

**Storytelling on the Margins:  
A Theoretical Framework for Imagining a Fashion Innovation Center in Tuscany**

By

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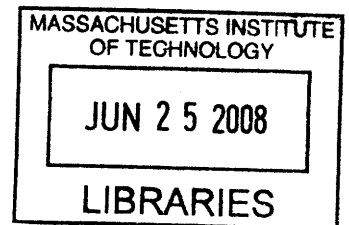
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**ABSTRACT**

The importance of the margin has long been deemed important in creative processes. At both the level of the individual and the level of the city, research shows that creativity tends to flourish on the philosophical and physical outskirts of society. This thesis expands upon this theory by looking at a second, less-documented trend of creative “edge” institutions: their deliberate use of storytelling for growth and idea development. This thesis examines these trends through three case studies, chosen to illuminate the particular case of Castel Pulci, a declining, vacant villa located ten miles outside of Florence, Italy, which the Italian government has slotted for physical and programmatic renovations to become a center for innovation and business in the fashion industry. The findings indicate that, in addition to exploiting their “edge” positions, innovative institutions pay constant, conscious, and deliberate attention to the role of narrative in their operations. Whether understanding objects, imagining the future, bringing a community together, or selling a product, the research in these case studies suggest that the use of storytelling is pivotal for innovative “edge” institutions

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Castel Pulci © MIT Mobile Experience Lab, 2007

## Preface: The Story of the Castel Pulci Project

In the spring semester of 2007 I took a course called MAS.967, *Castel Pulci: Innovation Center*, at the MIT Mobile Experience Lab. The class drew a small sample of students from each of three disciplines: architecture, urban planning, and business.

Our assignment was to reinvent Castel Pulci, a large but declining mansion ten miles outside of Florence, Italy, locked between countryside and city. Pulci has had many identities over its millennium existence: a castle and villa for three consecutive wealthy Italian families, a state mental hospital, a vacant building, and now the potential site for a fashion business and innovation center. Each of the three wealthy families that occupied the estate eventually went bankrupt, and finally the Italian government took over the estate in the early 1800's. It was at this time that Pulci became a mental hospital. Then, in the 1970s, there was a shift in accepted philosophy on treatment for the mentally ill. These patients were once excluded from society, hidden on the edges and locked in for life. But the emerging philosophy in the 1960's and 70's was one of inclusion and integration into mainstream society. With this change, hundreds of beautiful mansions in Europe and North America were left empty, stigmatized, and government owned, Castel Pulci included. After standing empty for thirty years, the local government slotted Castel Pulci for redevelopment. The provincial government came to MIT looking for ideas on how to make this place a fashion

hub. MAS.967 was charged with the task of making a programmatic and spatial plan for Castel Pulci.

Both the fashion world and business world had been criticizing Italy's fashion industry. Newspapers and magazines harped on Italy for outdated business models and stifling emerging talent.<sup>1</sup> The traditional family-oriented Italian business model was blamed for inhibiting new designers and stifling creativity in recent runway shows. The biggest names in Italian fashion often represent generations of designers within one family. But while the original founders of these names may have been design geniuses, their grand children and great grandchildren are often not. These old names and fashion houses retain their prowess because their greatest asset, their name, is not replicable. They infuse their operations with new design and business talent while trying to retain a majority ownership share for the family members. But retaining that ownership share, of course, becomes increasingly difficult in the global mega-business that is luxury fashion. Today, huge conglomerates own most of high fashion. The French conglomerate LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessey), for example, owns more than twelve runway names, several of them Italian. Italy, whose great asset is its ability to produce high quality luxury goods better than any other place in the world, is struggling with these non-Italian conglomerates, with the increasingly sophisticated Asian factories and markets, and, most importantly,

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<sup>1</sup> Trebay, Guy. Italian Fashion in the Time of the Trollope. *The New York Times*. September 22, 2007; Horyn, Cathy. 'The Bourgeois Lady Is Finished,' Miuccia Prada Says. *The New York Times*. September 28, 2005; Passariello, Christina. Europe's Lack of Young, Emerging Talent. *The Wall Street Journal*. February 28, 2008.

with the tremendous hurdle fresh Italian talent faces in overcoming these two macro forces.

Our class faced a big task. We immediately recognized that we could not produce a strategy for beating Asian markets or fashion conglomerates. We could, however, look at Castel Pulci as a place for new talent to bloom. We could see it as an international center for breakthrough thought and design in fashion. And we could see it as a place that could strengthen the local leather artisans and their workshops. We could not, however, approach the question with any real sense of context until after a class trip to Italy.

The Mobile Experience Lab, which aims to define 'connections between people, places, and information', derives its name from the 'hands-on' nature of the projects its students undertake. Students study a project with their classmates in Cambridge, but then, as part of the course, travel to the relevant project site in the relevant country, where they are able to meet with key players, see their site or system in person, and readjust their project goals and perceptions based on the experience. For our class, this trip was essential in transforming our perceptions of the problem and how to approach it. In March of 2007, we took a five-day trip to Florence to see our building and meet its local stakeholders.

We departed from a snowy runway in near-white-out conditions, on the only international flight to get out of Boston that night. Six hours later we exited the plane into comparatively warm Italian daylight, eager to see our project in

person. After a bus ride to Milan, train ride to Florence, and a walk through Florence from train station to hotel, we embarked on the fifteen-minute drive to Castel Pulci, some of us astounded by the beauty of a place we'd only hoped to travel to in our lives, others looking with satisfaction upon scenery they remembered well.

Castel Pulci astounded all of us. It is a building in layers, with the old turret of a medieval castle at its core, a Renaissance villa built gradually around it, and modern and airy hospital rooms built at the edges to enclose gardens and provide large-windowed lookouts. The Pulci family built the original structure, an L-shaped building with two medieval towers attached, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. After going bankrupt in the early 1500s, the Pulcis sold the building to the Soderini family, who maintained the building's original name, but quickly expanded its rooms with a new wing and courtyard in the Renaissance style. The Soderini wealth, however, did not endure, and before the turn of the century they sold Castel Pulci to the Riccardo family. In 1590 the Riccardo family began its own improvements upon the property, building the northwest wing in the Baroque style. During the two hundred-plus years that the Riccardo family owned the building, they added on parts to make the house more symmetrical. The Riccardo family, however, suffered the same financial fate as its predecessors. After failed attempts at auctioning off the building, the government assumed ownership.



Although the building had already benefited from some renovations on the outside walls when we visited, it was awaiting more. The interior revealed beautiful ceiling murals, romantic nooks, odd staircases, and wounds on the walls where looters had chipped off friezes and gargoyles during the building's thirty-year vacancy. From the back windows we could see the Tuscan countryside, and from the front we overlooked the Florentine fashion industry landscape, notable for large industrial buildings and the famous fashion labels that occupy them.

Looking out on these scenes from an empty building, enclosed by three layers of history, the question put to us in MAS.967 became clearer. Our specific task was to create a plan to make this building, situated ten to fifteen minutes outside of Florence, a lively local and international hub for fashion – a fashion business and innovation center. But more grandly, the question put to us was, in my ears, *“How do you make something out of nothing?”* *Something* didn't mean just any old something; it meant *innovation*, that 21<sup>st</sup> century buzzword that seems to have seeped through the skin of everything from environmentalism to social work, fashion included. And *nothing* didn't mean just any old nothing; it meant a physical and historical *context*. In this case the context was an empty building situated in the middle of a country that boasts an eight hundred-year history of dominating fashion, the country that essentially invented the fashion industry centuries ago. (Stuard, Gliding the Market)

While in Florence the class met with people who could elaborate on that context for us: essential faculty from Polimoda, Florence's famous design university; representatives from the province's government, who are managing and directing the project; Firenze Tecnologia, a forward-thinking consulting firm that works with Italian businesses to bridge old business models and new ones; and I Place, a non-profit business center that showcases and sells the beautiful work of local leather artisans with an eye on encouraging these artists to sustain their work and maintaining the region's leather goods tradition. Each of these groups gave fascinating, although sometimes conflicting, input for the project.

With this outside feedback as a sieve through which to filter 'innovative' yet realistic possibilities for Castel Pulci, the class made a set of mini case studies each week, looking at existing organizations, businesses, and institutions that represented a relevant aspect of Castel Pulci's potential. We examined schools, fellowship programs, open source design companies, incubators, and labs. At each class meeting we looked at a series of PowerPoint presentations prepared by individual students or small groups. This structure provided a forum for discussion and idea generation. It paid appropriate attention to the visual, as we were always looking at photos and images. Finally, it grounded our glamorous task in reality, because we were looking at real scenarios as a starting point.

