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## Regeneration through street art

*The Memorie Urbane graffiti festival has awakened creative tourism in the overlooked Lazio, Italy. Naima Morelli interviews founder Davide Rossillo.*

In the last couple of years, my best friend's mother, a dignified 60-year-old lady with short white hair forever jetting around the world – has gone from collecting tea cups to shooting photos of graffiti artists painting trains illegally.

"She thought graffiti was vandalism just three years ago and now she's drinking beers with Blue and Twoone. I don't know what the hell happened. I just want my mother back!" confessed my friend in tears.

Now, this lady is my go-to girl for graffiti. When she said she was going on a road trip in Italy last summer we still assumed she would go for Milan, Portofino, Rome and Positano. She surprised everybody by spending all her time hopping from obscure town to obscure town in the Lazio.

Back home and with a wi-fi connection – just kidding, they actually have the internet in Latina – she uploaded her road trip pictures on Facebook, wowing everybody.

In a split second, all those previously snubbed towns became the most desirable destinations.

Latina, Gaeta, Terracina were no longer just names on the train timetable. We became aware of their beautiful historical centres and graffiti-covered outskirts.

Once again, the lady had an eye for the cool. She knew that, thanks to the street art festival Memorie Urbane, Lazio was the place to be.

Celebrating its fourth anniversary, Memorie Urbane promotes street art and the regeneration of urban spaces in towns off the conventional tourist maps.

And so this year, to forgo my friend's mother on the graffiti front, I decided to interview Memorie Urbane's founder, Davide Rossillo.

Rossillo is a down-to-earth guy and the perfect combination of creative entrepreneur and curator. Without a specific art history background, he was driven to set up the festival by a relatively recent, but intense, passion for street art.

That's not to say that the guy doesn't have his ideas about what a curator should be.

"For me the curator shouldn't simply prettify an exhibition. He has to build something from zero. Get his hands dirty. The organisational part is key and I personally follow every step of the festival."

Another reason for starting Memorie Urbane was his interest in socio-economic growth and the development of tourism in the region.

"I'd like to see tourists go beyond Rome and the usual visit to the Colosseum. With Memorie Urbane we are inviting visitors to start exploring both the region and graffiti as an art form."

Over these four years, the festival has experienced an exponential growth thanks also, as Rossillo notes, to local government support.

"The first year in Gaeta we invited six artists. This spring we will have 40 artists working in nine different towns. Plus, for the first time we will go beyond Lazio and include the city of Caserta in the neighbouring region of Campania."

**Memorie Urbane is now seen as the representative street art festival in Italy. What has been the most important factor in this success?**

The fact that we gathered a number of international artists in a territory which is not urban has been our greatest strength. We have been able to work in small towns, some of which have a population of only 3,000. That's unique and it interests people used to seeing graffiti in big cities.

**I can imagine some of these towns having quite a conservative mentality. Have you ever faced resistance from the locals?**

We have seen some resistance, but only in the first year.

In Gaeta some people still associate graffiti with vandalism. But once they saw the pieces, they understood our project and acknowledged its value. By targeting abandoned and neglected areas we also won over the detractors.

Plus, we've paid special attention to the choice of the art in relation to its setting. Therefore, over the four editions of the festival we have seen a growth in people's perception of graffiti.

Now, in Gaeta I can dare to commission more complicated walls and cutting-edge pieces. Of course, in the case of smaller towns I'd start with more accessible pieces.

**You are developing new technologies to make it easier for visitors to find the walls. Can you tell me a bit about that?**



Shaka is one of the artists taking part in the festival. The above is an example of his works in France. Photo: Camille de Forsamz

*The festival promotes the regeneration of urban spaces off the CC*

We are working with the French company Urbacolors on an app which geo-locates the walls. The user can upload new walls or see those which are already there.

It's a game-based app, which makes it more fun. We think that's the best way for people to find the walls – paper maps can be hard to read at times.

In addition to that, we are working with the Terracina-based multimedia communication company Techmoving. Together we are creating a system which will allow people to scan a plate near the graffiti piece and get information about the artist who made it.

**The festival doesn't just target local tourism, but also an international public. What results have you observed in terms of interest from outside of Italy?**

I think we've raised international interest by inviting renowned artists who have never painted in Italy before.

That's a big lure for street art lovers. It's difficult to quantify exactly how many people are coming, because they visit at different times.

The pieces stay put and they are always visible. Visitors who are not necessarily looking for our walls might pass through a town and discover an unexpected attraction. This will hopefully compel them to explore the area further, getting them to know the cultural and historical richness of these towns.

**This year there will be an exhibition on the work of Martha Cooper, the photographer who documented the beginning of street art in the 1970s and 1980s. What is the importance of this show in the festival's framework?**

We have always had parallel events to the festival, like film screenings, conferences and workshops, but this year Martha Cooper's exhibition will be the pivotal element.

With this show we aim to trace the path of the street art from its beginnings until today. For me, it is a way to introduce people to street art, telling locals where we are coming from and where we are heading.

**So can you tell me how Memorie Urbane will evolve in the future?**

We, definitely, aim to go beyond one single region and get more and more cities involved. Under the brand Memorie Urbane we want to link with many other associations which share our philosophy.

Together, we have the power to bring the project to the next level. Up to now our model has proved successful – maybe too successful, since this edition has been quite difficult to manage. But I can't help it, I love a challenge.

*Memorie Urbane takes place between May and June across Lazio, Italy.*

[www.memorieurbane.it](http://www.memorieurbane.it)

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