

Firenze and Florence: two faces of a diversified (not disorderly) whole

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Introduction

Firenze or Florence: which one is the target of architecture students on a semester abroad? Does it make any sense to translate the name of a city? Is it still a valuable experience to study architecture abroad in a city that seems to have lost its once fertile relationship with architecture? Yes, it is. But only if we consider the city as a whole, with its two complementary faces, with its – somewhat hard to understand – ordered multiplicity of beauty and ugliness, high and low. As such, Firenze and Florence can trigger reflections and thoughts that will usefully inform the portfolio of future architects.

I've been – in a certain way – a student abroad. Throughout high school, I lived and studied in Sanremo. After that, I went “rinsing my clothes on the banks of the Arno river,” as Alessandro Manzoni once said.¹ Sure enough, from a Florentine perspective, Sanremo and the Riviera dei Fiori (as its coast is known) are not so “far west” as the United States. Also, first Dante in the Late Middle Ages, then the Italian public educational system from the 1860s onwards, and finally RAI (Italy's state television network) starting in the 1950s gave our country a national, unified language. Nevertheless, I can say that people in Liguria and Tuscany speak idioms that are remarkably different from one another. More precisely, the Florentines' approach to language (its rhythm and musicality, the related social etiquette, including physical distance between speakers and the “rules of engagement”) was mostly unusual to me, enough to

1. One can say that the famous Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni somewhat “studied abroad” in Firenze in the summer of 1827. Manzoni looked at the Florentine language as the model to follow for his Italian prose. Lacking a Florentine vocabulary, he thought that the best option for him would be to learn the language directly on site.

trigger a sometime unbridgeable sense of being out of place – what Italians would call “*spaesamento*.”

I started teaching in “Firenze” right after earning my degree at the local university’s School of Architecture. At first, I taught in several Italian universities, working – at once – as a freelance architect and a professor. In 2003, while doing research on self-construction in public housing for the Giovanni Michelucci Foundation at Fiesole, I was invited to give a lecture on this famous “maestro”, who was born in nearby Pistoia. Because of that invitation, I started teaching in English to students from various American architecture schools, mainly at ISI Florence, but also in other schools in the USA and the UK as a visiting professor. It’s been exactly fifteen years this last Fall Semester.

Over the years, I have grown so used to speaking about architecture in English that sometimes, when I give lectures or tutorials to Italian students, I cannot find the right words in my native language. From the start, I considered having to teach in a different language as an opportunity to develop the level of appropriateness and the exactitude that Italo Calvino recommends as a key attitude to survive in this third millennium.² The sense of comfort given by the use of metaphors, circumlocutions, informal verbal expressions and “disciplinary jargon” would never have let me achieve such precision in Italian. To be fully comprehensible and accessible is a necessary condition to obtain attention and respect from the students, especially if you are not teaching in your native language and your accent sounds a bit odd. To be precise and accessible you must continuously double check the exactitude of both form and content. As you can imagine, speaking of architecture is not always an easy task, because space is “*indicible*”³. Communication is not exclusively verbal – we all know this. But when you don’t share the same context (either because of cultural, personal or social issues), dialectic skills become crucial to break down cultural barriers and

2. I. Calvino *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Engl. trans. by P. Creagh, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1988.

3. Le Corbusier: “*L’espace indicible*” in *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, special issue, January, 1946.

gain credibility. In other words, teaching in another language proves to be a very precious methodological exercise for me, giving continuous feedback to my role as both an architect and an educator.

*People are strange when you're a stranger...*⁴ So runs a song by Jim Morrison, written more or less when I was born, that is, some fifty years ago. Despite the space-time distance of the two contexts, the words of this famous song by the Doors echo in my head at the beginning of each semester, when I first meet a new group of students. Their out-of-place faces (that I can't pair with a name yet, but that I'll learn soon, having to spend plenty of time with them in the following four months) trigger this song in my mind. Sometimes the students look scared, sometimes curious, sometimes arrogant, but they are always "strangers" at first.

What are they thinking of me? What do they know about me? What do they expect from this experience? A teacher is not a tour guide; a teacher is an educator. A good educator (as the etymology of this word suggests) has the duty of taking students away from ignorance by instilling curiosity, knowledge, and good manners (what Italians would call "*buona creanza*"). A student abroad is not a tourist; this holds true in particular if he or she comes here to study architecture.

There is Florence and there is "Firenze" – this is a typical "motto" in my studio during the first week of the semester. I find it is necessary to underline, as soon as possible, the historical duplicity deeply rooted in this city: two faces, two personalities, independent, contradictory and in continuous competition with one another. This is also suggested by the many rivalries that have marked the history of this city since its very beginning: Etruscans vs. Romans first, then Guelphs vs. Ghibellines, the Medici family vs. the Republic, and – finally, in the XX century – the *Ora-torio* vs. the *Casa del Popolo*.⁵ Likewise, we have Firenze vs. Florence.

