

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Generating modern heritage through changing urban environments and identities: A case study from Prato's (Italy) industrial district, history, and multiculturalism in a polycentric urban setting

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Abstract

Following economic crises, the evolution of industrial districts (IDs) has frequently caused the crisis within entire urban systems. Being IDs based on individual will and competences, rather than on big industries, their failure can compromise the city's identity. The Italian manufacturing industry consistently relied on this process, and this paper analyzes the case study of Prato, a medieval core city in central Italy that, since the mid-twentieth century, developed a world-class textile district based on a polycentric production structure and widespread family entrepreneurialism. During the global economic crisis of the early 2000s, production almost stalled, leaving the city without the core of a collective identity, but with a legacy of empty spaces. Significant foreign migration, in particular from China, filled these spaces, consolidating the clothing sector. The study investigated the city's contemporary identities resulting from the rapid change in people, activities, and spaces.

KEYWORDS

changing cities, historic center, identity, industrial districts, multiculturalism

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INTRODUCTION

Historic cities have experienced overlapping periods characterised by different social, economic, and cultural traits that define the connection of the population with the territory and its identity. The characteristics of living, on an architectural and urban scale, change according to the needs of the population in a specific historical period. However, these characteristics determining the transformation in the use of public and private space are often not easily detectable as they are permeated by everyday life. The research investigates this change in the case study of Prato, a medium-sized Italian city with a medieval nucleus, whose identity has been characterised over time by first agricultural and then industrial production. In 1900 the production was consolidated with the creation of the textile industrial district, which permeated the urban fabric in a capillary way and that, following the crisis of the early 2000s, almost stalled, emptying the city of production and confusing its identity. Since the 1990s, the city has received a consistent migration of foreign citizens, counting up to 124 foreign nationalities (data at January 1, 2022 Tuttitalia.it). Following the crisis, particularly the Chinese community has played a fundamental role in the development of the city, including establishing an expanding fast fashion district (Biggeri et al., 2021; Dei Ottati, 2014), this community represents 62.4% of the province's foreign population (data at January 1, 2022 Tuttitalia.it). Prato has been widely studied, especially from the economic perspective, for the structure of its identity, which has made it an “exemplary” case (Becattini, 2015) among the Italian ones. However, the value of this city lies not only in its industrial power, but also in the cultural traits that shape a specific way of living and which, over the centuries, have generated relationships between public and private spaces that results in forms of tangible and intangible heritage in relation to the natural context. Today, especially those elements that are more difficult to grasp, risk being lost and deserve to be recognized and valued, while monitoring changes in social, economic, and urban fabrics of the city.

The research lays its foundations on the concept that each urban fragment is shaped by a community for its specific needs in a given historical moment and environmental context. Therefore, it is necessary to document the processes of change, considering it as part of the development, in order to work on the identity awareness of the inhabitants, essential for the development of the territory (Cilona & Del Bianco, 2022; Del Bianco, 2020, 2021; Turner, 2017), and to understand the settlement logics (Lejano & Del Bianco, 2018). Finally, the study looks at the Prato context in the wake of the Historic Urban Landscape approach (UNESCO, 2011) and tries to unveil what is not usually seen or perceived as valuable but that is actually representing an example of modern heritage (Del Bianco, 2020, 2021, 2022, 247–253) trying to contribute to a better urban growth in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goal 11—Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. The research was supported by the Municipality of Prato in the framework of the development of its new Structural Plan and it was developed over a year, with onsite surveys and interviews and this paper reports its development and conclusions.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRATO CONTEXT

Prato is an intermediate city of around 195,331 inhabitants (Municipality of Prato, 2022) and it is in continuous demographic growth.¹ It was built on the plain between the cities of Florence and Pistoia (Figure 1), following the Roman agricultural centuriation, a system of organizing the agricultural land used to divide a flat area in an orthogonal grid of roads and canals² and agricultural plots (Figure 2). Its core is medieval, and its twelfth century walls are still in place, rising along the Bisenzio river (Figure 3). The city developed polycentrically following the matrix of the Roman centuriation, with residential nuclei located at the intersection of minor *cardos* and *decumani*³ (Vannucchi, 2008), and it is characterized, in both its surroundings and interior, by a diversity of production, culture, and landscape. Since the eighteenth century, the

