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RESEARCH

Floridian Imaginations of Venice and the Future of Its Coastal Cityscapes in an Age of Inundation

Philip Hayward

One persistent element in the imagination and promotion of southeastern Floridian cities as lifestyle and tourism destinations from the 1920s on has been the invocation of Venice as a model for waterside developments of various kinds. The Italian city was initially constructed in a lagoon in the 5th century CE and has prospered and sustained (with various modifications and safeguards) through to the present. Indeed, the charismatic locale has become a global attraction (and, more recently, an epitome of over-tourism) for its unique establishment on an archipelago with linking networks of bridges and water transport routes. This essay commences with a reflection on the nature of this inspiration, its misrepresentation in various contexts, and its strengths and weaknesses as a model for South Floridian waterfront developments, such as those of Miami and Fort Lauderdale, and then proceeds to a discussion of their plight in an 'era of inundation' when these areas are likely to become increasingly fragmented and 'islanded'. Despite strong political support for the Republican Party in Florida, which has been at best sceptical of and, more commonly, in denial about the reality of global climate change, Republican-controlled metropolitan authorities in Miami and Miami Beach have acknowledged the phenomenon and the inevitability of rising seas and water tables and implemented a series of measures to try to counter them. As welcome as such initiatives may have been, Stephanie Wakefield's recent volume, *Miami in the Anthropocene: Rising seas and urban resilience* (2024), has outlined that more radical scenarios of imagining Anthropocene futures need to be considered in areas of major inundation. Using Venice as a continuing reference point, this essay explores a number of these scenarios and reflects more broadly on the fragmented and fragmentary futures of low-lying coastal metropolises in the early 21st century.

Keywords: Inundation; aquatic cities; aquapelagos; Southern Florida; Venice; Miami

Introduction

In June 2025, the American plutocrat Jeff Bezos (who is one of the world's richest individuals, with a net worth of over US $250 billion[1]) married his long-time partner Lauren Sánchez in Venice, 5000 km from his principal residence in Miami. The wedding was part of an extended event that closed down areas of the city over several days and sparked major protests. The magnificence of the occasion—intentionally or not—mirrored a tradition of elaborate ceremonies and artifices along the city's Grand Canal designed to boost the prestige and perceived power of the Venetian Republic to visiting dignitaries. Flipping the position and projection of power, Bezos (alongside other billionaires such as Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg) can be regarded as princes of the Capitalocene, and ceremonies such as Bezos's nuptials serve as representations of that power to the world. I use the term 'Capitalocene' here to emphasise the extent to which a number of recent crises result from the unfolding of advanced capitalism and, in particular, what Varoufakis (2024) has argued as the new era of 'techno-feudalism', ushered in by 'cloud capitalists', such as Bezos. The concentration of financial power in the hands of a super-rich elite has rendered a number of social-democratic assumptions and apparatuses ineffectual, if not redundant, during a period of marked anthropogenic climate change that merits concerted governmental and institutional responses. It is noticeable in this regard that the power that such plutocrats wield on a global stage dwarves that of the Venetian Republic at its peak.[2]

The relocation of Bezos and other plutocrats, such as PayPal founder, libertarian, and Seasteading advocate[3] Peter Thiel, to Miami in the early 2020s (along with the headquarters of businesses such as Blockchain and Citadel) (Wakefield 2024: 60) has helped cement Miami's reputation as a global centre of wealth and ostentatious opulence. But while this factor may have strengthened superficial parallels between Miami and Venice, it has also served to mask their very different foundations (metaphorically and literally) and their relationships to the waters that surround them. This essay explores these aspects with regard to issues of urban planning and philosophies of resilience, retreat, and/or reconfiguration

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designed to safeguard and perpetuate city structures. Appropriately for an essay that commences with references to princes of the Capitalocene, hubris is a persistent motif throughout the essay, most obviously with regard to the establishment of socio-cultural-economic complexes reliant on engineered real estate that sit tenuously above the liquid element that surrounds them and, thereby, create their distinctiveness.

The first section surveys the manner in which Venice was evoked in the imagination, planning, and marketing of waterfront estates in Floridian cities and the differences between them and their ostensible point of inspiration. The second section engages with evocations of Venice and of an inundated and islandised Miami through an engagement with Stephanie Wakefield's recent study, *Miami in the Anthropocene: Rising seas and urban resilience* (2024). In particular, I attempt to explore the space between the two notional polarities that Wakefield posits for the early 21st century: 'a delirious or cynical effort by politicians and developers at one last boom before the floods truly arrive' (2024: 78) or a more radical point of departure that allows Floridian cities and communities to retain some semblance of continuity and agency. With regard to the latter, Wakefield asserts that while in an era 'increasingly saturated by apocalyptic climate change imaginaries that proclaim that there is no other future but ruination, other ways of seeing are often viewed as naïve', there is value to what she terms 'back loop experimentation'[4] 'geared toward preserving existing systems deemed worth saving by the parties concerned, and countering imaginaries of crisis with imaginaries of stability and serenity' (2024: 78–79). The latter part of this statement (consciously or not) evokes the endurance of Venice, often referred to as *La Serenissima*, on account of the city's ability to maintain stability through times of profound geopolitical and economic transition and, more recently, the combined impacts of climate change, modification to its lagoon, and over-tourism. As Wakefield asserts, one opportunity that might be grasped is the potential of 'transforming Miami into a new subtropical Venice, a floating or aquatic city, navigable by water taxis and boats, as so many design and architecture students already dream' (2024: 79). Indeed, as Section I identifies, *ideas of* Venice have informed previous approaches to designing Miami and other Floridian cities, albeit in more modest, but nonetheless enduring, manners.

