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Firenze Insurgent City



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Contested Places: Stories and Geographies from Another Florence

With its population made up of two categories of people, those who do business and those upon whom they prey, the city has only a painful life to offer the young person who goes there to learn and study; for sooner or later anyone who lives there, whatever his constitution, becomes disturbed and is eventually deranged and destroyed by the city, often in the most deadly and insidious manner. The extreme weather conditions have an unfailingly irritating, enervating, and sickening effect on the inhabitants, an effect which is compounded by the devastating influence of the [...] architecture. Anyone who is familiar with the city knows it to be a cemetery of fantasy and desire, beautiful on the surface but horrifying underneath. Whoever goes there to learn and to study [...] soon discovers that this city, renowned the world over for beauty and edification [...] is in truth nothing but a chill museum of death, open to every kind of disease and depravity [...]. What was at first a place of natural beauty and matchless architecture soon becomes a vile and impenetrable jungle of human viciousness, and when he goes through the streets they are no longer filled with [architecture] but with the moral filth of those who people them.

Thomas Bernhard, *Gathering Evidence: A Memoir*, Vintage, London, 2003, pp. 77-79.



This invective by Thomas Bernhard quoted in the opening remarks was aimed at Salzburg. It would need very few corrections to make it fit Florence. Florence also could be defined as "a squalid device for making money and yet more money out of the exploitation of beauty". For many of its inhabitants, both newcomers and long-time residents, it generates material suffering and conflict. The deadly atmosphere – an unholy communion of environmental devastation and horrible climate – renders the place noxious. The contrast between downtown and suburbia shows the device to be lying and double-faced; the dominance exerted by commerce and money makes it cynical and cruel; the exploitation of ancient culture, and the crisis of contemporary culture makes it sterile and dull; mental and material avarice make it, more often than not, hostile and unwelcoming.

As in Bernhard's Salzburg, the Florentine public scene reflects the physical and environmental decay of the city: indifferent governance, sheriffs and enforcers, barkers and couturiers, film directors and fat, 'has-been' former 'alternative singers', sclerotic theatres, farces that recycle TV shows. All these contribute to producing a fossilized cultural environment, where there is no place for courage to experiment or critical discrimination. The perverse 'beauty machine' of Florence, the 'cold museum of death', is represented in the city's maps and guides. Inflated in images and stories, it offers 'rooms with a view' with conventional, banal sights; a terminal flood (but a desert of meaning) of Florence to the world.

Our research goes beyond this aspect of the city's arts and cultural trade to address the reconstruction of another geography of Florence: an interstitial, hidden, fluid, mutating, active, dense, creative counter-geography of a different Florence, a budding, emergent city inside of and counter to the existing city.

We often define Florence as an insurgent city. Some explanation of the meaning of this expression is necessary, and of the term 'insurgent' in general. A few years ago, James Holston (Holston 1999) designated as "spaces of insurgent citizenship" those areas subordinated to the planned, modern domination of the city. According to Holston, these "include the territories of the homeless, the networks of migrants, the neighbourhoods of gay communities, the self-built suburbias ..., ganglands, fortified condos, places of self-production, squatters' settlements, the suburban encampments of foreigners, sweatshops and the so-called areas of new racism" (Holston 1999, p. 167). Holston considers insurgent all spaces in which there are practices "disturbing the modern city's established history". For our purposes this overstretches the term, lumping together as it does places of creative opposition with new exploitation and decay. Closer to our perspective is the terms used by Leonie Sandercock in a recent issue of the magazine *Plurimondi*, edited by her (Sandercock 1999). Sandercock defines "insurgent planning practices" as initiatives of planning and resistance opposing the existing city (its organisational and power structure) and building the first positive devices of an alternative, different city. Friedmann links these initiatives to the dynamics of expanding citizenship, to a progressive widening of democratic spaces (Friedmann 1999). New citizenships create a fecund, pluralistic context, a bona fide multipli/city, in which concrete, achievable forms of utopia become feasible and lay the ground for humans to achieve their full potential.



The term insurgent has older resonances, in particular in the thought of the early nineteenth century Scottish planner Patrick Geddes, and in the derivation of the concept in the writings of Lewis Mumford. In Geddes it is possible to find a sort of insurgent urbanism: an idea of city transformation capable of setting "the forward movement of life" in motion, "its insurgence and its expectancy". "Insurgence", Mumford wrote, is in fact "the ability to overcome, through power or cunning, through plan or dream, the forces threatening the organism" (Mumford 1959, p. 83). Both individual and collective insurgent practices are biological and existential before being political; to us they are the basic exercise of the right to live and the right to the city on the part of its poorest and most deprived inhabitants. Insurgence, in this Geddesian-Mumfordian sense, is the very movement of bodies within the city, of the organisms that yearn for survival and hope for the future. Molecular movements: the trajectories of bodies in the city's public scene, in pursuit of life and happiness and similar movements: the interaction between bodies that are mutually supportive, solidarity within shared work and friendship; and organized networks of resistance and action: the rooting of new communities within the space, the process of building or transforming places and settlements.

