

Unfamiliar Plots, Strange Tempos:
Conundrums and Action in a *Made In Italy* Neighborhood in
Transition

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ABSTRACT

Unfathomable economic pressures have warped an Italian textile district. The city of Prato serves as an ethnographic laboratory of globalization and crisis. Labeled the most multicultural city of Europe, Prato ranks No. 1 in terms of ratios of foreign residents to local citizens. This paper takes as its point of departure the paradox of a Marshall Plan industrial district free falling into crisis, on the one hand, and an immigrant niche economy taking off like a winged crane, on the other. Prato drew rural sharecroppers and Southern migrants to work in its factories and family firms during the economic boom of the 1960s. Residents grapple with bewildering transformations (Bressan and Tosi Cambini 2009) and contrasts in work rhythms: unemployed Italian sweater makers vs. überflexible Chinese garment workers. The latter are employed in some 4,800 Chinese-owned firms registered in Prato's Chamber of Commerce, a large portion of which manufacture or wholesale low-cost "fast fashion." Different tempos manifest in two neighborhoods, where residents, engaged urban planners, and anthropologists have launched efforts to counter segregation and xenophobia. This paper explores a grassroots neighborhood initiative and a collaborative action research project, both of which took place in the neighborhood of San Paolo, once Little Italy and now Little Wenzhou. Regardless of their regional or transnational origins, residents share a history of producing made in Italy textile, knitwear, or apparel products—though at different times and under different tempos. A transnational team reports on its challenges and findings designed to cultivate diversity.

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The neighborhood of San Paolo flanks the western side of the city of Prato, where silent smoke stacks soar skyward like brick beacons to twentieth-century industrial fervor. We take as our point of departure the paradox of a city free falling into post-industrial crisis, on the one hand, and an immigrant niche economy taking off like a winged crane, on the other. We lay out the context for an action research initiative, which developed in tandem with a transnational collaborative research project that innovated an encounter ethnography method to understand how families, institutions and communities cope with globalization.

The action research initiative unfolded in San Paolo and the adjoining neighborhood of Macrolotto Zero, where a Little Italy uncomfortably comingles with a Little Wenzhou. Prato drew rural Tuscan sharecroppers and Southern migrants to work in its factories and family firms during the economic boom of the 1960s. Since the mid-1990s, it has been the destination for tens of thousands of migrants, primarily from the Zhejiang Province of China. Regardless of their regional or transnational origins, residents share a history of producing "Made In Italy" textile,

knitwear, or apparel products. Despite similar tempos, their occurrence in different historical times has created social distance and dissonance. Residents grapple with bewildering transformations (Bressan and Tosi Cambini 2009) and contemporaneous contrasts in work rhythms such as unemployed Italian sweater artisans and household handloom workers as contrasted with uber-flexible Chinese garment workers and entrepreneurs (Ceccagno 2007). Temporal distance, we argue, has made similarities seem strange and even unrecognizable.

In both cases, considering the Italian and Chinese migrants, discipline to incessant work rhythms occurred separate from large factory floors. The types of top-down time thrift imposed on the working classes of E.P. Thompson's "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism" (Thompson 1967) are transmogrified in this story. Workers in Prato are known for a quest for autonomy and subsequent self-exploitation. In both cases, most work was or is carried out in small workshops, which now includes some 4,800 Chinese-owned firms, the vast majority engaged in cut-and-sew production for the "Made In Italy" fast-fashion market.¹

Temporalities and Borders

Macrolotto Zero sits immediately west of the city center (see Figure 1). Located beyond the city's medieval wall, the boundaries partly consist of physical barriers, such as the

raised railroad tracks, which slice through the neighborhood to the north and allow crossings only through a few treacherously narrow underpasses, a highly trafficked bypass that creates a west ring, and within it, the neighborhood of San Paolo itself (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Here, narrow streets curve into dead ends. Stucco structures squeeze into tight spaces. Cement walls rise naked with rebar. Factory windows are shattered. Fragments of spaces house families of Italian or Chinese origin. A lone chicken paces in strip of weeds behind a wire fence.

