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Italian transcultural atmospheres. A comparison of the Italian Forum in Sydney and Piazza Vittorio in Rome.

Abstract

This article is part of a larger study of ‘Italian’ commercial and urban spaces developed around the world over the past 15 years. It focuses in particular on the Italian Forum, a residential and commercial development built in Sydney (Australia) in the late 1990s. Designed as an attempt to replicate a typical Italian *piazza*, the Italian Forum also aimed at celebrating the Italian contribution to Australian multiculturalism, and at creating an urban space for the expression of Italian and Italian Australian cultures. However, the Italian Forum has largely failed as an urban, commercial, and multicultural space. By comparing it to an actual Italian *piazza*, Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II in Rome, the article argues for the need to reconceptualise transcultural urban places by addressing two fundamental questions: what does turn an urban space into a meaningful place? And can urban atmospheres be replicated in the context of purposely driven commercial developments?

Keywords: Italy, Australia, transcultural, multiculturalism, space and place, shopping malls

Introduction

The obscene appetite of contemporary global consumerism is often satisfied in non-places that are characterised by a reassuring and almost aseptic atmosphere.¹ These non-places are designed and managed to ensure that the acquisition of short-lived existential meanings, through the illusory purchase of overpriced status-symbols, is not disturbed by unwelcome interferences from the ‘real’ world. Yet at the same time a surplus of symbolic value is to be attached to specific consumerist experiences, in

¹ For the concept on non-place see Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).

order to differentiate them from other, very similar, experiences, and so to attract more customers, and justify the premium price of certain products.

As part of this global trend, shopping malls and other consumerist venues have at times been designed and marketed as quintessentially Italian places (often outside Italy). Such places are characterised by a reconstituted and often artificial essence of Italy, in which the geographical, linguistic, political, and cultural complexity of the country is largely lost in a vague atmosphere of *Italianess*.² Such complexity might be further reduced into the sellable labels of some particular Italian region or place, especially when supporting the sale of gastronomic produces.³

Traces of the problematic, complex, contradictory, and often traumatic histories and geographies of Italy, Italian migration and Italian colonialism are not to be easily found or consciously experienced by consumers in these sorts of shopping centres. This can be explained due to the exclusively consumerist focus, commercial aims, and well planned locations, marketing, and management typical of such centres. As Stephanie Malia Hom argues, these kinds of ‘Italianate simulacra materialize hyperreal Italy, which, masquerading as a depository of authenticity and tradition,

²Significant examples of such places include *Piazza d’Italia*, in New Orleans (USA), *The Venetian Hotel and Casino*, in Las Vegas (USA), *The Mercato*, in Dubai (UAE), *Villaggio*, in Doha (Qatar), *I-Style Town*, in Tianjin (China), and *The Venezia*, in Hua Hin (Thailand). Of different, but closely related nature, are outlets in Italy, such as the *Serravalle Designer Outlet*, and the *Valdichiana Outlet Village*, near Arezzo (Tuscany). To date, only a few sites have received significant scholarly attention: see in particular the books of Chiara Rabbiosi, *Nuovi itinerari del consumo. Gli outlet village tra esperienza dello shopping e dinamiche territoriali* (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli Editore, 2013), e Stephanie Malia Hom, *The Beautiful Country: Tourism & the Impossible State of Destination Italy* (Toronto, University of Toronto press, 2015), especially pp. 164-194 and 210-218; of particular interest for its link to Italian colonial history is *I-Style Town*, see in particular Maurizio Marinelli, ‘The triumph of the uncanny: Italians and Italian Architecture in Tianjin’, *Cultural Studies Review*, 19 (2013), 70–98; Maurizio Marinelli, ‘The ‘New I-Style Town’: from Italian concession to commercial attraction’, *China Heritage Quarterly*, 21 (2010), available online at http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=021_istyle.inc&issue=021.

³ A case in point is the recent extraordinary success of the chain Eataly, with 27 mega food stores worldwide, including 13 in Japan, 10 in Italy, 2 in the USA (New York and Chicago), and one each in Istanbul and Dubai.

simultaneously embodies and disavows the excess consumption that defines social taste and distinction in the present day'.⁴ Yet in some of these instances, the ethnically or culturally marked commercial venues are developed and established within urban locations that are visibly identified by traces of migratory and colonial histories. This article will take into consideration one such place, the Italian Forum in Sydney (Australia), and compare it with Piazza Vittorio and adjacent streets in Rome (Italy). The juxtaposition of these two places is particularly significant of the complex, ambiguous, and often contradictory relationship between migratory histories, multicultural policies, and transcultural experiences.

One pivotal paradox emerges from such juxtaposition. The Italian Forum was built within a multicultural framework and as an apparent recognition and celebration of the Italian presence in Sydney. However, it largely fails to deliver any meaningful transcultural experience to its visitors, inhabitants and traders. Furthermore, its apparent attempt to reproduce the features of a typical Italian *piazza* fails to acknowledge the actual complexity and variety of Italian public squares. At the same time such attempt does not fully embrace the postmodern pastiche based on the shameless reproduction of actual Italian locations, which we find in other 'Italian' shopping malls around the world. The result is a urban design based on stereotypical and misplaced urban signifiers of *Italianess* (the round shape, the clock, the alfresco cafes, etc.). Its supposedly Italian atmosphere delivers very few of its promises. And while it was supposed to stimulate commercial as well as cultural activities, several business within the plaza have not succeeded, and cultural events have been of limited significance and prestige. Conversely, in the last 20 years Piazza Vittorio has become the apparent and often debated symbol of migrants' large presence in the city of Rome. It has also become emblematic of the open hostility of many Romans towards migrants. Its palimpsestic nature also reveals rich processes of negotiation and positive transcultural interactions. Furthermore, several ethnic businesses have succeeded there, and the *piazza* has inspired interesting and innovative Italian literary and cultural productions in recent years. In other words, Piazza Vittorio has produced 'allergic' reactions to migrants' supposed otherness, but also vivid and meaningful aesthetic experiences and cultural and economic exchanges, while the Italian Forum,

⁴Hom, *The Beautiful Country*, p. 166.

with its anaesthetic celebration of *Italianness*, has for the most part produced indifference and contempt.