Our stories bring together living practices of new citizens, little daily anthropologies, histories and micro-histories of individuals or groups. To use another Geddesian metaphor, we are reconstructing a web of life, a new grid of life, of new citizenships expanding within the territories of Florence. Insurgent city does not mean subversive or revolutionary city (neither in Florence nor in any other Italian city these days, whether we like it or not). It is, however, a field of force, tensions, desires, projects, expectations. It is the whole of finite or partial transformative actions, of small realized utopias or simple acts of survival, manifestations of struggle and resistance, of individual or collective achievements, of diffused micro-powers ("thousands of tiny empowerments", to borrow again from Sandercock). Insurgence is not antagonistic action, algebraically negative, a mechanical overturning or challenging (and simultaneous legitimizing) of the established social (and spatial) order. Insurgent social practices are the outcome of positive, constructive collective aims. Practices on a different level, on thousands of different levels, impervious and indifferent to the traditional world of political struggle and ideologies. Unpolitical practices to some degree, and perhaps because of that, the only politically effective ones.



The Perspective Space

The original intent of the research project was to create a real city atlas of Florence's new social morphology. There are many ways of conceiving an atlas. One of the classic ways is to lump together compact, well-defined images of all the established knowledge regarding a certain portion of the world or society. In this way, the atlas fixes the known territory, the *terra cognita*, in a unitary, shared pattern. This mode of representation presupposes unity and stability and an unequivocal point of view. It implies that the time exploration is over, and that the sanctioning function of command and ownership, implicit in every geography, prevails over knowledge and action. In the end, this type of atlas is a homogeneous product, defined according to scales of representation, in a linear correspondence between the language of graphic symbols and the universe of 'real' phenomena. But how could we reach such a safe and fixed representation of Florence's mutating citizenships and their ever-changing relations to space? In short, we could not: this was not an option. However, there is another way of understanding the concept of atlas. 'Maps' and narratives - iconographic and topographic tales - fill up with tracks, with provisional signs; they swathe themselves in images and suggestions that make inroads into unknown territory. The atlas gives temporary validity to the path a route follows, almost as though it were a flight log, as opposed to the map of a peaceful Baedeker. This type of representation remains close to the things represented.

Our task was complicated by the fact that object of representation was precisely the world of the insurgent city: the city of freed subjectivities, of expanding and moving citizenships, a fluid and dynamic field of acting agents and initiatives. The materials to be represented were not made up of objects but by an interweave of human relations: new intra-subjective relationships having difficult and conflictual relations with the organizational and morphological structure of the city. We considered the possibility of a pluralistic, polymorphic, de-centralized atlas that might represent 'the perspective space' of the emerging city in its extension and its complication, an atlas of voices and relations, of routes and testimonies.

An indication by Pierre Bourdieu, contained in a volume which we used as model for ours (but whose quality we can barely begin to approach) guided us along the way: "To understand what happens in places ... moving people separated by everything else closer together, forcing them to cohabit, both in ignorance or in mutual incomprehension, in conflict, latent or patent, with all the suffering thus derived, it isn't sufficient to address each of the points of view in a separate way. It is also necessary to compare them as they are in reality ... to illuminate, through the simple effect of juxtaposition, the outcome of the clash of different and antagonistic visions of the world; i.e. in some cases, the tragic, born of an uncompromising clash between irreconcilable points of view, equally founded upon some social reason" (Bourdieu 1993, pp. 14-15). New urban geographies are "difficult to represent and to think" and require a multiple, complex representation: "to abandon the unique point of view, central, almost divine, in which the observer often gladly collocates him/herself, ... in favour of a plurality of perspectives corresponding to the plurality of points of view". At the end of our attempt, the answer to this question is open still: is the disorder of the material presented in our work simply the result of the limits of our capacity to conduct and interpret our research, or does it represent precisely the space of the perspective we have tried to investigate?