By the end of the semester, we composed a plan that included visions for the grounds and physical structures that comprise Castel Pulci, for developing a local and international network, and for educational programming. The final plan

represented business, architectural, and planning perspectives. The vision statement read as follows:

*We seek to bring fashion into the future, make connections between people and entities committed to the advancement of the field and reinforce Italy's leadership role in the evolution of the fashion industry.*

Our plan included the following key components:

- an international **fellows program** to draw in the most exciting design talents to be among one another in Italy
- the development of **global connections in a local context**, by:
  - o connecting local markets to global fellows through business seminars, design seminars, and collaboration
  - o using advanced communication technologies and television conferencing to enhance Pulci's position as a global hub and center of constant awareness
- **Pulci publications and traveling exhibitions** to show the work of the fellows, as well as foster a conversation about fashion with the general public
- An **organizational and leadership structure**, including a managing director; a board of directors; a financial & fundraising strategy; and an advisory board comprised of industry experts, artists, academics, scientists, and other relevant parties<sup>2</sup>

The class was excited about its vision. We could picture this building as a buzzing hub. Late in the semester, however, one class member raised the question, "How are they going to do it? How does a place become a creativity and innovation center?" It was an important question. We developed some

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<sup>2</sup> *Vision, Goals, and Implementation: Castel Pulci, Italian Center for Advanced Research in Fashion.* MIT Mobile Experience Lab. Spring 2007.

answers, which included the organizational structure, the board of directors, and managing members.

These answers essentially comprised a step-by-step manual. They were good steps, ones that some of us had taken at one point or another or had seen in our experiences and careers, and we thoughtfully tailored them to the needs of Castel Pulci. But we had not uncovered the story behind the steps. How does a project like this unfold? Where was the starting point? What would be the sequence of events that lead to global connections in a local context?

We had written a detailed setting, but had not yet imagined a plot

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is about writing a plot. The Castel Pulci project established a setting, and it has an intended conclusion: new ideas, creativity, and a hub for innovation in fashion. But it does not yet have the details of how to arrive at this desired end. To begin to fill in these details for Castel Pulci, I conducted three case studies that look at the question of *how*. These cases are three tales of organizations that have, in some relevant aspect, reached the desired end that Pulci hopes to achieve. The first study is about starting from nothing and building up to something; the second study is about developing a network and a community context; the final study is about selling stories – how to introduce creativity to the marketplace. Though seemingly disparate, these three studies fit together in such a way that begins to describe how Castel Pulci will become what MAS.967 imagined.

The purpose of this thesis is not to alter the class's original vision for Castel Pulci, or even to expand upon it. The purpose is to understand how Castel Pulci can arrive at this vision. How does an empty building eventually become an international hub for innovation in fashion?

The answer to this question comes in two parts. The first half is about context: each of the three organizations I studied is thriving on the physical and philosophical outskirts of society. They all grow their precious idea gardens out back, hidden behind the fly-swarmed compost pile, while they keep their prize-

winning hydrangeas out front for the passerby to ogle. The second half is about storytelling: each of these organizations has attentively crafted its stories – stories meant to both guide themselves and to inform their visitors – on how exactly it is that they came to grow such unusually beautiful hydrangeas.

In plain language, this thesis is about how three places, namely a business incubator, a museum, and a shoe company, have used (1) their position on the periphery and (2) an active process of storytelling, to become ‘innovative’ in a way that is specifically relevant to the case of Castel Pulci.

I define this nebulous concept of ‘innovation’ as a process, not a product. In *The Social Life of Information*, John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid define innovation as the implementation of invention. They write that invention produces new ideas, but it takes innovation to make these ideas fruitful. The soul of innovation, like the soul of storytelling, is in the process.

## **1.1 Methodology**

I arrived at these observations over the course of an extensive research process, beginning with MAS.967. The process in this course was:

(1) Visioning: We attempted to understand Castel Pulci from a distance, based on descriptions from our partners in Italy, by looking at case studies that exemplified what we understood of what Castel Pulci wanted to become.

(2) Reality: We traveled to Italy to see the actual building and conduct open-ended, in-person interviews with local stakeholders, including faculty at the Polimoda design university, directors at an association of leather craftspeople

called iPlace, and principals at a company working towards new Italian business models, Firenze Tecnologia.

(3) Workshop: We conducted a workshop with the employees of the tradeshow design company, *Pitti Imagine*, to better understand the Italian fashion industry, how products connect with the market, and how these tradeshow organizers feel this process could improve.

(4) Rethink: Back in Boston, we conducted our own workshop to re-envision Castel Pulci based on our new, contextual information, and wrote a plan for this fashion business and innovation center.

At this point, I moved into my own research process, which went as follows:

(5) Theory: I read extensively on the 'creative city' concept, narrative and storytelling, innovation processes, and creativity, as described in the literature review that follows this section.

(6) Ethnology: I sought a deeper understanding of Italian fashion and craftsmanship in context, and thus undertook a two-month internship at Brunello Cucinelli Cashmere in Solomeo, Italy, a company that is able to outdo Asian markets through its unmatched Italian quality goods. While at Brunello Cucinelli I immersed myself in the company culture through participant observation. I worked as an assistant in the marketing division, and as part of my participant observation process, maintained a daily journal. The company does not offer interviews or company information for research purposes.

(7) Case Studies Revisited: The original case studies, chosen by the class, were educated guesses. I revisited all of them and chose new ones based on my new academic and ethnographic knowledge.

(8) Research: I did in-depth reading and research for each case study, looking at recent newspaper and magazine articles, company and organization websites, images, academic articles, and conducting open-ended interviews<sup>3</sup> with various leaders and partners of each organization where possible.

Ultimately, I wrote each case study in two parts: an unadulterated story of the organization at hand, followed by an analysis of its relevance to Castel Pulci.

The first study concerns the Pratt Design Incubator for Sustainable Innovation. The Pratt Incubator, as it is more frequently called, serves as an example of an institution that is doing just what Castel Pulci sets out to do: create a business and innovation center in the field of design. The Pratt Incubator, located in Brooklyn, New York, is a young and unique take on the concept of a business incubator. It draws on the talent of a college campus, the Pratt Institute, to take on design-related consulting projects, and to support students whose business ideas have won them admission to the incubator.

The second study is on the Budoora Homestead Art Centre, an art museum and central community point in the Preston area of Darebin, a city north of Melbourne, Australia. The Bundoora Homestead Art Centre has altered the

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A.



traditional path in developing an exhibit. Rather than employing a team of experts to create an exhibit, it initiates exhibits that require the stories and materials of local people. In this way the locals become the experts, and connections are forged and remade among a local population. This concept speaks to a method of embedding a place in its immediate context.

The third study is on the Spanish shoe company, Camper. In this case I focus on Camper's ability to use its story to turn a shoe into a way of life. Camper has flipped the concept of 'lifestyle brand' upside down: Camper has used its history to create a lifestyle concept for its customers, rather than catering to a lifestyle that already exists. The company has done this by expanding its brand into a hotel and restaurant, instead of developing coordinating accessories and clothing lines, as most growing chains have recently done. Camper wants its customers to live as characters in its story, not just 'look the part' by wearing its product.

This analysis is designed to better understand processes that these three organizations use. Just as the students of the Pulci course were able to use case studies, vignettes in the form of PowerPoint presentations, to inform their final vision, my intention in writing these case studies is to provide stories that can be used to envision new things and new processes for Castel Pulci.

## **1.2 Review of the Relevant Literature**

This thesis addresses two distinct bodies of literature: a set of literature on the Creative City, and a set of literature on narrative and storytelling. The literature on the Creative City is important because it addresses context, and the

importance of the periphery for creative people and institutions. The literature on narrative and storytelling is important because it speaks to the ways in which these organizations have used storytelling to grow. In this review I will discuss each of these two bodies, and note their brief intersection point. There is a noticeable absence of literature that directly speaks to the role of narrative in creative processes.

***On Creativity:***

As is true of the literature on narrative, the literature on creativity begins at the level of the individual. Howard Gardner's 1993 work, Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity Seen through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi, finds that highly creative individuals often live on the margins, set apart from the mainstream by their social class, race, nationality, gender, or other differentiating characteristic. These individuals exploit their edge position, using it as material for their work, and actively maintain their positions on the edge rather than fight their way into the center.