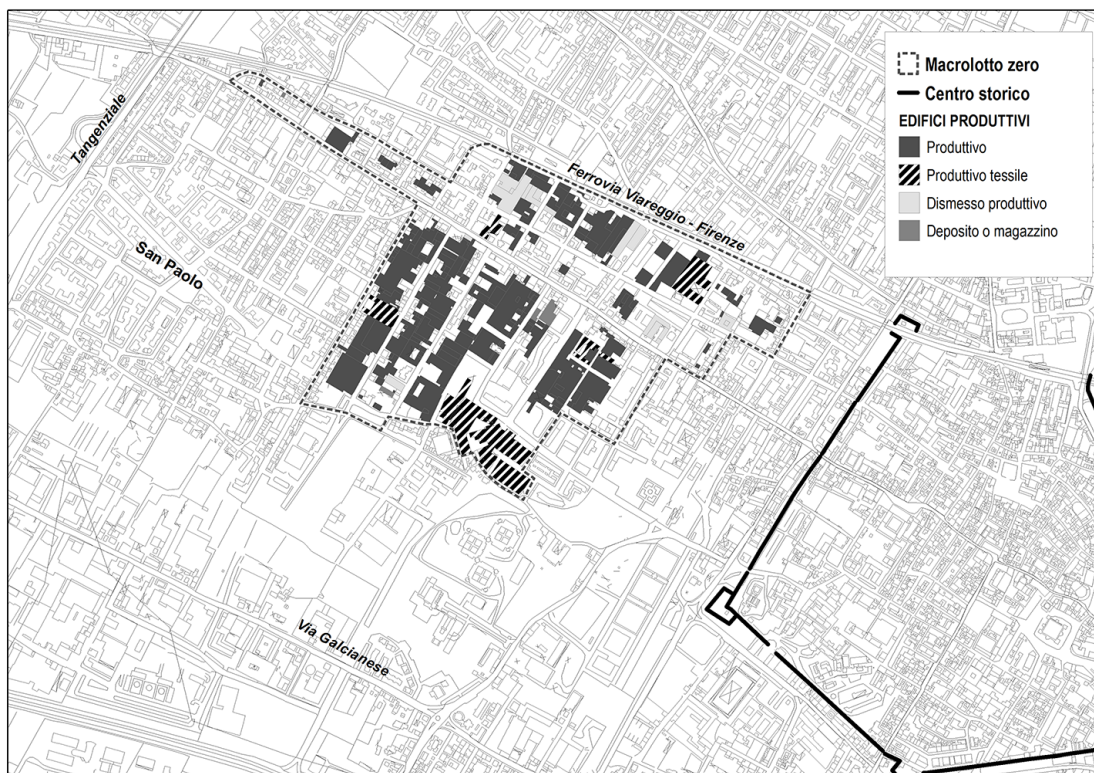


Fig. 1 –Macrolotto 0 and the old city of Prato.

Some residents, when referring to San Paolo, include the territorial area of Macrolotto Zero itself. The name resonates: “macro” translates as large and “lotto” refers to both a plot of

land but also connotes struggle. The plots and struggles precede the name itself, which dates to the Secchi Plan--an urban vision completed in the 1990s by a working group coordinated by the famous town planner Bernardo Secchi, known for coining the phrase "città fabbrica," or factory city, and for his vision of mixité, of valuing urban diversity (Secchi 1996a).

The shape and boundaries of Macrolotto Zero came into being in a sense after the fact as a result of Secchi's intention to carve out an exemplary physical space of urban development that re-valued the factory city (Secchi 1996b). His purpose was not, therefore, simply to identify a neighborhood--a notion he preferred to leave up to the groups of people who live there--but rather to accomplish something much bigger: to recognize and represent the unique physical and social aspects and potentialities of an urban phenomenon characterized by the postwar phase of development that launched the Italian industrial districts.