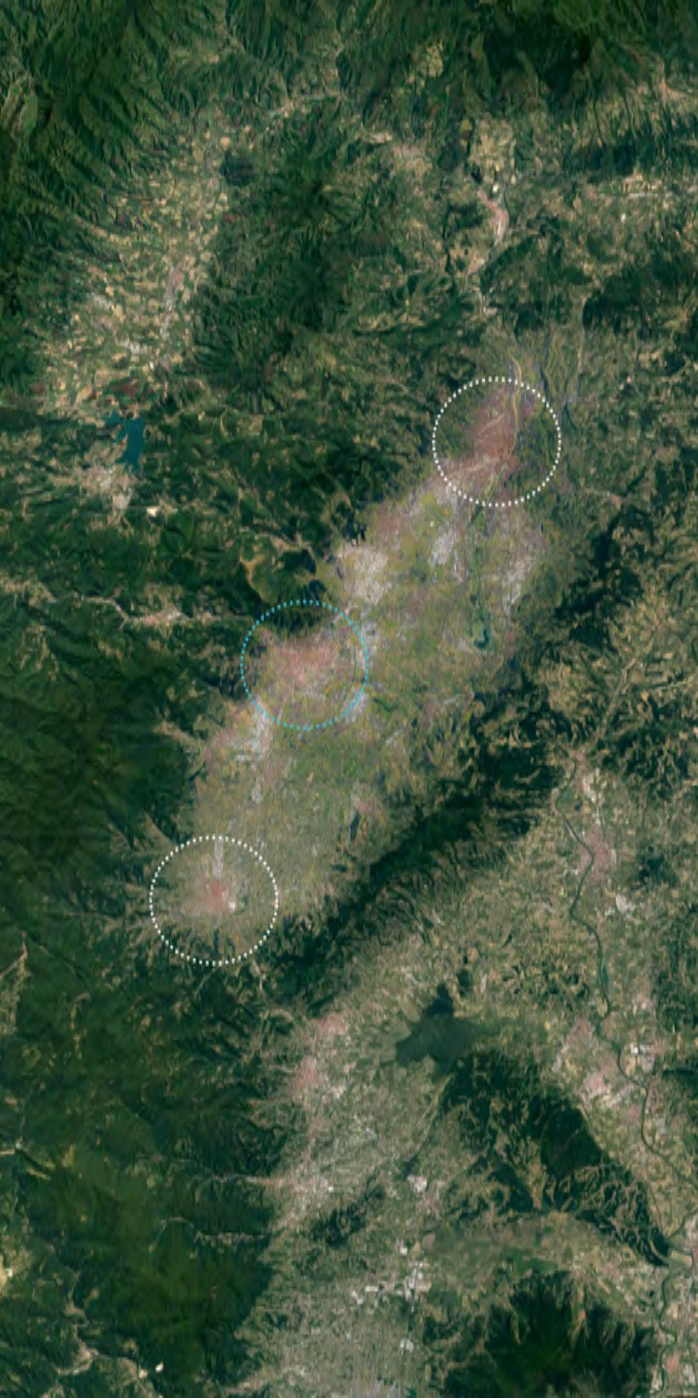


FIGURE 1 The Tuscan plain showing the three main cities, from the right, Florence, Prato and Pistoia (*Source*: Google Maps, elaboration by the author, 2022).



FIGURE 2 Prato's municipal territory schematic evolution. Historical thresholds 1934, 1954, 1966, 1979, 1991, 2007, and 2021 (Source: Municipal Town Planning base map, elaboration by the author with Marini, M., 2022).

city is known for its productive and commercial character producing wool, textiles, copper, and paper mills⁴ (Becattini, 2015). During the 1900s, with industrialization, the city began to grow beyond the historic center and around the agricultural villages. The city became a robust industrial district for textile production and for fashion. The growth was widespread, based on a system in which the home was also a workspace where looms could be placed. Spaces, as small as 4×4 m, were large enough to accommodate a mechanical loom. Most of the population was engaged in the textile business and expressed pride in the wealth it generated. Today, the histories and identities of these hamlets are still alive and continue to be valued even by younger generations (Punto Mobile, 2017). In the early 2000s, the Prato's industrial district has experienced the repercussions of an increasingly globalized and crisis-ridden economy that swept the city, and most of the family businesses failed or stopped. This created both a significant number of empty spaces and a loss of identity among the local population, producing what the writer and former textile entrepreneur Nesi in an interview, conducted for the purpose of this research and reported in its reports, called the “city mourning.” Using the empty spaces and the idea that people should live and work in the same place, the new Chinese immigrants started businesses allied to textile manufacturing: the production of clothing. However, Prato continued to attract migrants, first from other Italian regions and today from all over the world becoming a multicultural city; 24% of its inhabitants are foreign, with 29,822 Chinese citizenship, 2368 Pakistani,



FIGURE 3 Main urban elements: the Bisenzio river, the medieval walls, the highway and high speed road, the railroad, and the industrial poles (M1 and M2) (Source: Google Maps, elaboration by the author, 2022).

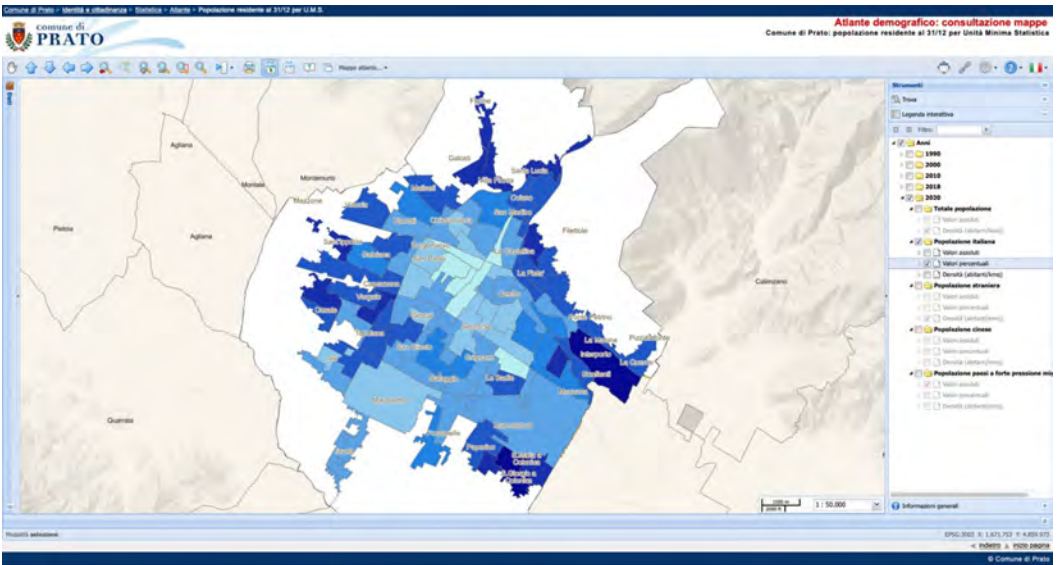


FIGURE 4 Screenshot of the demographic atlas by the Statistical Unit of the Prato Municipality showing the percentage of Italian residents in 2020. Dark blue is the highest concentration (Source: www.pratoconta.it, 2022).