Sir Peter Hall projects Gardner's conclusions on to history's most famous metropolises in his tremendous book, Cities in Civilization. Hall's Los Angeles account, for example, points to the fact that Jewish immigrants to America, unquestionable outsiders in their day, deserve the credit for the founding of Hollywood. And, without ignoring Los Angeles's ideal weather for film production, Hall observes that Hollywood itself is on the edge of an enormous country, away from the influences of New York. He tells a similar story of Impressionist Paris, with its most influential artists living in the Montmartre and

Montparnasse neighborhoods, separate and ostracized from the city's prestigious Academie des Beaux-Arts. Hall looks at several metropolises that lived through frenetic periods of creativity, and the innovations that these frenzies produced.

Although Hall does spend time examining explanations behind these creative cities, Charles Landry advances the effort in his book The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators, by applying Hall's lessons in a modern context. Landry begins to bridge the gap between stories and creativity by relying on mini case studies, short stories of successful cities, to illustrate his theories. Landry warns against a human tendency to erase memory and replace the past. And in that vein, Landry observes: "The challenge of creative urban initiatives is to embed narrative qualities and deeper, principled understandings within projects which have iconic power" (Landry 64). It is in this statement that I find the intersection point between two largely separate bodies of work. I hope to begin an answer to Landry's challenge in this thesis.

***On Narrative & Storytelling:***

Any library holds volumes upon volumes on the subjects of narrative and storytelling: the use of storytelling in biology; storytelling in economics; stories shaping childhood development; stories of psychoanalysis; the meaning of biography; dramatic storytelling; visual narratives; and the societal functions of fiction. Even this list is incomplete. But for an absence of literature on storytelling and innovation, my research focuses on literature that assesses the

power of narrative in a general way, as well as literature that discusses visual storytelling.

Jerome Brunner addresses the potential of narrative to act as catalyst in Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life. He writes, “Great narrative is an invitation to problem finding, not a lesson in problem solving. It is deeply about road rather than the inn to which it leads” (Bruner 20). Brunner, a prolific writer on the importance of stories, examines the depth at which storytelling is imbedded in human life. Susan Engel, author of Context is Everything: The Nature of Memory, has a similar mission, but with a focus on memory. Engel looks at the ways in which physical place, social setting, and situation impact the process of memory, and how these memories are reshaped when given to the public for participatory re-telling.

Engel’s work steps into the visual realm, looking at the way physical surroundings impact our personal stories. But another set of literature examines the power that physical and visual forms have on storytelling. This body of literature agrees that architecture, art, and landscape position their viewers as active narrators, rather than listeners. In Landscape Narratives: Design Practices for Telling Stories, Matthew Potteiger and Jamie Purinton write that “the spatial narrative is more about the showing, relinquishing control to the viewer/reader who must put together sequences, fill in gaps, and decipher meaning” (Potteiger 10).

Dennis Frenchman moves this discussion forward by claiming that more than just assembling narrative from static places, people can actually impose their narratives on the form of a place. In his essay *Narrative Places and the New Practice of Urban Design*, Frenchman writes, “Just as the Form of a city can shape the stories that unfold there, stories can be used to shape urban form”. Frenchman’s body of design work relies on heavily on storytelling for context: not only context as knowledge for the urban designer, but context for the person living and experiencing the design every day.

For the mass of people using a city, “any element of the surrounding scene may serve as a link to memories of past events and distant places, to narratives you have heard, and to facts that you have learned”, writes William J. Mitchell in Placing Words: Symbols, Space, and the City. “They construct a virtual mise-en-scene on the immediate physical one”.<sup>4</sup> The emerging concept, that the stories are wound into the physical through a constant process of memory and narrative, is a concept that this thesis deals with. How does it happen? Where do the stories come from, how do they live on and in the physical world, and how do they add up to creativity?

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<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, William J. 2005. Placing Words: Symbols, Space, and the City. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

## Chapter 2: The Pratt Design Incubator for Sustainable Innovation<sup>5</sup>

### 2.1 The Story Behind the Pratt Incubator

Deb Johnson, founder of the Pratt Design Incubator for Sustainable Innovation, rolls the green plastic dice on the Incubator's donated conference table.

"Gimme a five, big money!" One die turns up four dots, the other one turns up one. "All right!" Rolling a five means money, but the four/one combination means big money. Everyone takes a roll, and then gets a personal rundown of the meaning. Eight means love, two is a sign of heightened awareness, nine means it's a day to be patient, and eleven is a power day. "Attempt anything today!" says Johnson.

The Pratt Design Incubator for Sustainable Innovation is part of the Pratt Institute, a college and graduate school for Design, Architecture, and Fine Arts in Brooklyn, New York. The Design Incubator, a unique take on the concept of a business incubator, was founded in the spring of 2002 when Professor Johnson, proudly examining her seniors' graduation projects, finally saw a way out of her annual May sadness. Maybe she didn't have to watch her students' bright ideas (leaf-shaped solar panels that follow the sun, sustainable furniture design, reactive neighborhood-based stuffed animals) become forgotten portfolio pieces as the students were forced to take nine-to-fives to pay off their loan debts.

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<sup>5</sup> Information from this case study is a product of interviews with Debera Johnson in April 2007 and September 2007, and Interviews with Pratt Design Incubator staff (Debera Johnson, Samuel Cochran, Kevin McElroy, Diane Ruengsorn) on 10/22/07. See Appendix A.

Maybe she could give a few of them the chance to take their ideas out of the portfolio and into the world.

At the time, Johnson was the Director of the Industrial Design Department at the Pratt Institute, and with that title had a few key resources at her disposal. One: the long list of contacts, colleagues, and friends that had built itself up around her as a precipitate of her directorship and her enthusiastic, engaging personality. Two: a small budget to hire work-study students. Three: an empty room in the basement of the Engineering building at Pratt.

With these resources at her disposal, Johnson approached two outstanding Pratt students and offered them the chance to turn their senior year projects into businesses. She could give them free office space, work-study students to staff their projects, and access to a network of mentors to advise them on whatever they needed. The two students were sold. They scavenged for furniture to fill their office, worked off their own computers, and spent late nights in their newfound business incubator after working regular day jobs.

Until 2005, the incubator operated in this fashion. As Johnson says, they were incubating the Incubator, trying to figure out what its capacities were, where it could go, and how far it could go. By 2005, the Incubator was ready to accelerate. At this time it clarified its mission, renamed itself the Pratt Design Incubator for Sustainable/Social Enterprise, and decided to only accept businesses with sustainable products and plans. Later it simplified its name to

The Pratt Design Incubator for Sustainable Innovation. It developed this statement:

*The Pratt Design Incubator for Sustainable/Social Enterprise is a vibrant and energetic atmosphere supporting the entrepreneurial talents of designers, artists and architects selected from the Pratt community who share a common goal: linking the social entrepreneur with the business of design. The Incubator sponsors environmental, social and cultural initiatives and benefits from a growing network of legal, business, engineering, and manufacturing experts.<sup>6</sup>*

The Incubator also began a consultancy practice, which has the desirable impact of augmenting student opportunities in design and business, strengthening connections to the marketplace, and simultaneously answering significant design questions for real clients. Its consultancy practice brings together motivated students, recent Pratt graduates, professors, and relevant members of the extensive Incubator network, all of whom work to solve design problems for chosen clients.

The New York City Mayor's Office for Industrial and Manufacturing Businesses, for example, didn't know what to do about its illegal dumpster problem. The process of applying for a dumpster permit in the City of New York was so onerous that small businesses simply accepted the fines charged to them for using illegal dumpsters as an inevitable cost of doing business. As a result, the city was littered with poorly placed, odious, dangerous dumpsters. The Office for Industrial and Manufacturing Businesses came to the Pratt Incubator for help.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://incubator.pratt.edu/>



The Incubator assembled a team of students and professionals from relevant disciplines to consult. Not only was the team able to design an attractive, affordable dumpster shed, but it also reexamined the dumpster permitting process and reduced the time it takes to get a dumpster permit by 75 percent.

This project was a first step for the Consultancy at the Pratt Incubator. As Deb Johnson sent off final emails for the dumpster case, leaned back in her desk chair, and released a melodic breath of satisfaction, she thought to herself that the Incubator Consultancy was ready to take on something bigger, more complicated, and hopefully international in scope.

