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## Urban Transgression Beyond the Geography of Transgressive Spaces

*Frigidity is mostly the consequence of social factors [...] it may originate from fears of various kinds, from everything that represents the price of civilisation [...] It is the typical synonym of a sclerotic culture, inflexibility in the unyielding forms of civilisation, of a culture that is nearing its end.*

(Sandor Márai, *Divorzio a Buda*, 1935, Adelphi 2002)

### Is Florence a Frigid City?

In the light of the hospitality that a large part of the city gave to the participants in the European Social Forum (ESF) in November 2002, such a brutal definition would seem to be unjust. Indeed, in certain ways the ESF was a turning point for the city, demonstrating the continuity that exists between today's city and the traditions of hospitality (both institutional and informal) that have characterised its social fabric in the past. And the importance cannot be denied of the Community of Isolotto, the research foundation named for the architect Michelucci, ARCI, and the FIOM-CGIL trade-union having produced and distributed the bilingual book, "Florence: Traces of Another History" to all participants at the Forum, for in this book there are to be found the memory of several 'hospitable places' in the city bearing the clearest traces of a Florence open, progressive and capable of integrating differences within the stratifications of its urban space. All of this does not prevent Florence, in its daily life, from also showing another face: the face of a city afraid of being assaulted, a city that puts a cautious distance between itself and the differences that impinge on it. As one so-called non-European guest-resident remarked during the course of a survey that enriches with real-life experiences a study carried out by researchers from the Department of City Planning of the University of Florence in the text "Insurgent City":





*In some ways each of us (foreigners) is transgressive. Perhaps because we are coloured in a city made up of grey and brown stone, or because we stay on in the city while foreigners are assumed to be simply passing through here. Their passing is so rapid that not even public toilets have been provided...*

It is true - in Florence, the foreigner is often interpreted as a transgressive presence. No scientific investigation is necessary in order to affirm this: one needs only to live in the city as a resident in order to experience it personally on a day-to-day basis. For this reason, perhaps, the foreigner is regarded with a certain detachment, even by those who make their living from foreigners.

This is true above all for the so-called non-Europeans. Above all, but not only. Even many of the students in the Socrates programme end up feeling rejected by the place that they had dreamed of for such a long time. And so they often meet together, at their parties at language schools or American universities, in their bars, in their discos, in their Irish pubs or in their Brazilian cafés. Their separate spaces perpetuate the tradition of the English-speaking communities of the last century: 'a world apart'. Only that today, this 'parallel circuit' also has a 'virtual anchor': [www.studentville.it](http://www.studentville.it), the English-speaking site for young foreigners who become temporary Florentines. It provides information for those who want to participate in the city's life, even without being fully integrated into its human fabric. Luckily, not all of Florence rejects them, but at times the rejection encountered is sufficient to create a rupture.

Non-Europeans are more likely to be kept at arms-length. This is because their everyday life may seem transgressive when it is interpreted as a 'contamination' of the purity of traditions or of consolidated spaces. This is not necessarily a racist attitude. It is a distance which the ancient city places between itself and its new inhabitants.

For the most part, this type of transgression is involuntary, but it cannot be denied. It arises above all from the differences that are noted in the use of public spaces. For example, the difference seen in the by-now familiar figures around Piazza della Repubblica, who attract groups of people that obstruct traffic from the surrounding streets. They are mostly street artists, who bring back a bit of the chaos that was familiar to this area before the large popular market in the severe 19th-century square was demolished. They are the 4 'graffiti artists' and spray painters (2 Romanians, one Egyptian, and one Spaniard), the Iranian Charlie Chaplin, the Serbian and Polish mimes, the Peruvian and Slavic orchestras, the Chinese weavers of paper grasshoppers and their colleagues who 'embroider' the names of passers-by translated into oriental languages. Currently, the Municipal Council - which has always been opposed to improvised, multi-functional spaces - would like to move them away from there, to exile them to a 'specialised' space, perhaps far from the town centre, such as Piazzale

Michelangelo. It would not be the first time; this has already happened for the non-European street vendors ....

Equally transgressive is the group of South-American families who meet and dance on summer evenings in the same Piazza della Repubblica, to the music provided by the little orchestra of the Café Paskozski. Without paying, because the street belongs to everyone - at least up until now.