This article frames this paradox within two key questions about the relationship between humans and space: how does a certain space become a meaningful place? And why certain atmospheres activate a strong aesthetic and sensorial response, while other atmospheres never deliver their potential, and rather produce anaesthetic reactions? In addressing these issues from a multidisciplinary and comparative perspective, we intend to uncover the processes through which aesthetically vibrant and sensorially intense promises of palimpsestic urban environments might be transformed into anaesthetic experiences of purchasable otherness. Commercial enterprises organically developed by migrants within the urban core of contemporary global cities, while often resulting in social tensions and xenophobic reactions, can conversely create places of cultural, social and economic negotiation, thus offering opportunities for much more meaningful and intense transcultural, aesthetic, and commercial experiences.

Our argument is that meaningful places are not those in which a particular multicultural atmosphere might be recreated within a historical and cultural vacuum, through reconstituted and anaesthetising essences of a specific and stereotypical national identity (Italian or otherwise). Rather, meaningful places are those in which transcultural atmospheres develop organically, through ruptures, clashes, ambiguities, and negotiations. Meaningful places develop from a deep aesthetic engagement that while not always comfortable and reassuring, pushes us beyond the limitations of social experiences exclusively informed by emotionally compensatory consumerism.

Meaningful places

The constant and mutual relation of sensorial and emotional exchange between things (i.e. objects such as tools, clocks, embroidery, toys etc.; building materials such as

bricks, stones, marble, tiles; plants, and ornaments) and individuals determines a place worth living, and a life with meanings.⁵

Edward Casey has written about ‘tick places’, exemplified by a ‘landscape’ in which ‘place and self are thoroughly enmeshed’, and has distinguished them from ‘thinned out places’, which by contrast are defined as spaces characterised by lack of engagement and symbolic investment.⁶ A place exists meaningfully because a correlation between space and individual is established on the basis of an experience that is triggered by emotional and imaginative responses.

Place can also be inviting on the basis of its perceived comfort and the promise of satisfying certain needs, as well as providing gratification and contentment. This is, for instance, the case of shopping malls where, according to Nigel Thrift, an instructive example of ‘a microbiopolitics of the subliminal [...] that produce[s] effective outcomes, even when the exact reasons may be opaque’⁷ is at work. Be it ‘thick’ or ‘thin’, place is potentially attractive thanks to the atmosphere which, deliberately construed and conceived or historically and culturally developed, draws in and provides place with its own singularity and purpose. Do attraction and allure equate with meaning? The investigation of the Italian Forum and Piazza Vittorio in the second section of this essay will indicate some possible answers to this question. However, the study of the selected instances of place-making (the Italian Forum and Piazza Vittorio) must take place not within a vacuum but as part of a theoretical discussion and framework, which will help place some of our hypotheses into context as well as contribute to a reappraisal of multicultural developments and transcultural expression.

⁵ For a further development of the notion and category of “meaningful places” see the forthcoming book by Paolo Bartoloni, *Things that Matter: Objects in Italian Life and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2016).

⁶ Edward Casey, ‘Between geography and philosophy: What does it mean to be in the place-world?’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 91 (2001), 683–693 (684).

⁷ Nigel Thrift, ‘Intensities of feeling: Towards a spatial politics of affect’, *Geografiska Annaler*, 86B (2004), 57–78 (71).

The sacred has been invoked to categorize and explain the circumstances in which a rapport is established between individuals and place.⁸ Feelings and emotions account for the experience of place, and for the myriad of potential relations that might occur between individuals and things. These relations can be described as a series of emotional and sensorial experiences triggered by smell, touch, taste, images, and sounds as well as reactions to heat and cold, wind, water, light and darkness.

Happiness, for instance, can be felt at moments of harmonious co-habitation between humans and place, and through an experience of co-belonging that is the result of emotional ties first of all. Yet for such experience to have meaning, and for happiness to be more than the performative of *benessere* ('well being' as 'being well off'), a meaningful place must be more than the location in which a certain atmosphere can manifest. Place becomes meaningful when the movement and presence of bodies in space are immersed in and re-oriented by the traces of other people's past experiences, and the recognition and acknowledgement of past histories.

The necessity of such processes of recognition and re-orientation can be assumed by contrasting meaningful places to what the French anthropologist Marc Augé has described as 'non-places', and Casey as 'thinned out places'.⁹ These are the shopping malls and airport lounges sporting homogeneous design that repeat themselves time and time again in their apparently seductive but in reality dull push to produce a sterile comfort, inducing repetitive consumption.¹⁰

The things that fill these non-places reach out to be possessed and consumed rather than understood through a process of meaningful engagement. If they have meanings, these are to be found in the self-reflective narcissistic promise of pleasure and status

⁸See for instance Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), especially p. 14; see also Giovanni Caudo and Alice Sotgia, 'L'utopie du lieu', in *La poétique de l'habiter*, ed. by Augustin Berque, Alessia de Biase and Philippe Bonnin (Paris: Éditions Dnner Lieu, 2012), pp. 199-211; and Tonino Griffero, *Atmosferologia. Estetica degli spazi emozionali* (Bari: Laterza, 2010), especially pp. 27-28.

⁹ Augé, *Non-Places*; Casey, 'Between Geography'.

¹⁰ On airports see also the work of Peter Adey, 'Airports: Terminal/Vector', in *Geographies of Mobilities; Practices, Spaces, Subjects*, ed. by Tim Creswell and Peter Merriman (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 137-150.

symbol. More than things they are props supporting a rather unbalanced sense of selfhood.

The gradual proliferation of non-places may be linked to what the Italian architect and theoretician Giovanni Ferraro has described as the process of desacralisation of place.¹¹ Ferraro writes of technical indifference in relation to space that 'no longer demands to be read as a network of signs'.¹² Space becomes instead a mere prop 'without useful meanings to explain mechanical processes of modernisation'.¹³ However, he also claims that modern desacralisation has not completely erased the sacred, whose remains are often hidden, and reduced to caricatures at the very heart of non-places.¹⁴

This, we argue, is true for certain urban landscapes, such as the Italian Forum in Sydney, developed at the intersection of mainstream, Indigenous, and migrant cultures, architectures and urban developments. In these instances the potentially strong and meaningful values represented by symbolic signs of migratory experience are too easily turned into superficial and reassuring multicultural atmospheres at the service of commercial interests. The result is that ideas of identity, belonging, exchange, and encounter are turned into props supporting not so much the complex stories of negotiations, tensions, clashes, and reconciliations, which are still developing and morphing, as the image of an idyllic, static, ahistorical, and ultimately neutral and benign otherness. The sacred of which Ferraro writes is devalued to the function of instrumentality and use, and its emotional meaning is traded for the ephemeral promise of instant gratification. To reclaim the meaning of such places should become a powerful imperative for scholars concerned with the need for meaningful multicultural urban contexts as the result of a genuine process of engagement with transcultural expression.

