

# FIRENZE EXPERIENCE & IMPRESSION

SFU ITALIA DESIGN 2007 HEATHER CHIANG

## Transcendent Moments

What made this trip and indeed the field-school as a whole different from anything else I've ever experienced are the stunning moments that have come from truly seeing and understanding something very special. Moments when everything comes together so perfectly to create beauty. Moments when I am speechless, when I cannot believe my eyes.

To experience these you have to see things with knowledge, with understanding, with openness, and with curiosity. You need to let the experience take over your body and blow your mind.

These moments come in different forms and they can be, really, anything. For me, it was a little hill town in Tuscany called Pienza that in itself contained a whole universe. It was the emotionally charged second Pieta by the master of sculpture, Michelangelo Buonarroti. It was the small heartfelt interactions with local Italians, and the highly functional and very beautiful Santa Maria Novella Railroad Station.



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## Pienza

Pienza was the hill town that I studied beforehand while I was back home in Vancouver. The images of last year's Italia Design group told me this is a beautiful place and the Timeless Cities text told me that it is all about harmony. But as I entered the central piazza of Pienza I realized no picture and words can ever do it justice.

I silently stood under the loggia of the Palazzo Comunale, taking shelter from the blazing sun and looking out onto the busy piazza. In that instant I knew what it means for a town to be truly timeless. Each of those buildings so carefully designed with such elegance and understanding of human nature and Italian culture that they seem to communicate to each other and to the people in the piazza.

The way they are offset just a bit to allow the main road to pass through to facilitate flow, to allow the south western sunlight to spill into the piazza to give it abundant light, the beautiful and surprising views of the valley on either side of the cathedral, with the soft breezes and birds, and the seating all around the piazza for people to rest their feet and to watch other people and meet friends.

The buildings and spaces add to, and indeed create, life. And once these forms were placed, people just exist within them. Simplicity, nature, and all that the town stood for and created.

Pope Pius II knew how to create absolute harmony and sensual experience for the people of Pienza back during the age of the Renaissance. How much have we forgotten since then?

We stopped by the city walls of Pienza, the border between the urban and the country. When the cathedral bells rang, they seemed to make a statement of the foreverness of space and time and the solemn dignity of the church. I remembered the swinging of the bells as they rang, the birds playfully surrounding the bell tower, the breezes and the warm sun, the countryside on my left stretching to far beyond, and the local households on my right, all of which blend together to form a whole so much greater than its parts.



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## Pieta

I studied this second Pieta of Michelangelo's before coming to Florence. It is an unfinished piece, half of which is left in rough form, including Christ and Madonna's faces. I didn't think much of it originally.

After a long and tiring day Russell gave an enthusiastic lecture on the Pieta before we entered the museum where it was housed. By the time I actually saw it in a small room in the mid section of the stairway I felt I was supposed to love it because of how amazing it is supposed to be.

Feeling curious and a bit annoyed I walked around the marble sculpture, trying to see what was already pointed out to me.

And I was slowly transformed to absolute astonishment. The quiet, saddened face of Nicodemus (one of the two men who removed Christ from the cross) gazing down at Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary grabbed me. The way that he bends down to embrace the dying Christ and Madonna, and the lifeless body of Christ, supported by others and his mother, who placed her face softly by his hair, at the last moment of her son's death.

I walked around the pieta over and over again, intrigued to find out where the arms led to, how Christ laid in their arms, how the drapery fell, how the composition looked from different angles. I had grown to enjoy the unfinished parts too, imagining Madonna's expression as she held Jesus Christ.

The fact that Nicodemus' face is actually replaced by that of Michelangelo himself and the piece was meant for Michelangelo's own tomb adds another layer to the sculpture. How must had he felt as he carve out his own face looking down at Christ?

I never knew a sculpture could embody a whole world, powerful and charged with emotion, and an instant frozen in time can last forever, bringing such meaning to even a student born centuries later.



## People and Culture

During much of the time in Italy I wished I could speak Italian, because then I could communicate and understand local Italians better and they wouldn't be as rude to me because I am considered a tourist.

But there were a few moments when that didn't seem to matter. One night I went to a trattoria near Piazza della Signoria after spending an afternoon with the sculptures under the Loggia dei Lanzi. I ordered a plate of pesto pasta and soon realized it was too salty. I started stuffing my face with bread. It was a disappointing dish compared to the pesto pasta at Trattoria Pallottino which we had been to as a group.

One waiter had been looking at my plate every time he walked by, making me increasingly uncomfortable. At last I asked him for the bill and to my surprise he pointed at my unfinished plate and asked, "Good?"

"Ehh uhmm... not really."

"Oh, you can change."

"What?"

"You can change!"

He reached over and took my plate and pulled out the menu again, to which I was grateful but I was too full to take on another dish. He ended up giving me a good discount and I ended up giving him a big tip.

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This other experience is also about eating.

On the night of the fireworks I didn't go with the group because I had a different destination in mind from which to watch the celebration. I found an entrance near Ponte alla Carraia that goes down to a lowered stone path that is at the same level as the Arno River. It's a piece of dry land in the middle of the river from which I can see all around it, the sunset, the bridges, the crowds gathering by the sidewalks.

As I sat there waiting for the fireworks, chewing on my pretty sad salami and egg sandwich, a group of Italians were cooking BBQ beside me. I tried not to stare at their food. One of them came around giving his neighbors beer, to some other Italians. They were all happy.

Then he noticed me, gave me a cup and poured in beer from a jug. He asked what my name is and introduced me to the group and they all started piling food on my plate, boar's meat, sausage (undercooked as I found out), salmon, bread, napkin.

Suddenly in this place I felt right at home, being on that stone path, cheering at the fireworks with the rest of those around me.



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## Santa Maria Novella Railroad Station

This is also one of the topics I researched back in Vancouver. While exploring Florence I bumped into it by accident. Recognizing the glass facade and with Alessandro's tour on modern architecture still fresh in mind, I decided to check it out. And to try to find out just why it is a significant turning point in the modern architecture movement?

People were busy going about their ways as I walked into the passenger terminal, with luggage, and expressions full of purpose and direction, or of confusion, stress, boredom. I seemed to be only one who is there for the heck of it.

I was immediately taken by the sense of perspective, direction, and the sense of vast space and openness the passenger terminal creates. The beautiful opaque windows direct the flow of people and link up the facade just before the railroad tracks. Light and sky comes through the gaps between the roofs that cover the tracks and the beginning of each track is decorated by a patch of green space. The way the tracks are placed beside each other, looking from the terminal's end, seems to extend them far beyond to infinity.

I walked to the end of every part of the station to see how each is handled and what other modern surprises I could find lurking there.

I noticed that the red and white striped marble floor always indicates the flow, directing movement in subtle ways. Some parts of the station is underground, for shopping, eating, and connection to different transit systems and exits. They took the form of underground tunnels.

Throughout those parts there are elegant gaps that open up to the street above, allowing sunlight and small water streams to come down, connecting the tunnel with the outside environment so it does not feel enclosed. These are often placed at the end of a tunnel or a turning point to act as goal attractors.

One opening was also a small water fountain where people can sit around, bathing in the warm sunlight. Those on the ground level can look down into the tunnel as well.



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Small curvature detail on the ceiling of the tunnel creates a beautiful form noticeable only at the end of it, the tunnel seems to resemble the train.

A beautiful station and yet at the same time so functional and essential to the fast moving flow of those passing through. The openness of the station and the connection to the outside sky and sunlight create such surprising pleasure and relief. It's truly a fantastic piece of modern architecture.

