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Traces of Home

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Last year, a group of migrating bees moved into the shed at the rear of my Park Slope, Brooklyn, brownstone and established a residential enclave next to an exhaust vent. Having chosen what seemed to be an inhospitable location, they then spent a considerable amount of time and effort erecting a fascinating, many chambered labyrinth, which they clad in a Joseph's coat of multi-hued lint from a dryer.

In many ways, human migrants are like those backyard apian Brooklynites. Both often settle in places that seem (to outside observers) to be undesirable. Humans and bees also carry ideas for designing their home environments from places where they lived in the past and adapt them to the resources and opportunities in new locales. Unlike bees, however, who carry their blueprints in their genes, people carry community plans in their minds. These human designs are more easily modified because they are learned inside a myriad of other, related symbolic environments.

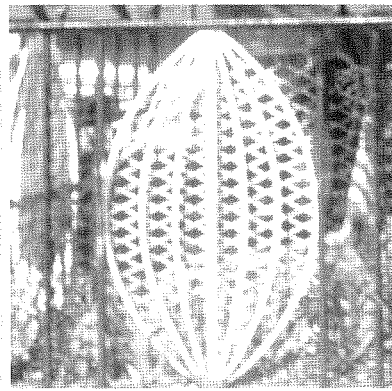
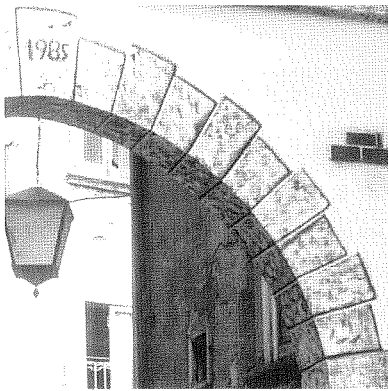
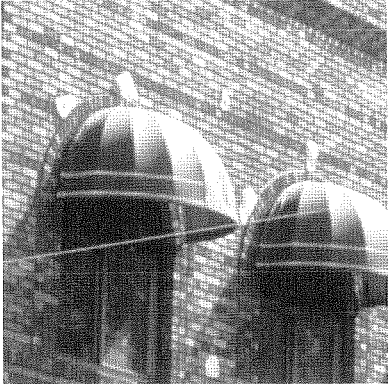
Theoretically, if immigrants could, they would replicate the highly valued places and spaces from which they came.¹ For example, Genoa, Wis., was founded in the 1860s by a group of alpine Italian immigrants who selected the site because the landscape

Background: Villa Firiuli, Torrington, CT.

Inset photos from Carroll Gardens,

Brooklyn, and Potenza, Italy.

Photos by Jerome Krase, unless otherwise indicated.





Sidewalk space in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, adapted for the gathering of family and friends.

resembled that of their Piedmont home. There, as one observer noted in 1911,

*The first building that catches the eye as one climbs the rocky street from the river is the Catholic chapel, built of grey quarried stone; somewhat resembling a little Swiss chalet. The chapel was built in 1863 by eight newly settled Italian families, who quarried, hauled, shaped, laid the stone, and constructed the church with their own hands.*²

In most cases, however, Italian immigrants merely created what some call ethnic neighborhoods in which examples of ethnic vernacular architecture can be found.

In American social discourse, the term “ethnic” ordinarily describes the millions of poor and working-class immigrants who streamed into the U.S. between 1880 and 1920 and their descendants. Most of these groups, such as Eastern European Jews, Slavs, and southern Italians, established themselves in already built-up urban places, where they lacked the power to alter their environments radically, and adopted the environmental values of the dominant society as they became assimilated or Americanized. Consequently, only limited traces of traditional approaches to the design

and use of buildings and space can be found in the new landscapes and places the immigrants created — and how groups use the environments they come to occupy is often more relevant than how they create new ones.

Recently I came across a newspaper article that is an ethno-architectural enigma.³ It seems that the home of John DiMichiel in Torrington, Conn., has been added to the National Register of Historic Places. The Italian Renaissance structure, which DiMichiel named “Villa Friuli” after his native region in northern Italy, is described as “preserving a style of architecture reminiscent of the city’s Italian roots.” Actually, Torrington’s Italian roots are better represented in the less impressive residential, commercial, and industrial buildings in the surrounding Italian neighborhood; they are less venerated, perhaps, but more relevant to the lives of Torrington’s Italian Americans.

