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Via Costa Masciarelli: A Question of Values

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We are walking on the Via Costa Masciarelli, in L'Aquila, on a Sunday afternoon in early October. It is about 6:30 and the pavement is wet from daylong off-and-on-again rain. There is still plenty of light. Via Costa Masciarelli leads down from and perpendicular to L'Aquila's main street, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, and its central piazza toward a city gate that soon comes into sight after a modest turn. Our purpose is nothing more than a late Sunday afternoon stroll with friends who live in a nearby village, Collimonto.

L'Aquila is a city of about 100,000 people, in the Abruzzi, north and east of Rome, about one and one-half hours, by bus, up in the Apennines. It is an administrative center without significant industries — a bit too far to attract commuters to Rome, too close and off the beaten track to attract tourists in large numbers: a provincial city. Say to friends that you have spent the weekend in L'Aquila and they are likely to ask you where it is. Nevertheless, the air is clear, there is skiing nearby during the winter, and the old castle is elegant and well worth seeing, as is a chapel in Santa Bernardino, with quite wonderful glazed terra cottas by one of the della Robbia clan. There is also a city orchestra, a city theater, a central piazza, and many smaller ones, and good places to eat.

After a first long compelling look down Via Costa Masciarelli to a recently restored, buff-colored city gateway, our attention focuses on the sloping pavement of the street itself. The street section is divided into five lineal bands. There are two bands of sloping steps, 1.5 meters wide (5.9 feet) and one meter long (3.28 feet). These are bounded by three sloping surfaces, one along each row of buildings that define the street edge, and one in the center between the two sets of steps. This central paved way is more for drainage than for walking. This is a street for people on foot, not for automobiles or other vehicles.

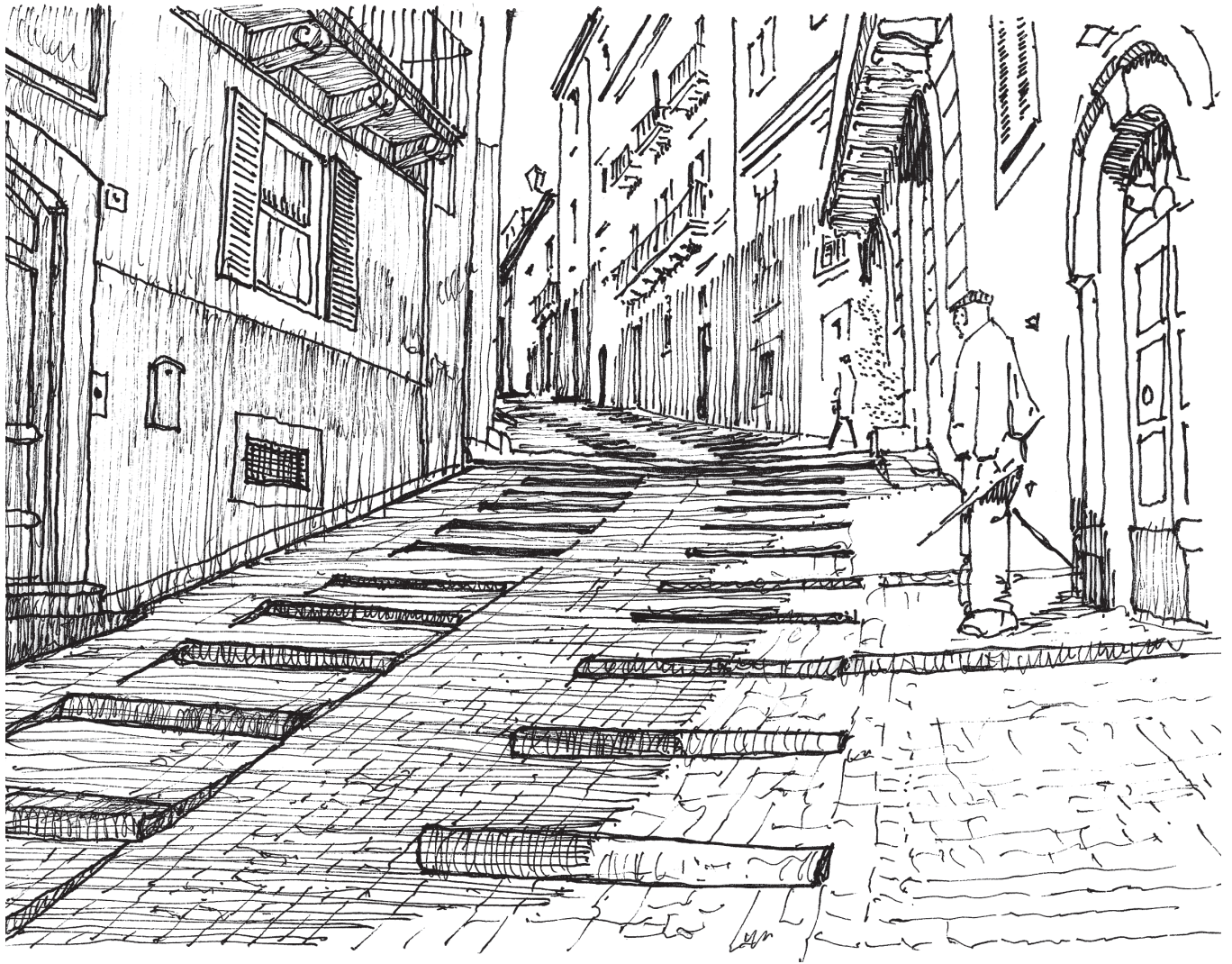
At the moment, however, our close attention has nothing to do with autos, or the lack thereof, but with the slope, even of the steps, and of the wet stone paving, suggesting the possibility of a slippery downhill surface. Walking downhill on wet steps is often cause for a degree of care, it seems, if for no other reason than the steps are further away from one's eyes than when walking uphill. So we are paying attention to our steps and to the stone paving, so clean, actually off-white stone square insets, and we conclude that the whole street has recently been rebuilt. Specifically, we notice how each of the walking paths is composed of a sloping surface made of small white stone squares leading to a step, also of stone, that drops down to the next sloping surface. Each of the three unstepped surfaces (the two next to the buildings and the one for drain-