4. The Doors, *People are Strange*, from the album *Strange Days* (1967).

5. These two Italian expressions can be translated into English as "Parish Church" and "People's House" (or, better, "Community Center"), respectively. Especially throughout the XX century, the former was a meeting place for Catholics and their families, while the latter served the same purpose for the working class (which was often associated with labor unions and left-wing parties).

In the intro to his book on the 1966 Florence flood,⁶ Robert Clark clearly points out these two souls:

- Firenze, dignified and incomprehensible, and the Florentines – “*bottegai*”⁷ and naively proud.
- Florence with its hordes of all-inclusive tourists, all looking for memorabilia and stereotyped pictures to be posted on Instagram.

“*We are here for the view*”, claims Clark.⁸

The history of study abroad programs as well as the centuries-old history of foreigners in Firenze is deeply connected with this complex personality. At first, one might think that students should be addressed to Firenze. By definition, Florence is already accessible and available without much effort. The city of cheap entertainment, the pearl of the Renaissance in ten slides, the city of “all you can drink” bars, of mountains of “gelato” that never melt, of one’s own “secret bakery”, of “Bus-to-Alps” weekends in Switzerland. All those experiences that a student must mandatorily flag on his/her academic curriculum under the section Study Abroad. A funny city, where apparently everyone speaks English, or better, “internet English”, i.e., that kit of a hundred words without connections and without “*consecutio temporum*”⁹ yet good enough to make every stranger comfortable in an undefined everlasting present. A city whose name is translated into English even on the local Hard Rock Café t-shirts. A city – significantly enough – that seems immense and cosmopolitan to the eyes of my students; but if one tries to measure it, he or she will find out that

6. R. Clark, *Dark Water. Flood and Redemption in the City of Masterpieces*, Doubleday, New York City 2009.

7. Literally “Shopkeepers.” In Italian, this word may have a pejorative connotation, denoting a shallow, greedy, and selfish person.

8. Clark, *Dark Water*, cit., p. 3.

9. Classical Latin formula meaning “Sequence of tenses,” that is, the rules governing the agreement between the tenses of verbs in related clauses or sentences.

it is no bigger than a medium-sized campus. In their four-month stay, our students stroll around on a surface of a couple square kilometers in the historic center around the borough of Santa Croce. It is not unusual to discover that at the end of their Florentine semester, they hardly went as far as the Cascine Park, Porta Romana, the Sant' Ambrogio Food Market or to see the stunning frescoes by Beato Angelico in the San Marco convent.

At first, it might seem natural to repudiate Florence in favor of Firenze for the sake of an assumed genuineness. I'm completely aware of the potential contradiction of such an assumption, especially from someone teaching at a study abroad program (ISI Florence) in this city. But it is not so. It is simplistic and reductive to split reality in two and ask people to support one over the other. Firenze is a city, and as such, it is filled with complexity and contradictions. Florence, on the other hand, is its complementary, inseparable part. To deny this would be a mistake.

One of the best definitions of "city" I can remember describes it as the place where we encounter the unexpected. And by "unexpected" we should think of both unfortunate encounters (for instance, a stolen wallet) and fortunate ones, like an infatuation while waiting in line at a supermarket cash register. In 2009, for the first time in history, the percentage of urbanized humans overtook those not living in cities. By 2050 this percentage is expected to be close to 75%¹⁰. For an architecture student used to the comfort of a campus (which is nothing but a simplified model of a city, without surprises and without canine manure on the sidewalks), both cities – Firenze and Florence – have a lot to teach. Anywhere in the world, cities – with their complex maze of stories and layers – will be the context of their professional lives and the backdrop to their jobs.

The city, in my own opinion, is the highest expression of humankind, and will be the main "client" of future architects. As such, we must know it well, in all its folds, including those hard to understand and uncomfortable. Firenze and its "alter ego" Florence (filled as they are with contradictions and the complexity of this duality) stand out as a very in-

10. 2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects.

teresting – and topical – case study. Both owing to its dimension and rich historic background, this city is perfect for the fifteen weeks of a regular semester. Exotic, but apparently understandable, within a short span of time it can give visitors that superficial sense of ease which is necessary to make them feel at home, although they are strangers.

For an architecture student, things should be different. In fact, that sense of comfort should be avoided as a terrible trap. In Firenze, more than 70% of the city's surface inside the last circuit of walls (dating from the Late Middle Ages) is under the aegis of UNESCO (whose decisions, I must say, are not always beneficial to urban landscape). Since 2009, building regulations only allow new constructions on condition that they preserve the original volumes. A city whose image is deliberately blocked and protected as a precious painting by laws and codes will end up having the effect of Botox on the face of an aged diva. Despite this, around 12,000 building interventions are legitimized every year, inexorably renewing the urban space.

Also, Florence is a city where capital-B Beauty becomes an overwhelming physical rather than intellectual experience. Not by chance, this is the city where Graziella Magherini coined the expression the “Stendhal syndrome”.¹¹

It's a city where on a daily basis, even without reaching the impossible numbers of Venezia, tourists (whose average permanence in town is less than two days) outnumber residents.