Most Americans of Italian descent have their roots in the villages and neighborhoods of middle Italy, southern Italy, and Sicily. These are the main geographical sources of Italian-American neighborhood traditions, some of which have been adapted and others which have been left behind

because of different social and physical conditions here.

Architectural and other physical artifacts of ethnicity are most easily seen when they successfully clash with those of the dominant society. As Vincent Scully has argued, American community structure tends toward unity, homogeneity, a sense of openness, impatience with communal constraints and a preference for change. Although the American residential norm is “nomadic,” at the same time it demonstrates “the self-righteousness of American Puritanism, which must see alternatives in terms of black or white.”⁴ Even the most casual observer would agree that such a description could never be made of an urban Italian-American neighborhood or their southern Italian counterparts. To folklorist Philip F. Notariani, the Italian-American setting is best characterized as random, if not illogical.⁵

After many years of studying and photographing Italian neighborhoods in the U.S. and Italy, I believe I have isolated some visual traces of Italian American community culture. I am speaking not merely of aesthetics, such as those expressed in folk art and crafts, but of practices derived from the historical experiences of the vast majority of Italian peasants. It should be noted that these traces are artificially isolated here for the purpose of discussion. In reality most are so intertwined as to be inseparable.

Italian communities endorse the supremacy of private (family) over public (nonfamily) values and interests in regard to territory and activities related to local spaces. The access to and freedom of movement through urban spaces that most Americans take for granted is simply not available in southern Italian towns, where homes are really walled compounds. Minimal area in front of

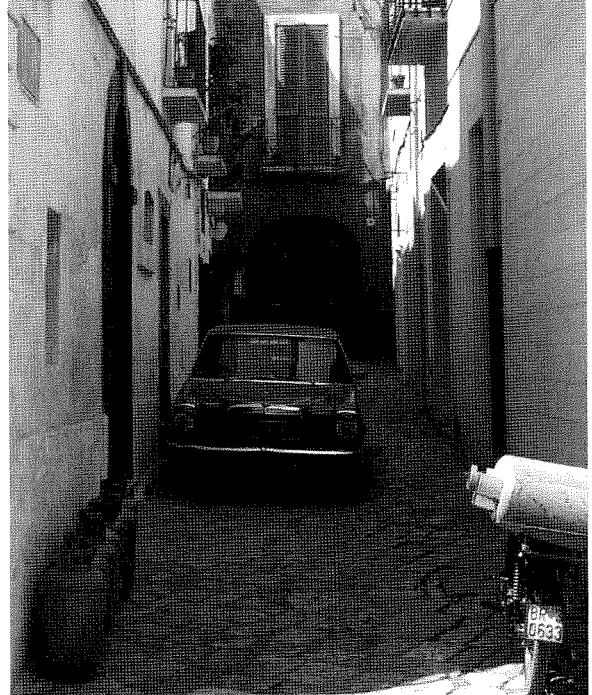
private property is allocated for the convenience of passersby. Also, while private property in Italy is well cared for, public property is seen by most citizens as solely the concern of government, as reflected in the generally poor condition of public spaces I have observed in three trips to Italy.⁶

In Italian America, the public right of way in front of dwellings is regarded by the owner as a personal (familial) domain. This perception extends beyond the front yard and sidewalks, into the street. It is not unusual to find that residents have essentially confiscated public spaces for private use; such as using sidewalks for parking spaces and making illegal curb cuts.

Urban gardens are another aspect of this focus on private property at the expense of public passersby. The limited spaces available to southern Italian peasants made them frugal in regard to the uses of private space. Small plots of land had to be put to greatest use, and gardens, although decorated by flowers, were devoted to producing food. On the Italian-American street scene, where houses were built with small front yards for ornamental plants, a productive fig tree is as appropriate as a Japanese maple.

Italian residential communities tend to be small scale and arranged so they facilitate intrafamily and interpersonal relations. Even in cities with large concentrations of Italians, the effective neighborhood seldom is larger than a block. For most Italian Americans the ideal residential setting would consist of a few houses on a dead end street.

This small scale is related to the accurate stereotype of Italian neighborhoods as multi-generational. Mother-daughter and other types of two-family households are still common, and apartments for newlyweds and other independent young people from the



The adaption of public space for private uses in Avellino, Italy (top); Brooklyn (center); and Potenza, Italy (right).

neighborhood are in great demand. Vacancies are usually controlled by an almost secretive housing referral system, run primarily by local women.