Effects of Place

Another aspect of the study created difficulties. Our intention was to arrive at a physical, even architectural and morphological description, of the alternative, emerging city. Not just to tell tales and collect testimonies, but to represent the transformations, to capture the new spatial figure of the city — the insurgent territory of Florence, the physical grid of a new geography. We thought that in the social energies deployed by the new citizenships the capacity for transformation of the city could be discovered, and we wanted to represent the results of this capacity. In reality, we found that the universe of emerging subjectivities is not yet capable of producing organic, structured change within cities. The movements are the origins of punctual modifications, of micro-transformations, at times depositing only symptoms of presence, signs marking a track. Therefore we have surveyed only the phenomena which are identifiable, to borrow once again from Bourdieu, as the "effects of place" of the new collective actions (Bourdieu, 1993). Taking into account the many different ways of carving out public and social space, we have tried to record a wide field of the effects of place generated by new social practices on the Florentine territory. These include changes in use and function; re-signification of buildings and public places; creation or re-creation of collective places; the 'colouring' of urban space (from aerosol art to modifications in urban décor, to the sights and sounds of social life, markets, passing presences, etc.); the reconfiguration of urban times (the different patterns of night, the operating rhythms of the city); the occupation and reoccupation of built and non-built

spaces; self-managed restoration work on housing; participatory projects; alternative occupations of the airwaves and non-material space; self-managed forms of 'renewal'; and in some cases the creation of real 'social building sites' for the city's transformation (such as the Isolotto in former times, and nowadays the Piagge area), capable of clearly and significantly affecting the city's organization. A gauge of the effects of place by the new citizenships might be summarized as the extent to which urban space has become contested space, place in dispute; in particular this regards public spaces, squares, streets, open spaces, parks and gardens, marginal and connective areas, abandoned buildings and vacated areas. These are places where different options of use and expectations in the city are being contended: Homi Bhabha (Bhabha 1994, pp. 101-102) calls them "third space", interstitial, in-between spaces, within which differences are articulated and life is negotiated, and existence agreed upon and played out.

The choice of topic and the way this research has developed has influenced its form, forcing a change from our initial intentions. The contents of this often figurative research are created from surveys, from partial focus on particular issues, contacts with and explorations of the city's movements. The content is often made up of discourses concerning small episodes, micro-phenomena, and sometimes also by inquiries into more complex phenomena encountered during our exploration of the city and its social space. The materials presented here are made up of many things and are mixed among themselves: iconographic material (photos, maps, drawings, diagrams, interpretative sketches), oral stories, interviews, narratives.



From Resistance to 'Social Building Sites'

Potentially, the list of acts of resistance is endless – everything from foot-dragging to walking, from sit-ins to outings, from chaining oneself up in treetops to dancing the night away, from parodying to passing, from bombs to hoaxes, from graffiti tags on New York trains to stealing pens from employers, from no voting to releasing laboratory animals, from mugging yuppies to buying shares, from cheating to dropping out, from tattoos to body piercing, from pink air to pink triangles, from loud music to loud T-shirts, from memories to dreams – and the reason for this seems to be that definitions of resistance have become bound up with the ways that people are understood to have capacities to change things, through giving their own (resistant) meanings to things, through finding their own tactics for avoiding, taunting, attacking, undermining, enduring, hindering, mocking the everyday exercise of power.
(S. Pile, M. Keith, eds., *Geographies of Resistance*, Routledge, London/New York, 1997)

A few comments are necessary to explain the content and articulation of different sections of the research project. Two, often intertwined, types of narration can be found. A number of themes run through the text through the contributions and interviews, repeated and re-examined from different perspectives. More specific aspects of the research use more traditional means of reporting, in the form of small essays or critical reconstructions. Images and quotes from the interviews constitute a sort of narrative infrastructure, meant almost as moments of reality guiding the reader to different parts of the book. I will review the contents by overview, so to speak, pausing at those aspects that I personally find most interesting. An orderly, hierarchical classification of the actions and movements researched is impossible. In the 'other' city, not one single ideal or project comes from above. It would therefore be wrong to list urban movements and projects or rebellious actions in any order of importance or meaning. Many small actions repeated can have greater affect on urban space than a single large organized initiative. In reality, one of the most relevant features of the world we have explored is precisely this mix of significant things and their unforeseeable emergences in different places around the city – in a simple individual biography a politically organized squat or the transformation of a building or a neighbourhood.

The threatening profile of a city hostile to the expansion of new citizenships is in the background of all the urban explorations represented. We call it the gated city: the forbidden city, under surveillance, a city that rejects and withdraws in its attempt to harness and contain alternative urban energies. It is the city of enclosures, fences, barriers, gates, access codes, remote control of time and space, of privatisation and surveillance of public space. It is the city that discriminates and pushes to its edges, the city of ethnic cleansing on the main commercial streets, of social cleansing along the banks of the river Arno. It is an architecture of fear that consolidates itself as such, through spatial control devices both large and small: a paranoid, security-obsessed vision of urban life opposing the very substance and *raison d'être* of the idea of city.

The first dimension of the opposition to the city-fortress is therefore that of resistance. The "arts of resistance" are the weapons of the poor, a sort of "infrapolitics of the powerless" (Pile, Keith 1997, pp. 89-91). To hide, to dissimulate, not cooperate, to disobey, to feign ignorance, to live off one's wits: the arts of survival constitute a range of spontaneous and informal activities, needing no coordination nor planning, a form of "Brechtian or Schweikian class struggle" (Pile, Keith 1997, pp. 89-91). Even in the more mature, planned and transformative movements, resistance constitutes a foundation and a starting point. It is on the basis of resistance and rebellion, often individual and lonely, sometimes organized and intentional, that even high hopes of concretisation rest. Resistance to control and the positive organization of survival are deployed especially within public space, in the city's contested space par excellence.