As if she were living in a novel, it was at that moment that the phone rang. Dr. Samuel Sia from the Columbia University Medical Center was on the phone. He told her that he did not know if he was calling the right place, and could be totally off base, but he had a design problem and he needed help. He had found Deb and the Incubator from a Google search.<sup>7</sup>

Five months later, in October of 2007, a representative from Dr. Sia's new Pratt consulting team was in Rwanda doing field research to determine the ideal design for Dr. Sia's invention: a credit-card sized device that can test blood for several diseases, including HIV, malaria and tuberculosis, in about twenty

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Dr. Samuel Sia, 12/23/07

minutes.<sup>8</sup> Even though Sia's invention was already backed by venture capital and profitable as a western medical device, he wanted to take his technology to Rwanda, where it could be useful on a higher level. He knew, however, that the current device, designed for use in American hospitals, would never hold up in a medical, cultural, and economic climate as different as Rwanda. He determined that he needed the help of an industrial designer to succeed.

Sia understood the huge potential for his device in a country like Rwanda. It could increase the number of clients that medical clinics see, thereby increasing the number of diagnoses and the amount of counseling time allotted to each patient. It could also save people a return visit to the clinic. People often go in for initial blood testing, but are then unable to return to see their test results because of transportation issues, financial issues, or other crises. Additionally, if used for in-home visits, this 'Lab On A Chip', as it has been named, could relieve people the stigma associated with walking into a clinic for testing, yet still allow them the advantage of knowing if they need to seek treatment for one or more illnesses.

Sam Cochran, the lead designer for Lab On A Chip, had already spent nearly two years incubating his own business when he took the lead on this project. Sam and his sister, Teresita, have also invented thin, leaf-shaped solar panels that can cover a roof and are able to follow the sun, an invention that was featured in the New York Museum of Modern Art's "Design and the Elastic Mind" exhibit in the

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<sup>8</sup> Chin, Curtis D., Vincent Linder, Samuel K. Sia. Lab On A Chip devices for global health: Past studies and future opportunities. *Lab Chip* 2007: (7) 41-57. The Royal Society of Chemistry.

Winter/Spring of 2007/08. Cochran's connections to the Incubator are deep and his talent for design is palpable.

He had to find a way to simplify Lab on A Chip: make it easier to use, easier to record and understand results, resistant to heat and dust, and less likely to break. In Rwanda, this device wouldn't be sitting on a desk in a medical office; it would be traveling from homes to clinics on dirt roads, by car and bicycle.

During his two weeks in Rwanda, Cochran traversed the country, visiting medical clinics and meeting with the nurses and doctors who will be using Lab On A Chip, to better understand Rwanda's social and cultural relationship with different diseases, and to talk to many of the nurses and doctors who will be using Lab On A Chip. Making in-depth observations of the ways that Rwandans operated and fixed broken bicycles, batteries, cell phones, and televisions, Cochran learned how Rwandans cope with broken devices and what materials they use to fix things. He redesigned the device so that it could be fixed with materials and tools readily available in Rwanda. He tested Pratt's prototype for durability in rough travel, endurance under constant exposure to heat and dust, and general ease of operation.

Lab On A Chip was a break-through project for the Pratt Incubator. It is more glamorous than dumpsters; it has made a name for them. It will bring them more projects, better projects, and better fundraising fodder. It expands their network.

A powerful and far-reaching network is extremely important for the Pratt Incubator, as Deb Johnson explained. They rely almost entirely on their network to find projects, to get mentorship for their businesses, and to acquire funding, because the university cannot pay for the Incubator. The Incubator's starting network was essentially Johnson's own network; she brought a fat Rolodex to the Incubator when she founded it.

But now the entrepreneurs and consultants who work at the Incubator are the ones who expand the Incubator's network. Their key to forging useful connections is a straightforward, bi-weekly meeting at which all of the businesses in the Incubator sit around their conference table. Pratt invites a guest speaker to every meeting to offer a new perspective and new connections. The guest speaker may be a successful entrepreneur, a business coach, or a designer.

At this same meeting, each person identifies his needs for mentorship and connections. The others either know a contact, or begin looking for one. All of the members of the Pratt Design Incubator attend many events (networking events, design showcases, conferences, exhibit openings) each month. At every event, the entrepreneur attending is on a search not only to find contacts for her business, but for every business at the Incubator. In this way, the Incubator maximizes its networking potential by relying on a team of people to make contacts.

They have found that people are eager to offer Pratt businesses free mentorship and advice. Often the incubees and consultants are doing everyone's dream project, so their mentors consider it more of a privilege than a favor to be involved. Plus, time demand is low on each individual member of the network. When you have a huge network, with each member giving three hours here and there, it all adds up to a mass of good advice.

Their network, although extensive in New York, becomes sparse outside their hometown. They have found that there is always an attorney, designer, investor, or marketing guru right at home in New York City, and so they rarely look beyond. Dr. Sam Sia had the same experience: "I didn't know anything about industrial design, except that I knew I needed it for us to turn our device into something that people will use. A great thing about being in New York is that I was confident there would be someone interested in working with us on this".<sup>9</sup> Sia's original *Google* search to find the Pratt Incubator included the words "New York", so as to avoid a comparable organization too far away.

Additionally, the Pratt Incubator finds 100% of its consultants and entrepreneurs within the Pratt Institute. While the Incubator seeks projects that move beyond the City, such as Lab On A Chip in Rwanda, it has not sought partners, mentors, or inspiration abroad.

At this point in the Incubator's life, Deb Johnson notes, she is not concerned with increasing her network or finding more partners. She is instead focused on

a search to find the right partner – a financial partner – who can offer the Incubator the funding it needs to grow.

Johnson dreams of having five consulting projects and ten to twelve businesses in the Incubator at once. She would like to offer each business \$25,000 in seed money. Finally, despite their beloved conference table and one-room basement home, they all envision a new Incubator office facility. If Johnson meets a \$23 million donor tomorrow, she'll be ready to show her the floor plans and architectural drawings for their new office. They have already mapped out their dream building, and without a whiff of the money they'd need to build it.

Like the businesses it incubates, the Pratt Design Incubator lives on the power of the dream and the tenacity of the zealot. In a few short years, this approach has resulted in a dumpster shed design approved by the city, ties to Rwanda and global health initiatives, and a handful of successful businesses run by Pratt students.

Good thing Deb Johnson rolled a five on the morning of October 22<sup>nd</sup> when we met. I speculate that there have been a lot of tens, twelves and nines rolled at their donated, networked, and some-day infamous conference table. Now it is time to get some fives out of it.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Dr. Samuel Sia, 12/23/2007

## 2.2 How is the Pratt Incubator relevant to Castel Pulci?

### *Commonalities & Relevance*

For a few key reasons, the story of the Pratt Incubator for Sustainable

Innovation is an ideal case study for understanding Castel Pulci's challenge.

From a 'big picture' standpoint, both Pulci and Pratt are genuinely invested in good design, innovative design, and the philosophical and social context for their designs. While finances are a powerful and motivating concern, the goal for both institutions is much deeper than profit. Ultimately, both places see that their work has the potential to lead change their respective fields. Both are motivated to be recognized international hubs in their industries.

Pulci and Pratt have a similar shortage of monetary resources, despite an abundance of talent resources. Although funding would unquestionably help the Pratt Incubator grow, increasing its freedom and options, it has been extremely successful at drawing from its existing resources, rather than waiting for money to appear. The nascent Pulci can realistically follow Pratt's path in ramping up its activity.

Like Pratt, Pulci does have some very valuable resources that other places simply do not have. It has a building, and a significant one at that. And like the Pratt Incubator, it has talent close by. Although part of the vision for Pulci is to host an international group of the finest and most promising designers, there is no shortage of homegrown talent, in a country that continues to breed creativity, quality, and innovation in fashion. The Pratt Incubator's designers are

its idea generators. These designers are young people with extraordinary vision and capacity for new ideas.

Pulci's proposed model for a fellowship program is international in scope. The plan that MAS.967 wrote seeks to draw design talent from all over the globe. This is different from Pratt, but not very different. Italy, as a country, already draws this talent from all over the globe. Right in Florence, Polimoda, a premier fashion school, draws talent from around the world every year in its student body, just as the Pratt Institute does.

