

Senior Project in Florence, Italy

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Imagine waking to a gentle winter sun warming your bed, and then walking fifty paces to a neighborhood café where the barista already knows what you're going to order as you walk in the door. Afterwards, you spend a good portion of your day people watching and studying behavior in an open piazza. You shop at the neighborhood grocer for meats and breads but save the fresh produce and cheese purchases for the open-air market. And finally, in the middle of the night when cravings for sweets strike, you find a bakery selling its next day's goods hot and fresh from their back door. I experienced these moments and more during my six-month habitation in Florence, Italy.

Last winter, I was given the opportunity to pursue an independent study for my senior project in Florence and it will remain one of the most valuable experiences of my life. I was able to tour most of Italy and many Western European cities. However, it was living in the birthplace of the renaissance what truly enabled me to appreciate the culture I was immersed in.

While there I attended lectures and field trips in conjunction with the Cal State International Program. I learned how Italian architecture and urban patterns continue to influence much of the world today. For my senior project, I joined a collaborative effort to revitalize the City of Livorno's Maritime Port, a large-scale redevelopment that gave rise to revitalization opportunities throughout the City. During this exploration and over the entirety of my time in Italy, I learned about the Italian perspective in the field of urban design. The following photos and descriptions are my attempts to articulate these lessons:

Dominance of Urban Public Spaces

I found myself loitering in a public piazza (town square) at least once a day. We sought them out to eat lunch in the sun, or meet each other to embark on an outing. Living on the outer edge of the center, Piazza Santa Croce was our first linkage to the rest of the City. It is the simplest imaginable form, an open paved rectangle surrounded by shops and housing on three walls and the magnificent Santa Croce Cathedral at the eastern wall. There is no provided seating, with the exception of the steps of the church.

The hours I spent in the many piazze of Florence are some of my fondest memories. From time to time during the evening we would play calcio (soccer) in the piazza and were joined by various passers-by. There was always an immensity of activities from puppet shows, street vendors to the occasional full-scale concert.

Dense Housing Works

Our 8-story apartment building had a large open atrium in the back that allowed all the apartments adequate sun exposure. The advantage of this exposure directly into my bedroom allowed me to bask in the sun during my siestas or enjoy while reading on the windowsill, even during the cold winter months.

The design of this building was such that I never felt I was in a dense place. The apartment never felt cramped, even with five of us in three bedrooms. I owe that to our 12-foot ceilings and fairly large floor plan. We always fear noise as the main problem with dense living, however I never felt disturbed by any loud conversations, music or the like. In addition, there were enough parks and piazzas to never be wanting for open space. We hung our laundry from the back balcony and attempted to grow basil from pots (no green thumbs here). Living in a dense neighborhood made me feel



Brianna in her Florence bedroom. (Photo: Y. Okano)

more connected to my community. Through the glimpses of Italian families surrounding us we learned the cultural methods of living in this type of environment, (its ok to block your downstairs neighbors' view with a drying sheet once in awhile).

Vitality in Complete Neighborhoods

Although our neighborhood was located on the edge of the historical center, it was not lacking in any commercial development. Less than a block away we had two cafes, a butcher, a bread shop, a tobacco shop, a fruit and vegetable shop, hardware and houseware stores, an electronic store, a general market, stationary, clothing, an organic food store, and even a small train station. I never had to go far for practically anything I ever needed. It was a complete paradigm shift to not consider using a car as a more convenient mode for daily errands.

Additionally, after becoming familiar with the clerks and other regulars, I really felt that I was part of a community. I enjoyed friendly conversations and the occasional free food samples at shops frequented. The daily connections with working class Italians in my neighborhood was the most valuable immersion of the culture I experienced. I can't say a foreigner in the US receives the same connections in our typical neighborhoods.

