

Touching Time

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Abstract

The American Academy in Rome provides an ideal place for visiting scholars and artists to stay. From this base on the Gianicolo, one can walk about the city and explore its heritage and experience both its contemporary vibrancy and sustained relevance. Touching Time is one American's reflections, through words and pictures, of his stay at the Academy and his walks in Rome and beyond.

Keywords

American Academy in Rome, landscape photography, Villa Lante in Bagnaia, The Vatican, St. Peter's.

I had lived in Europe but only ventured into northern Italy before winning a Rome Prize in 1998. The inspiration for the Academy application was the translation of my book, *The Living Landscape*, into Italian by Cristina Treu and Danilo Palazzo. That my work should find a receptive Italian audience was humbling and fascinating. Why was a book about ecological planning targeted to North American students and practitioners appealing to one of the world's oldest cultures?

Clearly, Italy has an important legacy in town and city planning. Regions are similar to American states and the nation pioneered regional planning. However, provincial-level planning lagged until a new law passed in 1990 that advanced the planning of provinces (which resemble American countries). My Milan Polytechnic translators thought my book would be useful to implement the new law and it was. I proposed to follow and to document the making of a plan for the Province of Cremona, in the region of Lombardy. I was surprised about winning a Rome Prize because it was awarded in a category—historic preservation—that I hadn't applied for. The jury determined that my proposal indeed addressed preservation and it helped illustrate the scope of the field. The other preservation fellow my year was engaged in paper conservation. As a result, we did embody the many scales of preserving heritage.

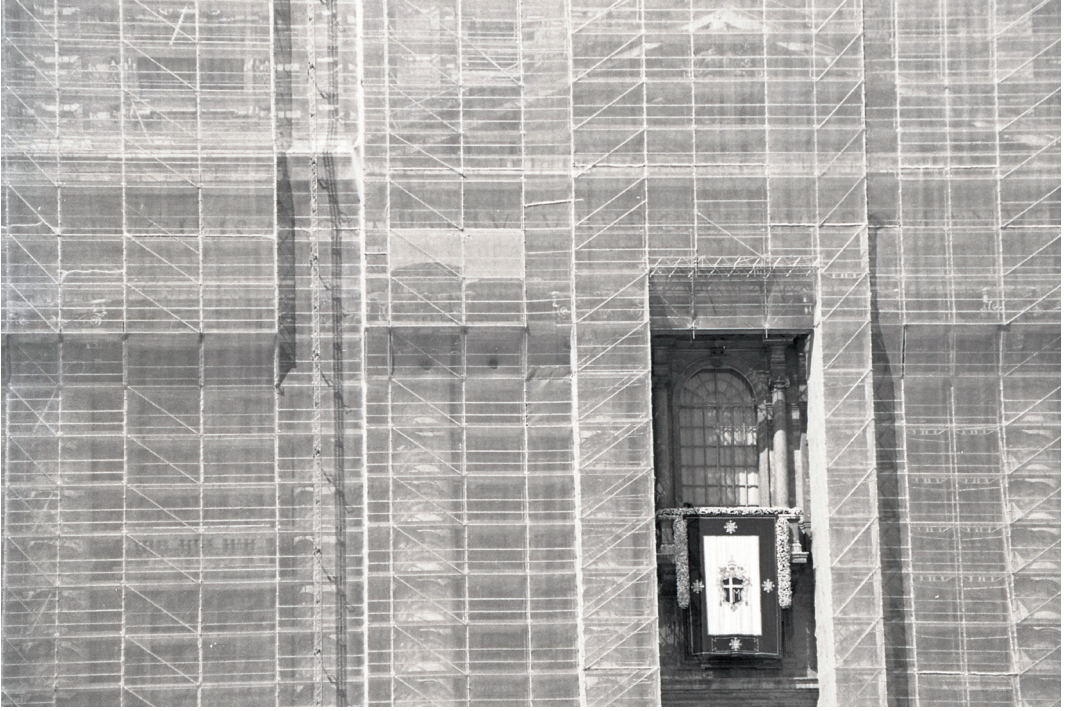
The American Academy provides generous studios for Rome Prize fellows. The ceilings are high and the light abundant. I hung maps and images of Cremona as well as a geology map of Rome on my studio walls. It is rather common for fellows to deviate from their proposed work. Having served a couple of times on the Rome Prize design jury, I know proposals are treated as a litmus test: is this person consumed by the jargon and minutiae of their field or do they have broad interests? Is this someone you would look forward to having lunch and dinner with for six months or a year?