age between the walking paths) is made of the same white insets. Meanwhile, the grout or cement between each stone is a light tan, sand color, and the actual risers on the sloping steps are of buff-colored stone.

To someone accustomed to walking on concrete sidewalks in modern cities or even on the black stone cobbles of central Rome, the paving of Via Costa Masciarelli is a very attractive and well-executed walking surface. It is also new and looks to be expensive. The design quality, the newness, and the assumed cost prompt a central question from which others spring: Why did they do it this way? Weren't there less costly, more economical ways to rebuild the street? Is this a wealthy city, more so than we had been led to believe? Why this particular street? Is there community power here? Was it done for tourists (doubtful, as L'Aquila is not noted as a major tourist city)? Were less expensive alternatives considered? Assuming there were adequate funds for the project (it is built, after all), what if there had been less money available?

Maybe, just maybe, this is the way they do things in L'Aquila, and, by extension, the way things are done in other Italian cities, small and large alike. The black stone paving blocks of central Rome seem to be a constant, and we are advised that some, maybe all, now come from China. In reality, that is our hypothesis; it's just the way they do it. Italians are no dummies. They know there are other, less expensive ways of paving a street, even one of importance, but those ways would not be appropriate, not "right." That is the answer we'd like to be closest to the truth: a question of values — not so much (or really very much at all) of monetary or economic values, but of historical, deeply held cultural values.

Even as we think this, though, we imagine economist colleagues shaking their heads in disagreement if not disbelief, holding that costs and benefits and available fiscal resources had everything to do with the rebuilding of the street, and that design aesthetics were made to fit economic reality. And we imagine a lot of economic theory, to boot. The whole endeavor may be called into question. Did the street designers or those who approved the project not give a whit for the whole city or all of its streets — to say nothing of important uses other than street paving to which the funds could more usefully be put? What about costs and benefits? Were not fine but less expensive designs possible? Why wasn't Via Costa Masciarelli paved with asphalt and precast concrete steps? Or, why not use large handsome, precast pavers, attractively set, as we observed on a recently executed major public way in Massa Maritima? These were more expensive than asphalt but a lot less so than what we are seeing in L'Aquila. These reactions, questions really,



crowd through our heads as we enjoy the walk down to Via Fortebraccio, where we turn left, rising as we go toward S. Bernardino. This street, too, is well paved. We would like to find out why the Via Costa Masciarelli was refinished the way it was. Perhaps we can come back, if only for a day or two, to find some answers.

L'Aquila is a Roman city. A clue to the historic importance of Via Costa Masciarelli is its focus at one end on an old city gate; not too many streets do that. Less obvious, on the ground, is that, together with Via Paradiso (or Via Cimino, or Strada di S. Domenico), it forms a major east-west spine of the city, meeting the more important Corso Vittorio Emanuele at the city's main piazza, Piazza Maggiore (or Piazza Grande, Piazza del Duomo, or Piazza del Mercato, depending on what plan or map one is looking at). After we begin our search for answers we are also told

that the city was destroyed in the middle of the thirteenth century.¹ It was rebuilt with some speed, starting in the early fourteenth century. As was so often the case in the building of Italian cities, L'Aquila's builders quarried stone from the "old" Roman City to build the new one, widening its streets. And indeed the more recent design and reconstruction of Via Costa Masciarelli did focus on making the street as much as possible as it had been in earlier times. To put it simply, being a very important historic city street, the aim was to rebuild it the way it had been.