Equally transgressive are the groups of young South Americans who, with a car radio and four loud-speakers, manage to carve 'squares to meet' out of the parking-lots where streets widen, which all true Florentines would be ashamed to call 'squares'.

Transgressive are the Albanians who build their cardboard houses under the bridges and those who sunbathe in groups, stretched out on old boxes in the Station Square, or in the garden in Viale Strozzi - especially on days when the 'high society' of the Pitti Immagine trade fairs are close-by.

Transgressive are the non-European women of the 'Nosotras' Association who, with the 'Paladar' multi-ethnic catering centre, have breached the implicit regulations of the world of 'culinary purity' and single-specialisation, preferring to mix the dishes of many different countries together into an original culinary 'melting pot'.

Transgressive are the Peruvians of the village of Settignano or the Filipinos of the Church of San Barnaba near the San Lorenzo market, because their religious processions continue to wind through a city where the great Easter religious celebration has by now become a mere tourist attraction. The same is true for the informal football games of the Singhalese in Piazza Indipendenza. By now, the squares considered the 'jewels of Florence' are only used officially for sport events like the 'football in costume' matches that have become a mere tourist attraction. The piazza where they take place, Santa Croce, is devastated by ghastly metal bleachers that are also utilized for tens of other performances, with the result that residents are deprived of the main neighbourhood square all summer long.

Transgressive are the Senegalese along the *lungarni* [streets along the banks of the Arno River, *ed. note*] who, as a protest and to protect themselves - after two years of patiently waiting for a municipal authorisation that has never arrived - have begun to open up large colourful umbrellas with which to protect their legally-authorized merchandise from the sun and rain. Only by forming themselves into a cooperative have they finally nailed the Municipality of Florence to its responsibility to build a small multi-ethnic market, a promise that has been under discussion since 1995.

And also transgressive are the Chinese when they put their fish out to dry on the fences between the houses of San Donnino, or when they cook their fried specialities and are accused of making the air in the district almost impossible to breathe. Better to leave the monopoly on contaminating the air with the smell of fried food to MacDonald's, as the people living around the MacDonald's in Via Cavour know all too well...

Often, however, the transgression that is perpetrated in the urban spaces becomes voluntary, because it is seeking attention, it is trying to remind distracted passers-by of something. It wants to re-introduce the 'outside world' into the city, so that its culture and its tradition of hospitality remain alive and are not transformed simply into a 'Renaissance Disneyland'. Thus, the Eritrean community that passes silently through the historic centre to remind us about the war with Ethiopia is transgressive; or the Palestinians who, under the 'Peace Tent', try to prevent us from becoming hardened to the tragedy of the Middle East. Transgressive is the Somali community that camps out in tents in Piazza Duomo to remind us of the drama of the failure to recognise the need for reuniting families.

Transgressive are the 200 Romanies who – guided by their association, 'Amalipè Romano' – stop traffic in front of the Prefecture and – sitting on the ground – celebrate a prayer vigil for a child who has died in a fire at the concentration camp for gypsies called 'Il Poderaccio'.

And transgressive are the 50 non-European citizens of the 'Housing Movement', who not only squat under-utilised buildings (and – if left to their own devices – try to put self-reclamation into practice), but in the middle of August 2002 had the courage to organise a sit-in in front of the Spanish Consulate out of solidarity with the 400 Algerians who had been violently deported from the Iberian peninsula.

Equally transgressive are the non-European citizens of the Street Vendors Union, because they 'usurp' the name of a formal structure for their informal union, which is fighting for the free circulation of merchandise on the street.

Transgressive is the Islamic community which voluntarily welcomes Florentines to its mosque-garage in Via Ghibellina, and one day hung up a sign that said: *For solidarity with the Somali community, from now on Friday prayers will be held in the Tent in Piazza Duomo. All the faithful are asked to join us there.*

The Senegalese community is also transgressive, and not just because it holds demonstrations in Piazza Signoria or hunger strikes in Piazza Duomo, where it exhibits placards in four languages as a 'resource' for explaining its problems to the numerous passing tourists. But also because it

remains vivacious and vital, even if it is very small, while it has become the most Florentine of non-European communities – to the point of having recently been the promoters one of the few in-depth policies to have emerged from the annals of the city's local government.

