on local development. The restoration of the Papal State in 1815 marked the beginning of mechanized drainage and reclamation work.

Improvements to the land led to the creation of vast tracts of cereal crops. The policy of land reclamation combined with respect for the history of the region and the ancient hydraulic system was to continue through to the mid-20th century and has shaped the face of the landscape as it is today.

Description

A vast alluvial plan, a fragile balance between land and water, a predominantly agricultural landscape criss-crossed by the many arms of the river and the geometric lines of the canals: the Diamante area nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List epitomizes nature shaped by mankind since the early prehistoric period. Every epoch in the history of civilization has left its mark

here. Channelling and controlling water plays, now as ever, a dominant role.

The site that is being proposed as a World Heritage nomination can be articulated in four parts:

1. the area connected with the estate of the Diamantina to the west of Ferrara;
2. an area extending to the north, and including the estate of Fossadalbero;
3. the old river of Po di Volano extending from Ferrara to the sea, including the monastery of Pomposa, the castle of Mesola, and the related Boschetto, as well as the estate of La Mensa;
4. the old waterways extending from Ferrara, first to the south, including the estates of Belriguardo, Venvignante, and Verginese, and then continuing to the east to Comacchio.

All the territory connecting the above areas and extending to the present-day course of the Po in the north is defined as the buffer zone. The proposed areas together with the buffer zone characterize the area well. The main emphasis in the nomination is on the territorial infrastructure, with the waterways and land connections. The architectural features, the *delizie*, and other historic buildings and settlements express the visible part of the nomination, as well as reflecting the historical stratigraphy of the place.

The most remarkable monuments, apart from the historic centres and military constructions, are the hydraulic works but, first and foremost, the *delizie* which shaped the landscape in the time of the Este. This disposition of dwellings combining pleasure with utility reshaped the landscape in a definitive manner which even now illustrates the golden age of the Ferrara region.

Subsequent development was really only a continuation of this task of reclaiming agricultural land, in such a way that the contemporary techniques used to maintain the delicate balance served only to enrich a land under threat from the sea, without diminishing the value of its historic heritage, which still predominates.

Today just over half of the Este *delizie* (ten in total) still exist, built between the 14th and 16th centuries. Added to these are the hunting lodges, numerous villas, farm estates and gardens, hydraulic works, towers and fortifications, and, in the region of Comacchio, fishing lodges. There are also the many churches and oratories, in particular the monastery of Pomposa, famed early in its existence throughout the Italian peninsula, whose Santa Maria basilica was constructed in the 8th century.

Perhaps the best known of the *delizie* is the *Schifanoia Palace* inside Ferrara, built in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, when that part of the town was still being reclaimed.

Many of the *delizie* outside were real castles, such as *Mesola*, which still dominates the landscape on the coast. The Este seem to have intended to build an entire city around the castle, but gave up owing to conflicts with the Venetians. The castle has been restored in the 1980s, and now houses various cultural functions. Not far from the

castle, there is a tower that was used for the control of waters; currently, this is used as a museum and exhibition place.

Another large 15th century *delizia* has been *Belriguardo* (Commune of Voghiera), which used to have some 300 rooms and large formal gardens, all arranged along a magnificent axis extending to the Diamante landscape. After the departure of the Este, the castle had several owners, and was gradually ruined. Today, with the help of the Province, the Commune has acquired part of the property, and has undertaken small interventions to restore it and to provide it with some socially and culturally useful functions. These include an archaeological museum displaying the finds of the nearby ancient Roman cemetery. Although a part of the site is still in private hands, there seems to be good collaboration with the owners. The buildings themselves are in a ruined state, although magnificent Gothic windows and some elegant arches still testify to its past glory. A large hall contains remains of beautiful wall paintings from the 16th century by distinguished masters.

The best preserved of all the *delizie* is the estate of *Zenzalino*. It is still normally used as an agricultural estate by a private family as in the past. The estate used to have some 2000ha of land, but is now only about 850ha. The place is not open for visitors, but it contains beautiful interiors with valuable historic furniture, paintings, and objects. The main building is linked with a splendid landscape garden with rare plants. The place is well taken care of.

