

FLORENCE: MY KIND OF TOWN
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In Michael Powell's masterpiece "A Matter of Life and Death" heaven is filmed in black and white and life is in Technicolor. Florence is heaven in colour. Unlike Lucca, where reality appears in Sepia, everything still and petrified, a monochrome necropolis stopped and damned Florence is sprawling, stretched out lazily like a lounging tabby cat. Past and present ways of life are merged with ancient and modern buildings in Florence. People appear as the measure of just what they survey. Beyond the Arno green hills mark a natural limit to human audacity. The vulnerable nature of a city and the games that endure to keep it there appear clearly. Returning is like waking from a daydream to discover once again, "Ah, so this is what life should be like".

Mediaeval mess mostly submerges the Roman grid. Bits of this are uncoiled, inverted and laid out in a string of ideal spaces fringed by classical types. In Brunelleschi's plan for the city, the basis of which was designed and built in a fifteen-year period of monumental organizational effort and determined vision, the modern art of urbanism and the profession of architecture were reinvented. The introverted knot of the cloistered scholastic world was sprung open and human beings' daily life situated in beautifully proportioned fragments of perfect geometrical figures. Statues and shoppers and market traders co-exist within and around the architecture. Loggias, colonnades, gateways, niches, porticoes, arches, steps and domes constitute the basic ingredients of architecture just as fruit and vegetables or verbs and nouns enable cooking and poetry. The irregular mediaeval deformations of the Roman City were not obliterated and collisions remain visible. The combination of this gregarious admixture of asymmetry and balance is like a wonderful conversation that you overhear. It is delightful to be able to understand parts of it, and because it appears unfinished it seems to invite you in to it too. Brunelleschi, Alberti and Michaelangelo represent the three cardinal archetypes of the architect as builder, scholar and artist. The combination of each in the other and their historical development makes Florence a heuristic place where education occurs naturally as you piece together the attributes of each that attract you.

Beyond the historic centre a new Eurostar terminal is amending the 19th century infrastructure. The leftover spaces, created by the decline of the industrial economy, offer fresh opportunities for contemporary architecture. The economic restriction on the expansion of the periphery now provides the opportunity for what Vittorio Gregotti calls 'the project of modification'. Just as Brunelleschi revived the Roman tradition of city planning, the task today is to relate the left over remnants of modernity to the suburbs and to unite both graciously with the old centre. A new type of anti-zoning urbanism is possible that does not neglect the domestic realm and that does not savage the countryside whilst keeping the centre preserved in aspic. . There is already evidence of urbanism working from the periphery inwards. A decade ago Piazza Santo Spirito at night was the haunt of heroin abusers and street drinkers. In 1980 the Commune held a street party and artists and local people combined to project their fantasies onto the façade of Brunelleschi's church. The transformation of political resistance into artistic vision and architectural action has gone somewhat towards civilizing the centre of Italian cities suffering the effects of the collapse of manufacturing and suburban sprawl. Peter Robb writes in *Midnight in Sicily* of the complicity of big business *Così Nostra*, the Christian Democratic party of government, and a whole generation of architects. Counter to this is a grass roots anarchistic resistance. This unlikely coalition of academics, grandmothers, whores and bakers is evident in the magical delights of the *Enoteca*, small wine shops and restaurants filled with local people and run by likeminded souls, artists, ex-students and musicians. The power of the neighbourhood above and beyond nationalistic and partisan political extremism offers a delicious promise of sustainable development. The mysteries of country cooking and fine wine are salvaged from the scandals of Parmalat and governmental disgrace, suggesting that the tourist industry is not the only way to resuscitate decrepit inner city quarters. Ideology is transformed into pleasure.

Florence is the birthplace of Humanism of course, and innovation and tradition, history and myth, fashion and eccentricity, pragmatism and stubbornness seem to work so well together there that they appear as reconcilable human attributes. The qualities of exuberant lightheartedness, romantic decay, religious piety and discrete display combine to create a sense of cheerful gravity that enables the locals to love Florence carelessly. Making you wonder if this is how you could be too.