Aesthetic atmospheres

¹¹ Giovanni Ferraro, *Il libro dei luoghi* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2001).

¹² Ferraro, *Il libro dei luoghi*, p. 17.

¹³ Ferraro, *Il libro dei luoghi*, p. 18.

¹⁴ Ferraro, *Il libro dei luoghi*, p. 21.

The term ‘atmosphere’, and the attendant philosophical and aesthetic eponymous category, has been recently mobilised to provide further insights into the relation between individual and place. However, ‘atmosphere’ is still, although widely employed in philosophy as well as geography and sociology, a source of contention and debate in relation to its meaning and definition. Ben Anderson stresses that ‘in everyday speech and aesthetic discourse, the word atmosphere is used interchangeably with mood, feeling, ambience, tone and other ways of naming collective affects.’ He adds that ‘the referent for the term atmosphere is multiple; epochs, societies, rooms, landscapes, couples, artworks and much more are all said to possess atmospheres (or be possessed by them).’¹⁵ Hence the ambiguity and the inherent openness of the term atmosphere, and the difficulty of defining it once and for all in relation to responses affected by the meeting between place and individuals. Openness appears to be one of the quintessential atmospheric traits, to the extent that it is unclear whether atmospheres are the result of natural events or whether they can be manufactured and constituted as part of purposive spatial developments. By arguing for the inherent ‘unfinished’ nature of atmospheres, Anderson seems to veer away from a constructed typology of atmospheric effect. By paraphrasing the philosopher Mikel Dufrenne, Anderson argues that ‘atmospheres are unfinished because of their constitutive openness to being taken up in experience.’¹⁶

And yet as Thrift illustrates, atmospheres can be subliminally crafted for certain purposes, including the enhancement of goods’ appeal. The crucial question in relation to the correlation between place and individual revolves around the nature, the purpose, the agency or lack thereof, and the free, spontaneous or regulated correlation between place and individuals.

In his book *Atmosferologia. Estetica degli spazi*,¹⁷ The Italian philosopher Tonino Griffero maintains that a life with meaning can be re-established through an ‘active

¹⁵ Ben Anderson, ‘Affective atmospheres’, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2 (2009), 77–81 (78).

¹⁶ Anderson, ‘Affective atmospheres’, p. 79.

¹⁷ Griffero, *Atmosferologia*. A comprehensive study of Griffero’s articulation of atmosphere in relation to meaningful places is provided in Paolo Bartoloni’s

resistance against the systematic robbing of the expressive and atmospheric value of things and their images [...].¹⁸

Paraphrasing Heidegger, Griffero reminds the reader that ‘spaces find their essence not so much in space but in place’,¹⁹ alluding to the significant distinction that must be made between space and place, where the latter intimates an investment of meaning that comes about through the mutual relation between individuals and things. This point is reinforced further when Griffero claims that a place as opposed to a space is endowed by a *genius loci*, which is the local and unique ‘condensation’ (*condensazione*) of a particular sensation or atmosphere.²⁰ The question is, what is it that one means by atmosphere, and assuming that a reasonable answer can be provided, how useful is it in the context of a debate on multicultural place-making, identity, and transcultural expression?

In Griffero’s work an atmosphere is a feeling that can be perceived, and that will subsequently necessitate a sensitive and cognitive qualification.²¹ Griffero goes further, adding that the perception of an atmosphere means to be caught (*essere afferrati*) by an excess (*un di-più*). To perceive an atmosphere, claims Griffero, is not just about interacting physically with an object or a series of objects. To ‘be caught’ by an atmosphere is the result of experiencing sensitively a situation that triggers a set of emotions, which are embedded in temporal (past and present through memory), and spatial (familiar and unfamiliar) thresholds engaged by signs (things, sounds, smells, images).

Atmospheres are emotionally loaded and they occur as the result of temporal sedimentations enriched by the interaction between individuals and place or artificially as a deliberate and purposefully conceived setting. Given their potential power of seduction, atmospheres can be manipulated and recreated for political as

forthcoming book *Things that Matter: Objects in Italian Life and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2016).

¹⁸ Griffero, *Atmosferologia*, p. 28.

¹⁹ Griffero, *Atmosferologia*, p. 42

²⁰ Griffero, *Atmosferologia*, p. 81.

²¹ Griffero, *Atmosferologia*, p. 8.

well as commercial purposes. Advertising and branding, for instance, are areas heavily informed by the notion of atmosphere. As Griffero writes, a ‘brand image’ is nothing other than ‘a series of elements that triggers cognitive and emotional reactions that are immediately translated into a well disposed attitude of the client towards the purchasing of the product’.²² Moreover, the atmospheric aura does not only concern a specific good, it must also interest and flow throughout the place in which the good is located to the extent that commercial shops or areas do not ‘interact with their clients in a rational-logic manner’.²³ They instead engage emotionally through the creation of an atmosphere that attracts the client according to a series of specifically conceived and developed criteria.

To recapitulate: 1) atmospheres are experienced emotionally and yet require a cognitive intervention on the part of the subject, who has been predisposed to respond and interact through a series of signs triggered by multiple and chaotic stimulations; 2) Atmospheres can be created ad hoc, and, contrary to point 1, are intended to cancel the cognitive intervention of the subject and induce, instead, a sense of benumbed stupor triggered by the artificially constructed allure of the brand, be it a specific good or an idea (i.e. multiculturalism). In both 1 and 2 atmospheres are determined by the encounter between place and individual, and the mutual relation that it is established between place and individual. But while in the first instance the encounter is meaningful since it is the outcome of a cognitive and active engagement between individual and place, in the second instance the exchange between individual and place is negligible due to the strategic artificiality of place and the desired passivity and lack of agency of the individual.

