

# TRASH



# TO BEAUTY

A CASE STUDY OF HOW PECCIOLI, A SMALL TUSCAN HILLSIDE TOWN, TURNED A LANDFILL INTO AN ENGINE OF SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, ECOLOGICAL, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE.

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CURATED BY BRETT LITTMAN



Comune di Peccioli





## ***Trash to Beauty:***

*A Case Study of how Peccioli, a small Tuscan hillside town, turned a landfill into an engine of social, economic, ecological, political and cultural change.*

Curated by Brett Littman

When I speak about the town of Peccioli to native Italians and people of who have traveled to Tuscany - most are not familiar with it and cannot place it geographically on a map. Driving about one hour from Pisa and Florence in the North or from Volterra in the South, Peccioli is one of the many Tuscan hillside towns that one passes on highway SS439 with rich histories dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> Century AD when the Etruscans of Volterra dominated the region and used the surrounding areas to farm cereals, plant vines and olive trees. Peccioli, though, is unique amongst these towns because it is the only one that announces itself on the various roadways several kilometers before you reach it with a series of large scale public art installations and civic infrastructure projects.

First, driving on roadway SP64, one sees the word “Peccioli” spelled out by toppled letters and forms on the Rotonda Guigargo by artist Giorgetto Giugargo. Further down the road, after a town sponsored sports complex, one notices a large giant naked man sitting on top of a building made by Naturaliter. Then a few hundred meters away, at the recently developed Hotel Portavaldera and Incubator Center, one sees *The Piazza De Chirico* by Mario Cuncinella, a large metal

canopy at its entrance and on the top of the hotel sits an orange neon outline of a cloud with a blue flash and a half-obfuscated sun on the bottom left hand corner, made by Vedovamazzei, an artistic collaboration between Simone Crispino and Stella Scala. At this point in your journey, you will also properly see the town of Peccioli clearly for the first time on top of a hill out of your car window. If you are driving at night, you will notice a neon sign, by artist Sara Marioli, with the words “la felicità è una via” (which translates to “happiness is a way”) appearing and disappearing at intervals. As you turn up the winding road leading to the town, you pass in a field *Centrifugo*, by Umberto Cavenago until you reach *Endless Sunset*, by Patrick Tuffofusco, a large belvedere that overlooks the surrounding landscape wrapped by multi-colored tilted metal disks. This is attached by a balcony to a parking garage complex and an elevator with a view that takes you to the top of the hill, where the medieval city of Peccioli is perched.

Around the world there are many towns, cities, and municipalities that have co-opted or used contemporary art, architecture or creatives (Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class* published in 2002 lays out the blueprint for this) to burnish reputations, generate tourism and regenerate the economies of seemingly “dying” places. Art and Architecture Biennale’s, film, dance, literary or theater festivals and other site-specific “events” bring tourist dollars and publicity – but in the end they are like alien spaceships

landing and then taking off again – making very little impact on the long term survival and growth of the local communities they need for labor, resources and they don't generally compensate for the wear and tear they create on the host communities ecology and their inhabitants long term financial stability. As well, if these projects are more permanent – they often don't sympathetically engage with their surroundings and feel out of place.

In 1991, the mayor (and still mayor) of Peccioli, Renzo Macelloni, in consultation with his community, decided to take resources from a renewed ecologically sound landfill in the region to support the Belvedere Corporation that would introduce contemporary culture, art, and architecture to modernize the infrastructures of this medieval town with an older flat growth population base. This project was framed by the ideas that it would promote the art of living together, the community should be the chorus and would co-exist and co-produce the results, and that placemaking requires that meaning be built collaboratively so it would be shared across many different stakeholders. He felt strongly that the art and projects chosen for the town should be future oriented and they should convey their meaning through human contact and partnerships. This would insure that contemporary culture would become an important part of the regeneration and growth of the town to make it welcoming place to live and directly impact for the better the lives of its inhabitants

on multiple levels beyond just aesthetics, entertainment and tourism.

The landfill which is located in a valley outside of Peccioli, near the town of Legoli, was started in 1979. It served four local towns of about 15,000 inhabitants and compacted about 10,000 tons of waste each year. It was designed as an open air landfill that didn't protect against the release of methane gas and didn't process its waste water. A short time later, in 1981, Italy passed new environmental laws targeting the cleanup of these types of small uncontrolled landfills like the one in Legoli. The town had a choice, it could shut down the landfill and let another town deal with the new regulations or it could find a way to clean up the site and turn it into something that could actually benefit its community. The town choose the later approach and by 1990, Legoli 1, a long-term community driven and approved project to deal with current and future waste disposal, opened with biogas renewal that could be used for the energy grid, proper leachate processing and ground covering for the waste itself to reduce the eyesore of the garbage in the landscape. This new facility could process the waste of 45,000 people, three time more than the old site and could dispose much more ecologically over 100,000 tons of waste each year. By 1997, Belvedere S.p.A was founded, a new corporation and foundation to oversee the landfill, with the municipality owning 78% of the shares and a commercial partner owning 22%. In 2000, Belvedere was restructured in