Hong Kong Italian Style

During the years of rapid growth of the textile industry, between 1950 and 1970, the population doubled as did the built environment, intermingling industrial and domestic spheres; production activities were born in garages, basements, and factories. Italy in 1953 already ranked No. 1 as the world

exporter of wool fabrics—indeed, Prato’s original specialization (Becattini 2001). Little attention was paid to preventing accidents. A colorful yet grizzly description of Prato applies to this part of town: “la città delle mani mozzi,” the city of the chopped-off hands. That reputation is a consequence of lots of textile work and used clothing that arrived from ships departing from all parts of the world, especially America. The “Little Hand,” an excerpt from native son Curzio Malaparte’s (Malaparte 1998) *Those Cursed Tuscans*, recounts the story of a severed hand lacquered with gold nail polish that the author found as a child playing in a bundle of rags.

For its exploitive conditions, the French fashion magazine *Elle* in 1978 compared Prato to India and dubbed the city *l’inferno del tessile*, or the hell of textiles. “The city fell into turmoil, the political and economic world became involved, but it reacted almost like a cartel, and forgot about its internal conflicts” (Cammelli 2014:28, authors’ translation). This media coverage was one of several attempts by high-profile European publications to get the scoop on the rapid success of Prato’s textile industry, which had brought many European competitors to their knees. The prestigious *Le Monde*, in 1980, offered a title that in retrospect seems nothing short of provocation: “Italian Hong Kong” (Maurus 1980). The journalist highlighted the city’s ability to respond to any type of problem

posed by production needs and with irony also underscored the severe effects on the urban environment and the health of its worker-citizens. The article referred to “self-exploitation,” a term which, the journalist asserted, had its origins in Prato. In the present temporal moment, the term self-exploitation is often used to describe, often disparagingly, the “economic habitus” of migrant workers from China (Bourdieu 2000). In both cases, such “flexibility” has been used as a “rite of passage” necessary for entry into the affluent society (Berti, Pedone, and Valzania 2013).

The original nucleus of houses and apartments along the main access routes of Via Pistoiese or Via Donizetti, roads that for some residents mark San Paolo’s border, eventually became part of a dense and chaotic industrial suburb resulting not from public planning processes but rather from industrialization and widespread internal migration as well as private initiative of Prato’s residents and migrants. The pace of construction in those years was intense. In Italy, the answer to the problem of accommodating the massive number of migrants who arrived during the postwar period in central and northern industrial cities was found in the familistic-private realm and known for its tolerance toward self-construction: agreements between small construction companies and groups of individuals and families, who purchased homes without recourse to banks, but instead

through agreements with contractors Arrighetti and Serravalli, 1997. This solution proved to be viable in the short term for a large majority of Italians to the point that they were able to ignore “the obvious drawbacks that it had in terms of managing the city and its territory” (Signorelli 1996, 112–113). This version of growth offered quick responses to an urgent demand for new structures but proved detrimental to public and residential spaces.

For some residents of San Paolo, Secchi’s vision of *mixité* is difficult to embrace. They associate the area of Macrolotto Zero with the presence of Chinese migrants, economic activities that push the limits of legality, militarized security blitzes that intensified between 2009–2014, compromised hygienic conditions of roads and trash receptacles, and overcrowding of private homes (Bracci 2012). In sum, it has become a transition zone (Bressan and Tosi Cambini 2011). By association, San Paolo has become known as a place left to its own devices, delapidated, beyond the bounds of planning—a place from which to distance one’s self if at all possible.

Neighborhood Plots

The action research project, *Trame di Quartiere* or Neighborhood Plots, sought to intervene against stubborn segregation and in effect to awaken collective remembering that

temporal distance has let slumber. Neighborhood Plots aimed to cultivate dignified diversity through a series of events: a landscape architect-guided urban walking tour, a social photography lab, documentary film screenings, and a digital storytelling workshop.

