

[international]

Flowers for my Teacher...

Every summer my children and I enjoy exploring a different part of the world. Last summer we had settled on visiting the Eternal City – Rome. While I was naturally excited about appreciating the art and architecture, the cuisine and the scenery, I was equally enthusiastic about the prospect of visiting Montessori’s first Casa dei Bambini. I consider myself a Montessorian (having been involved with the method for the past twenty years) but it was only when I made this pilgrimage to the Casa that every aspect of the method fell into place for me.

By Punum Bhatia



Standing in the archway to the courtyard cum playground

At only 36 years old, Maria Montessori was already recognized as a talented scientist, and was making grand discoveries in the academic world as she steadily created her own theories on child development. It was this growing reputation that caused a group of property developers to turn to her for an upcoming project which included renovating some of the city’s older buildings. The project merely required a baby-sitter of sorts; as both mothers and fathers worked the entire day in the turn-of-the-century Roman slum neighborhood of San Lorenzo, their many children were left to run wild on the streets, defacing property as a result of their boredom. The city planners intended on Montessori keeping the children occupied in one area so that they would not have to repeatedly spend money in repainting the walls. She was thus given one large room and one helper, but no money for food or equipment.



“Casa dei Bambini” Inauguration Day: January 1907

On January 6, 1907, the first Casa dei Bambini opened and Montessori writes “that more than fifty children gathered together for the first time. It was interesting to note how different these little creatures were from those that usually attend preschools. They were in tears and seemed afraid of everything” (Montessori, 1967, p 35). As soon became evident, Montessori completely changed their lives, allowing them to not only find independence in their own lives, but also to better their entire community.

The Quartiere di San Lorenzo was not easy to find. Having finally decided on a general direction, the children and I began walking towards the large Termini Train Station. I was busy imagining what I would find at 58 Via di Marsi. I knew of no one who had been there before, and the only image I had came from a



Pigeons welcoming us to the San Lorenzo district



The first "Casa dei Bambini"

I felt there should be some fanfare or fireworks going off. But there was nothing; this street too, was sparse. Had the school been in America, we would have been submerged in a mélange of souvenir shops, group tours, photo opportunities, and eating stalls.

photo snapped almost a century ago on the Inauguration day.

Crossing through the station we exited on the other side and turned right where a crumbling brick wall dictated our entrance into San Lorenzo.

Our only welcome to this district was a host of pigeons who flew off the left wall. The map and the road had come to an end. Should we turn right or left now?

Twists and turns

After many twists and turns, we eventually found Via di Marsi. Now, we just needed to find number 58 but the numbers seemed to be in no order. These were the streets on which the children played, the buildings they had burdened with graffiti; this was where Montessori gathered her first students and subsequently changed the course of child psychology.

A bronze plaque caught the sunlight and within all the Italian, I recognized the word 'Montessori'. Directly above the plaque was a square tile with the numerals 5 and 8 painted on it.

I felt there should be some fanfare or fireworks going off. But there was nothing; this street too, was sparse. Had the school been in America, we would have been submerged in a mélange of souvenir shops, group tours, photo opportunities, and food stalls. Yet this place managed to retain the simplicity and individuality that Montessori had discovered a hundred years ago. An

arched foyer greeted us before we moved into the expansive courtyard bathed in light.

Four large yellow buildings surrounded a green courtyard laden with dusty-blue hydrangea flowers. The building to our immediate right bore the title "Maria Montessori, Casa dei Bambini".

The irony was that someone had left their blue bathrobe and other articles of laundry to dangle over the brass letters. So many years ago, Montessori had pioneered a method here that allowed the children to have pride in themselves and their surroundings, causing them to forbid their mothers from hanging the laundry outside but encouraging them to put out window boxes of geraniums and other flowers,

I was overcome with emotion; suddenly, everything that I had read and taught over the years fell into place as I devoured the environment in which the method had been cultivated.

I thought about Montessori being here, observing the children at work, and changing the materials as she deemed necessary, the method evolving all the time.

As I climbed the stairs to enter the apartment building, (the school was simply one of the apartments on the ground floor), I pictured Montessori here and the children welcoming her in the morning. This was where she took the four-month old baby from her mother in the courtyard to show the children, —

the origin of the Silence Game.

The school was closed for the summer of course, so we could not enter the actual classroom. A feeling of gratitude enveloped me and I made a silent promise to spread her ideals as faithfully and truly as I possibly could.

There was a brass handle on the brown door and on that I placed a bunch of that abundant dusty blue hydrangea. I had not thought twice about doing so; it was an instinctive gesture. In India, we always take flowers to our 'guru.'

The Casa dei Bambini still functions as a Public Montessori preschool in the San Lorenzo district of Rome. There are two classrooms with about 25 children in each. Each classroom has one teacher trained in the Montessori method by the Opera Nazionale Montessori. The school runs from 8.30am to 4.30pm. An International Congress is being planned for January 2007 to celebrate its centenary. ■

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