Development Limited to Urban Areas

I took different trips on buses and Vespas out into the countryside of Tuscany. While it is important to note that sprawled development does exist, the majority of rural areas still remain undeveloped. Its remarkable that in a City as old as Florence, development has for the most part remained inward. A fifteen-minute walk can get you to a landscape of vast hillsides dotted with Italian Cypresses and the occasional 500-year-old Tuscan Villa. Driving through the rural roads between olive groves and vineyards made this city girl truly appreciate the importance of agriculture as both an economic and visual resource.

Historical Preservation and Enhancement

Florence is a living museum. There is an overwhelming wealth of architectural masterpieces throughout the center. For Italians, these places mark pride in the accomplishments of their culture. Historical buildings are constantly being washed and restored. The attention given to these buildings catalyzed the experiences I felt in their presence. I was often

overwhelmed by the grandeur of these cathedrals and palaces. Pictures can never do them justice. I continue to feel fortunate for having witnessed them.

Alternative Transportation Choices

I did not have a car and I did not need a car. I did have a bike, however, all I really needed was my feet. The buses and trains could reach just about every destination I could imagine. I never felt inhibited or immobilized by the fact that I had to take public transit or walk. The presence of so many choices of transportation modes coupled with the cost and difficulty of navigating streets in a car makes public transit the natural choice for a large percentage of Italians. I felt liberated from the confines of auto-dependency so prevalent in the US

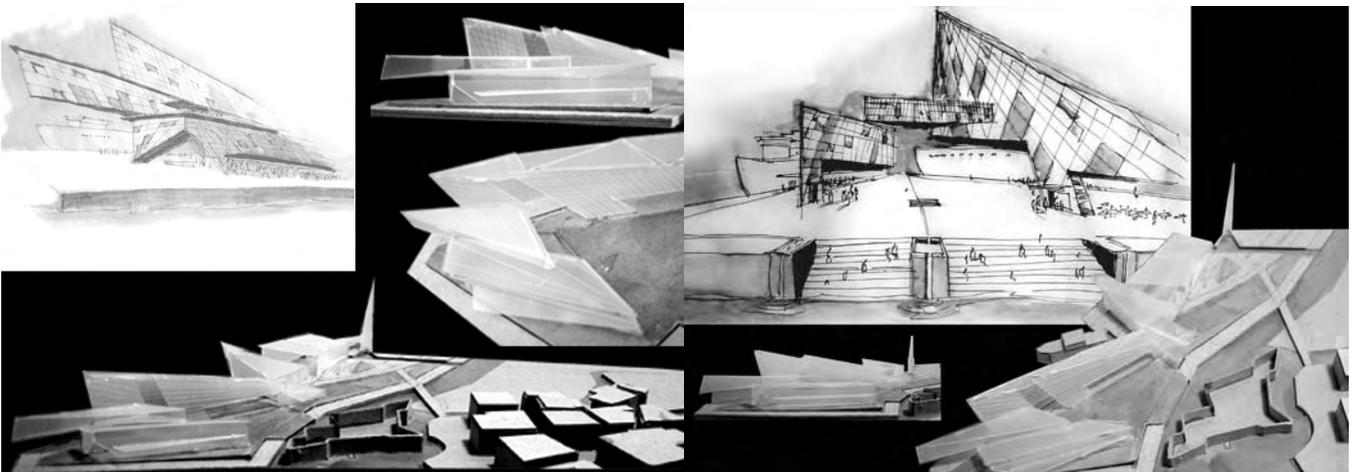
In returning to the United States, these lessons from abroad have revealed to me powerful and appropriate solutions to our struggles with sprawl and separated development trends. In Italy, these lessons are a social norm due to a cultural consensus to not let consumerism and car culture overshadow an individual's connection to a place. Instead, the city is shaped to promote a desirable quality of life. The United States should look to Italy as a model of appropriate development where people and culture take precedence over profit and property rights.



*Piazza Santa Croce.
(Photo: B. Clae)*



*Exploring the Tuscan countryside with a Vespa.
(Photo: Y. Okano)*



Models and sketches of Final Project: Port of Livorno Revitalization project (Photo: Y.Okano)



*Neighborhood cafe.
(Photo: Y. Okano)*