

Ethnic Changes in Little and Big Italy

Jerome Krase (October 02, 2007)



New Immigrant Influxes Diluted Italianità in Our Cities. Is the Old Country Next?

When people talk about ethnicity, food always seems to come to mind. For example, some call the U.S. a “melting pot,” where every immigrant group eventually dissolves into a homogeneous soup. Others think America is more like a “stew pot,” where separate hyphenated pieces float around in blended gravy. The latest ethnic taste is the multicultural “salad bowl,” where diverse groups share only a dash of dressing. In any of these American recipes, Italians have been a major ingredient.

Over the course of the last century, millions of Italian immigrants changed American cities by creating Italian colonies and Little Italies in one form or another. They did this not merely by the



power of superior numbers, but by changing the appearances and uses of these places. By the 1970s the demography, as well as the meanings of those Italian American enclaves, were challenged by the influx of new immigrant groups. Today some of the best known Little Italies remain as little more than what I have called, "Italian-American Ethnic Theme Parks." These are places which are virtually Italian in name only.

Back in the country of origin, something similar is beginning to happen. Italy has, for centuries, been a major source of emigrants, but it has only been since the 1980s that it has been the recipient of large numbers of foreigners seeking more than temporary residence. Even more recently, the demography of the most symbolically "Italian" of Italian cities has been changing in response to immigrants. As we can see how American cities became Italianized and then became less so, we can observe today how Italian spaces are losing their Italianità in response to immigrant settlements and especially their local commercial practices.

I have been studying and photographing neighborhoods in Italian America and in Italy for almost three decades now. My first focused project was to compare the appearance of Italian neighborhoods across the United States with each other. The second step was to compare those places in the U.S. with the places in Italy from which Italian-Americans came. As all these comparisons were going on, I began to see how Italian-American neighborhoods in the U.S. and eventually Italy itself were visibly changing in response to the influx of newcomers.

Many Italian cities now have significant populations of non-Italian origin and identifiable immigrant areas. By American standards, finding 3 million or so foreigners in the midst of Italy's approximately 60 million residents wouldn't be worth the effort, but to Italians, these relative small numbers are a big issue, especially as they begin to concentrate in certain areas, such as Africans in the Piazza Garibaldi in Naples and Chinese in Rome's L'Esquilino district near the central train station.

I conducted research in Rome, courtesy the University of Rome, La Sapienza, in 1998. When I returned in 2003, I re-photographed the L'Esquilino district almost street by street. What immediately came to mind as I walked around the neighborhood were images of two of America's most famous Little Italies – Mulberry Street in New York and North Beach in San Francisco, both of which today, with the exception of strips of Ethnic Theme Park, are almost totally absorbed by burgeoning Chinatowns. Just as Italian-American residents of Little Italies are resistant to neighborhood change, so seem to be their Italian counterparts according to The Washington Post's Daniel Williams who wrote in 2004 that "Chinatown Is a Hard Sell in Italy" (March 1, 2004, A 11). He noted that L'Esquilino was becoming a Chinatown, and that in response, Roman officials were trying to prevent the "development of ethnic neighborhoods." The authorities were making it difficult for Chinese merchants to concentrate their wholesale clothing and other outlets in the district and trying to keep a diverse offering of stores. If American Little Italies are a clue to the future of Big Italy, Marco Polo may be unceremoniously removed from the pantheon of national heroes.

(Originally published in US-Italia Weekly)



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