Strange: indeed, it is usually the less lively communities that are the most 'Florentinised' ones. Like the Iranians who – in order to celebrate their New Year – no longer take to the streets as they did 30 years ago, but now rent the halls of the Hotel Sheraton alongside the A1 Motorway. Thirty years ago, they were the ones who made the San Lorenzo market a place of welcome and belonging for non-Florentines.

As a well-educated representative of an African community observed synthetically one day:

*Your city is a little like Benozzo Bozzoli's Chapel of the Magi: it represents an inter-religious council, but the faces of the guests who arrive from far away are those of the Medici family. Already then, perhaps, guests were more welcome when they took on the faces and customs of the Florentines....*

But are the manifestations of diversity really transgressive in regard to the city spaces that they occupy? Perhaps not really, since many of them succeed in retrieving the memory of the historically-consolidated – and recently lost – significance of various of the city's public spaces. Or perhaps they are transgressive precisely because of this: because they place consolidated patterns of use in doubt, and restore historical depth to the significance of the city's public spaces.

Were the Senegalese transgressive when they threatened to appeal to all the Muslims and black people in the world to boycott the American film 'Hannibal II,' which had 'purged' them from several scenes filmed at the Ponte Vecchio after pressure brought to bear by the local Jewellers Association? Perhaps not. They were only reminding Florence that the Ponte Vecchio once used to house businesses that were more similar to pedlary than to the goldsmith's art, and that there is no sense in wanting to preserve a postcard image of the city that does not correspond to reality. Thus, director Ridley Scott was immediately obliged to re-integrate them in another scene in the film. But perhaps he did so only because they had touched the sensitive spot of an economic boycott.

Are the gypsies transgressive in their annual street celebration of the 'Festa of Romany Pride', when they dance in the street and throw garlands of flowers into the river? After all, in celebrating their diversity, they remind us that we have a river that once 'housed' activities that were a vital part of the urban space, while today it seems almost 'wasted'.

Did the family-members of peaceful Chinese families use the city's spaces in transgressive manner when in '95 they staged a protest at the Trespiano cemetery because they feared that their funeral customs were not being respected? Certainly not, because the 'final' spaces – those dedicated to 'rites of passage' – have always been delegated to representing collective memories and different traditions, 'condensing' the identities of every religious or ethnic group into a visible, permanent form.

Were the Somalis transgressive when, out of protest, they set up their tents and prayed to Allah in an improvised mosque in Piazza Duomo? Perhaps not: even the Bishop who lived over their heads praised them and supported their battle by offering them connections to the power and water systems. After all, the controversy over their prolonged presence stimulated Florentine journalists to reconstruct the history of the square and its statuary, in discovering that this square had played a secular and inter-religious role ever since the late Middle Ages ....

Was the Senegalese community being transgressive when it held its night-time assemblies under the Porcellino Market in order to attract attention to how small its official premises were? After all, it rediscovered the important role that the Florentine markets (first of all, the Straw Market, and then San Lorenzo) played in the 'integration of foreigners' during the past century.

And the same goes for the groups of Somalis and Albanians who meet outdoors in the evening in Piazza Santa Maria Novella, thus transforming it into the real 'multi-ethnic heart' of Florence, which all public demonstrations having as their theme the integration of foreigners in the city leave from. Do they contribute to the square's 'loss of identity' – as the flyer of a municipal convention on the restoration of the *parvis* in front of the Church put it – or do they, on the contrary, rediscover its ancient significance as a square that has always been used for multi-cultural encounters, as an ancient marble plaque on the façade of the Hotel Minerva recalls?

It may seem paradoxical, but it is perhaps the gypsies, i.e. the nomads, who are the most transgressive among Florence's new inhabitants: the ones who protest because they want to stay here, while they are still treated as 'people of passage'; the ones who built the experimental village of Guarlone, where they can remain close to their own customs and ways; the ones who – in the working-class district of Le Piagge, in the far outskirts of the city – have 'dared' to design the project of a small camp for families, which they mean to construct themselves. Their transgression – after 15 years spent in the dismantled shacks on the river bank – was to want to stop and live in the city which by then they felt a part of. Many of them have been forced to leave. And the 'District Laboratory' for the recovery of the working-class settlement of Le Piagge – which had dared to re-propose their construction project – was substantially scuppered by the authoritarian planning board of the local administration. After all, as an Albanian mason, who has lived and owned his own business in Florence for more than 10 years, observed:

*Today, to be politically correct, everyone uses the term 'migrants'. [But this] overemphasises the idea of passage, of something temporary, while many immigrants come here to stay [...]. In many places, we foreigners are given the right to pass through but not to stay [...]. If you look at the advertisements, there are entire buses that publicise telephone cards to call 'home' in far-away countries. There are ads in many languages [...]. This is intelligent, because immigrants are the main passengers on buses. [...] Work is available; as they say, flexible work, for people who fit in, who stay on for two or three years and then leave. But there is no housing. Because houses mean staying on. And it is a cause of fear to think that foreigners come, stay on, live in a different way, pray in a different way, have their own celebrations, with their own music [...]. It would be easier to have all tourists or American students, as there are in Florence: they come, they spend money, they leave, and not even shop-keepers have to be nice to them. Two people who stay on (an Italian and a non-European) cannot ignore each other; sooner or later they need to talk to each other. And if you are in contact with someone and talk to them, then you change. Both of us change. (sic)*



## A Counter-reading of the Traditional 'Transgressive Spaces'

In interpreting transgression within this perspective, we also change our way of regarding those spaces which are traditionally indicated as 'transgressive' because they house activities that are legally out-of-bounds, or at any rate go beyond what current moral codes accept as 'normal' in spaces open to the public.

Can we say, then, that these spaces show a higher degree of transgression than is traditionally recognised for the activities carried out there? Perhaps. And this is due to the fact that these activities interfere with the system of empty urban spaces through informal processes of appropriation and privatisation which 'mark' the territory and create 'zones of influence' superimposed on the traditional use of open spaces. New informal 'planning' links are 'de facto' occupying places that by right belong to the collectivity, at times transforming the language of prevarication and violence into 'internal regulations' that must be respected by everyone within the 'separate worlds' that created them.

These 'additional links' often colonise the spaces variably following a time differential. In fact, their dominion comes into effect above all in the 'kingdom of the night'. The 'spatial divisions' are therefore not visible to the naked eye, but can often be sensed intuitively, inferred from external clues - above all, by the change in the people who can be found there. It is as if a more refined form of transgression, deriving from the 'distorted' ways of using open spaces, were superimposed on a more 'banal' and almost 'standardised' one (carrying out an activity that would not be tolerated in the light of day).

The drug-traffic subculture in Florence is an example of this 'double transgression' in that it deals in illegal goods but also because, if we consider it from a bird's eye-view as a network that exploits public spaces, it is marked by a strong 'territorialisation' tending to superimpose its foreign subdivisions onto the city's physical spaces. This foreign geography is mapped out according to a logic that follows the contiguity of the native countries of the drug-pushers and to hierarchies in some cases already existing in those countries, or else is 'inherited' from former dealers who have chosen or have been obliged to abandon the Florentine 'market'.

However, not all of the city's space seems to be 'compartmentalised' with the same degree of rigidity. Above all for soft drugs there are areas with more 'fluid' margins, places whose availability is not certain from one year to the next, where it is not possible to know how long one will be able to work there undisturbed. In the past, these places left room, if not actually for free enterprise, at least for more 'extemporaneous' initiatives.

Obviously, the 'geographies' to which these illegal practices anchor themselves are fluid, as they have to adapt to changes in 'external' conditions. But these sudden variations in the 'surrounding conditions' are perceived more quickly by some than by others. And so, the image of certain places can remain fixed in strange ways. As an example, police living in the former Hotel Magnifico at Peretola recently captured two Albanian delinquents who had taken refuge there after being pursued. The Albanians still had in mind the image of the hotel as a refuge for clandestine persons and drug-dealers, which it very often was up to the year before, during the long period when the building works that turned it into lodgings for police functionaries were suspended.

In contrast, the unauthorised street vendors and 'wind-screen washers' who wait at the city's traffic lights do not have 'binding networks' for the assignment and management of day-time work on the street. The most plausible explanation, therefore, for the fact that the same persons tend to work at a given traffic light is the existence of a sort of 'right of primogeniture' ('first come, first served'). This margin of autonomy (and, therefore, of disorganisation) has both good and bad points. For example, it does not provide for mechanisms of 'compensation' in case something goes wrong (such as streets being closed to traffic for public works or other reasons, traffic lights being replaced by roundabouts, etc.), and the 'displaced' workers, left without a pitch, have to find their own alternatives. However, mechanisms of 'inheritance' and 'transfer' of the spaces (either free of charge or at a price) exist in the form of 'territory ceding'.