13,026 from Morocco, and almost 7000 Albanians and Romanians. The growth in foreign arrivals reached more than 5.38% in 2022.⁵ The city now hosts a Chinatown and a Little Pakistan around the city core, while the residents of Italian origin mainly live in the peripheral neighborhoods (Figure 4). Today, the Prato fabric sector is still an identifying feature, but it is governed

by larger companies that are characterized by innovation rather than by the traditional small family structure (Cerruti But, 2017).

The Chinese and Pakistani communities, different migratory paths and different living spaces

The research process—explained in the following paragraphs—through a literature review, and, above all, interviews, brought to light some characteristics of the two main foreign communities within the territory. These differ both for the reasons for undertaking the migratory path and for their aspirations and these differences generate diverse living spaces, shaping the existing ones.

The Chinese who arrive in Prato come from the Wenzhou region, in the Zhejiang province, an area historically characterized by a port with a strong commercial character, poor agriculture, the domestic production of leather goods (Dei Ottati, 2014) and numerous sacred places (Parbuono, 2015, 2016). Following the economic reform implemented by the Chinese government in 1978, the region experienced an explosion of domestic businesses and the start of a phenomenon of emigration in search of economic success (Dei Ottati, 2014). Chinese who arrived on the Florentine plain came with the ambition of becoming entrepreneurs (*laboan*). As the Municipal Councillor Marco Wong reports, the network of family relationships is essential for Chinese immigrants, who tend to arrive in couples or with a family nucleus and already have the connections to start work, to find a home and the necessary services upon arrival. At the beginning of the 1980s, the Chinese were already present in Tuscany, in particular in Campi Bisenzio, located between Florence and Prato, where they worked as self-employed workers in the leather manufacturing industry (Dei Ottati, 2014). In the early 1990s, when the Prato district needed labor, the Chinese community provided an available source. The mutual support that characterizes the Chinese community has ensured that, within a few years, Chinese entrepreneurs have grown in number, constituting a real district.

The migratory path followed by Pakistanis has not been studied so much, the source was the conversation with Farid Ghulam, President of the Pakistani Cultural Center. Pakistanis leave their country as a result of conditions of extreme poverty; almost exclusively single men arrive with the intention of bringing their families to Europe. They face life-threatening journeys and arrive in Prato because they know it is a place where there is a community that will welcome them, and where they will be able to find work, especially in Chinese companies. They remain in Prato for a few years, waiting to obtain the documents that will allow them to circulate in Europe, and then they will move to a country where the family reunification process is facilitated.

These two communities have a different impact on urban real estate. On the one hand, the Chinese tend to stabilize, improving housing conditions for the family, buying their house and the warehouse for the factory, investing in and making changes to the housing typologies, adapting them to the needs of their culture. Furthermore, having important institutions and commercial and recreational activities in the area, their meetings generally take place in private spaces, with the exception of some specific events, such as the Chinese New Year. Instead, Pakistanis are content with a temporary, often overcrowded foothold, sharing with other Pakistanis and using the city's public spaces for community gatherings and nonreligious celebrations. Religious events take place inside the mosque and the Pakistani Cultural Center.

Identity and identities in an industrial district

The theme of places and urban identities is debated (Jokar et al., 2022; Sepe, 2013) while regarded relevant but hard to define. The identity of a place cannot be summarized and presented

in a brief description and, as the urban organism is constantly evolving, place identity results from continuous evolutionary processes (Sepe, 2013). However, it can be considered as a set of characteristics that distinguish individuals and communities from others by creating a sense of belonging given by a real connection of people with place (Jokar et al., 2022). The attributes that shape a city's essence are its public spaces (streets and boulevards, piazzas, and courtyards) and its human fabric including the tangible and intangible assets, its natural and cultural features, and all that constitutes its heart and soul (Turner, 2018). Furthermore, the characteristics that distinguish the city for environmental, social, economic, cultural, and historical traits define a sense of belonging and psychological profiles.

In the case of industrial districts (IDs) the sense of belonging to the system is an essential factor for development. As described by the economist Becattini (2015), the phenomenon of bottom-up development of IDs is complex and required decades and even centuries for its maturation with structural and superstructural adaptations. The manufacturing industry, which characterizes Italy, draws its competitiveness from the combination of production with a historical, infrastructural, environmental, and cultural heritage that has been consolidated over time (Becattini, 2015). Furthermore, spatial proximity is essential as it allows the networking of a multiplicity of companies in the same sector and which, therefore, contributes to the formation of a productive environment rooted in the community. The production of the district is therefore characterized by unanimity, and it is precisely the character of the territory that makes it resilient to changes. This has been true following natural disasters that have compromised the places of production (for example the Reggio Emilia earthquake) but also following global economic crises (for example the Prato textile crisis) (Becattini, 2015).

In the “exemplary” case study of Prato, the production was diffused at the urban and social level, and, following the end of the “golden age” (Nesi, 2006) of textile manufacturing, the city experienced the “death” of the local ID. Currently, the Prato *fast fashion* district, introduced by the Chinese community, is growing successfully (Dei Ottati, 2014) and has largely replaced the traditional one by using existing and unused urban facilities abandoned by former local activities. The Chinese business, as the Italian one, is based on family and social networks and generates significant benefits for members of the community and for non-Chinese business partners. However, Chinese work tends to be based on irregular working conditions and social closure, and this happens homogeneously across time and firms (Biggeri et al., 2021). The sizeable immigration waves (entrepreneurs, workers and their families) from China since the 1990s produced a mixed effect within the district dynamics (Bellandi & Santini, 2019), bringing social tensions and weakening of local social cohesion (Dei Ottati, 2014). Since the 2010s the city has invested in creating a new image through political initiatives fostering sustainable cultural and urban redevelopment (Barberis, 2021; Cattaneo & Barberis, 2019). Over the last two decades, Prato is therefore living a relevant socio-economic change and the identity given by the industrial district is transforming, between new forms of production, a new multicultural society and, as a consequence, new ways of inhabiting the urban fabric.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, looking at what is not seen, giving value to what is commonly conceived as worthless was the starting point of the research (Del Bianco, 2020; 2021; 2022, 247–253). The work was developed as consultancy in the framework of the drafting of the Municipal Structural Plan (to be approved in 2023) to enhance the understanding of the current context and strengthen its structural invariants. The structural invariants, as defined by Marvi (2014), are the space–time structures that constitute and give shape to a territory, marking its identity, quality, and recognizability.