Is this, then, the difference between genuine and artificial atmospheres? If this is true, is it possible to create anew atmospheric places connecting with the individual in a truly authentic emotional and enriching experience? Are authentic atmospheres confined to the organic development of life; and is the creation or recreation of atmospheres an oxymoron, the impossible task destined to failure and disappointment or simply the result of market strategies at the service of commercial interests? And,

²² Griffero, *Atmosferologia*, p. 85.

²³ Griffero, *Atmosferologia*, p. 86.

conversely, can commercial interests enter a constructive dialogue with processes of creative production in the development of modes of transcultural expression?

The Italian Forum in Sydney, although conceived as the celebration of the Italian identity and presence in Australia, was also developed with the intention to combine multicultural ideas and commercial profit by investing the space with the perceived atmosphere of Italian authenticity. Rather than benumbing potential shoppers by plunging them into an artificial reality, like in more traditional non-places, the Italian Forum had the ambition to attract and make shoppers spend through the promise of an aesthetic engagement. The developers' intention was to capitalize by creating a place with meanings. To the opposite side of the spectrum one finds Piazza Vittorio in Rome, an existing place whose commercial activities are forever morphing according to changeable patterns of migration, relocation, and interaction between the so-called 'Romans' and the new arrivals, and whose attraction and atmosphere do not result from the placing of a patina of celebratory authenticity and harmony. Piazza Vittorio's cultural and commercial attraction is the result of developing social tensions and conflicts, and the turbulent encounters of allegedly irreconcilable identities and interests.

By considering two 'Italian' commercial places and the related atmospheres that in such places are produced and experienced, we do not intend to provide close, definitive, and rigid answers to such complex questions. Rather we aim to provide a starting point for a more subtle and critical understanding of such complex issues, one that does not simply conflate consumerism and capitalism with meaningless places and artificial atmospheres, but rather invite to reflect on the specific and complex processes through which places and atmospheres are constituted within an urban environment.

The Italian Forum in Sydney

The Italian Forum is located in Leichhardt, an inner-city suburb of Sydney traditionally inhabited by many Italian migrants who came to Australia in the postwar period, and by their children and grand children. Adjacent suburbs, including Haberfield and Five Dock also have a large presence of Italians, and the main streets of all these suburbs are characterised by a visible presence of Italian shops,

associations, cafes, and restaurants. Completed in 1999, the Italian Forum is structured as an enclosed square with restaurants and cafes, a terrace with various shops, prevalently selling cloths, and four levels of apartments. It also hosts the public library of Leichhardt, and a Cultural Centre that in recent years has produced a number of events relating to Italian culture and society. The Italian Forum's architecture attempts to imitate an imaginary 'typical' Italian square, with earthy colours, a small fountain with a statue of Dante, and a large clock on the main wall.

The development of the apartment blocks in the Italian Forum was made possible on the condition that the area also contributed to the Italian presence in multicultural Sydney. Its alleged *Italianess* was also supposed to attract many visitors and customers. The politics surrounding the design and construction of the Italian Forum must be understood within the broader context of Australian multiculturalism.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Australia gradually moved away from assimilationist policies and ideologies, and towards multiculturalism. Many initiatives developed to acknowledge the presence and contribution of migrants to Australian society. A reflection on the limits and contradictions of multiculturalism in Australia is beyond the scope of this article. However it is important to emphasise that the politics of difference at the core of Australian multiculturalism has often resulted in a stereotypical representation of ethnic communities that confirms, rather than challenge, the centrality of white Anglo Australia at the core of the nation.²⁴ In order to become part of the nation, ethnic communities have been required and encouraged to provide stereotypical, recognizable, unproblematic, and enjoyable experiences of otherness to the rest of the country. Complex histories of migration and colonialism and hybrid identities have often been instead repressed, marginalised, and overlooked. In the following two decades, multiculturalism has often been under the attack of

²⁴On the relationship between multiculturalism and whiteness in Australia, and the colonial roots of Australia multiculturalism see Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998); and Ghassan Hage, "Multiculturalism and White Paranoia in Australia," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 3.3–4 (2002): 417–437. See also the important work of Vince Marotta; in particular, for the distinction between multicultural and multiethnic cities. Vince Marotta, *Multicultural and Multiethnic Cities in Australia*, in *Ethnic Landscapes in an Urban World (Research in Urban Sociology, Volume 8)*, ed. by Ray Hutchison and Jerome Kruse (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2006), pp.41–62.

right wing parties and governments, and has lost most of its ideological appeal on both sides of politics. Meanwhile the largest Australian cities, Melbourne and Sydney, have become global and multiethnic metropolis, well beyond the purposes and boundaries of multiculturalism. The *Italian Forum* is more a late product of multiculturalism than the urban expression of a contemporary global and multiethnic metropolis.

The *Italian Forum* project largely failed on at least three levels: as a multicultural centre celebrating and promoting *Italianess*, as a commercial centre, and as an aesthetically pleasing urban environment. A recent article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* summarised the state of the Italian Forum with the title ‘Leichhardt’s Italian Forum goes from retail tiger to white elephant’.²⁵ The article noted that ‘Once there were 12 packed Italian eateries, now there are eight and they are all but empty. Where there were 22 shops, there are now just 13’. After the initial commercial success in the early 2000s, the place has gradually but consistently lost its appeal. The article quotes a commissioned study of 2012, according to which the Italian Forum has become ‘a white elephant due to poor management and high strata fees for commercial properties’. It also quotes Leichhardt mayor Darcy Byrne’s worry that ‘if we are not careful, Leichhardt’s status as the spiritual home of Italian culture in Australia, could be permanently lost’. Yet an opposite interpretation of the demise of the Italian Forum might become apparent by applying a cultural and aesthetic perspective: the place has actually never been the ‘spiritual home’ of Italians in Australia, and it is rather the result of a multicultural approach that has failed to transition into a new form of transcultural approach - such new approach is required in order to produce meaningful and rewarding aesthetic and commercial experiences in a global city like Sydney.²⁶

²⁵ Daisy Dumas, ‘Leichhardt’s Italian Forum goes from retail tiger to white elephant’, *Sydney Morning Herald* (online), 7 July 2014. Last accessed 3 September 2014 at <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/leichhardts-italian-forum-goes-from-retail-tiger-to-white-elephant-20140606-39oyr.html>.

²⁶ We recognise that other negative factors might also have contributed to the current situation, such as poor management, legal issues, and broader demographic and commercial shifts in Sydney and Australia. However the peculiarity of the *Italian Forum* is also apparent and must be investigated.