I. Venice and Its Role in the Development of Floridian Imaginaries

> I have been traveling to Venice for at least 20 years now because I am attracted to its rapport with the sea, as well as its romantic history of cultural fusion, appropriations, longing, nostalgia, melancholy, ornamentation, decay and the contradictions of the passage of time. (Carlos Betancourt, in Tschida, 2022).

Miami-based, Cuban-American artist Carlos Betancourt's perceptions of the historical character of Venice could equally well serve as a characterisation of the 'romantic history' of many of Florida's coastal cities over the past century. His remarks were made in the context of an interview about a collaboration he undertook with Venetian glassblower Alberto Lattore on Venice's Murano Island (a centre for traditional glass production since the 13th century) in 2012. Fittingly, the collaborative works he produced there playfully blended traditional Venetian techniques, such as layering gold leaf on glass, with exotic design elements,[5] affectionately satirising the gilt and glamour prominent in both cities.

Modern-day Venice has its origins in humble structures built upon banks in the Venetian lagoon around the 4th century CE. These were progressively enhanced and developed as artificial islands over several centuries and had aggregated as an important regional trading centre by the 10th century.[6] The city subsequently extended over a hundred small islands and islets, centred on the Grand Canal, with its major civic buildings clustered around St Mark's Square. The inner islands and islets were (and still are) linked by connecting pedestrian bridges (such as the famous Rialto)[7] and through a variety of passenger and cargo vessel routes that wind through the city's waterways and/or connect to various points on the fringing mainland. In its early phases, in particular, the emergent city was dependent on lagoonal and coastal food resources such as shellfish, crustaceans, and fish,[8] making it an archetypally aquapelagic city[9] that was highly attuned to its watery environment. One aspect of the latter was its ability to accommodate frequent *acqua alta* (high water) events[10] without undue disruption or appreciable damage to life, property, or socio-economic stability. The success and wealth of the city and its extensive trading empire were reflected in its patronage of the arts, as evident in its churches and palaces, and in its expenditure on the striking civic spaces that became the basis of its reputation as a major centre for heritage tourism from the 1800s onwards (and, more recently, for over-tourism). Beyond that, Venice also offered what might be characterised as 'a culture of surfaces' to visitors, especially along its Grand Canal and adjacent spaces. Indeed, the deeply established aquapelagic livelihood basis of the city was complemented by a series of lavish spectacles that appeared above the lagoon's waters like the semiotic peak of a socio-economic 'iceberg'.

The association of various coastal locations in Florida with Venice initially represented a form of largely nomenclative real estate and tourism boosterism.[11] The first locale to experience such treatment was an area on the mid-west coast of the lower Florida peninsula, about 30 km south of Sarasota, that was initially developed by European settlers in the 1870s.[12] The name 'Venice' was applied to it in the late 1880s by a French settler, Francis Higel, who reputedly perceived a resemblance between the Italian city and the area, located close to a scatter of low-lying islands in the creek-fed Dona, Lyons and Roberts bays, with a river running along its eastern side (which was later incorporated into the Intracoastal Waterway). Formally established as the 'City of Venice' in 1927, the area began to develop as a centre for tourism and,

subsequently, for retiree relocation after World War II. In the second half of the 20th century, it expanded with the establishment of the adjacent South Venice and Venice Gardens areas. Despite its nomenclative advantage,[13] a city on the opposite coast of the peninsula, Fort Lauderdale, also gained prominence by promoting an innovative approach to coastal landscape design that led it to be referred to and subsequently promoted as the 'Venice of America'[14] from the 1930s onwards. Hayward and Fleury (2014: 31) characterise the approach to urban design pursued there as 'the creation of finger islands alternating with dredged canals so as to allow maximum residential waterfrontage in small areas' aggregated into clusters that the authors refer to as 'finger island canal estates' (FICEs).[15] One element of the appeal and marketing of these areas was the accessibility of all plots by water and the capacity to moor boats at the rear of residential properties. The 'Venice of America' sobriquet was reiterated so often in real estate and tourism marketing in subsequent decades (see **Figure 1**, for instance)[16] that it adhered to the area despite minimal resemblance between its FICEs and the canals within the central Venetian archipelago (see **Figure 2**).

Miami's engagement with such place associations first occurred in the form of the six so-called 'Venetian Islands' constructed in sheltered Biscayne Bay in the early 1920s by developer Carl Fisher. The artificial islands were constructed along an east-west road axis (named the 'Venetian Causeway') running between downtown Miami and Miami Beach (**Figure 3**).[17] Unlike the bulldozing and dredging approach to construction of FICEs in Fort Lauderdale's wetlands, Miami's Venetian Islands were constructed by methods similar to those used in Venice, that is, through infilling supporting perimeters within an open water space with dredged materials and then draining them to allow construction. Despite this similarity—and the appellations of three of the inner four islands as San Marco, Di Lido, and Rivo Alto[18]—there is very little resemblance between the design of the islands (and their organisation as a lateral chain) and those of Venice, and very little sense of the Miami islands being integrated with Biscayne Bay for livelihood activities and/or resource exploitation in any manner similar to the Italian city's integration with its lagoon. The construction of high-rise apartments on Biscayne Island in recent years (visible in the foreground of **Figure 3**) has further lessened any sense of similarity between the two locales. Along with the islands, Miami was also the site of the Venetian Pool development, a water park in the Coral Gables area south-west of the city's CBD envisaged by developer George Merrick and realised by designer Denman Fink and architect Phineas Paist in 1924. Located within a repurposed quarry site and fed by an underground aquifer, the attraction (included on the National Register of Historic Places since 1981) features arched bridges, vaguely Venetian architecture, and a central islet that once housed moorings for Venetian-style gondolas that could be rowed around the pool.[19]

The last major evocation of Venice as a model for the development of an area of Miami prior to the 21st-century schemes and visions outlined in Section II occurred in

Figure 1: Vintage postcard of a Fort Lauderdale Finger Island Canal Estate locale (c. 1955).

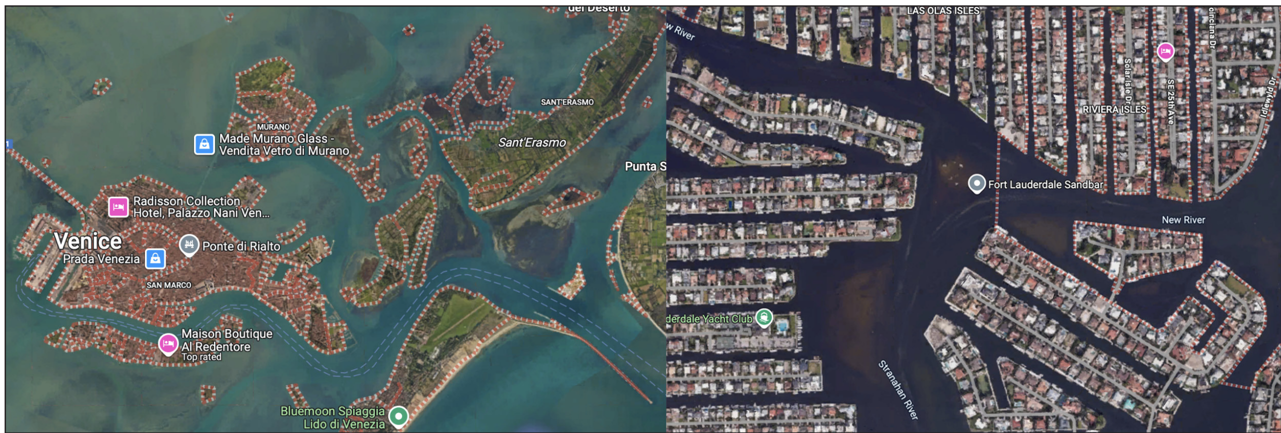

Figure 2: The contrasting spatial configurations of the centre of the Venetian archipelago (left) and central Fort Lauderdale (right) (Google Maps 2025).

Figure 3: The Venetian Causeway viewed from an elevated position in downtown Miami, looking south-east across the Venetian Islands, with Biscayne Island in the central foreground and (in order of recession) San Marco, San Marino, Di Lido, Rivo Alto, and Belle Islands to its rear). Photo by Marc Averette, Wikimedia Commons, date unknown.

the 1970s. This took the form of a highly contentious proposal to redevelop an unplanned, low socio-economic status retirement community that had established itself at the southern tip of Miami Beach in the 1950s (Revell 2018). Seen as both a problem and an area of opportunity for city planners and real estate developers, in 1973, the City of Miami Beach characterised it as 'blighted', created a redevelopment agency to draw up plans for the area, and imposed a moratorium on new developments (other than those due to be proposed by its own agency). Referring to the area as the 'South Shore', the city supported the agency's proposals, which were frequently reported to be Venetian themed (when they might more accurately have been described as Floridian pseudo-Venetian in the manner discussed above). Banks (1976) summarised the city's approach in the following terms:

> The latest scheme calls for leveling every building in South Beach, save for a few recently constructed high-rises. Although a Miami Herald puff piece on the redevelopment plan describes South Beach as a 'blighted landscape,' in fact it has unique architectural character. The three-and four-story white hotels with contrasting trim that most of the old people call home form the densest concentration of Art Deco buildings in the country. In their place the Redevelopment Agency proposes to construct an archipelago of seven islands connected by a pedestrian walkway and 20 acres of canals. Along with luxury hotels (one with a boat-in lobby), a sports complex, a 450-boat marina and the fleet of water taxis, the plan features a 'fisherman's wharf area' of restaurants, shops and open-air cafes….[20] The architects' drawings are classics of the genre, replete with potted palms, rustic wooden signs hanging in front of posh shops and elegant power boats moored at the sides of the canals. Venice would blush. (1976: 11)

In the face of concerted local activism, the proposal was finally dropped in 1982, and the area was subsequently refurbished and redesignated as Miami Beach's Art Deco Historic District. Together with the related museum, its vintage buildings are now prominently represented in tourism promotions.[21] This is in marked contrast to Miami's pseudo-Venetian-themed developments, which have not been subject to similar packaging and principally continue as nomenclative records of previous attempts to imagine and/or render aspects of Miami (however weakly) as Venetian.[22]

II. Twenty-first Century Miami

> Sea level rise presents a major societal challenge for coastal communities and decision-makers around the world. Due to the slow response of the oceans and ice sheets to global warming, sea level rise will continue for many centuries even under scenarios with strong reductions in future greenhouse gas emissions. (Palmer & Weeks 2024: 1)

Palmer and Weeks' cautious and sober assessment of anthropogenic-related sea-level rise typifies established scientific analyses of available data and predictions of likely global trends. As Stephanie Wakefield (2024) details, these are pressing issues for Southern Florida. After opening her volume *Miami in the Anthropocene: Rising seas and urban resilience* with a brief discussion of the city's colourful representation in audio-visual media as a site of glamour, rampant hedonism and crime, she goes on to assert that

> since the 2010s Miami has quickly come to signify something else in the popular and professional imagination as well: climate change ground zero, a modern Atlantis soon to be swallowed by seas and a front-runner in urban adaptation, a model of pro-active resiliency building for planners and governments worldwide. (Wakefield 2024: 1)

One of the paradoxes of the city's 'front-runner' status as a centre for adaptation to rising sea levels and its imaginative engagement with these is that the state is dominated by the Republican Party, whose members currently hold the positions of governor, attorney general, and secretary of state, and have the majority in the state's upper and lower houses. Over the last decade, the party and its Floridian branch in particular have been strident deniers of human-influenced climate change, *let alone* the existence of any kind of Anthropocene climate crisis. This denial was highlighted by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who signed off on three state bills in May 2024 that removed the majority of references to climate change in state legislation, prohibited expansion of renewable energy sources, and prioritised increasing use of fossil fuels. Keen to tout the political significance of the bill, he accompanied it with an Instagram posting that declared,

> The legislation I signed today—HB 1645, HB 7071, and HB 1331—will keep windmills off our beaches, gas in our tanks, and China out of our state. We're restoring sanity in our approach to energy and rejecting the agenda of the radical green zealots. (DeSantis 2024)

Despite such pronouncements and enactions, there is marked dissonance between such discourse and the awareness of progressive sea-level rise and flood dangers amongst Democrat- and Republican-controlled city authorities alike,[23] with a series of policies and strategies in place—such as raising road levels and installing pumping systems—that indicate that the danger is perceived as real (rather than as fanciful 'doom-saying' by 'radical green zealots').

It is one of the strengths of Wakefield's study that she combines consideration of these various elements of the imagination of Southern Florida's current and future plight as a key aspect of her work, asserting that

> in the approach I take, Miami's entanglement with images, imagination, and artifice is not something to dismiss but an integral part of city's material and libidinal reality, and moreover part of what makes the city enthralling, complex and unique. Miami harnesses this image-reality connection, plays on and elaborates it. And so it is also important to understand how the city's new Anthropocentric imaginaries are bound up with urban thinking and planning at this particular historical moment. (2024: 34)

What is most striking about the above characterisation is that it could equally easily apply to Venice and its entanglements as it can to Miami. The two cities are, themselves, entangled as they slide into an era of increasing inundation and as Venice lingers on as a referent in the imagination of Miami's future.

A range of visualisations of what an inundated Miami might look like—like those of Manhattan under similar inundation[24]—invite comparison to images of Venice in showing waterways where streets had once been and with towers rising dramatically out of the water. One notable representation of a future inundated Miami was offered by Gridics, a Miami-based company that combines real estate, urban planning, and development functions. In 2025, it published a short report on the city headlined 'Once a swamp, always a swamp, and maybe the next Venice'. Along with the relatively unusual—although entirely warranted—reiteration of the swampiness of Miami's coastal location (not, in itself, an appealing marketing hook for buyers and investors), the report featured an arresting image of what Miami would look like with a sea-level rise of around 3 m (**Figure 4**).[25] The dark blue portions of the map indicate the areas likely to be permanently inundated by seawater. While the inundation of the mainland coast is marked, the massive reduction in the area of Miami Beach is also striking, rendering it a slender barrier island, with its western FICEs, golf course, and low-lying coastal areas underwater. Similarly, the Venetian Islands (and the Star, Palm, and Hibiscus islands to their immediate south) are only represented by elevated fragments. In cartographic terms, the reshaped area has some resemblance to Venice in that there is a substantial central lagoon and what now appears as a thin, Lido-like outer barrier island, but the only element similar to the well-established central lagoon 'heartland' of the (actual) Venice is the very different elevated and heavily concretised dockland area of Dodge Island.

Wakefield's principal address to the progressive inundation, fragmentation, and, thereby, islandisation of Miami as sea levels rise occurs in Chapter 4 of her

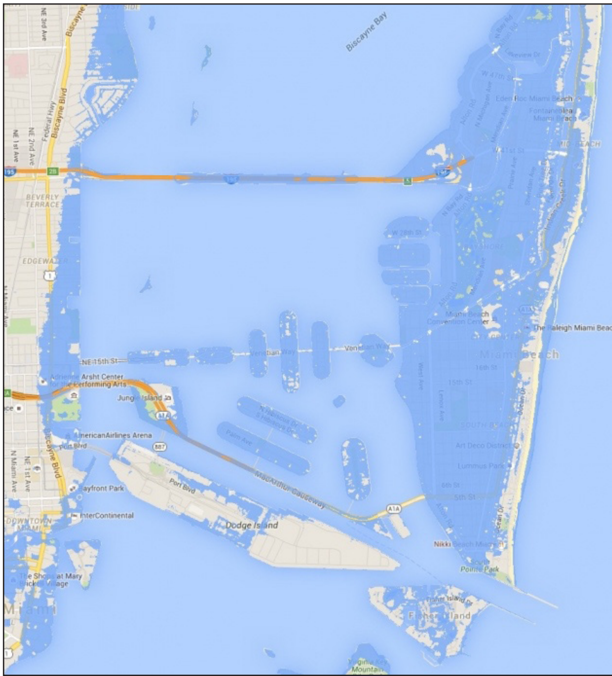

Figure 4: Visualisation of inundated central Miami at an unspecified future date (Gridics 2025). Note: If current levels of sea-level rise increase at a median predicted rate, this inundation may be reached by c. 2250–2500.[26]

volume, entitled 'Beyond Resilience: Islands, Urbicide and Infrastructural Delinking'. Presumably unaware of the substantial volume of work within island studies[27] that is germane to her discussions, Wakefield plots her own brief course through concepts of islands, islandness, and islanding. Her alternative orientation is premised on the limitations of urban resilience as a strategy to resist sea-level rise over the next centuries; the *urbicide* (demise of major urban centres) that will result from inundation; and various strategies, from controlled retreat to engineered survival modules, that have been proposed for Southern Florida and for Miami in particular. While she outlines a variety of strategies proposed for the cities, such as Gabriel Filippi's 'Green Water Village' concept for a floating island moored off the Little River neighbourhood in Biscayne Bay, the approaches proposed by the interdisciplinary Salty Urbanism (SU) project for the North Beach Village in Fort Lauderdale—immediately to the east of the city's earliest and densest FICE development—merit particular attention. As detailed in Huber et al.'s (2017) initial essay 'Salty Urbanism: Towards an adaptive coastal design framework to address sea level rise' and in the project's subsequent design manual written by SU team leader and architect Jeffrey Huber (2024), the SU project considered three levels of, and related responses to, inundation. The first of these, 'Soft Defense' comprises a number of low-tech and environmentally friendly strategies to enhance drainage and soften coastlines of types similar to those discussed in Hayward and Joseph's (2025) study of New York's responses to rising sea levels. Level 2 comprises 'Strategic Retreat (Salt Lines)', a site-specific adaptation of the concept that has been asserted and trialled elsewhere (such as in southeastern England; see Oliver [2021]), whereby there is a managed, pre-catastrophe relocation of inhabitants away from coastal locations.[28] SU's strategic retreat plan for North Beach Village envisages a combination of soft defense strategies occurring in tandem with a relocation of the residences and related amenities from the lowest-lying areas to the coastal ridge, intensifying urban development on these with the 'implementation of a potential resilience easement or utility' together 'with enhanced dunes and sand engines… implemented along the beach as a way to further build robust ecological edges along both shorelines of the neighborhood' (2017: 409). This approach incorporates it and is more drastic and costly than the purely 'Soft Defense' approach of Level 1.

Level 3 is the most ambitious and involves a deliberate engagement with inundation through accepting and structurally enhancing the islandisation of higher areas of ground as lower ones are submerged. This is vividly envisaged in the team's 'Axiometric of Land Adjustment scenario' (2017: 410) (reproduced here as **Figure 5**), which it describes as shifting 'development into atolls and islands for greater flood protection'. While Venice is not identified as an inspiration for or comparator with the island and atoll space located between North Beach and the area's dense network of FICEs, the mixed development of small, densely built islets and low-lying marshy atolls, islets and food production areas more clearly resembles the Italian lagoon city than any of the pseudo-Venetian themed real estate developments discussed in Section I of this article. Yet, similarly to Venice itself, the situation that even such an advanced adaptation scenario as Stage 3 shows is fundamentally a short-term, interim one. Sea-level rises and related surges caused by intensifying storms and hurricanes in future years are likely to limit the viability of such developments in such a manner that the cost of such projects outweighs their short-term benefits.

Wakefield terms proposals such as SU's Stage 3 as 'Anthropocene Island Imaginaries' that reflect the manner in which 'existing urban formations' can be understood to be 'already doomed, destined to be swallowed by the century's rising seas' (2024: 145). In contrast to the soft adaptations and planned retreats that characterise SU's Stages 1 and 2 and/or the building up of ridge lines to increase resistance to incoming waters, Wakefield identifies a vision for the creation of new Islands of South Florida (ISF) as both the most radical and radically effective manner of preserving some trace or essence of contemporary Miami as sea levels rise. As she describes it, ISF 'envisions the necessity of **pulverizing** the current city [my emphasis] in order to use its substrate as fill for a new geography' (2024: 146). Her discussion shifts the tone of her volume—and particularly, her evident affection for Miami—into a vivid and incisive characterisation of the processes and socio-cultural costs of the city's development. This section has a decidedly reparative edge in which Miami's 'physical ground appears as a pragmatic and existential problem *and* solution' to 'urban vulnerability to sea rise and raw material for new territory' (2024: 126). She proceeds to emphasise that the 'physical ground' of the city 'was itself recently engineered' and that

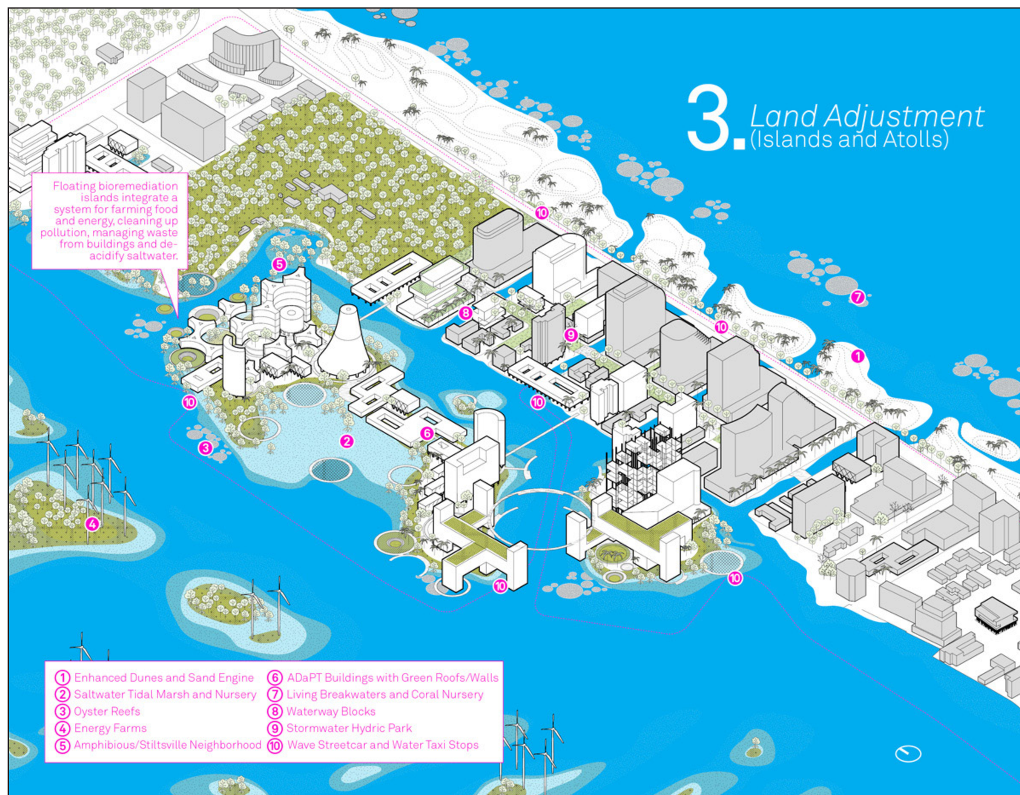

Figure 5: Figure 14 from Huber et al. showing 'Axonometric of Land Adjustment Scenario, which shifts development into atolls and islands for greater flood protection' (2017: 410).

> Much of the city was built—largely by Black laborers from the Caribbean and American South and poor white workers—on drained swampland. Likewise, the current topography of Miami Beach, a thin barrier island in the late nineteenth century, was created in the early twentieth century as party of a real estate scheme by entrepreneur Carl Fisher. Under Fisher, workers, elephants, and mules cleared the islands' dense mangrove swamps and filled in the land. Millions of cubic yards of sand dredged from adjacent Biscayne Bay and Everglades soil were added atop existing limestone foundation and arranged into level terrain three to five feet above sea level. Miami Beach's grid of streets, pavements, and condos was overlaid on this new foundation, built with rock brought in by barge from inland mines, providing terrain for Fisher's new industrial money crowd (2024: 146).

The ISF proposal provides the dramatic vision of Miami's 'ubiquitous excavators and bulldozers' being redeployed, 'no longer digging holes for the expanding forest of luxury condos and hotels that crowd Miami's waterfront; instead, they are demolishing buildings and waterfront' (2024: 147). Once such structures are erased, material would be scraped from the limestone below to provide fill for a series of what Wakefield proposes as 'a series of massive, elevated islands' crowned by 'high-rise buildings, inhabited by residents who enjoy water-based lifestyles' (2024: 147). Ambitious as such costly engineering and construction projects may be, they are (metaphorically) shallow. They do not suggest any radically different approach to the challenges and opportunities of the Anthropocene and life in an era of progressive inundation and principally seem to offer an opportunity to keep some semblance of Miaminess in place for those able to afford it. But, in the chapter's most useful contribution to the field of island studies that the author shows negligible awareness of, she uses this post-inundation vision to think through concepts of socio-economic *delinking* from contemporary capitalism and/or its successor form, technofeudalism, in artificial island locales physically separated from nearby coasts by both inundation itself and constructions aimed to accommodate the impacts of rising seas. There is a pleasing inversion of island studies' continuing concern with the extent to which fixed links 'de-island' islands[29] here and the extent to which such links serve to integrate them with (and, thereby, make them increasingly dependent on) the societies, cultures, institutions, and livelihood opportunities of coastlands or larger islands. Given that there are few examples of islands with fixed links having these deliberately removed,[30] nor, seemingly, much prospect of that occurring in an era obsessed with connectivity, Wakefield's discussion usefully airs the potential impacts of such delinking.

In a section entitled 'To Cut', Wakefield takes up the theme of delinking in the context of her visions of a new ISF. One point of inspiration for this is the work of Miami-focussed multidisciplinary collective Alliance of the Southern Triangle (AST). The collective has ambitiously theorised the Anthropocene's challenge to traditional concepts of territoriality in the following terms:

> The concept of territory must now be defined by shifting urgencies rather than historical power grabs. We must unlearn the ways we previously understood territory. New language, new maps, new spatial matrices must be developed in order to articulate where we are. 'Territory' must be recalibrated. Previous territories and borders were delineated by mapping through extractivist processes, a history of violence and contradictions defined by power in the interest of power. Westphalian sovereignty is not adequate to engage with climate change, geo-political entanglements, the cloud, pandemics. These are our pre-existing conditions.[31] (n.d.a).

As the collective went on to assert in a separate text entitled 'Protocols for phase transition: Towards new alliances' (n.d.b):

> Meeting the multiplicity of health crises, missing social safety nets, climate change, AI, automation, and risk analyses require scalable, coherent narratives that must emanate from within small clusters yet also engage the overall assemblage of larger systems. Strategic alliances will define new terms of engagement between systems and societies, and these alliances are and will be the protagonists as well as the spaces through which they navigate.[32]

Wakefield identifies that one strategy that has been considered by AST for Southern Florida, as its coastal areas and islands become inundated and fragmented, and/or as artificial islands arise, has been the area's secession from the United States (2024: 140). While this strategy is (as yet) sketchily rendered in AST materials, it suggests itself as far more flexibly constituted and adaptive than the aspirations for micronationality that have been attached to (and, less commonly, enacted on) a variety of islands and marine platforms (as detailed in *Shima*, 2025). Although no reference is made to Hakim Bey's writings, it suggests itself as a flexible coalition of the small self-governing units that Bey (1991) referred to as 'Temporary Autonomous Zones' (TAZs). Indeed, if only momentarily, the fragmentation of Florida and the creation of new (is)lands allow us to imagine them as unclaimed spaces for various agents (such as the AST, libertarian seasteaders, plutocrats etc.) of a type that Bey had claimed as extinct as a result of 'the closure of the map' affected by the 'territorial gangsterism' of national states concerned that 'not one speck of rock… can be left *open*, not one remote valley' (1991). In all likelihood, the 'territorial gangsterism' of the United States—let alone the expansionist orientation of its current presidential gangster-in-chief—would not allow any direct secession, but new forms of governance might gain some kind of traction, particularly if they were corporate rather than democratic in orientation. Notably, in this regard, the individual islands of the Venetian lagoon had various degrees of autonomy and/or special statuses during the heyday of the Venetian Republic, suggesting that rigid national homogenisation of governmental structures is neither a necessary nor an ideal model for a fragmented Anthropocene world, particularly one in which islands might play as central a role as mainlands and where coastal centres have no choice but to refigure their rationales and characters.

Discussion

This short analysis has profiled the use of Venice as a referent for both 20th-century coastal real estate development and promotion and for imaginations of an inundated Southern Florida. In the mid-20th century, configurations of particular locales as FICEs were strongly indicative of a contemporary worldview that perceived sea levels and water tables as relatively fixed, predictable factors. By the 1990s, there was common scientific agreement that sea levels were rising and that these were likely to become an issue in/threat to low-lying coastal areas. Around the same time, the general sogginess of urban locations and frequent flooding of low-lying and subsurface spaces indicated that water encroachment was a serious issue for residents, businesses, and local authorities. Recognition of these issues has required both attempts to protect coastal communities from inundation and a reimagination of coastal futures, one aspect of which—as in the case of Miami—has concerned the disconnection and resultant islandness of a variety of (presently coastal) locations. The radical restructuring of place and the organisation and administration of such new locales have prompted a range of Anthropocene imaginaries, such as those explored by Wakefield (2024). These are not, in themselves, innately utopian or dystopian but are, rather, open to interpretation and to colonisation by various factions. Peter Thiel's residence and investment in Miami and his support for libertarian Seasteading projects suggest one way that Southern Florida's new islands might be imagined as new types of communities within the borders of a United States that is showing itself to be open to radical reformulations of power and sovereignty. AST's vision is more idealistic and aspirational, but nonetheless represents an attempt to think of radically alternative ways of de- and re-connecting with other communities and institutions. The first phrase of Karl Marx's famous colourful characterisation from *The Communist Manifesto*, 'All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man [sic] is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind', comes to mind with regard to Marshall Berman's borrowing of the opening phrase for the title of his acclaimed 1982 book on modernity. We might usefully twist Marx and Berman here in the context of the Anthropocene and its rising sea levels to contend that—in Southern Florida and other low-lying locales, at least—'all that is solid becomes inundated and fragmented' and, particularly, all that is the product of the modernity that Berman explores.

One significant—if often overlooked—difference between Venice and Southern Florida's waterfront cities is not that the Venetian lagoon has been more inherently stable in terms of water levels than the waters around Miami or Fort Lauderdale, but that the speed at which

levels have risen for the latter has not allowed for the degrees of accommodation that Venice managed until the late 20th century. Despite recent droughts that have left canals temporarily drained,[33] water levels in the Venetian lagoon have risen around 2 m since Venice was initially established, and areas of the inner city have also sunk by varying degrees. As alarming as this might sound, this has occurred in a manner that has inconvenienced, rather than imperilled, its inhabitants. This gradual inundation has allowed Venice to retain much of its mediaeval structure and to manage and tolerate periodic *acqua alta* events. In this manner, it offers a model of stability and gradual change that might be contrasted to the urgency of Southern Florida's current responses to rising sea levels. But this parallel is illusory in that while Venice may have weathered centuries of gradual inundation, current rising sea levels present a more dramatic intervention, and the city is now facing a similar existential crisis to Southern Florida. While the Italian city is now substantially protected from storm surges in the Adriatic by its MOSE flood barrier systems, at least on a short-term basis, frequent use of the barriers is likely to substantially affect water flows in the lagoon and to disturb its ecosystems. Radical solutions are being posited for the city, including raising its structures through mechanical means. The cost of any substantial elevation would be astronomical and would require funding commitments of a scale that would be unlikely to be viable for the Italian state, let alone any more local agencies. Other, more radical, fanciful, and risky schemes have involved such unlikely scenarios as encasing the heritage spaces of the inner islands in watertight glass cases accessible from above as water levels rise, rendering these once vibrant areas as massive museumified artefacts, and Fabian and Centis (2022) mapped scenarios for a future Venice built around lake systems.

While a strategic retreat from Venice might seem inconceivable given its global heritage status, and a strategic withdrawal from Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and other Floridian cities might seem unlikely given the value of their real estate, the harsh reality for the cities, their inhabitants, and the tourists who patronise them is that the costs of coastal retreats and reconstructions across their respective nations are likely to be ruinous, and the amount of support for radical, localised reconfigurations is likely to be minimal. In this manner, while Wakefield's imagination of more positive futures for reconstituted coastal cities might be an intriguing and even reassuring exercise, it is more likely that a more fragmented patchwork of strategies will be deployed, preserving some fragments through elevation and/or enclosure and undertaking the bulk removal of material artefacts from others while allowing the sea to inundate lower levels of cities, creating short-term, pseudo-Venetian systems where city streets become waterways and marginal populations squat in barely serviced residential and commercial buildings (as represented in Kim Stanley Washington's novel *New York 2140*). But even this state is likely to be short-lived as salt-water corrosion, wave action, and accelerated structural decay afflict buildings that were not designed to operate and sustain under water. Low-rise developments, such as Florida's water-level FICEs, are likely to be the first to disappear, and their shallow, multiply-fingered terrains may well offer inviting spaces for fish, coral, and aquatic plants to develop, reinvigorating pre-modern ecologies.[34] If human society negotiates sea-level change sufficiently deftly to continue its socio-economic basis and current leisure pursuits (at whatever cost to the planetary environment), it might well be that submerged cityscapes such as those of Venice, Miami, and other coastal locations can take on new aquapelagic functions as centres of dive tourism and underwater heritage exploration with their liquid spaces embodying a new form of submerged Anthropocene serenity.

