

THE GENIUS OF A PLACE

How do you survive to the “tourismification”? One suggestion would be the example of the city of Cortona and the documentary “The Genius of Place”, which tells how this small town in Tuscany is facing his sudden popularity as a tourist destination, after it was published the book “Under the Tuscan Sun” from which it was derived an homonymous film.

The idea of the documentary, written and produced by OLO Creative Farm, is to explain how you can pursue economic development without compromising the historical and natural heritage of our planet. An hard challenge that many communities, large or small, are facing. Just like is doing Cortona.

We talked to Sarah Marder, creator of the project, producer and reporter, who explained to us how was born the idea of “The Genius of a Place” and gave us some suggestions on how we can become more conscious travelers.

“This documentary was born twice. On one side was born 20 years ago in my daydream... I wanted to document aspects of Cortona that would be lost in time, but I didn’t have the means or expertise to realize this dream. In more concrete terms, however, “The Genius of a Place” was born less than two years ago when I met for working reasons the three founding members of OLO Creative Farm, a production company located in Como: Mattia Amadori, Andrea Corti and Max De Ponti. I was fine to work with them, and having this vague dream in a drawer for a long time, I asked them if they were willing to collaborate on a project like this. They were available to talk about the idea and so, in November 2008, we began to see us one for month to develop the idea. In March we went for the first time in Cortona and we started shooting the film. A few months later, Andrea Aquino has been added as fifth member to the creative team”.

When a town like Cortona comes to the fore thanks to a film or another big event, the effects are positive or negative? *“Clearly there are both positive and negative effects. It is like when a family wins a big lottery prize. Suddenly finds himself better off, but at the same time, is to handle problems never before imagined. It 's the same for a place that has a period of rapid economic development. The merchants sell more goods. New works and exercises are created. Property values increase. It creates resources that allow the maintenance or restoration of important structures. On the other hand, with this new prosperity (for some), there's the inconvenience to the community.*



Often, the trade begins to move towards new customers rather than to the needs of residents, it becomes too expensive for locals to buy or rent in the area, parking is scarce and so on. The world is complex! And Cortona seems to be a microcosm that demonstrates the challenges faced by communities around the world”.

In the project website you often speak about the concept of “globalization of place”. Can you explain what that means? *“The word globalization is open to many interpretations. The main concepts are still those of integration, interdependence and even approval of components that were previously operating with greater autonomy. This concept, which usually applies to goods or other systems can also be applied to places. If we think about it, many places have lived almost their entire history in a state of semi-isolation. But now it seems normal to move constantly, before the difficulties of the journey made almost every place an entity in itself. Let me give an example: for the film we interviewed three older brothers. We were told that when they were children, they have made one trip: they went to a show in Foiano, which is about 18 km far away from their house. But they say that a journey like that, at that time, had the same value of a transatlantic voyage today. Today, thanks to the innovation of infrastructure, goods and people can reach virtually anywhere in the world. On the one hand, this opens up the economic exchange and also allows the geographical and cultural discovery, returning to the concept of integration that I mentioned earlier. Second, it creates greater interdependence than ever before, for better or for worse. Even small sites now are often exposed to the vicissitudes of a global system. This can lead to prosperity and development, but can also take power away from the site, making it vulnerable and most helpless in front of events too macro to be managed. Finally, globalization can lead to the approval of the site. At the cultural level, every first place (especially in Italy) had their own way of speaking, cooking and celebrating. Every place built in a certain way, using materials readily available in the area. The same was true for products that were grown in fields and orchards. Today, these characteristic features of a place are tending to disappear within this process that we call “globalization of place.” Even at a business level, before the goods on sale were mostly produced locally, and then typical of the place. As one French lady who we interviewed said - every place has the same shirts, the same baseball caps, the same Chinese bags, the same dishes heated in a microwave...”.*



On your website you state that the documentary “conveys the important message that both residents and visitors can try to find and keep the genius of a place”. Can you tell me how we can become more aware and respectful tourists? *“I think that the attitude is all part of the person who goes on a journey. It depends on the motives and objectives of the stay. When you go on with the aim to respect, understand, and why not even treat the place that you will visit, you will behave differently than the person that starts with the intention of seeing more places in less time possible, without doing much. After our two years of work on this film, we believe more than ever that the genius of a place is something ephemeral, vast, subtle and complex. As the soul of a person, it is very difficult to photograph, describe, or forwarded. But this does not mean it does not exist. Rather, it means that a person has to slow down and tune to a careful listening, respectful and sensitive to sense even a fragment of it. Then something else even more challenging is to cultivate and protect the genius of a place, which requires a delicate act together and decided. Although it is an ideal, outside the reach of almost all of us, we like a phrase of the Tao that says that the good traveler leaves no trace”.*

Your documentary is still in production? *“After we went to Cortona for periods of six shots over 18 months, we finished shooting the film in August. We are now in post-production, which includes everything that happens to manufacture a shot in the finished film. For now the effort is more editing to reduce our 50 hours of filming a movie in 90 minutes! We have created dozens of interviews and now we have to create an interesting and representative mosaic about the site. In addition to interviews with the mayor and many senior citizens, students and merchants, journalists and tourists, will put a pinch of celebrity, thanks to our interviews with leading figures like the actor Anthony Hopkins and singer Jovanotti”.*

When will it be available? *“We are trying to be able to distribute it in 2011. In all likelihood, the first version will be in English. Of course, we will make a version in Italian as well”.*

And after the release of the documentary what are your projects? *“For now I have no more concrete career plan, in addition to finishing and promoting this film and its messages. I think I will commit full-time for at least another year on it, and probably more. I started writing a book of reflections on the theme of our need to live in a small community, even within an urban fabric, but I put it aside. The work of the film is too exciting so far for me to join it with another creative work”.*