Another Este estate still in use is the *Diamantina*, to the west of Ferrara. It has some 500ha of land, and includes three churches. The main building is partly used as a museum, and the owners come here occasionally. In fact, a general characteristic of the agricultural activity nowadays is that the owners tend to live in urban areas, and only come to the farm land when required to do so for specific activities. The *Diamantina* estate is in good condition, and well taken care of by the owner. To the west of *Diamantina* there is the fort of *Stellata*, which has been restored and is currently used as a centre for cultural activities.

The *Fossadalbero* is a country club for members only. It includes sports facilities and is regularly used all the year round. The estate of *Benvignante* (Commune of Argenta) is in a poor state; some structural repairs are being done, but there is no decision about its use in the future. The estate of *Verginese* (Commune of Portomaggiore) is a relatively small place, representing a typical structure with corner towers. The main building has been recently restored, and is now used for social events and exhibitions, but the commune is looking for a more substantial use in the future.

La Mensa, a relatively modest place, is in a poor state, and the owner seems to be waiting for an opportunity to sell it. The former *delizia* of *Copparo* has been integrated into the present town hall; the central tower is still standing, and is used for scholastic purposes. Inside the town hall, current repairs have brought to light the remains of another tower embedded in the modern structures.

An important issue in the landscape is the presence of religion. The most important of these is the *Monastery of Pomposa*, one of the most visited sites in Italy. The buildings form an interesting ensemble, and represent features that are typical of this particular region of Italy, including rich fresco decoration, and Cosmati-type mosaic floors. Pomposa was significant in extending Christianity to the interior, and there are a number of smaller Romanesque chapels and churches scattered in the countryside.

Finally, the delta area is characterized by numerous small country towns and villages that have grown out of the historic context, many of them with ancient origins. The most important is *Comacchio*, a former rival of Venice and later integrated into the Este state. While much smaller in scale, Comacchio is characterized by a system of canals and bridges on the pattern of Venice, but it has its own distinctive character and has a number of important historic buildings, palaces, and churches, including the famous Renaissance bridge of Tre Ponti. Comacchio is still cultivating eels in the traditional manner, although now this is also presented as part of the tourist attractions of the place.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The Ferrara area is currently under the protection of 58 decrees affecting the privately owned property (under National Law No 1089/1939), seven decrees protecting the landscape (under National Law No 1497/1939), and 36,399ha of regional park (Regional Law No 27/1988). In addition, under the terms of National Law No 142/1990 and Regional Law No 6/1995, the current plan for provincial co-ordination of land use classifies 27 historic sites, nine historic roads, 2079ha of land designated as of special landscape value, 4140ha of archaeological sites and 1728ha of areas of special historic importance.

Adding together the areas already covered by these different laws (assuming that these areas can be added in this way) gives a total surface area roughly equivalent to the area covered by the nomination.

Management

Ownership of the properties that make up this proposed extension is diverse, including public and private bodies, private individuals, and ecclesiastical institutions.

The provincial government has responsibility for the area, managing its roads and secondary education system and being involved in the restoration of local heritage and historic monuments.

Municipal administrations are responsible for enforcing the laws on protection and urban development within their own communes.

The Superintendence of Architectural Heritage for the Provinces of Ferrara, Ravenna, and Forlì is responsible for historic monuments and for the supervision of listed public or private property.

The Superintendence of Archaeological Heritage for Emilia-Romagna is involved in archaeological excavations and sites.

The Superintendence for the Archival Heritage is responsible for public and private archives and libraries.

These Superintendences (*Soprintendenze*) are state institutions under the control of the Ministry of Culture. The University and the Archiepiscopal Curia also play a part in restoration work, under the supervision of the agencies responsible.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

In common with other areas of reclaimed land and other deltas (Holland, the Danube, the Rhone, the Guadalquivir, etc, to name only sites in Europe), the Po delta still retains many traces of vanished ancient civilizations, but most of all of the organization imposed by the Dukes of Este.

Certain natural features, such as the woods of Ponfília and Mesola or the lagoons of Comacchio, are a unique and outstanding testimony of a natural environment which man has succeeded in maintaining virtually intact since prehistoric times.

The cultural landscape of the Po delta has been formed over several centuries as a result of the activities of different settlers and landowners. The various historic phases are expressed in the constructions and changes that have become part of the historic landscape. It is still possible to read the pattern of the various historic strata as reflected in the land ownership and in the construction of waterways and roads.