The study provides tools for an integrated form of planning that looks at the context through a cultural lens. Therefore, it has focused on the documentation and examination of the city's development, highlighting the identifying characteristics of contemporary living in the urban fabric and their trend of change. Furthermore, the research tries to reveal the spatial and dynamic relationships between tangible and intangible elements that contribute to the evolution of the Prato settlement and its specific identity, providing a data synthesis with visualizations. In conclusion, the study underlines the cultural significance of the Prato character of living that represents the value of the place for its people in past, present and future, and that needs to be protected and enhanced. For this purpose, a multilevel analysis was carried out, which considered historical, morphological, and cultural aspects, enhancing the diversity of the cultural and natural heritage of the municipality. Finally, the results and conclusions of the research can be used as monitoring tools to detect changes.

METHODOLOGY OF ANALYSIS AND OUTPUTS

The research used an integrated cultural mapping method with a holistic approach, investigating the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of the human settlement as inter-related components of a complex that includes both tangible and intangible cultural elements (Pillai, 2013). The study envisaged two parallel lines of work: on the one hand, the mapping of the elements that characterize the urban fabric, with its polycentrism, and on the other, listening to the different communities that inhabit the area.

The research was carried out in three phases: (1) A review of bibliographic documentation, the retrieval of basic maps and statistical data from the Statistics Office of the municipality, and preliminary inspections, including visits to the key local institutions. This phase made it possible to connect with the territory and to identify a possible method for subsequent inspections. (2) Inspections in the selected areas and the arrangement and analysis of the produced documentation (photographic surveys, maps, development schemes for the settlements, historical satellite photographs, population data, and so on). This phase allowed the interpretation of the territory in terms of its spaces and its residential and productive characteristics, with related services. (3) An investigation of how the different social groups of the territory experience it, what their conception of the area is, what their indispensable spaces are and how much the community feels rooted and is thus able to engage in long-term projects in the area. For this, preliminary meetings with the councillor for Culture and Citizenship and with the Immigration Office were held. These meetings were followed by conversations with political, religious, and cultural leaders of the main communities in the form of unstructured interviews.

The research output consists of three parts: (1) The research report, with methodology, interviews, conclusions, and accompanied by an appendix comprising 34 dossiers, one for each area of the investigation. (2) *Elements of Prato*, a photographic inquiry comprising 1016 selected, categorized and subcategorized georeferenced images that identify the architectural elements of the city and their use. (3) *The Sense of Living*, a photo-reportage comprising 141 large format photographs, which aims to not just narrate the city, but also to enhance the beauty of the local *modus vivendi* that keeps together the dichotomies and contrasts between nature, work and living; history and modernity; and closures and openings.

Survey and photographic inquiry

The inspections took place over 25 days between January 31 and April 5, 2022 and were conducted on foot (a shared scooter was used only in rare cases and for limited journeys)



FIGURE 5 One of the spreads of the output *Elements of Prato* recording the “villas” typology (Photographs and elaboration by the author, 2022).

and paths were recorded with the GPS software *Runkeeper*. Walking is intended as a great opportunity for examining and understanding the different elements of the territory (Garofoli, 2017) and in each area, notes were made of what happened during the visit, including events or meetings. In this phase of the investigation, the description and evaluation of the city and its elements were linked to the material aspect of the context rather than to the nonmaterial one.

The photographic inquiry was a further tool for interpreting different parts of the city. Two types of photographs were taken: the georeferenced images with an iPhone camera and the RAW format with a Canon 77D camera, subsequently post produced and exported in high-quality jpegs.

Cataloguing represented a method of enquiry and analysis and thus allowed one of the possible representations of the city. The classification of the images used the following city elements categories: houses (subcategories: fancy architecture, terraced houses, condominiums, *mixité* [mixed use], villas, Figure 5, terraced small villas); altars (subcategories: Madonna, Madonna with Child, Figure 6, Padre Pio, Holy Family, Sacred Heart, blank/other, Annunciation, Crucifix); streets (subcategories: hamlets streets, with green borders, walled on the sides, urban streets); private–public relationship (subcategories: invitational gates, cul-de-sacs, car parks, attached spaces); and landscape (subcategories: monuments, nature).

Interviews

Many people were consulted during the year of research, starting from the municipal officers, politicians, and citizens met during the site visits, up to informal conversations: all of



FIGURE 6 One of the spreads of the output *Elements of Prato* recording the “altars” with the *Madonna with Child* (Photographs and elaboration by the author, 2022).

them consistently added to the research. In addition, seven people were formally interviewed. These are Italians, Chinese, and Pakistani community representatives for cultural or political reasons. For the Italian community the novelist and former entrepreneur Nesi was selected, as well as the director of the Textile Museum, Filippo Guarini, one of the institutions collecting the memories of the district and narrating its evolutions. Furthermore, among the city councillors are two representatives of the Chinese community, Marco Wong and Teresa Lin, who represent different age groups and backgrounds in the community. The Chinese were also represented by Miaomiao Huang, a journalist dedicated to mutual understanding between foreigners, and by Gianni Zhang, a cultural activist based in Florence who organizes Chinese cultural activities in Italy. The Pakistani community, although smaller in numbers, is relevant in terms of immigration issues. For this community, the director of the Pakistani Cultural Center and entrepreneur Farid Ghulam was interviewed.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Assessing essential literature on Prato