Although I did pursue my interest in Cremona (Treu et al., 2000; Magoni and Steiner, 2001), a second enterprise arose. As an undergraduate, I had flirted with majoring in photography and retained an interest in taking pictures. I began to load my Minolta with black and white film for Academy field trips and for my regular strolls around the city. I documented my walks in the land where you can touch time. A film processing company across the city that catered to professionals was recommended. Sabatini Fotografia produced contact sheets unlike anything I had seen. Instead of cramming all negatives from a roll of film on a single sheet of photographic paper, the images were printed on long strips. Larger images result with each image being easier to investigate.











I began hanging the strips on my studio walls. Studio visits were common. One afternoon the University of Pennsylvania art historian Malcolm Campbell stopped by my studio. He was a resident at the Academy. Residents are senior scholars, designers, and artists who contribute considerable depth to the Academy community. Professor Campbell was a leader in the shift in art history scholarship from a focus on singular great artists to broader cultural forces, such as the role of patrons. He was very enthusiastic about my contact strips and provided insights into the places in the images.

As a planner, I enjoy encouraging people to express their preferences. So, I asked Professor Campbell to indicate his favorite images with small yellow post-it notes. He obliged and we had a lively discussion about the history and significance of each place captured on film. With subsequent visitors, I repeated the process. I was curious what images connected with the others staying at the Academy.

As with Professor Campbell, I learned much about what I had taken pictures of from these conversations. The Academy is always full of experts on all things Rome, and they are eager to share that knowledge. The photos collecting the most post-its were printed and displayed on the studio walls. The pictures and contact strips soon dominated the tall walls. Naturally, I was attracted to landscapes, formal and vernacular. My pictures of gardens and the Vatican had particular appeal. Villa Lante in Bagnaia had especially garnered many post-its. While my photos focused on the weathered formal garden, it was at Villa Lante where I learned about the *vigne* (in its non-vineyard meaning). Laurie Olin (1996) observes that the outdoor spaces of Italian villas were much more than just the formal gardens, and are better understood as *vigne*, encompassing park-like places beyond the famous geometrical spaces. At Bagnaia, as with other Renaissance estates, the *vigne* was used for hunting.

Examples of such *vigne* include the contemporary Roman city parks of Villa Borghese and Villa Doria Pamphilj.

Our field trips consisted of morning walks into the city to visit famous places and day excursions to important sites such as Villa Lante. There were longer outings as well, such as to the Veneto and Sardinia. Italian scholars were present to explain the significance of the place. Lots of walking was involved. I jotted notes, sometimes sketched, and took pictures of sites from Villa Adriana and Villa d'Este to a newly discovered temple in a Roman basement.

When I wasn't on a field trip, I would walk down and up the steep steps of the Gianicolo. For the first several months, I lived in the Academy and would walk down into the city. Then, my family joined me for several months and I would climb the steps to my studio. We lived in the Trastevere, which made me feel more grounded and connected with the city.

I varied my routes through the city but some places, the Pantheon for instance, called me back time and time again. Rome is called the "Eternal City" for good reasons. There is a strong sense of permanence but also abundant possibilities, visual harmony with sensory complexity. I walked through these prospects with my Minolta and a sketchbook attempting to capture its wonder.

The Vatican was both a destination and a stop on my walk to Sabatini Fotografia. The façade of St. Peter's was undergoing renovation at the time of my stay. As a result, I took many pictures of scaffolding. Once, I was able to gain access to the roof of St. Peter's. Sometimes, I loaded color slide film too but preferred working in black and white. I visited the Vatican early in the morning and late in the day to capture shadows and, on cloudy days, dappled light.

The use of an analog camera (with limited numbers of pictures allowed, narrow adjustment of the pictures taken, and the heftiness of the instrument) instead of today's ubiquitous digital devices (vir-

tually unlimited numbers of pictures, immediately transformable and filterable, and its lightness and portability) had a role in my choice of the subjects and of the decision to shoot or not depending on several factors, including the weather, whether I was with others or alone, whether or not there were people around, the daylight, the traffic, and if I found something interesting enough to stop walking and shoot. A moment is captured and holds on, if not forever, for a potentially long time.

The art historian Robin Earle Kelsey observed: "The histories of landscape and photography are deeply interwoven" (2015, p. 71).

Landscapes are visual, cultural, ecological.

Photographs capture, reveal, and connect.

Kelsey declares "... landscape *is* photography. Photography constitutes modern society's fundamental investment in images as a connective tissue between humanity and the world" (2015, p. 90).

Looking back on my walks during my first stay in Rome almost 25 years ago, I know many things have come and gone, but some good pictures remain.

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