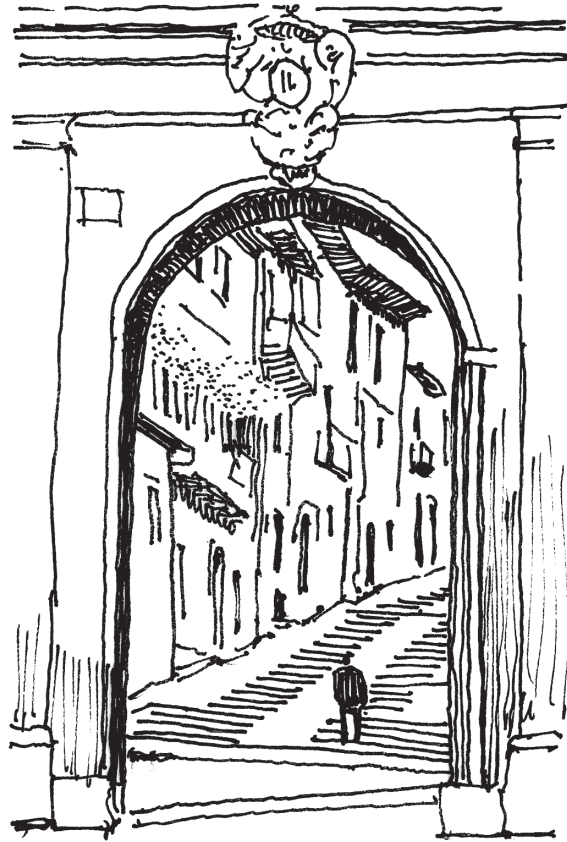
It helps, of course, to know what the street and city had been: to know its importance, and to have a model to shoot for. There are for L'Aquila historical references, if not of the details of street paving, certainly of the historic growth of the city and even of typical building conventions, as expressed in detailed drawings.² From these, and from

discussions with L’Aquila’s architect-town planner we eventually come to understand that the redesigners of Via Costa Masciarelli knew full well that it would be expensive to carry out, but knew as well that the state, through the Superintendenza Archeologica, not the city, would pay, to do the street “right.”³

When we pursue these issues, we ask what would happen if the state didn’t or doesn’t have the money? The answer is uncompromising: “They find the money.” If they can’t find the money, then the street will not be fixed. Or, the city will find private people who will pay for the design in exchange for glory: a carryover from the days when great art was connected to the church. We are shown a piazza outside the architect’s office, newly repaved with lower-quality stone, and are reminded that it is “not as good.” In reality, isn’t that the answer? Without adequate funds, even on Via Costa Masciarelli, the work would be done less expensively, and perhaps less well. But it would be of some importance that there would be community knowledge and memory that the street repaving is not of the quality it should be.

In our local inquiries, we sense a reluctance to deal with the question, hypothetical or not, of “what if” there hadn’t been enough money. Maybe there is some defensiveness about a job so well and expensively done. Finally, after some thought, we are advised that the repaving of Via Costa Masciarelli, and by extension other public places, is a matter of community identity, that identity remains important in L’Aquila. If money isn’t there now to “do it right,” they will either not do it at all, or if they have to, they will do it less well, but with a knowledge and memory that the work will, some day, have to be done again, right.

In our discussions, it is difficult to get to the question of economic value in this matter of public works. Eventually, we are advised that economic value is relative. In the market of public works, we are told, the value of identity is held to be stable (even if we know this to be untrue). Economic value, on the other hand, changes. In comparison, the identity value is always superior — or at least, so goes the explanation; it is a short way of saying that cultural values, remembering and honoring the past, are important in L’Aquila. Perhaps, in the end, what is important is to be able to remember what is good and to continue an insistence on the best.



Notes

1. Interview with Pierluigi Properzi, October 2003.
2. Mario Centofanti, Raffaele Colapietra, Cladia Cenforti, Pierluigi Properzi, Luigi Zordau, *L’Aquila: Città Di Piazze* (Pescara, Italy: Carsa Edizioni, 1992).
3. Interview with Pierluigi Properzi, October 2003.

All drawings of Via Costa Masciarelli are by the author.