It is interesting that with the passing of time several informal categories of workers have undergone a sort of 'job upgrading' that has often involved entire communities, which have gradually disappeared from the street to move on to other occupations - thanks to informal word-of-mouth networks and direct 'calls'.

For example, the Poles who presided over the traffic lights as windscreen washers at the beginning of the 1990s have completely disappeared from their posts. They have been replaced mainly by North Africans and Roma. However, the term 'Pole' as a synonym for 'windscreen washer' has remained in common use.

Lastly, some fleeting observations should be dedicated to the night-time activities linked to the sex trade in Florence's public spaces. Florence lived for over 20 years with the fear of the 'monster', a homicidal maniac who killed several couples of lovers in isolated spots in the surrounding countryside. This threat caused a particular evolution in the sexual customs of Florentines, in their search for the safety and protection that seemed guaranteed by staying in groups, so as not to feel isolated and vulnerable.

Thus, along with the preferred choice of closed spaces (private houses, hotels, the first 'swappers homes'), the phenomenon of semi-collective exploitation of secluded open spaces has arisen. Even today, therefore, there are peripheral or badly-lighted places (the open spaces along the *viale dei Colli* or the narrow street below the Church of San Miniato, for example) where at night fixed or casual couples withdraw in cars parked one next to the other, blanking off the windows with newspapers. This semi-collective use – good-humouredly tolerated even by the police – represents a typically – though not exclusively – Florentine 'transgression' of the rule of complete isolation that are in force elsewhere. It often carries with it 'complementary' uses of these semi-protected areas: condom-sellers and groups of local adolescents who play practical jokes at the expense of the couples.

A more articulated network of spaces closer to the city centre describes the 'queer geographies', which in Florence are characterised by 'personalised exploitation' of the territory (freer and more variegated for gay males, more secluded and stable for lesbian groups). Despite the fact that the 'self-made' maps and guides compiled by the homosexual communities indicate the spots where meeting places (bars, discos, shops, theatres, saunas, squares or parks) are to be found, the procedures that determine how these places are frequented tend to expand beyond these 'anchors', creating 'fluid', 'flexible' geographies of use open to sudden change. This makes it possible to use – temporarily or permanently – 'alternative' spaces if the traditional ones become dangerous or inaccessible.

As in other urban realities, in Florence the network of 'queer' spaces is well-articulated and differentiated. It corresponds to a microcosm of differences that are not limited to the groups operating at the most 'visible' level, which offer hospitality and engage in political activities to advance demands and provide services. Various geographies of

non-communicating homosexual aggregation seem to exist, parallel and autonomous worlds that tend to come together almost by chance only on the occasion of highly important political or social happenings. Or – in contrast – on light-hearted, festive or 'trendy' occasions, often having to do with the world of fashion or with certain 'cult' theatres like the Comunale [Florence's concert and opera hall, *ed. note*] the Limonaia, the Rifredi).

In recent years, the capacity for 'wider involvement' of initiatives at first meant the rapid increase in participation by the homosexual community in initiatives created around 'themes' in spaces generally frequented by heterosexuals. With an ironic approach to '*hetero-compatibility*', gay groups have often rigorously selected only these improvised initiatives, often rejecting others aimed towards a gay clientele only to take advantage of its spending power. In this, the gay community adopts '*hetero rules*', i.e., using the various 'venues' casually, without no care for the needs of the users, such as *relaxation, spontaneity of use and hospitality*. An interesting feature of the queer geographies is, moreover, their extreme sensitivity, vulnerability and instability, which at times result in individuals moving with unexpected rapidity from one territorial 'anchorage' to another. This happens on the basis of a 'geography of glances' made up of sensations and changes of mood linked to an almost 'hypersensitive' perception of how genuine are the welcome and good-feelings offered to gay/lesbian groups in the places they frequent.