an interesting way to build on ways to make more public the company's profit to better its own community. To address this, the municipality proposed owning 84% of the stock and offering 380 shareholders from its local community the opportunity to own the remaining 16%. By 2003, Belvedere, increased the number of “community” stockholder to 800 and who would now own 38% of the shares. In 2023, community stockholders own 46% of Belvedere's shares and each one receives dividends annually which makes a positive impact on their personal income and ability to cope during periods of economic instability in Italy.

The reasons why Mayor Macelloni and the town decided to “socialize” the landfill and make a foundation to support contemporary culture in Peccioli in the early 90s might be traced all the way back to two historical events four hundred years apart. In 1479, Benozzo Gozzoli, a Pisano artist escaping the plague, relocated himself to the foothills of Legoli, a small hamlet near Peccioli. Bored and troubled by the situation he and his family found themselves in, he decided, with the aid of some local artisans, to decorate the local Oratory of the Blessed Virgin Mary (later consecrated as the Chapel of Saint Catherine in 1822) with a four-sided, highly detailed and colorful religious fresco painting. The Oratory now sits in a small building in Legoli that one can visit and view this highly regarded masterwork of Renaissance Art that has been an artistic symbol of fortitude and resistance against natural disasters for more than five

centuries. The other precursor was the decision by the residents of Peccioli in 1898 to self-tax themselves to build the Bellincioni Bell Tower in the center of town. This Bell Tower was to serve as a source of civic pride and to announce the town far and wide in the Tuscan landscape with its height and unusual cupola. It also sent a message that civic improvements could be taken care of internally without reliance on outside political forces and money.

Today, the Belvedere Corporation and the Fondazione Peccioli per l'Arte, which was born out of the desire to create an instrument that would directly take care of all the cultural activities, are supported by the profits from the landfill. Both have become the major investors in the issues that directly impact the quality of life and enrich the cultural life of its community and remains committed to the principles of the art of life, collaboration with the community and the ideal of creating shared meaning. To that end it has bought a fleet of mini electric cars that residents and visitors can use for free to shop for groceries, run errands, visit cultural sites and site-specific installations or visit friends and relatives nearby. It has supported MACCA, an outdoor museum of more than 80 site-specific artworks in public spaces and churches in small villages that are part of the municipality of Peccioli and the Palazzo Senza Tempo, a Kunsthalle with permanent art installations inside and outside of the museum. It has overseen the building and planning of several more bridges and lifts to make it easy to get to the town. It has built



public viewing platforms and spaces for social gathering, doing yoga or watching a sunset over the Tuscan hills. It has established a library, a music school, an elderly residence, a sports center, a business incubator, a new supermarket and a new hotel and restaurant nearby and there are plans for an walkway to help senior citizens go to the supermarket which located about 15 minutes away from the center of town. An outdoor amphitheater, an indoor space at the Palazzo Senzo Tempo, The Gallery of Giants, an old warehouse and the Cinema Passerotti, an old movie theater in town has been developed for performances, events and concerts. Even the Legoli landfill has been developed with art and a conference center to make it a location for the community and visitors to celebrate rather than hide it from the public. Lastly, in 2020, during the pandemic, it established a program called Social Energies to re-activate local communities and associations who were not used to working together to propose and manage cultural projects for financing to respond to the new social needs that would renew ways of living together and create solidarity and bonds between people.

In the world of culture, leaders often speak about arts the effect on community and the local economic development spurred by creativity and contemporary art. I also believe in culture as an important part of the biodiversity of our human environment and very much champion its value and positive effect on individuals and communities – but I sometime

wonder about how deeply it can be integrated into daily fabric of life. In Peccioli, I see a new paradigm for how this can be done. By taking control of something that is necessary but harmful, like a landfill, and turning it into a shared resource with the goals of improving the quality of life for its users and redistributing value and wealth across more community stakeholders – a self-sufficient system of support for socially guided contemporary culture and infrastructure can be created that will co-owned and supported for years to come. It is an incredible, efficient and benevolent model and one that I believe that could act as a blueprint for arts leaders, local governments, politicians and residents to create a future society where art, life, politics, economics, and ecology can co-exist, be mutually supportive and thrive.

**Italian Cultural Institute**

**686 Park Avenue**

**New York, NY 10021**

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