### ***Context***

Pulci is also similar to the Pratt Incubator in terms of context in the physical landscape. Yes, the Pratt Incubator is in New York City, a much bigger metropolis than Florence, but it is far out in residential Brooklyn off the ever-reluctant G Train, easily a forty-five minute trip to Manhattan, and an hour's trip to Dr. Sia's lab at Columbia University on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Pulci is also on the periphery of a hub, a fifteen-minute drive out of Florence on the beginning edges of the countryside. The literature on creativity suggests advantages to the periphery. Many of history's most astounding inventions can credit a place or person just outside the hub and outside the mainstream. Silicon Valley, a classic example, was born on the invention of Fairchild Semiconductor, a company that spun off of the oppressive Shockley Semiconductor Laboratory, which was itself a collection of people just stepping outside of Stanford University's prestigious engineering program.



### ***Using Stories***

*Storytelling is a focus for me – perhaps partly from my background as a museum exhibit designer – but it is a huge part of understanding design. For example, what is the story behind any product? What is the story behind a plastic bottle of water, what does it allow people to do that they couldn't do before, what cultural message is behind our need to have water that is bottled, what is the story of the water itself – Pellegrino vs. Fiji vs. tap water from a New York aqueduct?*

*We spend a lot of time understanding the context that a design is going to enter. Who are the stakeholders, what does it look like from their point of view, what is the real problem that needs to be solved, where are the unseen design opportunities?<sup>10</sup>*

*- Deb Johnson, Pratt Institute*

Most interesting in the story of the Pratt Incubator, and most relevant to understanding creative processes, are the details in how its projects come together. Like the way in which a good collection of short stories or poems converge on one another to form a collective and enlightening whole, the innovations of the Pratt Incubator are an assembly of stories gathered into a similarly life-altering object.

Lab On A Chip, for example, has drawn several disparate stories together. There is the story of Sam Sia, the Columbia University inventor and academic; there is Sam Cochran's life story, his love of design and his multiple projects with the Incubator; Debera Johnson's story of chance, of being brave enough to roll the dice to see what comes up; then there is the story of progress in microchip technology. Finally, there is Rwanda's story, which is first a story of a white-man's race to colonize a potentially resource-rich continent, dividing up land with

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<sup>10</sup> Email from Debera Johnson to Alexa Mills, 12/4/2007

no regard for its natural divisions, and dividing up and labeling people with no regard for their natural positions and relationships. Then there is the precipitating story of Rwandan Genocide. Following that story is the story of Rwandan recovery, a fierce dedication to economic and social growth, a country taking every step it can to accommodate technological development and foreign investment, most recently establishing itself as the country to give more antiretroviral drugs than any of its neighbors.

The Pratt Incubator is forward, but surely not unique, in realizing a pattern of stories behind its projects. Certainly, any object could be understood through the framework I've illustrated above. The point is that, in all the literature on creativity and innovation, which tirelessly tries to understand processes and secrets behind discovery, there is little on the role of stories. In the context of this case study, written as a story itself, it becomes clear that a case, whether the case of the Pratt Design Incubator or the case of an object like Lab On A Chip, is no more than the sum of its parts (Becker 208-9), a sequence of stories looped through one another to form the whole.

Debera Johnson relies on these stories, the significance of each of them and what it means for them to come together. I argue that a large part of the Pratt Design Incubator's success is its ability to understand the power and importance of the stories it encounters, as well as its abilities to use them and weave them. The Incubator is already imagining the stories of the future of this device, its

ability to relieve social stigma, its possibility to change medical counseling in rural clinics, and ultimately its potential to change the landscape of HIV/AIDS.

And, the Incubator staff has invested a great deal of time in imagining the story of the Incubator's future. They have the architectural plans drawn up and a budget worked out, even though it could take ten years to happen. Without this capacity for imagining what their next chapter could be, and five chapters ahead of that, the Pratt Design Incubator would be aimless. They may roll the dice, so to speak, but they do so in the context of a story that they are carefully and consciously writing for themselves.

## Chapter 3: The Burdoora Homestead Art Centre

### 3.1 The Story of the Bundoora Homestead

In 2001 the Bundoora Homestead in Darebin, Australia reinvented itself for the third time, this time as a community art centre. The original building, a beautiful Victorian home, was built in the year 1900 as the result of an architecture contest sponsored by its owner, John Matthew Vincent Smith.

Each of the building's three identities has layered distinct associations and memories on the property. First it was the mansion home of John Smith, businessman in the horse breeding and racing industry. The story of Smith's horse, rather than Smith himself, has been the lasting memory in the minds of the community there. His horse Wallace, son of 1890 Melbourne Cup winning Carbine, lived in the property stables. Wallace is the star of a local ghost story now, accounted on the Bundoora Homestead website:

*A majestic galloper, Wallace had won the Caulfield Guineas, Victoria Derby and Sydney Cup by the time he was three years old. It was his 22 years at stud however, for which he is most renowned - the progeny of Wallace competed in a total of 949 races, winning \$246,000 pounds in prize money. In 1917, aged 25, Wallace died and was buried close to the Bundoora Park stables where his grave was originally marked by a flat stone cairn inscribed with his name. Legend claims that Wallace is watched over by a ghost horse. Late at night, if you walk close to his grave and hear the clip clop of hooves, it is thought to be his stable mate, a mare called Lurline, coming to see who goes near him.<sup>11</sup>*

In 1920, three years after Wallace died, Smith sold his property to the local commonwealth government, which gradually added buildings and facilities to the

property for the purposes of a state-run mental hospital designed to help mentally traumatized Australian World War I veterans recover from the war. Over the course of time, however, the facility grew to accept depressed and mentally unstable patients regardless of their service in the war. From 1920 to 1965, the hospital capacity expanded from serving thirty patients, to two hundred ninety patients.

By historical accounts, the hospital seems to have been more humane and advanced in philosophy than many of its fellow mental hospitals over the world, primarily because its mission was to rehabilitate patients and return them to mainstream society, rather than permanently cut them out of it. In that spirit, Australian psychiatrist and World War II veteran, Dr. John Cade, discovered the use of lithium carbonate in treating manic depression. He kept his lab on the grounds of Bundoora Homestead. He suspected that depression was a chemical problem, not fully explained as a precipitate of trauma. He tested the urine of his manic patients and found that it was significantly more toxic than the urine of non-manic people.

Testing the drug on himself first to determine its safety, Dr. Cade then gave the drug to a patient, and had remarkable results. The patient improved so dramatically over the course of a month that he was able to return home and to his former job. Dr. Cade's discovery was a major breakthrough in psychiatry and his findings were published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* in 1949.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bundoorahomestead.com/>

In 1993, years after most mental hospitals had been disbanded, the Commonwealth government decommissioned the hospital and handed the property over to the State. Within three years they demolished the majority of the hospital buildings, leaving the original mansion home intact. The building stood vacant and in the process of repair for several years, until, in 2001, it opened as the Bundoora Homestead Art Centre. The Commonwealth government, La Trobe University, and the Darebin City Council partnered in opening the Centre.

The museum has a café, exhibits, and events – the usual art museum experience. But it has one special gallery, called the Access Gallery, which makes it unique among its fellow museums:

*The Access Gallery at Bundoora Homestead Art Centre is an exhibition space that hosts projects developed by community groups, individuals and special interest groups. The purpose of this space is to encourage users to tell their own stories of cultural diversity, heritage, and identity.<sup>12</sup>*

It was in this spirit that, in 2005, museum curator, Dr. Jaqueline Healy, commissioned the first comprehensive exhibit of the work of Premier Pottery Preston, a local pottery in the City of Darebin that created beautiful pottery between 1929 and the mid-1950's.

Historian and curator Noris Ioannou took on the work of coordinating the exhibit. Several Australian museums and centers had exhibited pieces from Premier

Pottery Preston in galleries and pottery exhibits, but no one had yet told the comprehensive story of the pottery. And no one person ever would. Rather, it would be the collective work of the friends, family members, collectors, neighbors, and purchasers associated with Premier Pottery Preston that created the exhibit with museum curators.

Premier Pottery Preston was founded in an industrial district called Preston in the City of Darebin, a community just north of Melbourne Australia. Founders Reg Hawkins and David Dee were underemployed potters as the Depression approached, and so built a kiln out of recycled bricks to make their own pottery in an old bacon curing building. They had only a handful of employees, including artist Margaret Kerr, who used the clay to model Australian plants and animals. The pottery eventually began affixing Kerr's creations to its pots, bowls, and vases, giving it some of the distinction that made the pottery famous.