The Italian Forum project had the potential to become an exemplary attempt to include a multicultural perspective into Australian urban planning practice, which have usually proven to be resistant to multicultural influences. However, it replicated most of the limitations emphasised by Susan Thompson with regard to planning and multiculturalism in Australia.²⁷ Firstly, even though the voice of the Italian Australian community was not completely ignored, the complex historical and geographical intersections of race, class, and gender were not properly acknowledged and kept into due consideration. The rhetorical celebratory intent, and the will to ‘forget and enjoy’, prevailed over the need to remember the past in all its tensions and contradictions. Secondly, economic considerations seem to have prevailed over socio-cultural considerations. For instance, as we will illustrate, the shops and apartments were completed much before the completion of the cultural centre, and little attention was given to socio-cultural implications in the management and renting of shops and restaurant. Thirdly, while the Italian Forum was supposed to be an Italian Australian place, migrants’ attitudes, behavior, and practices, were not given proper consideration. The apartments for instance are virtually indistinguishable from other modern apartments mostly designed for young professionals living in the city and inner city areas; there is no provision for vegetable gardens and sustainable urban food production; and the enclosed space of the *piazza* does not allow casual meetings and chats by passer-by neighbours.

The Italian Forum has not become a meaningful space of transcultural interaction since its planning, design, and management privileged an imaginary idea of sensual, luxury, and elegant Italy over the creation of what Amanda Wise has called ‘sensuous multiculturalism’, and ‘multicultural place-sharing’.²⁸ Ideally, the Italian Forum should have facilitated and celebrated ‘the rhythms and rhymes of urban diversity through forms and sites of interaction across difference, the production of everyday forms of belonging and of material, social and symbolic networks’.²⁹ Instead, the

²⁷ Susan Thompson, ‘Planning and multiculturalism: a reflection on Australian local practice’, *Planning Theory and Practice*, 4 (2010), 275–293.

²⁸ Amanda Wise, ‘Sensuous multiculturalism: emotional landscapes of inter-ethnic living in Australian suburbia’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36 (2010), 917–937 (918).

²⁹ Wise, ‘Sensuous multiculturalism’, p. 918.

emotion of difference, encounter, and negotiation was hidden under an imaginary idea of a stylish, unproblematic, and reassuring Italy, that should have facilitated consumerism and economic gain. This is to be framed not only within a misplaced understanding of shopping malls design and development practice, but also within the profound cultural and political contradictions of Australian multicultural planning. Firstly, dialogue and negotiation between culturally diverse people is often made impossible in Australian ‘manufactured, ‘boutique’ multiethnic public spaces where the marginalised and the prejudiced stay away’.³⁰ The intention to hide or exclude conflict (and its historical traces), impact on such spaces’ capacity to become meaningful places. By avoiding the risk of cultural and social destabilisation, the capacity for meaningful ‘new patterns of social interaction’ is also compromised.³¹ Secondly, council planners have often attributed no historic or aesthetic value to housing alterations made by Southern European migrants, and in many instances have been openly hostile to them.³² It is also worth remembering that in the same years in which the project was taking place, the alleged ‘Mediterraneanisation’ of Australian houses and suburbs was portrayed negatively by many media commentators and politicians.³³ This project thus had to be purified by excessive and disturbing references to working-class mediterranean migration, while allegedly celebrating its contribution to Australian multiculturalism.

Despite its commercial focus, the Italian Forum has been unable to deliver as a commercial enterprise in a contemporary global city. First, it does not offer a comfortable, reassuring, and luxurious shopping experience that can be replicated almost identically in most global cities worldwide – thus it cannot compete with large shopping centres such as Westfield in Sydney CBD. Second, it does not offer an exciting and rich experience of a specific culture and gastronomy, in this case a

³⁰ Vince Marotta, ‘Multicultural and multiethnic cities in Australia’, *Research in Urban Sociology*, 8 (2007), 41–62 (55).

³¹ Ash Amin, ‘Ethnicity and the multicultural city: living with diversity’, *Environment and Planning A.*, 34 (2002), 959–980.

³² David Beynon, ‘Architecture, multiculturalism and cultural sustainability in Australian cities’, *The International Journal of Environmental, cultural, economic and social sustainability*, 5 (2009), 45–56.

³³ Fiona Allon, ‘Translated spaces/translated identities: the production of place, culture and memory in an Australian suburb’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 26 (2002), 99–110.

sensory powerful and enjoyable experience of Italy, – thus it cannot compete with the myriad of shops and restaurants that do so in gentrified suburbs such as Paddington and Surry Hills. Third, it does not closely and effectively relate to the needs of a specific ethnic community, in this instance the now elderly postwar Italian migrants or their acculturated children and grandchildren – thus it cannot be as successful as areas like Sydney’s Chinatown. Fourth, it does not facilitate and stimulate transcultural exchanges in which different cultures and different sensory experiences can be negotiated and purchased –transcultural exchanges that have become apparent in many different urban contexts in Sydney. In other words the Italian Forum is not really Italy, is not really Italian Australia, and is not really global or transcultural. It is neither a non-place nor a meaningful place.

Given that the Italian Forum developed in an area marked by the presence of Italians and their commercial activities, many of which are still largely successful, a more specific analysis is required in order to understand how and why it failed to produce meaningful cultural and social experiences, and aesthetic atmospheres that could also be consistently converted into economic value. Here we focus on three specific aspects: the design of the Italian Forum; the Cultural Centre that was supposed to be at the core of its cultural and commercial development; and the shopping and eating experiences offered in it.

The design of the Italian forum is structured around supposed markers of a typical Italian urban environment: the enclosed piazza, the arches, the small fountain, the small statue of Dante, the 6-hour clock, the earthy colours of the walls, the *al fresco* restaurants and cafes, the fashion shops. It attempts to offer an exciting and yet also reassuring image of Italy, one that should have facilitated enjoyment and consumption. One of the authors of this article has previously suggested to read the Italian forum as ‘a bad translation’ of Italy.³⁴ This is not necessarily a negative comments in so far as all translations are for their own nature destined to fail, and yet still play an essential function in the dialogue between different cultures, traditions, and languages. The etymological roots of translation (Lat. translation, Lat. trans- and

³⁴Paolo Bartoloni, ‘Translation and the Urban Space’, *Literature and Aesthetics*, 5-2, (2005), pp. 109-18.

fero, meaning to carry across) suggests though the need for the translator to literally carry something with him/her, to transfer something from one place to another. This is where the Italian forum, from a potentially bad yet fruitful translation, becomes a failed translation. It fails to carry within its structure and design meaningful objects and atmospheres of Italy and Italian migration into an Australia urban context.