According to the literature, Prato is an historical city with an illustrious planning history (Cardini, 2004; Vannucchi, 2008) that in the latest decades was able to regenerate former industrial areas, especially in its historical core, into cultural poles (Textile Museum, 2003) and to provide new visions for the city (Cattaneo & Barberis, 2019) and new planning tools (Gorelli et al., 2012). There is a tradition of participatory planning processes highly initiated by Secchi in the LaboratorioPratoPRG⁶ (Secchi, 1996a), which, in the mid-1990s, was drawing the city

plan after a deep on-site research and participatory process. The participatory processes are ongoing, for example, with the project *Prato al Futuro*, conducted by Sociolab⁷ (Punto Mobile, 2017) for the municipality and the ongoing (at the time of the drafting of this paper) *Prato Immagina*. During these processes citizens can voice their concerns and identify problem areas within the city. However, as the participants are mainly Italian, this research has presented the views of foreign communities in the interviews conducted. The debate on the city was also carried out following in the footsteps of Bernardo Secchi, whose plan was only partially implemented (Viganò, 2017), but whose methodology of analysis was based on the field research as an alternative research path aimed at the understanding of the place through direct collection of informal information through interviews (Garofoli, 2017). The preliminary analysis work for the drafting of the Secchi plan was of exceptional importance, and the related publications (Becattini, 1996; Garofoli, 2017; Secchi, 1994, 1996a, 1996b; Viganò, 1996, 2017) constitute a solid knowledge base for the territory. Secchi defined the city as a *factory city* characterized by an urban fabric made up of residential and productive functions, the so called *mixité* (Secchi, 1996a) and identified its specific typologies and its structure. However, his studies date back to the 1990s and in many cases they are outdated.

Prato's urban identity has also been studied in relation to the nearby city of Florence, with which it has always had a subaltern relationship that has created historical frictions and contrasts. This influenced the city's identity in opposition to the one of Florence ("capital of rugs" vs. "capital of arts," genuine vs. sophisticated, and so on) (Giovannoni, 2019).

In addition, the city was one of the first Italian industrial districts to be devoted entirely to textiles, following decades and even centuries of local know how cultivated in families via personal investments and sacrifices. From the mid-twentieth century, with the rise of the textile district that the city stood as an "exemplary case" (Becattini, 2020) and was studied by several economists for the way in which its economy was intertwined with the geography and culture of the place. As Becattini (2015, 2020) emphasizes, it was the collective effort, as well as the proximity and, most importantly, cultural homogeneity of families, that made the ID competitive on a global scale. A clear representation of the wealth generated by the ID is given in the novels of Nesi (2006, 2010) who defines the decades of the ID as the city's "golden age." During the interview with the novelist, he pointed out that the identity related to the ID was so widespread and rooted that the end of that era was lived as a city inhabiting a period of mourning that is yet to be processed.

Finally, the change in the production following the establishment of the "Chinese district" occurred not only in terms of product, with the shift from textiles toward clothing sector, but also in terms of places diffusing production centers across the Florentine plain rather than in the capillary way characterizing the city's *mixité* (Cerruti But, 2017, 2018). The General Report of the Operational Plan described some of the already mentioned changes following the city's 2030 Agenda, with a forestation strategy and a push to circularity.

However, after the recent crisis within the ID and its consequences, scholars have emphasized the changes currently underway from a sociological perspective focusing on the migration process (Ceccagno, 2003, 2004, 2017; Ceccagno & Rastrelli, 2008), and, from the anthropological one, by analyzing those parts of the city that became exemplary settlements of the new communities, in particular the Chinese (Berti et al., 2013; Bressan & Tosi Cambini, 2011). As Biggeri states, the social networks created by Chinese businesses play a decisive role, from the migration process to successful production. However, these successes are accompanied by rising worker exploitation (2021). This socio-economic relationship, in time, was also investigated by Dei Ottati (2014), who highlights Chinese businesses success and traces the possible consequences of their evolution in the city's future and in the new global economy; a framework for the new local productive configurations interpretation is given by Bellandi and Santini (2019). Furthermore, Parbuono reports the cultural and religious significance of the Chinese temple within the Italian Chinese community (2015, 2016). The literature on Prato is wide and transverses many academic fields. However, there

is still space for research on the identifying architectural and urban elements that make up the urban fabric and that are now undergoing a process of transformation, and this research contributes to filling this gap.

Areas selection

Prato's polycentrism is shaped by the realities of its location between the plain and the slopes of Calvana and Monte Ferrato. These centers were historically, in most cases, villages, where different local identities were maintained, often isolated from the urban fabric that was not