Some of the historic buildings have continued in their original function, whilst others have been less successful. In fact, some of the Renaissance properties have been lost over time, and some others have been preserved only in a ruined state. The modern interest in the protection and restoration of some of these buildings goes back to the 19th century, as in the case of Pomposa, and to the early 20th century, when the association of *Ferrariae Decus* was established (in 1906), and raised public interest in historic places not only in the city of Ferrara but also in its territory.

More recently, in the past decades, the public authorities have been making efforts to safeguard places that earlier would have been abandoned, in danger of demolition. Several of the important buildings have been restored by the *Soprintendenze*, while some more modest ones are taken care of by the local administrations. *Ferrariae Decus* is active in raising funds for the conservation and maintenance of small churches and other historic buildings.

Authenticity

The infrastructure and the architectural highlights of the Po delta conserve today important testimonies of the planning efforts of the Este family in the 15th and 16th centuries. Furthermore, the stratigraphy of the area reflects the previous historical phases of over two

millennia. The introduction of mechanized technology in working the land has so far taken account of the historical strata, and modern interventions have been reasonably well integrated.

Today, this cultural landscape forms an historic whole, with an integrity that needs to be respected. Considering that technology continues to progress and that the economic priorities of today do not necessarily favour the traditional methods of cultivation, the current integrity of the site may be at risk in the future.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the site in February 1999.

Qualities

As a result of the various phases of land reclamation and construction, the Po delta has become an important cultural landscape with stratification extending over a period of three millennia. Even though there have been changes in the area, caused both by man and by nature, the different historic strata are visible in the patterns of the landscape. The infrastructure created by the Este family is still the dominating feature of the area, but it is possible to see that such visibility goes back further - to the Middle Ages and to classical antiquity. At the same time, the landscape of the delta, as developed by the Este family, is closely related to the city of Ferrara, with which it forms a single whole, with its own specific character and integrity.

Comparative analysis

In the whole of the Po delta, the Ferrara region stands out by virtue of its extremely long history of human occupation and the constant association of man and nature. The result is a wealth of reminders of past epochs, whether archaeological or architectural.

Most other major river deltas around the world are dominated by nature, with man's presence only a secondary feature. The Ferrara region, however, has seen the successive emergence of civilizations whose actions have been complementary and which rapidly developed hydraulic techniques and architectural styles to cope with the lagoon environment with which they were faced. The wealth created by these civilizations encouraged the development of the arts, and the art of ceramics in particular, as well as the growth of civil and religious ideas.

ICOMOS comments

This nomination follows on from the inscription of the city of Ferrara, of which it is a logical extension.

The means available for the protection of an urban site are very different from those applicable to a rural environment: whatever the legal arsenal available, it is often difficult to exercise control over a landscape whose infrastructure changes in response to changes in techniques and markets.

The region of Ferrara received its first territorial master plan about 30 years ago. The principles then expressed are still the basis for planning of the delta area. However, there are also problems of a more general nature connected with the migration of farmers to urban centres. Whilst it is desirable to continue the traditional types of activity whenever this is feasible, it will be necessary to make efforts to rehabilitate some historic properties that have lost their function in order to avoid their further decay. Cultural activities, representation, and even tourism may well be acceptable to some of these places, considering that they were created for the purpose of representing the ducal power .

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

In order to continue and improve territorial policies in the management of historic properties, it is recommended that the collaboration between the individual municipal administrations, the provincial authority, and the central government should be strengthened and co-ordinated by the provincial administration. ICOMOS believes that it is essential that there should be an overall management plan for the nominated landscape which establishes the mechanisms for the co-ordination of existing planning and management provisions and assigns responsibilities for these.

The State Party should also lose no time in setting up a wide-ranging information campaign aimed at creating an awareness among land owners and users of the universal value of the property.

Since the meeting of the Bureau in July 1999 ICOMOS has received additional documentation from the State Party which indicates that action is already under way to implement these suggestions.

Brief description

The alluvial delta of the Po valley has been settled for millennia. From the 14th to the 16th century the Dukes of Este carried out extensive land reclamation and building projects, which give this area a unique character and link it intimately with the city of Ferrara, seat of the Este family.

Recommendation

That this extension should be *approved*, with the addition of *criteria iii and v* to the existing criteria ii, iv, and vi:

Criterion iii The Este ducal residences in the Po Delta illustrate the influence of Renaissance culture on the natural landscape in an exceptional manner.

Criterion v The Po Delta is an outstanding planned cultural landscape which retains its original form to a remarkable extent.

ICOMOS, September 1999