

Place



My Kind of Town

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Dewy-eyed architects returning to a dreary British autumn from holiday are prone to wax lyrical about the places they have visited, but though my appreciation of Todi may be coloured by fond memories of the warmer climate of central Italy, it is rooted in a deeper respect for the town's urban qualities. Despite its modest size, each visit continues to unveil new layers of interest.

Located halfway between Florence and Rome, the town clings defiantly to the top of a hill overlooking the Tiber valley. While it does not possess the gloating stone towers of San Gimignano, and avoids the gaudy baroque facades of nearby Orvieto, its cool streets and modest piazzas are largely untainted by tourism even in high summer.

Unlike its better-known and equally ancient counterparts across Tuscany and Umbria, Todi still feels very much a modern town, avoiding the arrested decrepitude and ornament outlets that characterise places on the tourist trail. While retaining a careful respect for its history, it seems liberated by its heritage rather than shackled to it. Changes to the town's fabric are closely monitored — arguments over the precise shade of ecru-coloured paint that must be applied to all buildings within the walls are common — but one gets the impression that there is an acceptance that the place must be allowed to adapt if it is to survive.

Todi's ability to reinvent itself has been the subject of much academic study, with numerous papers written by one professor at the Center for Sustainable Cities at the University of Kentucky that herald it as the exemplar sustainable city.

Historic expansion has arranged the town concentrically around the Piazza del Popolo. Roman walls lie outside the Etruscan ones, and the medieval walls outside of those. Homes and workplaces fill the gaps between, charting growth like tree rings.

Visible throughout the town are windows which have been punctured through stone walls with wanton disregard for proportion and order — even for the existence of previous openings — with new apertures slicing randomly through lintels and sills as the rooms hidden behind are rearranged to suit changing needs. The resultant voids are filled with volcanic tufa stone scooped from the nearby hills. Everywhere the layers of history and adaptation are apparent, with no attempt to obscure the changes that have taken place over time.

Todi's ability to adapt to social, economic and political change has meant that it has remained a place where people want to live, and so remains very much alive. The complex network of alleyways that encircles Piazza del Popolo is permeated by the sounds of life proceeding — a piano reverberating from an open window — despite the relative tranquillity at street level. It is the antithesis of sterile Belgravia or Mayfair, where activity is abundant at street level but absent from the unlit windows above.

In relatively recent times a communist mayor instigated the complete renewal of the town's public realm, the refurbishment of its ancient drainage system and the installation of a funicular railway rising from a new car park at the northern base of the walls to a striking vantage point close to the centre. This single move has dramatically reduced the volume of cars that ascend to the summit of the town, allowing pedestrians to dominate the urban realm, and only rarely needing to duck into doorways to avoid four-wheeled interlopers.

One further delight of these ancient streets is the close proximity of each home to others, with the distinction between individual dwellings long obscured. Some windows are granted spectacular views across the countryside, others an outlook extending just a few feet across a narrow alley to a neighbouring apartment. Strangely this doesn't make the homes any less desirable; rather the inhabitants celebrate the opportunity to maintain social contact with those who live close by. I'm struck by the contrast with planners at home and their unhealthy obsession with back-to-back distances and overlooking, which is surely contributing to an increasing sense of isolation amongst the residents of new developments. In Todi — and places like it across Italy — knowing one's neighbours is a thing to be celebrated, not condemned. **A**