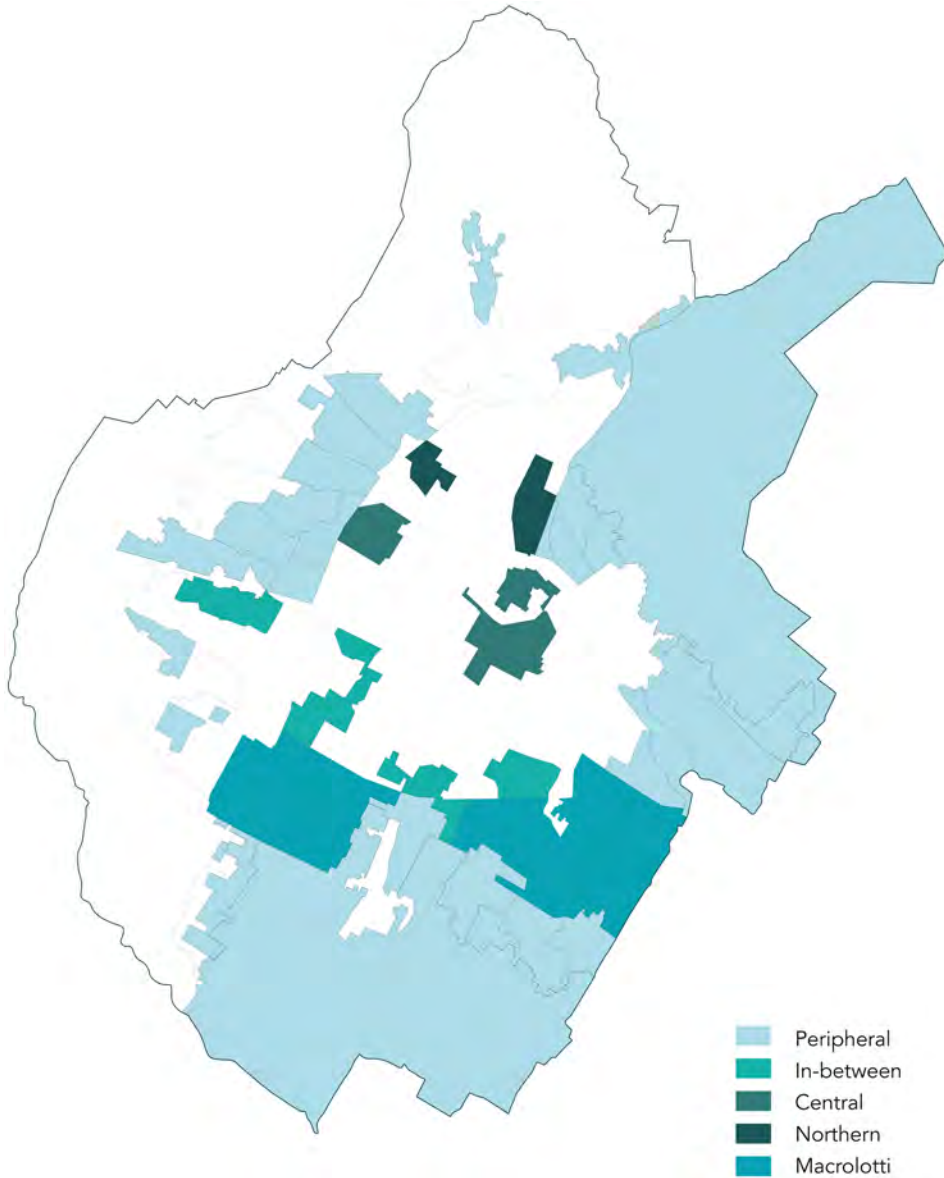


FIGURE 7 Location of selected areas reported for their statistical unit perimeter (Source: Municipal Town Planning base map, elaboration by the author with Marini, M., 2022).

always connected by roads. These places therefore remain powerful centers of identity, bolstered by decentralized industry and fragmented in the Prato style of *mixité*.

The diversity of the city of Prato, as Secchi observed, seems to lead back to different 'parts' (Secchi, 1994: 27). In the current research, an attempt was made to interpret the territory in a consistent and unitary way, avoiding giving greater weight to some areas in favor of others. The areas have therefore been selected starting with the most peripheral, including the hamlets, up to the most central ones. The municipal territory has been divided into five macro categories: (1) *peripheral areas*,⁸ (2) *in-between areas*,⁹ (3) *central areas*,¹⁰ (4) *northern areas*¹¹ and (5) *Macrolotti*¹² (Figure 7).

Each area has a dossier available that contains the relevant material, including (1) the photographic selection divided into categories; (2) the GPS path and the geolocation of the images taken; (3) the maps based on the documents provided, from which the themes that identify full and empty areas were selected; (4) the greenery and orography; (5) the evolutionary schemes of the settlement referencing seven time thresholds: 1934, 1954, 1966, 1979, 2007 and 2021; (6) land use; and (7) selected statistical data, including population by age group and origin based on population density.

Elements of change

From the inspections, interviews and analyses carried out, it was possible to identify elements of permanence and others of change, which are often difficult to see, but which characterize life in the public and private spaces of the city. Although the areas have typological and morphological differences as well as experiences of appropriation by specific social groups with different economic possibilities, the characteristics listed are consistently spread throughout the territory of the municipality. However, generally, they are not understood by the inhabitants as identity elements, because they are permeated with an everyday life that makes them invisible.

A specific definition for each of the prevailing housing typologies (such as condominiums, villas, terraced villas, terraced houses and *mixité*) in the Prato context was drawn to verify their variations and is reported in Table 1. Currently there are not many changes, detectable from the outside, to the purely residential typologies and these variations mainly concern the inclusion of new security systems. From the interviews, however, it emerges that the interiors of the houses have been adapted to the needs of the new inhabitants and this is a starting point for further investigation. The typologies in which there is the coexistence of spaces for living and production, on the other hand, have changed. Where production is no longer present, they have been transformed into appendices or extensions of the house.

Instead, what is changing consistently is the relationship between public and private that traditional forms of living conceived in a cohesive and synergic community perspective (Table 2). The Italian citizens of Prato are moving away from the historic center, favoring residences in the hamlets (Comune di Prato, 2022), but they retain some characteristics of city life, such as leaving their gates open to the street, as if inviting passers-by to enter; installing see-through fences on the street front; placing religious effigies on the façades or in niches or, if real altars, placing these in the garden/courtyard along the street front; and the extension of private space into the street front by placing seats of various kinds in the public space or on the terraces. Even the promiscuous use of the 'cul de sac' has been maintained, although, in many cases, foreign communities have appropriated them using them as extension of their homes, for working or living purposes. Finally, some customs characterizing cultures 'other' than the local one are present and visible on the façade or on the street front and impact the urban landscape. For example, the habit of hanging clothes generates a variation with respect to the traditional, or other customs, that sometimes provoke conflict at the neighborhood scale, such as leaving shoes outside the door or drying meat on balconies. These elements exemplify

TABLE 1 Residential typologies present in the Prato context, their specific definition, and variations.