A May 2015 intervention involved a four-day workshop in which Italian participants ranging in age, gender, and place of origin produced digital stories on meaningful themes: industrial abandonment, green spaces, job precarity, regional migration, diverse ways of belonging, and struggles with racism. Indeed, one poignant story spoke to the challenges of *mixité*:

[show federica's story]

The desire of Federica's friend to avoid Via Pistoiese troubles our sensibilities. As we watch Federica delineate her eventual route, the movements of her finger call to mind an infamous public ordinance. Defining the perimeters of Macrolotto Zero assumed new stakes when a policy was enacted to limit business practices operating within its boundaries. In September 2010, the newly elected mayor of Prato approved an ordinance (no. 2054/2010): "Hours for Macrolotto Zero and Adjacent Streets." The ordinance restricted hours of operation for the "exercise of artisan, trade, administration, services, entertainment and leisure activities that cause, because of their schedules into

the late hours of the night, noise and environmental discomfort to residents.”

The administration justified its action as an attempt to “reconcile the exercise of economic activities in the territory with citizens’ rights to quiet and rest” (from the ordinance). Residents’ complaints of noise and odors motivated the policy. Peculiar about the policymaking was its application to only a precise and bounded area of the city. Its approval immediately triggered organized legal action among shopkeepers and entrepreneurs operating within Macrolotto’s boundaries. In short order, thirty Chinese business leaders appealed and, backed by Italian lawyers’ investigation, won a positive judgment. In March 2012, the Regional Administrative Court (TAR) overturned the ordinance, ruling it to be discriminatory and thus unjustified (Bressan and Krause 2014).

In part as a tactic to counter the administration’s politics of containment, Neighborhood Plots invited Secchi in February 2014 to a public encounter at a Circolo in San Paolo. His visit brought into relief contrasting political views on the status of urban planning in the city. Secchi told the audience that he considered Macrolotto Zero “one of the most fascinating places of the city because it is a place of diversity” and underscored *mixité* as his guiding star. “I prefer a diversity of activity and of population to socially homogenous neighborhoods,”

Secchi said. "Let's not forget that the twentieth century was the century of the autonomous individual--which is exactly why it is necessary to give space to difference." He rejected the then center-right city council's urban planning vision, which he called "a disaster" (Il Tirreno 2014). In a press release a few days later, the mayor shot back, describing the "exaltation of Macrolotto Zero inappropriate and morally harmful" (Comune of Prato 2014).

Closure and Temporality

The end of the May digital storytelling workshop felt rushed. Storytellers were required to de-install software. They had to let go of their unfinished work. There was a collective sense of loose ends. But there was also closure through the ritual of screening rough cuts. Participants were invited to say something about their story. They underscored the importance of giving different points of view on the neighborhood. The screening had a celebratory feel. Afterward, the group went around the circle to offer one hope for the neighborhood. Silvia said "pride" given that San Paolo was largely forgotten by the administration. Stefania underscored integration. Giuseppe said "it can't get any worse here, it can only get better" and pointed to his desire to make known San Paolo's history. Gabrielle reminded that neighborhoods are made up of people,

that they construct the spirit and soul of a community, that these stories narrate memory and history, and that they democratize listening. All told, making the stories raised awareness, stimulated dialogue, and created solidarity.

The most recent influx of immigrants to a large extent has returned the neighborhood of San Paolo and its environs to the rhythm of the 1960s--the era of the industrial boom. Borders exist even if, at times, they shift and take on new significance, depending on the intentions, power and capabilities of the actors on the ground.

The presence of transnational migrant workers and their families has made San Paolo and Macrolotto Zero more complex than they were in the past, presenting new challenges and opportunities for realizing *mixité*: (i) a local juncture for transnational cultural practices, which entail "passageways" not only between urban or regional but also into global markets; (ii) a sphere of separation and segregation that operates on multiple levels; and (iii) a place where "diversity" is expressed both in terms of an extraordinary *mixité* in the urban landscape involving a flow of meanings and situations that require constant capacity of reading and interpretation, a process of adaptation to cultural diversity and to the interconnections among material and temporal spaces.

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¹As of 2012, there were 4,830 firms registered with the Camera di Commercio of Prato (which includes seven communes in the province) in the name of entrepreneurs of Chinese nationality. Some 3,379 individual firms were registered in the category of "Confezione di articoli di abbigliamento; confezione di art. in pelle e pelliccia," or Production of articles of clothing, leather and fur, with the vast majority being clothing.