Kitchen windows that face areas where children can play are coveted architectural features. In Italy, interior courtyards might serve this purpose. In the U.S., backyards with rear-facing kitchen windows are a reasonable substitute. Less desirable, but more common in most American city neighborhoods, are street-facing windows from which women can intermittently check on kids playing on the sidewalks.

The custom of frequent extended family gatherings creates a need for spaces that are large enough to accommodate the whole group. This can be met by finished basements, garages, and large family rooms. In warm weather, backyards, patios, alleys, and driveways are open-air substitutes and are reminiscent of the southern Italian crowded outdoor gatherings.

Italians seem to have a great tolerance, if not a preference, for high human density. In southern Italian culture, the per-

son who seeks isolation may be seen as deviant or even ill. Italians don't space themselves out evenly in open areas, they clump together. Spaces in Italian neighborhoods appear either empty or crowded. When people are in the spaces they become filled, as one person attracts another. One might say that the bubble of personal space of Italians, at least among family and friends, is relatively small.

Most of my photographs from the south of Italy were taken during August excursions at midday, while the more sensible local people were enjoying their *sieste*. Therefore many shots are devoid of people. In the cool evening hours, the same empty spaces through which I had traveled earlier were filled, as nearby residents filed out after late evening meals. Similarly, during the heat of a summer's day, America's Italian neighborhoods appear deserted. But, when evening comes the sidewalks of quiet residential streets can become obstacle courses for pedestrians, as residents who lack backyards or patios to crowd onto carry

chairs outside to sit. Public walkways become even more crowded when stoops and porches are either unavailable or inadequate for the demand.

Among Italians, individuality and competitiveness are emphasized over conformity and cooperation in spatial interactions. In Italian-American communities, residents typically add their own touches to the exteriors of their homes in an effort to distinguish them clearly from others. In a row of Victorian brownstones, for example, one house might be denuded of the facing stone to reveal the rough brick underneath, another may be covered with startling white stucco, and a third may be clad in light blue aluminum siding.

This can be disruptive to the architectural and visual character of neighborhoods in which blocks of housing have been constructed simultaneously with similar plans. In Brooklyn, landmark preservation groups are especially critical of the tendency of Italian-American homeowners to disregard the architectural integrity of row house streetscapes. One group went so far as



to print and distribute posters, written in Italian, with photographs of some of these modified exteriors proclaiming in bold letters: *Mala!*

The attention of Italian Americans to the public front of their structures is an American adaption. In Italian villages individual property owners provide little for public use or view. Historically, Italians have tried to hide their assets from neighbors and officials. At first this tradition was imported to the U.S.; urbanists commented on the shabby appearance of Italian American areas and were surprised when they discovered well-kept or even luxurious accommodations inside "slum" buildings in Italian colonies.

In southern Italy today, privately owned sculpture, religious shrines, or ornamental gardens are still generally tucked away in interior spaces. If you are lucky, you might get to peek inside an open door. The most colorful example of this Italian versus American approach to exterior decor is seen during the Christmas season when many Italian-American homes become contes-

tants in what appear to be illumination contests. These dazzling displays are an obvious contrast to the Currier and Ives image of proper American Christmas decoration, with virtually identical displays of candles and wreaths.

Where feasible, Italian Americans have introduced traditional architectural and other aesthetics in new construction, maintenance, and renovation. Most Italians grew up in places where the fronts of buildings are flat — like walls of fortresses. Objects or surfaces in public view tended to be minimal, limited to entries, perhaps balconies, and exterior masonry. Building and repairing things in certain ways is part of one's culture. Regions and locales in southern Italy are differentiated by their preferences for varieties of stone, stucco, or other materials used for the exteriors of structures. Southern Italians seem to prefer the looks of certain things; for

Facade alterations often express the house owner's individuality. Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn (opposite page and below left) and Ostuni, Italy (below). Below left photo by John Letizia.



example, blue, pink, green, and yellow pastel colors are often used for exterior walls. They seem to like certain visual patterns, such as flat surfaces or linear designs, more than others. I have noticed that rough textured surfaces appear often on exteriors and that smooth surfaces, such as glazed tiles are more likely to be found in interior or private areas.

