

# *Urban Greening:* *Prato, Italy*

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In central Italy, amidst the rolling hills of Tuscany lies the City of Prato. Its economy has historically been dependent on textiles, just like many areas of South Carolina. It is a center of the slow food movement, which explains the lack of golden arches and drive through service. I traveled there to present my research, "The Therapeutic Benefits of Nature Images on Health: Results from the Sorting Task"

at an international interdisciplinary conference on social sciences.

I walked 60 minutes each way to and from the conference each day. The atmosphere was a bit gritty, very different from South Carolina, with random bits of trash blown up against stone walls and caught among shrubbery. Passersby didn't readily smile or engage in eye contact. I could have trav-

elled faster, by taxi or steady steps, but couldn't pass by the photographic opportunities that presented themselves every few feet. Camera ready moments featured elderly people sitting on benches with their dogs, bicyclists in business suits, landscaped biking and walking paths with night lighting, striking architecture, and ample green space.

Historic buildings with peel-

ing paint, wrought iron fences, and elaborate door knockers are compelling photographic subjects on their own; but when you dress the architecture with vines, shade trees, and pots of flowers, what was attractive becomes beautiful. Potted trees and shrubs regularly marked the middle of congested traffic patterns. One important intersection in the historic downtown featured a petunia pyramid of



pots stacked 10' high. Lack of ground didn't stop anyone from planting; potted plants proliferated.

The eateries managed to create outdoor ambiance and relative refuge for customers by creating screens and hedges of potted shrubs. The tables might be a mere two feet from the busy sidewalk, but felt like 14' away due to the green screen. One upscale

pizzeria laced vines through a wire fence to create a wall separating the street from their diners. Only during a close up shot with a macro setting did I realize the vines were merely life-like, not real at all.

Not all the architecture was appealing. Large drab rectangular box like structures, six to twelve stories high, were home to many people in Prato. Defying ordinary drabness,

many residents created elaborate gardens on their tiny terraces. Even some single family homes with small porches on the second story sported lush green gardens.

This compulsive attention given to green space by the municipality, commercial businesses, and residents indicates the important role plants play in the quality of urban life. We can probably live closer

together, in greater numbers, and in greater harmony, provided there is ample and abundant green infrastructure. The view that startled me most was about 30' up in a solid ancient wall that marked the entrance to the historic center of the city. Up there were two simple square holes that no one could ever easily access. Each "window" to nowhere contained a window box overflowing with annuals.