The symbols allegedly referring to Italian life and culture, such as the statue of Dante, the clock tower, the archways, and the earthy colours, are merely gestures that fails to create a sense of mutual engagement with the life around them. The feeling and sense of a *genius loci*, to which Griffero refers to in his illustration of atmospheres as one of the essential marks of meaningful places, is missing in the Italian Forum. This is partly due to the monolithic and frozen structure of the Forum which, by its very position of hidden recess tucked away from the bustling life of the main street, is unable to freely interact and mutually engage with the passers-by. One does not happen to arrive in the Italian Forum. By contrast, one has to go to the Forum by following a particular route as one does when propelled by a reason. The very act of regulating movement according to a purpose strips away the potential for surprise and serendipitous encounters, and turns objects from symbols of free and chaotic engagement to signs with a clearly defined function. One goes to a shop to buy something or goes to a museum to gratify an aesthetic need or enhance knowledge about an artist, an epoch or a historic event. And yet, museums or shops are not meaningful places simply because their scope is to provide a service which is not necessarily connected to their situatedness. A museum is well organized, rich, significant, but certainly not meaningful as such, and the same goes for a shop. Paradoxically the Italian Forum is not even a museum or a shop. It is not meaningful as such because is devoid of life's fluidity, and it is not rich or significant because the individual objects and the events that are on display have been stripped of their sacredness and appear as poor caricatures and calques of a life that is happening somewhere else. In the words of Griffero, the things and objects in the Forum have been robbed of their meaning and employed as mere instruments and signs referring to something else, and as such without a life of their own. The statue of Dante and the clock tower are empty masks that cannot 'catch us' simply because they lack a language and a textuality through which a meaningful engagement can take place.

Italian migrants have carried with them from Italy objects, stories, memories, and languages that relate to complex, happy, and exciting but also tragic histories of poverty, class struggle, internal and external colonialism, racism, migration, adventure, political consciousness, crime, religion, culture, social structure, individual, family and community agency. Very little of all this is to be found in the Italian Forum. Furthermore, once in Australia, these migrants have transformed, adapted, negotiated, reinvented, readapted all these objects, stories, memories, and languages, through transcultural encounters, clashes and negotiations with Indigenous Australians, other migrants, and ‘mainstream’ Australians. This is also largely absent in the Italian Forum. And finally, but also very importantly, the limited financial resources have probably made impossible any proper reference to the great architectural traditions of Italy. For instance, the influence of Palladian architecture is to be easily found in some of the buildings of the University of Sydney campus, but has certainly not shaped the architecture of the Italian Forum.

All these complex layers of history, memory, and culture are central to any serious attempt to even badly translate the palimpsestic nature on Italian urban environments within a new, multicultural location. What is left is instead an artificial essence of *postcard-Italianess* that lacks the organic, contradictory, ambiguous, and challenging fabric of both Italian *and Australian* urban cityscapes. The resulting atmosphere, once the initial excitement for the new urban location has passed, does not deliver either the rich texture of actual transcultural locations, or the soft silky elegance of contemporary luxurious shopping environments.

Furthermore, the Cultural Centre that should have been at the core of the project was not properly developed and supported. The land where the Italian Forum now stands was donated ‘by the NSW State Government to the Italian community to acknowledge its contribution to the advancement of Australian society’.³⁵ While the apartment block and the shops were completed in 1999, the Centre only opened ten years later, after a series of long legal issues; and the performance space only opened

³⁵ See

http://www.italianforum.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=27, last accessed 3 September 2014.

in 2012, after a further financial injection by the Rudd Government. Even then, the non-for-profit association managing the centre went into voluntary administration in August 2013.

While it is hard to understand the intricate legal battles surrounding the development and management of the Centre, it is apparent that it never became the place in which Italian Australian culture could be represented, negotiated, and experienced; neither became the central engine of the commercial viability of the Italian Forum. Under new management, the Cultural Centre has in recent times developed interesting cultural initiatives that suggest a clearer understanding of the complex cultural needs of a global city like Sydney, beyond the rhetoric of multiculturalism, and a nostalgic and superficial attachment to some symbolic markers of alleged *Italianness*. Such initiatives have included a series of events related to the local community, but also significant contemporary artistic performances. For instance the Kalascima band from Italy has performed in very entertaining fashion ‘the original sound from South of Italy’.³⁶ Their songs relate to southern Italy’s musical traditions and to a long and rich series of ethnographic studies in southern Italian musical folklore (especially but not exclusively Apulian), yet also express the contemporary complexity of Italian transculturalism through a postcolonial perspective. They can be attractive for Italian migrants and their children, as well as for a broader cosmopolitan Australian audience. This is an example of a rich and more meaningful and honest approach that is finally recognising the global and transcultural nature of Sydney, of the Italian Australian community, and of Italian contemporary society. Had this sort of initiative been at the centre of the Italian Forum development and management since the beginning, the Italian Forum would have been able to preserve more effectively its appeal as an Italian/Australian/transcultural centre. A proper cultural management adds value to the two main performing spaces in the Italian Forum (the theatre and the piazza), and also produces cultural, aesthetic, and sensorial experiences that might transform the Italian Forum into a meaningful place of Italian, Australian, transcultural and global atmospheres.

³⁶ See <http://www.kalascima.it/en/>, last accessed 3 September 2014.

Finally, if one has to identify the essence of an Italian stereotypical experience, this must be embodied if not through erotic experiences, at least through food and wine. As middle class, well educated Italians living in Sydney, the authors of this article and many of their Italian friends living in Sydney initially approached the Italian Forum with a certain degree of curiosity and enthusiasm, especially with regard to the opportunity of enjoying a large and varied offer of good and honest Italian food. The Italian Forum was also the first place in Sydney where one of the authors was taken upon his arrival by a small group of Italian Australians he had met at the University of Sydney. It was an uncanny experience, in which both familiar and unfamiliar objects, smells, tastes, and words were all intertwined. What was uncanny and somehow disturbing, however, was not the hybridity of the place, its mixing of Italian and Australian cultures and gastronomies, but rather the manifest artificiality of the place and its food, which hid the complexity of Italian Australian cultures, histories and communities under the pretence of a typical Italian piazza and typical Italian food; a typicality that would immediately appear forced, inauthentic, and unsatisfying to an Italian.