Of the emerging penchant of wealthier Italians to *fa una bella figura* (make a good appearance) architecturally, my friend Jerre Mangione once shared with me the observation that “in Sicily families who have money sometimes paint the marble fronts of their homes to make them look like wood. And in this country I have noticed that southern Italians paint the wooden fronts of their homes to make them look like marble.” In southern Italy wood is scarce, and a very expensive building material. In the U.S., on the other hand, most people think of stone houses as indicating affluence and success. In Carroll Gardens I have

observed an increasing number of storefronts with rustic brickwork facades, which mimics ruins where finished surfaces have worn away and exposed the masonry underneath. Also, one might notice decorative ironwork, and Roman-style archways in many Italian-American communities.

Since colonial times, Italy has been the source for skilled craftsmen in the ceramic, masonry, plaster, and metal-working trades. In many American cities the decorative ironwork and residential masonry industries are, in fact, dominated by Italian entrepreneurs who serve not only their local neighborhood but also the wider community. An Italian-American architect once related to me an ironic story of an Italian contractor who has done very well in America: First he tore off the brownstone, limestone facades, and metal cornices of buildings and replaced them with southern Italian-style masonry and other decorative features; more recently, his company has been reinvigorated by the urban gentry

Italian neighborhoods often mix residential uses with commercial and industrial activities, many of which employ and serve the neighborhood. Houses next to an elevated subway in Carroll Gardens (below).



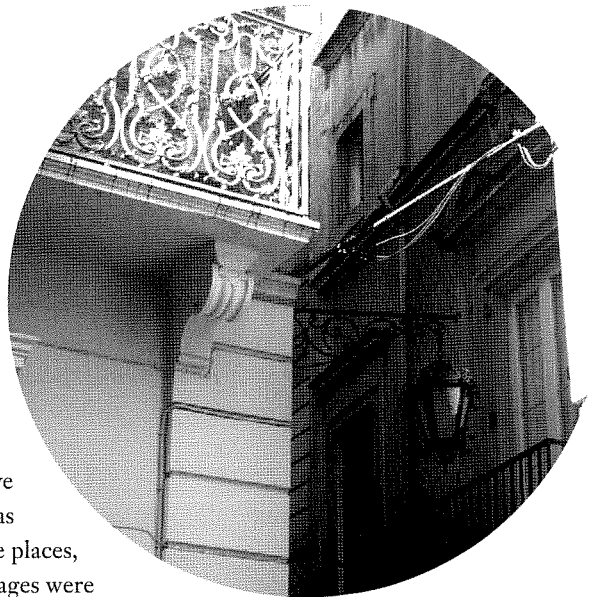
who are invading Italian American neighborhoods and spare no expense in restoring the original facades.

Toleration for the mixing of commercial and industrial activities with residences is common in Italian neighborhoods. Every one of the dozens of older urban Italian areas I have observed and photographed in the U.S., from Boston's North End to San Francisco's North Beach, is close to some past or present negative environmental feature. For example, both the North End and North Beach became Italian neighborhoods when the nearby waterfronts and industrial areas were booming. Brooklyn's Italian Carroll Gardens is adjacent to the extremely polluted Gowanus Canal, noxious industries, decaying wharves, illegal dumps, dilapidated warehouses, and a congested six-lane highway.

One would expect that such areas would be home only to the poor, but a portion of the Italian-American population has remained generations after attaining middle-class status. I would

argue this perseverance is due to the persistence of a community that converted the place from one that was inhospitable to one that is essentially habitable. In contrast to the stereotype many people have of southern Italian villages as being romantic, picturesque places, early twentieth-century villages were "miserable and wretched places in which to live."⁷ Italian communities are structured to avoid or overcome such environmental conditions.

Additionally, many Italian-American neighborhoods are sprinkled with residential structures that are used, legally or illegally, for service, commercial, or industrial activities. This practice could have its roots in southern Italy where, even today, long commutation is unusual. Many workers continue to live so close to work that they are able to come home for lunch and a siesta. Similarly, Italian Americans prefer having groceries, bakeries, restaurants, and



Italian Americans often introduce traditional architectural details in new construction, maintenance, and renovation projects. Traditional iron work in Potenza, Italy (above) and a Brooklyn iron works (opposite page). Pastel-colored facade in Carroll Gardens (below).



other shops nearby, in contrast to the American urban planning ideal of functionally segregated residential communities with commercial centers some distance away.