It's a city that hosts seventy-four museums and where in the past few years the number of restaurants and bars has grown at an incredible pace.

It's a city where the “Antico Vinaio” sandwich shop has the same appeal (at least according to Trip Advisor) as the Galleria degli Uffizi.

It's a city – I must add – where architects are more numerous than in the entire state of Pennsylvania. As of today, there are about five thou-

11. Graziella Magherini is an Italian psychiatrist who worked for many years at the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital in Florence. She is best known for her 1989 book *The Stendhal Syndrome*, which popularized this expression (that she had coined some ten years earlier) to indicate a psychosomatic illness affecting some individuals when exposed to art.

sand licensed architects in Florence. Despite this, the percentage of projects signed by architects is still one of the lowest in Europe.

Does it make any sense for an architecture student to study and practice design in such a city, where – at first sight – there is no physical or conceptual space for design? My answer to this question is a clear and resounding “yes”. The best athletes train themselves by searching for the most demanding conditions. During training routines, the worst-case scenario is reproduced to acquire the ease and the authority necessary to be successful on the competition field. When I got my driving license, I started practicing in an old Italian car (Fiat 131 Supermirafiori) without power steering. When you get used to that, everything else is a joke. Architecture students in Firenze are forced to find the best response to a very difficult (yet extremely rewarding) context. To live and think as an architect in Firenze means to ponder the meaning of gestures and the intrinsic value of things. Architects must face the built environment, understand it, and free it from stereotypes and prejudices. This leads to reading context as a text, learning to respect and love it. It also leads to discovering that the value of the city is not so much in its monuments as in the fabric that holds them together harmoniously.

As Louis Kahn (an important American architect particularly fond of ancient Roman architecture) once said, to be able to contribute – even with a small verse – to this ever-evolving choral poem that is known as the built environment, one must fight the idea of perfection and finality, one must stop looking for the masterpiece and resize the ego. *Beauty will evolve*,¹² to borrow Kahn’s words. This is why reading and listening to context are skills that will prove extremely useful and qualifying in the daily practice of future architects.

Firenze can play a crucial role in developing these skills only if it is considered in its complex duality: Firenze and Florence, together. The

12. L. I. Kahn *Order is*, first published in *Zodiac*, 1961, p. 20, then reprinted in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, ed. by U. Conrads, Engl. trans. by M. Bullock, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1970, pp. 16-170.

mission that must be clear to those who teach students out of context, especially those coming from US campuses, is to be an interpreter of the city, bridging the multiple realities that coexist in it and feed them. We should avoid the “Truman Show” of study abroad by providing the right lenses to recognize the city and instilling the antibodies that are necessary to inhabit it. Also, we must be equidistant from Firenze and Florence and share awareness. We must be able to find the right words to give new life to the city and the Culture (with a capital C) of which the city is a built image and a symbol.

In closing, I'd like to quote a passage from *The story of the warrior and the captive* by Jorge Luis Borges.¹³ It is pinned on the billboard at the entrance to the Marystudio,¹⁴ on the second floor of Palazzo Bargagli (one of the two ISI Florence premises, the other being the famous fifteenth-century Palazzo Rucellai, which Leon Battista Alberti designed in the 1450s). It has been hanging there for many years now, both as a warning and an encouragement to the students. In my own opinion, it contains everything I try to support while tutoring a student abroad in Florence. I never made it mandatory to read, but sometimes someone lingers in front of it. Sometimes, someone tries to understand why that quote is hanging there. Sometimes it works. This is how it reads:

He came from the inextricable forests of the boar and the bison; he was light-skinned, spirited, innocent, cruel, loyal to his captain and his tribe, but not to the universe. The wars bring him to Ravenna and there he sees something he has never seen before, or has not seen fully. He sees the day and the cypresses and the marble. He sees a whole whose multiplicity is not that of disorder; he sees a city, an organism composed of statues, temples, gardens, rooms, amphitheatres, vases, columns, regular and open spaces. None of these fabrications (I know) impresses him as beautiful; he is touched by

13. J. L. Borges, *The story of the warrior and the captive*, in *The Aleph and other stories*, Engl. trans. by A. Hurley, Penguin, London 2000.

14. Marystudio is the nickname of the studio that I teach at ISI Florence. The reason for this name is that the students enrolled in it come from Marywood University and University of Maryland.

them as we now would be by a complex mechanism whose purpose we could not fathom but in whose design an immortal intelligence might be divined. Perhaps it is enough for him to see a single arch with an incomprehensible inscription in eternal Roman letters. Suddenly he is blinded and renewed by this revelation, the City. He knows that in it he will be a dog, or a child, and that he will not even begin to understand it, but he also knows that it is worth more than his gods and his sworn faith and all the marshes of Germany. Droctulft abandons his own and fights for Ravenna. He dies and on his grave they inscribe these words, which he would not have understood:

Contempsit caros, dum nos amat ille, parentes,

Hanc patriam reputans esse, Ravenna, suam.

He wasn't a traitor (traitors don't usually inspire pious epitaphs), he was illuminated, a convert.