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The House of Montisi

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On top of a hill in one of the more remote regions of Tuscany, where the nearest train station is half an hour away by car and the pulse of agriculture is still stronger than that of tourism, where the roads curve arduously up and down steep slopes and around sharp bends from one hilltop to another, is the village of Montisi.

Tuscany is built on the hilltops: The cities, the towns, the villages and even the individual *podere* (farmsteads) make the high hills seem higher, accentuate the distance between them and reinforce the sense that each built hill, from the larger towns like Siena to the smallest village, is in some sense one building, one house.

These “houses,” claiming their hills with astonishing regularity (the zoning

in Tuscany is dictated by topography, not town planners) are surrounded by moats of cultivated hillside and valley. From a distance the hill-town boasts its uniqueness, both individually and as a member of a type that has been much acclaimed for its picturesque image and way of life. At the end of a month-long visit, however, I was convinced that Montisi is in fact typical — not only of the Tuscan hill town but of all houses potentially: houses of unnamed rooms.

On approach the town reads as a fortified cap. With no particular shape of its own, it hugs the convex hilltop as though knitted of stone. But although solid at this landscape scale, Montisi is a true vessel; it exists as both object and container. Like a nautilus, that which appears singular from the outside is in fact many-chambered.

Inside the walls of Montisi are the chambers. The streets are rooms, the private houses like thick walls containing closets and cupboards in which only the most private acts of daily life take place. All the rest — eating, talking, cooking, washing, working, playing, reading and resting — can and does happen in the rooms of the street. These activities are not paired with named spaces. The tiny piazza at the top of the town is a parking place for six or seven small cars, but these are banished to the lower streets outside the walls on the eve of the Palio, when the square magically converts to an outdoor dining hall for 200 people.

One day a street is a workshop, full of cabinetmakers’ windows, tools and sawhorses. That night the sawhorses multiply to dozens, as plank wooden tables and benches snake through the street to seat the entire *contrada* (a social group whose members generally come from a specific district in the town) for an eight-course meal. The event extends far into the night, but by



The hill town of Montisi is like a house, and the streets serve as its rooms.

Photos, drawings by Jill Stoner.

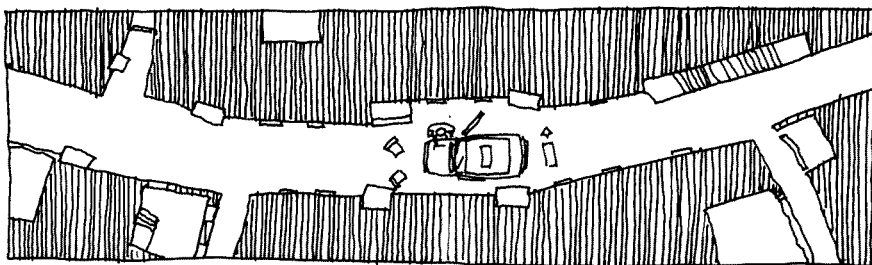
morning the tables and chairs have vanished, packed away into the “cup-board” of the *contrada* house like a set of kosher dishes to be used only at special times of the year. In the street, swept clean of debris but with toasts and song still lingering on the air, a young man dismantles his car in the street-cum-body shop. Vinyl upholstery lies on the cobblestones and chrome fenders distort the reflections of ancient walls. This village street is not an arbiter of taste; it offers a fair venue to anyone.

In these street-rooms, articulation is independent of use. No delineated sidewalk or curb separates “motorist” from “pedestrian.” The street slopes to the center rather than to the edges, making the space an emphatically con-

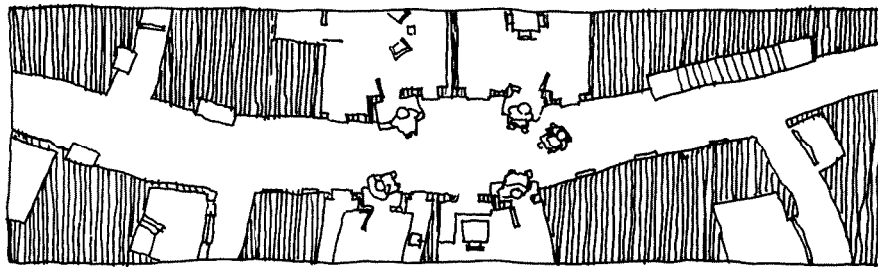
cave container with a focus toward the middle. Walls meet the paving directly at right angles, but both walls and paving are strong, textured surfaces that hold fast to their intrinsic nature, in spite of the life that comes and goes.

