

“Social Energies” New York

When I speak about the town of Peccioli to native Italians and tourists 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 9th 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 felicitá 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.

The story of how contemporary culture came to Peccioli and the impact it has made, however, follows a radically different model. One that places it in the center of a self-sustaining Venn diagram which prioritizes quality of life, ecology, civic infrastructure, culture, economic development, and social energy. 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 Foundation 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 ensure 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.

Today, the Belvedere Foundation, which is supported by the profits from the landfill, has become the major investor into the issues that directly impact the quality of life and enrich the cultural life of its community. It remains committed to the principles of the art of life, collaboration with the community and the ideal of shared 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 65 site-specific artworks in public spaces and churches in five towns 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 social 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 electric walkway to help older residencies 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.

Beyond just the art and civic architecture, Peccioli started a community project called Social Energies in 2020. Beginning with the municipalities of Peccioli and Lajatico, the goals of Social Energies were to re-activate communities through the involvement of local associations that already existed to collaborate and propose new projects for financing that would be responsive to contemporary social needs that promoted better forms of living together, solidarity and strengthened the bonds between people. Since these initial projects were piloted, the local communities and associations who participated have much strong ties between them and are working together in cooperation towards shared goals. Social Energies continues today to add new geographically contiguous territories and municipalities to the mix under the banner of the Art of Living Together. These new projects will reinforce Social Energies original goals and will continue to expand the outreach of increasing community representation in the major decisions vital to these municipalities, promote active citizen engagement and care of cultural projects and provide better outreach and support for elderly and marginalized community members to participate.

On my first research trip to Peccioli in June 2023, I was excited to see firsthand what the town had done and to hear more about what the future held from the local major stakeholders and change agents. It is rare in one's career, to have the opportunity to think through aesthetically a municipality and town, which is a large and multi-faceted social project. Usually, as curator, I am called up to deal only with art works and from time-to-time considerations of site and history – but here I had to think in economic, social and cultural terms to get my head around the totality. It was very interesting to do this as a curator and it forced me to think outside of the traditional boxes that

I normally work from so that I could make a visually compelling exhibition about a site, without having the ability to bring anything physical from the site to NY. In the end, I determined the best way forward would be to make the project into a visual and textual case study, to lay out clearly in three distinct curatorial areas: Cultural, Social, Architecture and Landscape, what makes Peccioli unique and compelling. I decided that the main story would be told through captioned photographs, wall panels and through an essay and specially written text for each program.

In addition, I determined that an important part of my project would be to make a short film about the reaction of the people to the cultural work that the Belvedere Foundation has done over the years. The marketing photos and brochures could only go so far to tell the whole story. The documentary seemed like an important piece of the project, as I strongly felt that the lived experience of the town could only truly be understood through the voice of the “people” who call it home. I was very lucky to be introduced a local film maker named, Francesco Mazzei, who was able to interview about 20 people and ask them the five questions that I had scripted and edit the responses down to a short five-minute film. We had young people, old people, people who worked in the government, where artists, musicians and business owners. It was very enlightening and inspiring to hear their thoughts about how the “centering” of cultural development in Peccioli had positively affected their lives directly.

Later in the curatorial process, it was made clear to me that I could also bring some of the models of the architecture that been designed through support of the Belvedere Foundation in the exhibition. Working with Heliopolis 21 Architects, Nico Panizzi and Alessandro Mellis, I was able secure two large scale models of past and future buildings and car park / bridge including the Palazzo Sens Tempo designed by Mario Cucinella Architects and Patrick Tuttofuoco’s new car park/bridge called Endless sunset, which was being developed and built. These added a lot to the exhibition and gave visitors a sense of the physical sites and the scale of the civic architecture projects that have or would be engaged in.

Another late addition to the project was the decision to include Vittorio Corsini’s *The Peccioli Look* installation on the façade of the Italian Cultural Institute. A version of this project exists as a permanent installation in Peccioli and is made up of photos of all the residencies eyes. It was very complicated to devise the proper way to do this on a landmark building and to install it on one of the busiest streets in all of New York. But in the end with the help of Corsini himself, Workspace 11 fabricators and Heliopolis 21 Architects we were able to get it fabricated and installed safely before the exhibition opened. I am very glad we were able to add this installation to the exhibition; it surely made itself known on the street, with it images of hundreds of eyes, staring out at New York day in and day out for several months. As well, for me it added the temporary “presence” of the people of Peccioli into the fabric of New York in a profound and interesting way.

In February and April 2024, more than 300 residents of Peccioli, traveled under the auspices of the Social Energies project to New York to visit the exhibition at the Italian Cultural Institute that I had curated, called *Trash to Beauty*, about their town. For many residents, this was their first time in New York, so they were very excited to be there. Their first introduction to the project was seeing Corsini’s installation on the outside of the building and many of them were able to identify their own eyes or the eyes of family members and friends. As a curator, it was a unique opportunity to present this project to the local inhabitants and share in their local pride seeing their town being held up as exemplary and instructive in the worlds of cultural policy in the city of New York. It was also a pleasure to introduce them to some of the fabricators, installers and colleagues who were present

at the opening – they were all amazed by the turn out and very happy to speak to the guests about their town. One amazing and strange thing happened when the group visited in April – it was the day of a solar eclipse in New York, and the group was able to witness this in person from Park Avenue with other New Yorkers. I imagine that is something they will never forget. The group had a busy itinerary beyond just seeing the exhibition with trips planned to other locations in New York State and meetings with other Italian government officials based in the United States. I imagine that in the end everyone who made the journey left feeling that the miracle of Peccioli reverberates for people far beyond Tuscany and Italy.

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 blueprint for arts leaders, local governments, politicians and residents can create a future society where art, life, politics, economics, and ecology can co-exist, be mutually supportive and thrive.