Ioannou's first steps in creating the exhibit were to look at past exhibits featuring the Pottery, including exhibits from the National Gallery of Victoria, the Powerhouse Museum and National Gallery of Australia. The exhibit in the National Gallery of Victoria was a gift of one of the descendants of Pottery founder David Dee. Dr. Healy writes in her account of the exhibit process:

*...The turning point was making local connections to the families of the key contributors of the pottery. Merv Lia, President of the Preston Historical Society knew Myrtle James, the wife of Alan James, the pottery's thrower. She was in her eighties and we were able to interview*

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<sup>12</sup> [www.bundoorahomestead.com](http://www.bundoorahomestead.com)

*her and her son Kerry. They were still living locally. The second major contact was with Cath Webb and her father. Cath Webb had written the essay on Premier Pottery Preston in the Shepparton Art Gallery catalogue on ceramics and at that time she had conducted extensive interviews of her relatives about the pottery. Finally, Greg Hill, ceramic expert and author of Brunswick Potteries offered to participate in the project because he had been researching the markings on the base of the pots and the history of the pottery.*

This process was just the beginning, though. More people became involved. People who had lived near the pottery as children recalled events, smells, and encounters associated with Premier Pottery Preston. Families pulled out their heirloom vases and bowls to share with the community. Over sixty pieces of pottery came from individuals, representing more than half of the total pieces in the exhibit.

Once the exhibit was on display, these stories and remnants of the Pottery came out tenfold. At one event, an old man raised his hand and identified himself as someone who had worked at the pottery. He was able to offer previously unsettled information about the artistic contributions of Margaret Kerr to the Pottery. Descendants of the pottery workers came to the exhibit and reconciled after decades of acrimonious relations over a glaze recipe book.

*People began coming to the museum with pieces of pottery they kept at the back of their cupboards, talking with one another, with museum staff, and with guests about their pottery. Through telling the stories behind their pottery pieces, people in the community found a common bond with one another they didn't know they had.*



In 2007 the enthusiasm continues. The website [www.remued.com](http://www.remued.com), dedicated to organizing and recording the evolution of the premier Pottery Preston styles, continues to update its research and photo gallery regularly. The book that was published in association with the exhibit is still in demand. People have maintained their connections and the community has grown its collective knowledge of itself through the story it told.

### **3.1 How is the Bundoora Homestead Art Centre relevant to Castel Pulci?**

#### ***Commonalities & Relevance***

Castel Pulci and the Bundoora Homestead are both multi-tenanted, layered buildings that have followed the ownership sequence of: wealthy homeowner, state mental hospital, community/national arts-related institution. This common path between the two buildings speaks to the flexibility of beautiful, historical buildings, and the ability of such buildings to transform over time and respond to local needs.

It also speaks to the impact of a physical structure on the psyche of a community. More than just the walls that hold a museum or institution, these buildings are historical landmarks in the minds of the local people who see them every day or ever week. The people of Darebin had a mental relationship with the Bundoora Homestead long before it became an art gallery. But now, as an art gallery, local people have a relationship with Bundoora's contents as well as its physical structure. I posit that Castel Pulci must do the same: like the case

of Bundoora Homestead, people living in and around Florence already have a relationship with Pulci's walls; as Pulci becomes a center for business and innovation in fashion, these people must have a way to develop a relationship with its contents too.

### ***Context***

Bundoora Homestead is on the periphery – just like Pratt and Pulci – thriving on the outside edge of the hub. Darebin is north of Melbourne, the big city. As in the case of the Pratt Incubator, the Bundoora Homestead experiences specific advantages on the periphery. Curator Jaqueline Healy writes:

*The labyrinth of cultural organizations that map our cities outside their epicenters create intense layered experiences that are difficult to replicate in larger state and national cultural organizations. (Healy 1)*

Healy sees this advantage to existing outside of the epicenter, not just for Bundoora, but for 'cultural organizations' in general. Furthermore, she recognizes the difficulty of operating in an epicenter. The pottery exhibit would not have worked in downtown Melbourne. It wouldn't have had the same impact, wouldn't be grounded in a community context, and, finally, would just not have fit in. Downtown art, in almost any downtown, is mainstream – famous name artists posted on a white gallery wall or on a pedestal in the middle of a room. What is happening at the Bundoora Homestead Art Centre is far more involved than that.

Darebin's innovations include one of the first anti-depression drugs, a pottery workshop that developed a new style, and also new techniques in glazing and coloring. But the Bundoora Homestead Art Center, which showcases these histories rather than trying to make research breakthroughs of its own, is actually making a breakthrough in its process. Its Access Gallery's process of developing exhibits from the bottom up is dependent upon Bundoora's peripheral location, and creates a unique setting in which exciting, unexpected things can happen.

### *Using Stories*

When MAS.967 was in Italy, we met with Linda Lopa at the Polimoda. She asked one very provocative question: "How do you exhibit fashion, so it is more than just clothes on the girl?" The Bundoora Homestead provides an answer to her question: Fashion becomes more than just the clothes on a girl when it is grounded in a community story. The Premier Pottery Preston made beautiful pottery, yes. But on a deeper level, a large part of the pottery's lasting value goes beyond its physical beauty. The pottery has been able to bring people together and build connections.

As *New York Times* fashion editor Cathy Horyn wrote, "Fashion is essentially autobiographical and sentimental. Designers put their name on a label, tell their story, express their taste and experience and, if told well and often enough, they find an audience."<sup>13</sup> Horyn has answered Lopa's question as it pertains to the

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<sup>13</sup> Horyn, Cathy. 'The Bourgeois Lady Is Finished,' Miuccia Prada Says. *The New York Times*. September 28, 2005

runway. But if we take a step back to the workroom, and then a further step back into the history of Italian fashion, how can we respond to Linda Lopa? How can Castel Pulci respond to Linda Lopa? I assert that Pulci can make fashion more than just 'clothes on the girl' by embedding those clothes in their natural context through a community-based story, much as the Bundoora Homestead has done with pottery.

Any community has hundreds of stories that can only be written with local knowledge; the towns surrounding Florence are no exception. The Castel Pulci proposal sets out the goal to 'make global connections in a local context'. A gallery like Bundoora's Access Gallery could be the foundations of Pulci's context. Pulci needs to facilitate new connections between the small artisan shops in the various industries (leathermaking, cashmere, et cetera) dotted all over the countryside. What story do the leather artisans have to tell? About their history or their product? What stories do the people have to tell about the fashion heirlooms they have saved over generations? Is there a story about traditional Italian processes for producing various fine goods?

Castel Pulci should make its walls porous to the possibilities. As Healy so poignantly notes:

*There are few barriers to the community directly communicating with a local gallery. The smaller scale results in greater access to programs and staff. There are no bewildering websites to navigate or the need to be interrogated by visitor services officers to see if the enquiry is worthy enough to be passed on to the curator. There is direct access and instant interest.*

...

*While the exhibition was on display at Bundoora Homestead Art Centre members of the public came with pieces of pottery under their arms or in their handbags to share their memories. People who had worked or lived near the pottery came to tell their stories. Such a gathering of community could only have happened in the heartland of where the pottery had existed.*

That is the power of the community gallery model; it allows for exhibits that no one else and no *place* else could exhibit. It is a way to promote knowledge sharing among people who can gain creatively and financially from sharing their knowledge with one another. I don't argue that Castel Pulci can rely on a community art gallery to define its local context, but I do believe that such a gallery has tremendous possibility to get the connections started, to provide great flexibility over the long term, and to give people an additional reason to come to Castel Pulci.

In the fall and winter of 2007/2008, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston had an exhibit on shoes called *Walk This Way*. It featured an international collection of shoes, dating as far back as Byzantine Egypt, which highlighted the most important breakthroughs in the history of the shoe. (Naturally, a disproportionate number of the shoes on exhibit were Italian.) The pairs were scattered all over the museum, and visitors had to walk through all the galleries if they wanted to see every pair, bringing people to galleries they don't normally visit.

Castel Pulci, a place that has been vacant for three years, needs to become a place that attracts people. Like the Museum of Fine Arts Boston used the shoe

exhibit to bring people through new galleries, Pulci should use exhibits to bring people to its grounds. A regular museum-style exhibit would never work, though, because Pulci can't attract just simple viewers, people who only want to look, observe and marvel at someone else's innovation; Pulci has to attract participants, people who have a real reason to come there and add their knowledge and expertise in return for more connections and more knowledge, or at least more complete knowledge.