Residential typologies		
Typologies	Definition	Variations
Condominiums	Small and medium-sized buildings that house several housing units	Not detected
Villas	Independent housing units generally free on four sides. Sometimes they are isolated, sometimes joined by other properties, sometimes multi-family	Adding security systems
Terraced small villas	Residential units with independent access but generally free only on the street front and on the back and side by side on both sides. The custom is that the entrance to the building is preceded by a small garden or a front courtyard. They generally consist of two or three floors above ground	Adding security systems
Terraced houses	Residential units usually made up of two or three floors above the ground, siding one to each other, with independent access from the street front	Not detected
Mixité	Residential units including a productive space	Transformation of the productive space in addition to the residential unit (garage, gym, depot, and bedroom)

Source: Author (2023).

TABLE 2 Public-private relationship in Prato defining the urban quality produced and monitoring of the changes at 2022.

Public/private relationship		
Identity element	Description	Change
Inviting gates	The gates of homes and industrial spaces are often left open, completely or by a few centimeters, as if to invite passers-by to enter	Fluidity between public and private space In houses inhabited by foreigners the gates are closed
Transparency of fences	The railings and low walls that divide the living space from the street are designed to allow for dialogue	Fluidity between public and private space Community dialogue Not detected
Religious effigies	Ceramic or terracotta tiles placed on the façade, or niches, or altars, always near the entrance, bearing the Madonna, the Madonna with Child, the Holy Family, the Sacred Heart, Crosses, Annunciation, Padre Pio	Sense of belonging to a community In some cases the effigy was removed from the niche/altar which remained empty or was replaced with flowers
Seats facing the street	Extension of the living area of the house onto the street front or onto terraces where the inhabitant places seats for entertaining	Fluidity between public and private space Community dialogue The habit is still present and widespread in the area
Cul de sac	Blind streets of public or private ownership with a high degree of intimacy for those who live there. Access to these spaces by outsiders is allowed but not well perceived	Private use of public space Many are used by the Chinese population as an extension of their work/living space
Laundry	Laundry hanging out on the facade or in front of the entrances	Urban landscape Traditionally, the clothes are hung in rear or inconspicuous areas of the house. The Chinese population, on the other hand, hangs out on hangers on mobile racks that are often placed on the street, near the entrance door

Source: Author (2023).

some of the substantial impacting on life in the city and, consequently, its landscape. In the wake of changing habits and customs, over a longer period of time, residential typologies will also change, and it is possible that this will happen spontaneously, without municipal control, to the point of making the city unrecognizable. This is why the research also offers a tool for monitoring the ongoing changes.

Evidence from the Prato case study

Identities may change and modify but they act on the environmental context of a place with specific geographic characteristics and historical evolution. It is history that determines the interweaving that creates forms of tangible and intangible heritage. Identity is connected to both geographical and natural aspects as well as historical-cultural and socio-economic ones. In the case of Prato, despite the territory having undergone important changes over the last few decades, the city has maintained its character, also thanks to its spatiality and its urban form, adapting it to other communities. Indeed, Prato is still characterized by the succession of production and living spaces (*mixité*) of the textile district, so consistently that it was defined by Secchi as a *factory city*. In this succession of spaces, Prato companies, largely family-run, were organized and the city proved to be an effective model also for the Chinese production system, which shared one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the Prato population, namely the dedication to work and family business, mixing spaces for living and working. One can say that, despite the crisis, the atmosphere of industriousness remains present in the streets of Prato. This ethos of sharing emerged in the interviews: all the Chinese interviewees stated that the people of Prato and the Chinese were alike in terms of dedication to work and ambition, and this was shared also by Dei Ottati (2014). Furthermore, the character of Prato, dedicated to work and interpersonal relationships and made up of small entrepreneurs and family businesses, has welcomed foreign communities, not without difficulty, but nevertheless with policies and services aimed at inclusion and conflict resolution. However, the urban fabric remains fragmented, with specific areas for specific communities. But, as Secchi states (2000) the contemporary city is equipped to handle difference and mixing, and in turn the fluctuations between subjects and activities.

In regard to the architectural elements characterizing the city, for an Italian citizen of Prato, the traditional meaning of the house is kept and is social; care of the house, including religious elements, plants and spaces for gatherings, is fundamental, as is the need to maintain openness to the street front and to demonstrate a sense of sharing and of 'having nothing to hide' from the community. These are elements that the other cultures have not yet made their own but they persist strongly in the old Prato community. Among some foreign-owned houses, however, there is a tendency toward decay, with compromised plaster and fixtures, rusty railings, and damaged flooring. There are probably several reasons for maintenance and care problems in newcomers' homes, such as being "temporary tenants," low income, spending many hours working away from home or not feeling part of the community.

The religious character of the city, which is found in architectural and decorative elements in both public and private spaces, has been maintained. The most consequential adjustment probably concerns the relationship with public space. Prato living spaces provide for meaningful dialogue with the public space, given by the permeability of the street fronts or by the use of the threshold of the houses. Nonetheless, the inhabitants clearly distinguish the functions and customs of the intimacy of family life from public ones.

In such multicultural context, it seems simplistic to only speak of the Chinese community even if, based on its numbers and economic power, it is the one that is contributing the most to the city's development. There are community activities that take place in public space, especially those related to religious (Muslim) rites or sports activities in parks or on buildings open

ground. This was revealed both in the analysis of the physical elements of the city and in the interviews carried out.

The ancient center of Prato, however, has maintained the character that Secchi (1994, 186) described: flexibility; adaptability to changing uses, cancellations and transformations, and stratifying features of different times, societies, and economies.

CONCLUSIONS

Cities that are experiencing significant changes in their socioeconomic structures as a result of natural disasters or an economic crisis, can rely on their resilience and ability to react and reorganize, which is provided by a competent social fabric permeated with a commitment to work (Becattini, 2015) that shapes the community's identity. Issues concerning local identities are inextricably linked to the natural, social, historical, and cultural context and one of the most relevant challenges, to keep the local identity alive by avoiding abrupt changes and resiliency levels, is to raise awareness about the territory's relevance, creating educational programs combining competences in production with the historical and natural heritages, and aimed at integrating diversity.