The gastronomic offer in the Italian Forum has been for the large part evidence of the inability to perceive a fundamental socio-economic and cultural shift in the population of a global city like Sydney, in which an increasing number of people is able to identify and request meaningful aesthetic and sensory experiences. This does not mean the need for producing and selling ‘authenticity’. Rather, it means that an increasing number of people are more easily able to identify the amount of deep knowledge and creativity expressed in and attached to cultural and gastronomic artefacts and performances. What is often presented as a search for ‘authentic’ Italian, French or Chinese food, is rather a search for meals and beverages that carry a significant amount of knowledge and creativity (in the produce, in the recipes, in the cooking processes, etc.). The important distinction here is that while the former would implicitly reject any sense of hybridity and ‘contamination’, in search for the ‘real’ Italian, French or Chinese experience, the second strives on them. Here is precisely where the production of imaginary authenticity is shifting towards a transcultural production of territorialised culinary experiences based on meaningful and creative knowledge of different products, cultures, and sensory worlds. This does not necessarily implies expensive and cosmopolitan culinary experiences, but it does

require a proactive and creative engagement with food cultures, produce, and techniques, something to be easily found in many restaurants in Sydney, but not in the Italian Forum.

Given all these considerations, it is not surprising that the Italian Forum has also failed to become an iconic presence at the urban core of Sydney. To our knowledge there are not significant media, artistic, and literary productions that have represented or spoken about this place, or have embraced its supposedly multicultural nature. This, as we will argue in the next section, is particularly significant when compared to a transcultural place like Piazza Vittorio in Rome, which in the last fifteen years has been at the centre of successful musical, cinematic, and literary productions. A place is not only meaningful in itself, but also in its ability to symbolise certain tensions and histories through the artistic and cultural artefacts that it inspires.

Furthermore, somehow provocatively, we have chosen Piazza Vittorio as a model of comparison between the Italian Forum and an existing Italian *piazza*. Our argument is that authenticity requires an actual engagement with the reality of multilayered and complex histories set within increasingly globalised cultural geographies. If some authenticity is to be found, it is not in the nationalistic or parochial simplifications of essentialised identities, in the rigid separation of multicultural ethnicities or in the artificial establishment of aseptic non-places with an essence of some stereotypical *Italianess*. It is rather in the recognition of transculturality as a foundational element not only of contemporary societies and globalising cityscapes, but also of past societies, and stratified urban environments.

Piazza Vittorio in Rome

Piazza Vittorio is the core of the Esquilino, a central suburb of Rome. Esquilino is, together with Pigneto and Tor Pignattara, one of the Roman suburbs that in the last twenty years have seen the strongest emergence of small ethnic businesses and social spaces, as well as significant social conflicts associated to these urban changes.³⁷ The

³⁷ Pierpaolo Mudu, 'The new Romans: ethnic economic activities in Rome', in *Lanscapes of the ethnic economy*, ed. by David H. Kaplan and Wei Li (Boulder, CO: Rowan and Littlefield), pp. 165–176; also on Piazza Vittorio and the surrounding area

public discourse has often been dominated by a negative perception of such transformation. Pierpaolo Mudu argues that such perception can be summarised in the following terms: ‘a once middle-class district turned into a blighted area by the influx of immigrants [...] a once-beautiful district now shed of its ‘exquisitely Roman traits’ as typical local products are threatened by the bric-a-brac imported by hundreds of illegal immigrants’.³⁸ Importantly, Mudu emphasises how the perception of migrants’ responsibility in the degradation of this urban area does not take into consideration fundamental urban changes in the area due to real-estate speculations, and a lack of public investment in the maintenance and valorisation of public spaces in the area.³⁹ The xenophobic misinterpretation of the reasons for the urban degradation of the area, often too uncritically accepted and promoted by Roman newspapers and other media, has also resulted in a number of political demonstrations against migrants staged by the extreme right, and at times also involving parties in Government, such as Lega and Alleanza Nazionale, and the former mayor of the city, Gianni Alemanno.⁴⁰ The hostility towards migrants is also apparent in the significant number of racist writings and posters on the walls, and the many visible references to neo-fascist ideologies and slogans.⁴¹

Complex processes of repression and negotiation are constantly at play in the area. For instance, the large market that used to be located at the centre of Piazza Vittorio, and that in recent years had evolved into the largest market of ethnic products and produces in Rome, has been moved to an enclosed and covered near-by area. While similar relocations have taken place also for other markets that had retained a more distinct Roman character (for instance Testaccio), this relocation is also to be

see Pierpaolo Mudu, ‘Gli Esquilini: contributi al dibattito sulle trasformazioni nel rione Esquilino di Roma dagli anni Settanta al Duemila’, in *I territori di Roma*, ed. by R. Morelli, E. Sonnino and C. M. Travaglini (Rome: University of Rome, 2003), 641–680. Pierpaolo Mudu, ‘Patterns of segregation in contemporary Rome’, *Urban Geographies*, 27 (2006), 422–440.

³⁸ Mudu, ‘The new Romans’, p. 173.

³⁹ Mudu, ‘Gli Esquilini’, p. 660.

⁴⁰ Paolo Favero, ‘Italians, the “good people”’: reflections on national self-representation in contemporary Italian debates on xenophobia and war’, *Outlines - Critical Practice Studies*, 2 (2010), 138–153.

⁴¹ Favero, ‘Italians’, p. 142.

understood as a political attempt to reclaim and re-gentrify the area, also through the development of a luxury hotel and university premises, and strict police patrolling.⁴²

Nevertheless, Piazza Vittorio and its adjacent streets maintain a strong multicultural character, with a large presence of migrants and successful ethnic businesses.

Furthermore, in recent years this area has inspired a growing number of cultural initiatives that have embraced multiculturalism and transculturalism, such as the cultural association Apollo 11 and its Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio, the successful documentary movie linked to the orchestra, and the novel *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* by Amara Lakous, which has also enjoyed a significant literary and commercial success.

