

FIRENZE EXPERIENCE & IMPRESSION

SFU ITALIA DESIGN 2007 ROB INNES

Transcendent Moments

Traveling to some of the greatest cities in the world brings you closer to great achievements, to the small moments of perfection in thousands of years of history. It also brings you closer to the people around you who shared the same experience of these spaces. It is within these moments that you find yourself in a place that is outside of time, where you can sit in great piazzas and loggias and look into the eyes of their creators, where you can go out at night and completely give yourself over to an experience. These transcendent moments pull you out of the world you can touch and surround you with something that is beyond the five senses. These moments, once experienced, exist far beyond memory, and when thought of, would bring you right back to the place where they occurred.

The first transcendent moment that I experienced in Florence was in the monastery of San Marco. I had studied the topic in the previous semester and was looking forward to seeing Fra Angelico's work and the incredible architecture of the building. There is something rewarding in experiencing something I had studied beforehand. The serenity of the courtyard as I entered the complex set the mood for the rest of the space. Slowly, I sat down on an old wooden chair overlooking a 400-year-old elm tree, with its gnarled trunk showing the scars of hundreds of years of trimming.

Inside, the painting of the Last Supper was exquisite, and even the bookstore in front of it stood peacefully in its presence. I was fully aware that Fra Angelico's Annunciation was on the wall at the top of the stair case that lead to the monks cells. Yet somehow, I was completely surprised as it appeared through the doorway when I reached the landing of the stairwell. It looked as though it had just been painted yesterday, like the plaster had just dried. These works of art acted as a transition through time and pulled me into a place where cloaked monks walked the hallways of the monastery.

I was most struck with this connection to the past when I entered the cell that Cosimo di Medici had stayed in. As I ascended the stairs into the small private chapel at the back of the cells, time became completely irrelevant.



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It was one of the first times during the entire trip that I really sensed I was in the spot where a great man once stood, knowing that Cosimo had contributed to the wear of the stairs I was now standing on. I was moved by the thought that I was having a reflective experience in a space where he too would have come to reflect.

Through the rest of the tour and most of the day this moment stayed with me. It was as though I had been brought closer to things that surrounded me in this city, that in a way, I had touched the past.



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Many profound experiences on this trip had nothing to do with my surroundings. Sometimes it was a personal accomplishment or the achievement of a goal that set in motion all of the small parts that lead to a transcendent moment.

On the 24th day of our trip I set out with no intention of climbing a mountain on my one-speed bicycle. But as chance would have it that was exactly what happened. As I was speeding along on my way to nowhere, I ran into Woojin. He told me that he was going to try to make it to Fiesole and that I should come along. I really didn't need any more convincing than that, so we pointed our bikes in the direction of the town and set off without a map.

After some time we passed the sign that indicated we were leaving Florence. I got this incredible feeling that I really was far from home, and with every foot we climbed and every corner we took that distance was widening. This feeling of excitement and peace was abruptly interrupted as we realized that we had just climbed the wrong hill and had to point our bikes straight down a one way hill that was about as close to vertical as any vehicle could handle. After an exhilarating ride down, I was happy to arrive at the bottom with my very worn one inch wide bicycle tires still intact.

Soon after we began climbing the correct hill, we stopped at the parking lot of a church that overlooked Florence and the monstrous hill we had just descended. The cool breeze and the chance to rest our legs mixed well with the sounds of birds and crickets. It was the first time since I had arrived in Florence that I couldn't hear a Vespa.

We continued riding through San Domenico and up the snaking hill towards Fiesole. By this point we were riding for about one hundred feet, stopping for a few minutes, and then continuing to ride for another hundred feet. We proceeded in that fashion as we worked our way up the hill. We finally reached a pullout overlooking the city, with a small bench and trees on either side. We kicked our feet up on a ledge and enjoyed the space for about an hour. It really was a beautiful day. Sitting in silence overlooking a skyline that was largely unchanged over hundreds of years I really felt on top of the world. We both agreed that the rather grueling ride had been worth it just for the chance to sit on that bench.



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We did manage to make it to Fiesole, well at least the Fiesole sign. But in the end we knew that the destination never really mattered. We just wanted to get away from the city and conquer the journey in the process. We did exactly that.



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Much like the trip to Fiesole, I went to the Boboli Gardens to get away from the city. I have always found tranquility when I am surrounded by green space. I spent most of my childhood in the park across the street and have always felt at home in a quiet place underneath a tree.

When I first entered the garden I was blown away by the scale of things around me. I couldn't wait to get lost in the myriad of trails that surrounded me. After walking most of the parameter I had found a few peaceful places away from the other visitors, where I could just sit and watch the birds. The garden was full of surprises - small statues, fountains and pieces of architecture that seemingly appear out of nowhere. I found my favorite spot on a bench that lay by the large green pond on the far side of the gardens.

After taking in my surroundings, I enjoyed five minutes during which there were no other people around the pond. The only sounds that could be heard were the trickling of water and the singing of birds. It was in those five minutes that I found the connection to the past that I had felt in San Marco. Knowing that the clam I was feeling had been experienced by so many before me and that the birds and butterflies playing around the central statue in the pond had been doing so for generations, I was able to stay in this moment long after the space began to fill with people. I just laid back, closed my eyes and listened to that trickle of water. I had found my quiet place under a tree.