Italian-American communities provide a wide range of different types of places for various age and sex groups. My daughter, who recently moved into a Carroll Gardens apartment, described for me the patterns of interaction she saw among her Italian neighbors. On summer evenings adult women sit in front of their houses while groups of children play on the sidewalks and older kids play in the streets. Elderly men play cards or bocce in a small local park, and, in the same park, teenage boys played basketball while being eyed by small groups of teenage girls.

As Carroll Gardens has continued to attract Italian immigrants, it also contains several regional or town-based “social clubs,” which tend to be the exclusive hangouts of foreign-born males. Adult men of various ages and nativities also might hang out in small knots on the corners of commercial streets; young adults here, middle-aged there and eldest in another spot. Women, young or old, are most likely to be seen going from one place to another, either shopping or traveling between work and home, not hanging around in groups in public view. Occasionally, one can notice small groups of young women with baby carriages and, at certain times of the day, women in groups waiting near schools for the discharge of children.

The physical and symbolic defense of individual, family and neighborhood spaces is the most important feature of the community. This concern for security is so important that almost all of the previously discussed visual elements of Italian community life can be connected to it. For example, the decorative

masonry and ironwork one sees in Italian America is usually in the form of gates and fences. The many strains among people in densely settled Italian and Italian-American neighborhoods require universal agreement that everyone mind their own business and their own spatial boundaries. Without such agreement there would be chaos. Physical barriers reinforce social rules where necessary.

From the time when the entrances to Roman homes were graced by mosaics or ceramic tiles of ferocious dogs that proclaimed “*Cave canem!*”, Italians seek closure for their homes and their communities. Even in Italy’s large cities, neighborhoods are literally separate villages that seem to have grown into each other accidentally over the centuries. These sections have clearly delimited boundaries, such as remnants of old walls.

In Italian-American neighborhoods a great deal of effort is expended toward shielding the family from the outside world, yet the cues to boundaries are seldom recognized by outsiders who wander across them. Homes are guarded physically by walls and fences, and symbolically by “Keep Out” signs. The symbols may also be the stares of older men who are on guard while sweeping the curbs in front of their houses or the comments of young men who congregate at the street corner portals of their blocks.

While giving a lecture at the University of Rhode Island in 1987, I commented on the penchant of Italian Americans to erect fences. Upon hearing this, Professor Wallace Silanpoa of the Italian department related that when he recently visited the region of Abruzzo he observed that Italians who had returned home after long stays in the U.S. built fences where none had been before. We concluded that in

Italy neighbors usually know the extent of each other’s property and use natural or casual boundary markers such as trees or large stones. Fences are reserved for animals. Here, Italians feel that strangers cannot be trusted to respect implicit boundaries.

Observations like these can serve as the basis for a broader study of Italian immigrants’ adaption to the American urban neighborhoods in which they settle. Although this essay discusses only one segment of the Italian-American community — groups that live in similar urban environments during a limited historical period — these observations suggest that there are many layers of relationship between the way a space was originally constructed, the ways in which it has been modified, and the ways in which it is used. They also suggest that cultural habits lead immigrants to change the uses of existing spaces until they can create their own. Ironically, for most immigrants, economic and social mobility also means assimilating American values regarding the physical form and uses of community space.

Notes

1. Lyn H. Lofland, *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1985). See especially pp. 132-137.
2. Alexander E. Cance, "Piedmontese on the Mississippi," in Lydio F. Tomasi, ed., *The Italian in America: The Progressive View* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1978), 280-81.
3. Liz Seymour, "House Recalls City's Italian Heritage," *Torrington Register-Citizen* (13 August 1991), p. 13.
4. Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 229.
5. Philip F. Notariani and Richard Raspa, "The Community of Helper, Utah" in R. N. Juliani, ed., *The Family and Community Life of Italian Americans* (New York: AIHA, 1983), 23-33.
6. The lack of civic culture among Southern Italians has been noted by many. On recent Italian attitudes see: *Italy Today: Social Picture and Trends, 1989*, (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1990), especially pp. 10-11.
7. Humbert S. Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethnic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 21.

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Above: Italian communities offer settings for a range of activities.

Below: The defense of space is an important feature of Italian communities.