The Premier Pottery Preston exhibit forged connections and built knowledge because it provided the community with a structure within which they could tell a collective story. No one person in Darebin, not even the descendants of the potters themselves, could have told the story of Premier Pottery Preston. No historian could have pieced it together, even with interviews, to produce a final product that had the emotional, real-time, living-story effect that the exhibit at the Bundoora Homestead Art Centre had. This is because the story of the Pottery was living in fragmented pieces in the minds of hundreds of people.

When the story went public it developed the richness and depth of human connection that characterizes a novel. It brought the past into the present. "When a memory takes on a public form it doesn't necessarily lose its internal psychological intensity. But it may subtly transform it. In fact, sometimes the public use of a memory gives it a definition and substance it didn't have when it lived only in one's mind as a fleeting and infrequent visitor" (Engel 16). A place

or an object is of little importance to people if it is not understood in its physical and historical context.

The Bundoora Homestead Art Centre has based its existence on these premises. It is no accident or lucky coincidence that its pottery exhibit drew so much knowledge from the community and built up so many connections. It is part of the Centre's philosophy, reflected not only in its special Access Gallery, but also in its conscientious attention to the history of its own building. The Centre's website has an entire page covering the history of the building in detail.

The story of the homestead's former resident Wallace the horse, for example, is a ghost story. It says that his mare, Lurline, watches his grave at night looking for anyone who tries to disturb him. People have heard the clip clops of her hooves at night. Promoting stories like this can ground a place in a local tale that everyone has written. They make places real to both insiders and visitors.

## Chapter 4: Camper

### 4.1 The Story of Camper

One day in 1877 Antonio Fluxá, a native to Spain's small Mediterranean Island of Mallorca, packed his bags and went to England, for no obvious reason. A few months later he returned to his island home with a new knowledge of the most modern techniques for leather shoe production, and remade himself into a cobbler. His factory produced dress shoes.<sup>14</sup>

Nearly a century later Antonio's grandson Lorenzo, seeing promise and inspiration in his grandfather's story, created Camper. This modern descendant of Antonio Fluxa's original company is headquartered on the Island of Mallorca, and now has a shop on every important shopping street in the world. The brand is famous for its colorful urban shoes, designed to support heavy walking use, and known to be worn on earth-conscious celebrities, artists, and hip twenty-somethings in any major urban center.

Anyone looking to learn the origins of Camper will find some version of this little history of Antonio Fluxa's mysterious 1877 trip to England. It is on the Camper website, in its company literature, and in nearly every article ever published about Camper. It is the company's anthem. When I interviewed the store

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<sup>14</sup> Story repeated in several publications, including the company website ([http://www.camper.com/web/en/camper\\_history.asp](http://www.camper.com/web/en/camper_history.asp)); company reports ([www.camper.com/web/en/pdf/camper\\_corporate\\_info\\_en.pdf](http://www.camper.com/web/en/pdf/camper_corporate_info_en.pdf)); Fairs, Marcus. Interview with Miguel Fluxá in Mallorca. *Icon Eye Magazine*. June 2005.; Riefler, Dagmar. Camper – More than just shoes. *Mallorca Magazine*. <http://www.abc-mallorca.com/ArticleView.asp?idArticle=71>.; Vienne, Veronique. Growing Up Camper. *Metropolismag.com*. October 2007.



manager at Boston's Camper shop, I found a singer of this anthem. Kamesha<sup>15</sup> presides over the bright rows of Camper's oft-mismatched shoes at 139 Newbury Street in Boston. She is the store manager. Newbury Street, especially this stretch of Newbury Street, is an exclusive club of the finest retailers. Camper stands a few steps away from the European fashion classics and legends: Loro Piana, Chanel, Valentino, and Burberry.

Kamesha used to work at a Steve Madden shoe store at the other end of Newbury Street, and before that at the American shoe chain Nine West, and before that at a former downtown Boston shoe store called Crystals, and before that at a series of clothing stores. She has found her home at Camper. "If you work here, it's not like working at any American company," she said. Kamesha has been taken by Camper's high pay, excellent benefits, a seasonal clothing allowance that enables her to purchase clothes specifically for work, an annual trip to Mallorca for store managers, and occasional visits from the higher-ups in Spain, who always come with kisses, gifts, and an invitation to dinner.

As a manager, Kamesha is not just assigned to just the usual store-manager fare of tracking sales figures and keeping customers happy. She also learns marketing research, walking around Boston with a Polaroid to find Camper wearers who are willing to smile for her camera. The company wants her to know what shoe designs are most popular among Bostonians' feet, who wears

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<sup>15</sup> Interviews with staff at Camper store on Newbury Street, Boston MA. August 2007 and November 2007. See Appendix A.

which models, and how people dress themselves when wearing Camper. As a result, she and her staff know what to offer customers when they walk in the store, just by giving them a quick body scan.

She is pleased to sell a line of shoes that is made of 100 percent recycled materials, and she is happy with the robot made of shoe boxes that stands in her store window this season. Camper's interior designers create a different look for each store. While Camper's stores once had a common look, a recognizable format for customers, the company is gradually changing that. Now Camper shops each have a completely different look, done by different designers who do not collaborate or consult with one another.

Most stores try to make all of their branches look and feel the same. But Camper relies on its story, this little twist of unexpectedness in Antonio Fluxa's surprise departure from Spain to learn shoemaking in England. Its products, both the shops and the shoes, are reflections of that twist: picture a pair of black maryjanes with a big yellow sunflower on the right toe, and a buzzing bee on the left toe. Camper brands itself by being consistently unpredictable, rather than consistently predictable, like The Gap, the French Connection, Brooks Brother, or a host of other stores have been.

In 2005 Camper gave the world a real-time example of Camper's unpredictability factor. The company had considered developing watches and purses, as other brands have done, but finally settled on something more grand. After a few

years venture with Food Ball, an organic fast-food restaurant that sold glorified rice balls at its shop in Barcelona,<sup>16</sup> the company has found a better fit in the form of Casa Camper, a Barcelona boutique hotel that attempts to teach its guests how to live a Camper life. New York Times hotel and restaurant reviewer Frank Bruni states, “You’ve walked in the shoe, now sleep in the hotel! That could well be the slogan for Casa Camper, which is not merely a place to stay but a sensibility, a philosophy – or in other, more cynical words, an exercise in brand extension”.<sup>17</sup> From the obvious to the simple, Casa Camper is an embodiment of all that Camper has evolved to stand for.

At Casa Camper each guest is welcomed to a two-room suite, which includes cubbies instead of a closet, an indoor hammock for afternoon naps, and a pillow menu that guests can use to order the pillow of their choice for a comfy night’s sleep.<sup>18</sup>

Fernando Amat, the hotel’s famous Spanish designer, created clean, white bathrooms, and Casa Camper provides guests with fluffy white robes. Generous showerheads and water pressure make for a luxurious shower, while the water washed down the drain gets recycled and funneled into the toilet water system. Casa Camper is the first hotel in the world to employ this water recycling program.

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<sup>16</sup> Camper cierra el restaurante de comida ecológica Food Ball en Raval. *El País*. 12/05/07.

<sup>17</sup> Bruni, Frank. Barcelona: Casa Camper. *The New York Times*. 5/15/05.

When you are hungry at Casa Camper, you can go down to the kitchen and eat, just as if you were at home. The hotel has done away with minibars and limited-hours hotel restaurants, and replaced them with a free 24-hour food bar that includes a range of healthy organic snacks and sandwiches.