Prato is linked to the concept of modern heritage as defined by the Cape Town Document (2022): “inherited cultural and natural attributes of the modern era, the temporal extent of which is disciplinarily varied and ranges from the past two centuries to the past two millennia.” The city is part of a centuries-old process of identity construction, in which the population has developed due to a collective knowledge and experiences built over time, to the point of making the city an “exemplary case” among industrial districts. As affirmed by Nesi, the crisis of the textile industry has led the city to have to “mourn” and, consequently, to reformulate its vision. A city that has long built its identity in opposition to nearby Florence, a place of art and history par excellence, struggles to recognize itself in the concept of heritage, but it is also the concept of heritage that has changed and evolved and is now including tangible and intangible aspects of culture and its modern declination. Furthermore, the Prato heritage intertwines the natural context with production and culture with tradition and it has always been open to new communities, first of immigrant Italian citizens and now of foreign citizens that, through cultural diversity contributed to the city's development. In fact, following the industrial revolution, and basing on employment dynamics rooted in the community (Becattini, 2015), the city has greatly enriched itself by creating a new social fabric and changing its identity. Following the end of production, the city experienced an impasse that was revitalized with the arrival of new communities that created a new sector derived from the textile one (Dei Ottati, 2014). It is not an isolated case that groups of foreign citizens breathe new life into Italian post-industrial contexts (Lanzani, 2017), but the result is a new identity system, made up of a multiplicity of identities that interact in a process of acculturation¹³ and that contribute to shaping the urban organism and the way of inhabiting public and private spaces.

Prato is characterized by contrasts, such as rural and industrial in a historical context, modernity and tradition, nature brought back to the city with forestation projects, tangible and intangible heritage, which the contemporary world is accentuating. The city has always been able, over time, to achieve coexistence by integrating them into a social fabric that is increasingly diversified. Furthermore, the urban fabric is complex, made up of industries, laboratories, houses, social housing districts, rural areas, which make it a heterogeneous and surprising object (Viganò, 2017). Reading and enhancing these dichotomies is not easy. In recent years, the city has taken on a negative connotation, linked to crime and the abandonment of its positive image to negative stereotypes. This research aims to counter these trends by contributing to consolidating the Prato identity through isolating those elements of everyday life that represent a way of relating, between public and private, which creates a specific quality of living

in a neighborhood. Once identified, it is possible to create processes to enhance the awareness of inhabitants to the value of their city, and thereafter to begin to encourage the protection of these elements. This research has contributed to the understanding, recognition, conservation, and enhancement of a local heritage and, thanks also to the photographic documentation, it became a means of sharing the value of the city with the population through cultural events.¹⁴

The Prato identity crisis, the urban “mourning,” is the result of a set of factors that depend on the transformations of the global economy, on movements of social groups and on processes of acculturation between different cultures, especially Italian, Pakistani, and Chinese. This change is driven both by cultural diversity and its points of similarity and is reflected in the urban context, underlining what is expressed in the New Urban Agenda, Quito Declaration: culture and cultural diversity are sources of enrichment for mankind and consistently contribute to the sustainable development of cities. In the case of Prato, the migratory processes allowed the city economic evolution after the crises, preventing its “death.” Furthermore, they contributed to its new cultural and urban character shaping its identity and reinforcing its forms of modern heritage. Therefore, this research considers the cultural diversity and creativity present in Prato as assets for human, urban, social, and economic development and, therefore, commits itself to support the creation of planning tools for the territory, especially the Structural Plan, to contribute to the understanding of the challenges imposed by the actual development of the city.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Prato Conta – Ufficio Statistica Comune di Prato at <https://www.comune.prato.it/it/statistica/pagina1696.html>.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ It doubled its inhabitants from 1951 to 1971 and has maintained growth above the national average in the decades since (Cattaneo & Barberis, 2019).
- ² Main urban scheme used by the ancient Romans based on an orthogonal grid system parallelly articulated to two main axes: the *cardo maximus* (north–south) and the *decumanus maximus* (east–west).
- ³ In the case of Prato, the grid is oriented by 30° from N-NE to S-SW.
- ⁴ Pietro Leopoldo, Grand Duke of Tuscany, in his *Reports on the government of Tuscany*.
- ⁵ Data Prato Municipality, *Atlante Demografico*, 2023.
- ⁶ During the researches for the drafting of the Plan, the LaboratorioPratoPRG was the place dedicated to the encounter with the local community offering a programme of seminars, exhibitions, workshops, debates, and presentations (Viganò, 2017).
- ⁷ Social enterprise for social participation and research.
- ⁸ Figline, St. Lucia, La Pietà, Cantiere, Le Macine/Cementificio, La Querce, Mezzana, St. Giorgio a Colonica, St. Maria a Colonica, Paperino, Fontanelle, Castelnuovo, Tavola, Iolo, Casale, Galciana, Narnali, Guado, Maliseti, Gonfienti and Filettole.
- ⁹ Badie, Cafaggio, Villaggio San Giusto, Reggiana and Vergaio.
- ¹⁰ Old Town, the Little Pakistan of Soccorso, the Chinatown of Macrolotto 0 and San Paolo and the area around Via Valentini.
- ¹¹ New Market and Chiesanuova.
- ¹² Macrolotto 1 and 2.
- ¹³ The mutual influence of different cultures in close contact.
- ¹⁴ The exhibition *Elements of living – Postcards of Prato* on display at the Urban Center of the Luigi Pecci Contemporary Art Center from May 11 to June 18, 2023 documents the reportages created for the research and has become part of the Structural Plan participatory process.

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