These cultural productions demonstrate that the area has stimulated and inspired the artistic and cultural productions of local, national, and international significance. Not all these initiatives have embraced the transcultural essence of contemporary Rome. For instance, it has been argued that the documentary movie on the Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio relies too heavily on the rhetorical celebration of the eternal city and the othering of the migrant musicians, so that they are never really represented as part of the city and the nation.⁴³ As stated by Favero, they become ‘the objects of entertainment rather than producers of music (and the film too) in their own right’.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, one has to recognise that such initiatives and productions are also expression of a much broader and more articulated development of migrant music, culture, and art in the area and in Rome more in general.⁴⁵

The interesting paradox is that the transcultural Piazza Vittorio is actually much more ‘authentically’ Roman than its nostalgic and imaginary pre-immigration version, in so

⁴² Mudu, ‘The new Romans’, p. 173.

⁴³ Paolo Favero, ‘The spectacle of multicultural art and the invisibility of politics: a review of the documentary film “L’Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio” (by Agostino Ferrente, Italy 2006)’, *Social Anthropology*, 13 (2009), 345–350; see also Abigail Keating, ‘All roads lead to Piazza Vittorio: Transnational spaces in Agostino Ferrente’s documusical’, *Studies in Documentary Film*, 5 (2011), 197–209 .

⁴⁴ Favero, ‘The spectacle’, p. 349.

⁴⁵ On this see in particular the work being conducted by Alessandro Portelli, Alessandro Triulzi and their collaborators at the Archivio Franco Chioggiola and Archivio delle memorie migranti.

far as it embodies more honestly and realistically the palimpsestic nature typical of this Piazza, but also and more generally of the urban fabric of Rome. Rome has always been postmodern in its palimpsestic accumulation of intertwined traces of different historical eras, cultural influences, and social classes.⁴⁶ After all, Rome is a city developed in almost three millennia through waves of colonisation, urbanisation, migration, tourism, and international influences. One should not forget for instance that Rome before the large international migration of the last 40 years, had been already transformed by the post-unification waves of migration and urbanisation from the centre and south of Italy. In other words, Rome is a city that can only be faithful to its history, identity, and urban fabric in so far as it does not get pigeon holed into a purified vision of a specific historical, social and cultural past that never existed as such. This is also true for Piazza Vittorio and the whole Esquilino district of which is part, an area apparently dominated by the modern building of the post-unification period (that is, the 'foreign', colonial, influence of northern bureaucracy and urban planning), but in fact enriched by infinite traces of different historical periods, events, cultural, political and religious beliefs, urban interventions, and the lives and activities of people from different geographical origins and social classes.

On a different yet as important level, the 'authenticity' of Piazza Vittorio is also to be found in its unique capacity to offer multiple and constant reminders of those histories of Italy that are rarely if at all recalled in prevailing discourse about the nation: the history of a country traversed, occupied, influenced, and reshaped for centuries by different people and different cultures; the history of the national unification through the occupation of the south and the imposition of colonial ideologies; the history of Italy as part of the Mediterranean world; the history of Italian colonialism; the history of immense and sustained migratory flows, which is to be understood as part of larger global trends as well as long-established Italian migratory phenomena; the history of Fascism and Italian pivotal contribution to the development of Fascist and racist ideologies. As the book of Amara Lakous shows, many of these histories come

⁴⁶ On this important topic see Dom Holdaway and Filippo Trentin, 'Introduction: Rome, postmodern narratives of a cityscape', in *Rome, postmodern narratives of a cityscape*, ed. by Dom Holdaway and Filippo Trentin (London, Pickering & Chatto, 2013), pp. 1–18.

together and become apparent in places like Piazza Vittorio.⁴⁷ This helps explain the failure of a place like the Italian Forum, a place whose significance is irremediably compromised by its willingness to forget, hide or ignore all these histories as well as the colonial and racist foundations of Australia, under the mantle of the supposedly progressive and democratic multiculturalism that has financed and structured its development.

Concluding remarks

The Italian Forum in Sydney and Piazza Vittorio in Rome are urban places that can hardly be compared. Too different are the time and nature of their development, the geographical locations, the historical, social and cultural contexts. However, their juxtaposition is not simply a provocation. In studying, understanding, and planning our rapidly globalising cities, it is important to recognise the peculiarities of specific urban contexts vis a vis the imaginary construction of stereotypical locations and essentialised identities. Urban experiences increasingly shaped by rarefied immersions in non-places and adulterated atmospheres are often suddenly and abruptly interrupted by the powerful reminders of the complex stratifications of the geographical and historical layers that constitute the fabric of postmodern cities. The pivotal question here is not if and how Piazza Vittorio might represent a better model of multicultural and transcultural development. The enormous social and political issues that mark the Piazza would suggest otherwise. Rather, the question is why Piazza Vittorio cannot be recognised as an authentic Italian piazza, and why simplified, imaginary versions of what an Italian piazza is supposed to be have been privileged not only in Italian public discourse and urban planning, but even in an allegedly multicultural urban environment like Sydney, and within a community, the Italian Australians of Sydney, that should know all too well the actual richness and complexity of Italian histories, cultures, and geographies.

⁴⁷ See Norma Bouchard, 'Reading the discourse of multicultural Italy: promises and challenges of transnational Italy in an era of global migration', *Italian Culture*, 28 (2010), 104–120; Federica Mazzara, 'Beyond Italian borders', *Crossings*, 3 (2012), 71–87; and Graziella Parati, 'Where do migrants live? Amara Lakous's *Clasj of civilizations over an elevator in Piazza Vittorio*', *Annali di Italianistica*, 28 (2010), 431–445.

In our opinion the answer is to be found in an aesthetic understanding of the emotional geographies around which meaningful places and atmospheres are created, experienced and, often, rejected. It seems apparent to us that a complex, contradictory, at times hostile and violent place like Piazza Vittorio can deliver a more meaningful experience than the artificial otherness available through the poorly planned, designed, and managed multicultural environment of the Italian Forum. At the same time, a place like the Italian Forum cannot compete with global consumerism in providing a rarified, comfortable essence of purchasable otherness. It is in the power of aesthetic and sensory experiences structured around deep and sincere connections with different historical and geographical contexts that a more sustainable, enjoyable, and meaningful experience of transcultural exchange can be provided within increasingly globalised urban environments.