

SGUARDI DAL MONDO

A garden oasis for Palazzo Vaj

by Cecilia Hewlett



Palazzo Vaj gardens.



As the project for the re-establishment of a garden at Palazzo Vaj finally nears its completion, I am feeling a growing sense of anticipation. A sensation that builds day by day, like the anticipation when waiting for the arrival date of a new baby. The garden is due to be officially opened on the 24th June, the festival of St John the Baptist, an auspicious day indeed.

It was almost four years ago now that the very first seed of the Palazzo Vaj garden was planted. At that stage the garden was little more than a disused work-site and the seed was figurative rather than real. I had only recently taken on the role of Director of the Monash University Prato Centre (MUPC) after spending 12 months based at Villa I Tatti, the Harvard Center for Renaissance Studies in Settignano. For those of you who have visited I Tatti, it will not be difficult to understand how the idea of creating a garden in Prato first came to me. In the magnificent Cecil Pinsent designed gardens of Villa I Tatti, I was privileged to experience first-hand how a beautiful garden could feed the mind as well as the soul.

When I first arrived in Prato in 2001 I was relatively new to Italy and easily charmed by the city's architecture, people and food.



Girolamo Ristori, scene di vita cortese,
1475-90, da Palazzo Vaj (giardino).

One thing I did miss, however, were green spaces – such a fundamental part of the urban planning and development of my other home, the city of Melbourne in Australia. In those early days, regular walks along the Bisenzio river prevented me from feeling this absence too acutely and the surrounding hills provided a breath of fresh air to counter the imposing stone palazzi and cobbled streets.

When I returned to Prato as the Director of MUPEC in 2012, I began to develop a list of potential fundraising projects, and building a garden for Palazzo Vaj was at the top of my list. After all, I had a daily reminder of Palazzo Vaj's original garden, with a reproduction of the graffiti that had been found in the garden walls hanging in the ground floor offices of the Arte della Lana. These graffiti can be viewed today in San Domenico's

Museo di Pittura Murale and depict a series of courtly scenes and May Day celebrations. As a Renaissance historian, it seemed only fitting to return this space to its Renaissance origins. Unfortunately, we have only a few traces of what this garden would have looked like, and certainly the space would have been very different to that which we have now. The current design has been executed by the Australian landscaper designer Paul Bangay, who has quite deliberately not tried to recreate an Italian garden but rather re-interpret one through Australian eyes.

The initial seed of an idea was nurtured and nourished by the enthusiasm of everyone I spoke to about my plans. There is something about a garden which appeals to people from all walks of life, and I have been constantly surprised by the way in which this project has



been embraced by Italians and Australians alike. The contribution of our Centre's Patron, Australian fashion designer Carla Zampatti, stands out for particular mention here. Without the encouragement and support of the people around me, too numerous to mention by name here,

I would have given up long ago and this garden would never have been built. It has truly been a collaborative effort.

Over the years I have spent in Prato, it has been my great privilege to be witness to the way in which students have been



Palazzo Vaj garden.

transformed by their experiences here. The city has a particular skill for getting under people's skin. When I am in Melbourne I often run into colleagues and students who have spent time in Prato and I am always moved by their celebration of this place and culture, and by the light in their eyes when they speak of Prato – even years after the event. They nearly always look for ways to return here. I hope the garden will long continue to provide a meeting place between Pratese and Monash students and academics who temporarily make their home in Prato. I also hope that in this

meeting space there will be a meeting of minds and cultures.

At a fundamental level, the Palazzo Vaj garden project is a way of giving something back to the city of Prato, the city which has been my home on two separate occasions. Prato will always be a second home for me and I look forward to returning to the city again and again, for many years to come. And when I do, I very much look forward to taking some time out to enjoy sitting on one of the stone benches in the Palazzo Vaj garden.