Nearly every article and website describing Casa Camper notes that visitors often confuse the hotel lobby with a small art gallery or museum. There are both paintings on the walls and bicycles hanging from the ceiling.<sup>19</sup>

On other accounts, Camper is more direct in its message. The hotel has posted signs all over the building with messages like, *Walk, don't run; Express yourself; You are what you eat;* as well as signs near the elevators encouraging guests to take the stairs, and others advocating recycling, not smoking, conserving water, and using condoms.<sup>20</sup>

In all its products, Camper is attempting to equate choosing shoes with choosing a way to eat, a way to commute, a way to consume, a way to do work, and a way to think of time. As Marcus Fairs noted in his 2005 article for *Icon Eye* magazine, "The concept is that by providing food and shelter as well as clothing,

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<sup>18</sup> Bernado, Jordi. Interview with Tió, Jordi and Fernando Amat: Playfulness symbolizes a Spanish shoemaker's first step into hospitality. *Architectural Record*. 2006.  
[http://archrecord.construction.com/projects/bts/archives/renovations/06\\_camper/overview.asp](http://archrecord.construction.com/projects/bts/archives/renovations/06_camper/overview.asp)

<sup>19</sup> Amat, Feran.  
[http://www.designhotels.com/hotels/europe/spain/barcelona/casa\\_camper\\_barcelona\\_spain/casa\\_camper\\_barcelona\\_design\\_concept?PHPSESSID=de4eeb73f...](http://www.designhotels.com/hotels/europe/spain/barcelona/casa_camper_barcelona_spain/casa_camper_barcelona_design_concept?PHPSESSID=de4eeb73f...)

<sup>20</sup> Vienne, Veronique. Growing Up Camper. *Metropolismag.com*. October 2007.

camper is supplying the three most basic human needs”.<sup>21</sup> As Kamesha at the Boston store so aptly confirmed, “I don’t want to say Camper is a lifestyle brand, because that’s such a cliché, but Camper really is a lifestyle.”

Madrid’s El País reported:

*El hotel significa para Camper el tercer paso en el desarrollo del negocio. El primero, dice Fluxá, fue la creación del proyecto. Un proyecto rompedor en una España, la de los setenta, “en blanco y negro”. El Segundo lo dio a partir de 1992 con su internacionalización, y hoy factura el 70% en el mercado exterior, y el tercero es la diversificación, que arrancó hace un año con el restaurante Food Ball y continúa con Casa Camper.<sup>22</sup>*

Whatever comes in Camper’s fourth phase, we can be sure that the company will tell it, show it, teach it, and live it.

## 4.2 How is Camper Relevant to Castel Pulci?

### ***Commonalities & Relevance***

Camper’s story is relevant to Castel Pulci because it has moved beyond the realm of the wearable product and into the realm of the livable product. One of the proposals for Castel Pulci, generated in Italy and discussed by MAS.967, is to make part of Pulci a boutique hotel. Although Camper’s hotel is, in many ways a brand extension, part of its marketing and sales plan, it is also a new and excellent model of how to tell customers a story.

<sup>21</sup> Fairs, Marcus. Interview with Miguel Fluxá in Mallorca. *Icon Eye Magazine*. June 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Cebrían, Belén. Camper pisa su nueva casa: La invierte 11 millones de euros en un hotel con el que amplía su diversificación. *El País*. 1/30/2005.

Additionally, Camper is relevant because fashion, even innovation in fashion, is for sale. Ultimately, the creativity or fashion innovation that comes out of Castel Pulci will reach the market. Camper has found a way to sell its history. When many people shop, they choose a product not just for its utility and its price, but for the feeling it gives them. Camper is expert in selling the feeling.

There is a company called Brunello Cucinelli Cashmere hidden in the mountainside village of Solomeo in Umbria, Italy. Solomeo has a population of about five hundred people, most of whom work for Cucinelli. The company, whose entire operation, including design center and factory production, is on this one site in Solomeo. Solomeo is about a thirty minutes drive from Perugia, the closest city. The company has sunflower fields on one side and mountains on the other. Brunello Cucinelli is less well-known than Camper, but with a smaller, wealthier, and more exclusive customer base.

Brunello Cucinelli is relevant in some of the same ways as Camper: It also sells a story, and also keeps a small hotel. Cucinelli, though, keeps its hotel right on the company grounds in secluded Solomeo. And the story it sells is not so much the story of the company, but the story of luxury goods production in Italy. Every person who buys Cucinelli, which averages around \$1,000 US for a sweater, knows he is getting a product that is made in Italy, by Italian artisans, of the finest material available. He knows because Brunello Cucinelli makes sure that he knows it. All of Cucinelli's dealers in Europe, Asia, and the US, many of whom are Italian born, are educated on the details of how Cucunelli clothes are

made on site in Solomeo. Every item for sale comes with a mini four-page booklet on the history of the company. Like Camper, Cucinelli knows that people don't just buy the quality, they buy the feeling that when they wear Italian-made cashmere, they have Italian-luxury souls.

### ***Context***

Like the Bundoora Homestead Art Centre and the Pratt Institute, Camper exists on the periphery. While its hotel is in the middle of Barcelona, its design and business headquarters are on the Island of Mallorca off the coast of Spain. Camper keeps its original island home, securely isolated from any creativity crushers. Camper, however, is a bad example in this category, because unlike Pulci, Camper does not try to draw visitors to its center. Just the opposite, Camper actively tries to keep people away, almost never speaking to the press or inviting visitors.

Cucinelli, on the other hand, maintains its periphery position while encouraging visitors to come to its boutique hotel, on-site company restaurant, and full-line clothing shop. Cucinelli hosts events, music and medieval dinners, throughout the year. It advertises its events in Perugia and elsewhere. Cucinelli wants visitors to experience the Cucinelli way. It wants its visitors to experience luxury Italy, and it proves that there is a way to reap the advantages of isolation on the edge, while simultaneously sharing its treasures and philosophies with curious visitors.

Although Cucinelli does it on the periphery and Camper does it in the middle of Barcelona, both companies offer people something that is very important to Castel Pulci's future: the opportunity to experience their story in real time.

### *Using Stories*

Jerome Bruner wrote, "Storymaking is our medium for coming to terms with the surprises and oddities of the human condition and for coming to terms with our imperfect grasp of that condition." The literature on stories and narrative routinely defines stories by their presentation of the unexpected, a typical sequence interrupted by the atypical, and all the strains and reactions that humans must endure to recover from the unexpected. (Bruner 90)

Camper's story has that surprise, like a good story should. Fluxá went to England, *seemingly for no reason*, and came back a cobbler. Camper looks deeper into the twist in its story with every step it takes. Camper intends that the wearers of its shoes and the guests at its hotel are nothing less than characters in this story, people themselves on the verge of exciting twists, living it as it happens, participants in the evolution of a company (or, at least, paying customers in the evolution of a company). There is a certain amount of insincerity in Camper's story, since ultimately they are selling it. Unlike the Pratt Incubator or the Bundoora Homestead, Camper's story is for sale.

And it sells very well. But what sells changes over time. In 1975 when Lorenzo Fluxá was creating Camper out of the remnants of his grandfather's work, his story was the real story, the explanation of the company's origins and



motivations. But as the company grew, Antonio Fluxá's four-sentence biography became more of a tale than an account, even though its details remained unchanged.

Now this simple story-turned-fairy-tale has morphed into a marketing strategy with a hint of a fable-style lesson for Camper customers at the end. Camper is trying to convince customers that in Camper shoes, they can be that person who does something a little wild, a little creative, and a little out of the ordinary. Don't we all sometimes wish that we could drop everything, take a trip, and come back a changed person? Camper just wants to make sure that if you do it, you do it in their shoes.

Or, you can do it in their retail and hotel environments. Camper's brand strategist Brian Collins says, "Today people don't have time for insincerity. Advertising campaigns make them suspicious. The most powerful way for a brand to tell its story is its retail environment. ... These people use their heritage as an engine – they are not paralyzed by their past".<sup>23</sup>

In the case of Casa Camper, long-time Camper designer Fernando Amat proved his brand strategist's point to an unprecedented degree. Casa Camper is a living story, a sequence built into the shape of a hotel in the El Raval district of Old Barcelona. Every detail, from the bikes hanging from the lobby ceiling to the

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<sup>23</sup> Vienne, Veronique. Growing Up Camper. *Metropolismag.com*. October 2007.

pillow menu, is deliberate. The bikes are a piece of the Mallorca story, a way of transportation that maintains the environment of a naturally beautiful place. The always-open food bar is part of the freedom story. Why should guests be restricted by restaurant hours and poor minibar quality when it comes to something as essential as eating? The pristine bathrooms with super soft white towels and a pillow menu is part of the luxury quality story. Fluxá came back to Spain making dress shoes, not flip-flops.

Ultimately, though, interpreting Camper's visuals is the guests' work. (Brilliant, 16) It is with this logic that I argue that Camper intends for its customers and associates to have a deeper relationship with the scenery than to be narrators of it. They are meant to feel like characters in it, because *they* become the ones to live out an unexpected life twist, rather than just purchase someone else's. