

Carolina Esther Jimenez
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I came to Italy to escape the familiar. Here, even the most routine moments have been made unknown. On my way to have lunch I have passed by the Duomo, my feet stepped on stones that have been there for centuries. Riding on the back of a green bicycle, I've looked up to the windows of the grand Palazzi and wondered about the lives that unfolded there. I've thought about the weddings and ceremonies that occurred in the Loggia di Rucellai, about the painters and craftspeople that built up Florence as center of learning. The cities I have visited in Italy are rich with the traces of the past, of memory.

The stories that occur each day become intertwined with stories from hundreds of years ago. Layers upon layers, cities have history rewritten upon them. *We* shape them. Italy has made me think about the collective and the way that representations of a place and of a people are formed. Here, I have sought to place myself within this larger context. Political and social forces are brought forward collectively to form civic life.

From the thunderous chants and banners that call me out of my apartment to the gleeful laughter of children in a piazza, this is the city. A mixture of students, tourists, and Florentines, saturates the streets, a phenomenon I did not expect, because I thought I knew what Italian culture would be. For precisely this reason I have struggled with life in Florence, because I wanted to find authenticity in it. Which public forms the space of the city, I asked myself. I felt the sense of belonging to a larger whole, but couldn't be sure how to describe it. I felt it was hiding in plain sight.

I was at odds with the notion that a city could be so open to tourism, and not be afraid of losing its identity. I thought Florence was a ghost of itself because it had become so inundated with tourists, so open to anyone. So willing to let anyone participate in the formation of public spaces. And I think, somehow, this was the key to my realization that although in some ways Florence seems a mere fragment of the city it once was, the power of its urban structures have not diminished. The streets and the piazzas remain brilliant stage sets for our daily lives. They continue to inspire the individual and remain generators of a public constantly in flux. While the Italians might not dominate the *centro*, the culture of public life certainly has not disappeared. And this vibrancy of public life is a quality emblematic of Italian culture.

Trips to visit monuments of architectural thought have helped to illustrate how Italy has arrived at this point. There are ideologies embedded within villas and churches alike that speak to private and public domains. The Roman Villas illustrate chaos and order, natural and built worlds and the necessity for both. Palladio wanted to shape not just the space contained within his projects, but stretched out to see how far he could extend the awareness of one particular place, and the individuals that represent that place.

We see how a piece of architecture is conceptualized as a part of two worlds, the domestic and the civic. Florence is often recognized for its role in the development of the Renaissance and of humanism, movements that shaped how the individual is understood today. The spirit of personal expression, the value of independence and the interest in making the world we live in *ours* by engaging with the life of the city: these are aspects of Italy's history which I have made my own.

Coluccio Salutati Essay

My marks have been made on Florence just as it has made its imprint on me. We have the other helped create our present selves.