We have examined these collective spatial challenges in a few sensitive places: the squares, the social hangouts of the inner city; the railway station and zones of commerce and transit; and the streets themselves. We have recorded the positive signs of these challenges, the micro-transformations and the processes of reclaiming collective space (multiethnic squares, coloured streets, etc.) In particular we have attempted to draw up map of the inhabitants who have come from far away, the 'foreigners' and migrants.

To live and keep on trying to live by 'insurgent living practices', paraphrasing the expression by Sandercock which we began with, means in this instance to be forced at the same time to resist and to change the city. Life isn't guaranteed to this category of unwanted citizens, their existence hasn't quietly crystallized in houses around the city. For migrants, continuing life is still a goal, not the natural starting point, and is a project in and of itself. To live means to secure a shelter, to furnish a collective space for survival, to ensure the satisfaction of basic needs, to adapt the structures of consumption and commerce, to seize the possibility for movement and communication, to tackle the problems of employment and training, to affirm the right to a family and children, to face the problems of leisure, to have not only bread but also roses. It is as a consequence of this gradual process by which the lives of migrants take root that the effects of place accumulate and the city is reshaped, transformed, coloured.

The lives of migrants are never linear or commonplace. Complex and contradictory biographies: resistance and capacity to create life projects, behaviour patterns considered unorthodox and desire for normality, individualism and solidarity. What comes out is, at the same time, discomfort and adaptability emerge, cunning and entrepreneurship, along with an appreciable cultural level, with knowledge of other cultures and of other languages far superior to that of most 'ordinary' citizens. In some cases, the life-stories cross a sort of wild zone, the border territory of the city, placed on the edge, and sometimes beyond it, of regulations and laws: third space, wild zone, again, oblique spaces, hybrid, ambiguous, such as queer spaces, the 'wrong' spaces of free sexual practices. New geographies of desire and bodily freedom of the body are formed, often balanced on the threshold between self-expression and self-exploitation.

An important part of our research is dedicated to the geography of occupied sites in the city, of real-estate liberated by groups of homeless citizens, of vacant or abandoned factories and areas that have become complex places of the alternative, emergent city. I would like to underline here the open, unforeseeable, unplanned character of these experiences, to the point of being unpolitical in the sense I explained earlier. I think this is important, for instance, in the via Aldini squat, given the complex character of the experience: the hopes, the internal relations, the meeting of different lives and cultures, the mixing of ages and expectations, the appreciation of collective feeling and work albeit amid many difficulties and contradictions. Florence's social centres are very different from one another both in the way they are conceived and in the way the meaning of their experience is lived as they are in many other Italian cities; here, however, they are more radically hostile to the power structure of the existing city in the material, daily, existential content of the occupations. The insurgent aspect is, therefore, in "Geddesian": the insurgency lies in the collective life of that moment, the energy unleashed, the direct experience of change.



A Partial and Plural Research

The images and the stories of our research were born of compelling, albeit partial investigations. Our choice of tools depended on the moment, perhaps causing some confusion and risk of approximation: intense, participatory interviews, more dense than the average question-answer format, highlighting some aspects (they were dialogue-interviews and thus with a high degree of subjective interaction-interpretation); 'critical reconstruction of cases' conducted from deep down; sometimes participatory observation in the traditional sense, complicated by a high degree of personal involvement, as in the case of urban explorations; action research (as in the case of the neighbourhood lab at the Piagge, still in progress), where the researchers actively worked with the projects and their implementation. In many cases, the researchers were part of the situations described, or they have become so. At times, parts of the report assume a form of self-description. The point of view expressed is never neutral; rather it is invariably influenced by a relationship with the subjects of the research. Many developments arose out of our research from unforeseeable outcomes of interaction with the subjects, as is demonstrated in many of the interviews. The dialogue-interviews have been re-worked and double-checked with the interviewees, in a mutual, circular process. The group of the researchers itself constitutes an example of the multiplicity of perspectives and horizons of an insurgent, alternative city. The researchers involved hold diverse opinions, some have a point of view coming from within the movements, almost conspiratorial; others have a more detached, not fully convinced point of view. The materials deriving from this difficult weaving of sensibilities and positions are therefore differentiated amongst themselves, even contradictory at times, but we preferred this sort of presentation to a reduction or amalgamation of the process of work. It seems to us that the articulation of the many voices and languages within the project group is itself a representation of the plurality of voices, attitudes and hopes coming from the part of the city that we have tried to study and understand.

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