Notes

1. In June 2024, Tanaka and Herrera estimated his net worth as US $263.8 billion.
2. The doges—elected leaders of the Venetian Republic—were notably modest with regard to public displays of their personal power or wealth.
3. Seasteading is a libertarian movement spearheaded by the California-based Seasteading Institute, founded in 2008, that advocates for and has attempted to establish autonomous communities on various types of structures moored outside national territorial waters. See Friedman and Gramlich (2009) for a foundational text advocating the practice and Simpson (2021) for a critical analysis of the 'successful failure' of a recent initiative. See Wainwright (2020) for a discussion of Thiel's advocacy.
4. In her volume, *Anthropocene back loop*, Wakefield (2020) proposes such 'experimentation' as a way of surviving and productively responding to Anthropocene disruption of existing forms of socio-spatial organisation by creating new ways of thinking and being.
5. Such as bananas, knives, and a bird diving into a cake in the case of his sculpture *Torta Atomica*—see photographs of the work online at https://www.carlosbetancourt.com/artworks/categories/74-torta-atomica-murano-residency-2012/.
6. See Lane (1973) and Caniato, Turri, and Zanetti (Eds.) (1995) for more detailed discussions.
7. Pedestrian mobility through the city was enhanced in the 19th century, when an attempt was made to provide the city with a unitary network of pedestrian paths, connecting the various sections (*insulae*) (Cavallo, Visentin & Vallerani, 2021: 12).
8. With outer islands such as Sant Erasmo, Vignole, and Torcello cultivating and supplying fruit and vegetables to central Venetian markets.
9. For an introduction to the concept of the aquapelago, see Hayward (2024); for a profile of an aquapelagic city, see Hayward and Joseph (2024).
10. Seasonal surges in lagoon water height (see Camuffo, 2023, for historical discussion).
11. The promotion of a location by emphasising its positive aspects and/or through creating place brand associations through attractive and evocative nomenclature and associated publicity (e.g. the

bestowal of place names such as 'Avalon' or 'Elysian Fields' on otherwise unremarkable US, Canadian, and Australian suburbs or 'Shangri-La' for locations in Brazil and China.

[12] Another notable evocation of Venice in this period was the lavish Ca' d'Zan mansion designed and built for John and Mable Ringling on Sarasota Bay in 1926, inspired by and evoking the grandeur of Venice they experienced during a visit there in 1923 (see Hershon, 2024: 158–193).

[13] This connection was not reinforced in any public branding such as city logos, etc. However, such a connection was made explicit in the coat of arms of the Roman Catholic diocese of Venice, which features the distinct winged lion with an open bible image that featured in the flag of the Venetian Republic from the 13th to 18th centuries and recurs in a variety of city symbols to the present. See the Floridian diocese's coat of arms at https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Coat_of_arms_of_the_Diocese_of_Venice_in_Florida.svg.

[14] This characterisation was not a deliberate marketing ploy involving the coining of an official slogan but rather the frequent reference to the area in this manner that was embraced by local boosters and external commentators.

[15] This approach was pioneered in Southern California in 1900 by developer Albert Kinney, who created a network of canals with arched bridges and gondolas in an unincorporated area south of Santa Monica that was initially promoted as the 'Venice of America' (Shevitz 2001). When initial interest in the area proved less than anticipated, it was redesigned and was significantly transformed by the subsequent infilling of canals in the 1920s to create roadways. The area fell into significant disrepair and social decline prior to World War II, before being reinvigorated in the 1990s as a more attractive and upmarket area known as the Venice Canal Historic District.

[16] Indeed, these characterisations are still frequently used in marketing (see Kelley 2024 for a recent example).

[17] A number of other islands and connecting causeways were planned but never completed.

[18] The names refer to the Lido, Venice's elongated outer barrier island, its central Piazza San Marco, and the Rivo Alto area close to Rialto Bridge. The fourth inner island is named San Marino, in apparent reference to the small independent republic located in northern Italy, 60 km west of Firenze.

[19] See the *Venetian Pool of Coral Gables*' centennial video feature (2024) online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WmMspuzjuM.

[20] Banks added, 'If that sounds like Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, it's not surprising. The firm hired to work these wonders was San Francisco's Wurster, Bernardi and Emmons'.

[21] See, for instance, Franker (2025), written for and featured on the official website for Greater Miami and Miami Beach, and books such as Schwartzman (2023).

[22] Notably, in this regard, neither Miami nor Miami Beach has a twin city agreement with Venice (although Fort Lauderdale does).

[23] Currently, Fort Lauderdale has a Democrat mayor, Dean Trantalis, Miami has a Democrat, Elieen Higgins, and Miami Beach has a former Republican, Steve Meiner, who switched to a non-partisan identity in 2018 (although his policies remain broadly aligned to Trump Republicanism).

[24] See, for instance, the photo-realist visualisation of a flooded Manhattan accompanying Mark Hertsgaard's feature 'While Washington slept' in the May 2006 issue of *Vanity Fair*. For a more positive imagination of a flooded Manhattan, imagined in a Neo-Venetian manner and reclaimed as a more egalitarian city, see Robinson (2017).

[25] Using Lindsey's (2023) projections and Palmer and Weeks' (2024: 2) model of median projections of global mean sea level rise, this 3-m mark may be reached by around 2250–2500.

[26] See fn 19.

[27] See, for instance, work published in *Island Studies Journal* over the last two decades.

[28] A scenario that was represented at a national level in Thomas Vinterberg's TV mini-series *Familier son vores* ['Families like us'] (2024) that represents the whole of Denmark being depopulated by its government ahead of inundation and the resulting complexities for its displaced people.

[29] See Baldacchino (Ed.) (2007) and Brinklow and Jennings (Eds.) (2023).

[30] At least, for anything other than safety concerns or due to structural replacement. Amongst the few bridges to have been removed for other reasons is Montana's bridge to Dogstader Island from the shore of Flathead Lake (known locally as the 'bridge to nowhere', as the island is privately owned and uninhabited), which was demolished in 2023. Thanks to Ilan Kelman for alerting me to this—also see Scott (2023).

[31] This discussion results in the collective's Protocol 002 'Territory is now a process. It is not a fixed state'.

[32] One of the adaptive approaches they advocate and aspire to is *murmuration*, an approach they derive from starlings and their 'remarkable ability to maintain cohesion as a group in highly uncertain environments and with limited, noisy information' (AST, n.d.b).

[33] See Tangermann (2023) for a description and photographic representation of the canals in late Winter 2023.

[34] See https://floridascoralreef.org for a discussion of south-eastern Florida's fringing coral reef system.

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