The charm of a village like Montisi could easily be explained by the richness of these textures, colors, intense chiaroscuro and diminutive dimensions. These, we may say, are obsolete, out of our time and place and therefore irrelevant. But, perhaps blinded by the picturesque, we miss the more elusive lesson, which is independent of time and place — the lesson of unnamed rooms.

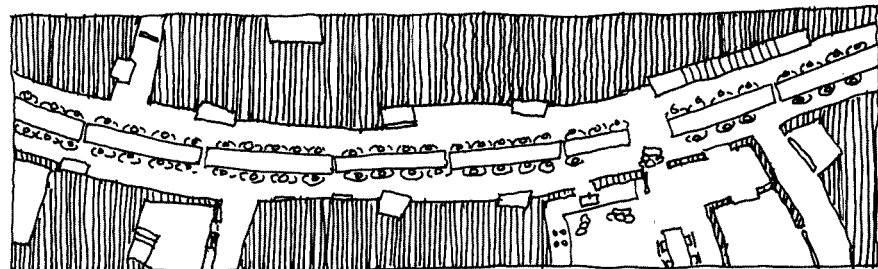
The eloquence of the Montisi street-rooms is in the mingling of children and grandparents, cars and peo-



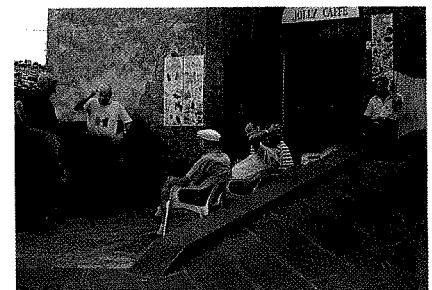
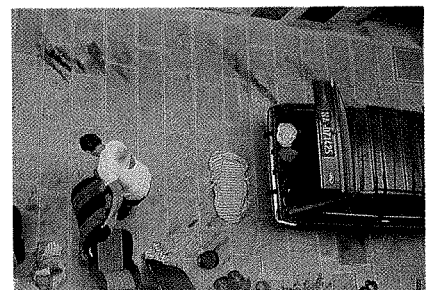
The street-room as body shop.



The street-room as parlor.



The street-room as dining hall.



ple, work and conversation, the constant reappropriation and reinvention of the same places, time and again. This is exactly the opposite of our American multi-purpose room, a featureless, textureless space that cannot be appropriated because it has no character. No such programming preceded the construction of Montisi's places, nor the kind that predicts: "Here the children will play, here the elderly will rest." The town seems aware that such designations make places mute.

Here then is the paradox of the unnamed street-rooms. So particular within themselves, each can nevertheless contain many things—the street-room as kitchen, as parlor, as dining hall, as playroom, as workshop, as garage, as laundry, as garden, as porch.

Four women sit, each on her stoop, the one-step threshold between the street and private house. The street is about two and a half meters wide, the adjacent doors only a meter apart. In their relationship to each other, the stoops approximate the placement of chairs in a conventional parlor. The street is a parlor *al fresco*, a parlor with a mezzanine, for the husbands occasionally lean out from a second-floor window to join a friendly argument. A car comes respectfully by, a not-unwelcome interloper whose driver has time not only to slow down but also to stop. The street-room can accommodate this, for the car claims nothing for itself. A temporary furnishing, it moves on, making way for the next event—a caravan of tricycles and wagons.

This parlor is public; everyone is uninvited but welcome. It is also the extension of the private house; each of the four women possesses an invisible porch that extends to the center-line of the street. The existence of this porch dissolves the street momentarily.

Like an optical game that presents two images alternately, presenting both equally the street-room is both public and private, unnamed on any plan or land-use study.

While Montisi is unarguably picturesque, it is so only by default, by the omission of any unified effort to modernize. Television antennas, rock music, polyester suits and dresses, plastic toys, new (but small) cars, packaged ice cream and video games have moved in happily among the old clay rooftops and cobbled pavement of the eccentric plan. This is the evidence of authentic reappropriation; the most obvious acts are unpressed, unreviewed. The village is code free and zoning free.

In front of the church and bar, the two "public" buildings of the village, the street widens enough to accommodate the card players and after-church crowd, but not so much that it ceases to be a street. The street exists in Montisi everywhere that the buildings are not. On a Sunday it contains the unceremonious mingling of bells from church and from pinball machines. A motorcycle roars past.

The street rooms echo with the complementary voices of ritual and practicality, tradition and fashion, age and youth. Their tolerance is their discipline. Accommodating change but remaining themselves unchanged, they hold the house together.

Montisi is not behind the times, but neither has it left the times behind.