

Comments

Seeing Naples *

By Jerome Krase

As the new Co-editor of Urbanities I would like to take this opportunity to inaugurate a variation on the usual ‘commentary’ we are likely to come across in academic journals. Since our academic business is urban ethnography, why not take the opportunity of our global journeys to publish brief observations by CUA members on the fascinating places at which we periodically gather to deliberate? Contributions such as disciplinary conversations, academic biographies or even more contested debates between members, it is hoped, would demonstrate to our readers that our scholarly pursuits have a lighter side that is no less valuable for the promotion of our craft. I should first note the excellence of the plenary and more focused sessions that I attended and in which I participated. To have so many informed and articulate colleagues assembled in such a fascinating venue as Naples, Italy for us academics is a gift of sizable proportion.

‘See Naples and Die’ (*Vedi Napoli e poi Muori*) is a cryptic aphorism attributed to Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe he is said to have uttered regarding the overwhelming panoramic beauty of Naples in the late 18th Century. Much of what he saw was still there during my recent trip to Naples for the Commission on Urban Anthropology’s Conference on ‘Entrepreneurial Culture, Corporate Responsibility and Urban Development’, at the *Mostra d’Oltremare in Fuorigrotta*. The lively meeting provided the opportunity to observe and photographically survey much of Naples’, now more distressed, urban labyrinth. As I moved around the city during rush hours on the overcrowded trains and buses, as well on leisurely strolls through broad and narrow passages, I looked for, and found, an eye-pleasing magnificent shabbiness and more surprisingly — a degree of taken-for-granted local ethnic diversity all around me. This observation of the streets of Naples as somewhat multicultural is a major contradiction to the common view of exclusively bad blood between new and old *Napoletani*.

* An extended version of this article was published in my ‘Traces Blog’ at I-Italy.org.

Unfortunately, I also often learned the difference between *tempo italiano* and *tempo napoletano* One hour later (*un'ora piú tardi*).

In Naples, a town with somewhat of a bad reputation, even the most sinister-looking places were colorfully filled with lively and friendly people into the evening hours. For example, within two days of walking to the *Montesanto* train station from my central city hotel through *Quartieri Spagnoli* I became for all intents and purposes a neighborhood regular and began to ignore the fact that the city is neither clean nor particularly efficient. In one instance, at my regular stop at the *Campi Flegrei* station where I disembarked for the conference I, and the rest of the regular commuters, scampered back and forth as three consecutive track change announcements (*cambio di binario*) for the same departing train were made within a span of five minutes. I had been warned about the Neapolitan dialect but found that the locals had no problem understanding my Italian. In one toy store I searched for figurines of ancient Roman soldiers (*Cerco statuette di antichi soldati Romani*) and, although I seldom understood their response, we still managed to get along with a smile. As to a San Gennaro miracle of the trip, in Anacapri I found an expensive digital camera under a tree in a small piazza and gave it to a traffic cop along with my business card, just in case... A week later I received an e-mail from a grateful French visitor. I saw Naples and survived (*Vidi Napoli e sopravvissi*) to tell about it.