More steadily 'anchored' to the territory, instead, is the network of hidden places for nocturnal homosexual encounters, which follow a clear logic of localisation and 'visible invisibility' (the Cascine Park, the large square at the stadium, several lay-bys along the motorway). They often function as centres for contact with individuals (such as many non-European gays) who do not participate in the spaces of 'visible social relations' in Florence. Differently from elsewhere, in Florence the geographies of queer encounters do not tend to take possession of unused border territories (the far outskirts, abandoned areas, etc.). At most, they use 'weakly structured' places that have multiple uses during the course of the day. In this sense, their degree of 'transgression' does not go much beyond the transgressive activity to which the encounter may possibly give rise, since the 'new' uses to which the public space is put are not fixed or exclusive.

The same is true for the activities of male prostitution, although on the whole prostitution tends to superimpose on urban spaces 'heavy' territorial divisions which affect networks of both public and private spaces. The fact is that in Florence there seem to exist 'different degrees of freedom', according to who the subjects are that offer themselves or are offered to the clientele, and to their sex .

Territorial sub-divisions in the form of 'lots' ('virtual' pieces of the territory rigidly respected for those who are 'inside the milieu') are valid above all for female prostitution, except for the so-called 'old ladies' in the historic centre. This rigid apportionment is instrumental for the collection of the 'tolls', which are in proportion to the desirability and centrality of the beat, and as the basis for whatever change and territorial reorganisation are made necessary by increasing danger or urban 'pressure' on the territory. Thus, if the unwanted disappearance of a place from the 'map of exchange' forces female sex workers to move from one zone to another, they can identify the new collectors and be inserted within a network of renewed relations of 'price-controlled competition' with other colleagues. The minute organisation of the territory into zones of influence generates a saving mechanism of 'compensation' during the 'hotter' periods of attention from the police or politicians, taking advantage of the substantial lack of interest shown by official programmes to eliminate prostitution in closed spaces, which is in fact the largest and most remunerative slice of the Florentine 'business'.

'Insurgent' phenomena are often connected with the 'Slavic' prostitutes, who are often 'slaves' dragged onto the streets and 'managed' like objects by pyramidal joint ventures that collaborate in the administration of the territorial 'spaces' and the 'services' provided within them). This is in contrast with the indigenous, prevalently female, management that characterises much of the prostitution of African origin (Nigeria or Cameroon), which even opens up prospects for passing from 'employee' to 'self-employed' work. It is no coincidence, therefore, that precisely among the Nigerian night-time workers it has recently been possible to witness the development of interesting, albeit corporative, forms of united action, or even rare events like an informal 'strike' against the excessive number of requests for unprotected sex. This was proclaimed in 1995 in the streets of Calenzano, where most low-cost prostitution is found, having been expelled from the gentrified city-centre. Here

preference is now given to prostitution in flats or in the high-powered cars of male and female night-workers who crowd the ring roads from the Fortezza da Basso to Piazza Beccaria every evening. In reality, nobody has as yet succeeded in verifying whether the strike did in fact take place. In any case, the vast echo of the initiative in the local papers attained its purpose - the message reached many potential clients.

Today another interesting phenomenon is taking place within small evangelical religious communities founded and supported thanks to the commitment of groups of Central-African female night-workers. As described in the words of a Nigerian cultural intermediary employed in programmes aimed at the rehabilitation of ex-prostitutes set up by the Co-operative CAT: is a 'reaction insurgent practice', sorting out from a distorted and negative use of the territory:

*There is a reciprocal utility between the pastor and the congregation, since these women survive within their work and keep their balance thanks to their faith and the idea of pardon. This has determined strange mechanisms that arise precisely in a field like the Church, which is in general directed from on high and works through commands that are, or at least pretend to be, divinely inspired, to which the faithful conform. Here, no. It is as though the women who follow these sects had elaborated their philosophy from below. It is as though they said, forcefully, "you'll be in trouble, priest, if you do not keep silent or if you contradict us. Don't talk to us about sin, but only about pardon. Just pray for us and for our souls; we will manage our lives by ourselves." This is interesting, because they change the characteristics of how faith is approached, and how ecclesiastical hierarchies are constructed.*

Is it possible to think that reactions like these represent 'acts of rebellion', a sort of constructive transgression in contrast with phenomena in which 'transgression' against socially-accepted rules for the organisation of activities in the city's territory can be seen as distorted, unjust, excluding and therefore, in the end, negative?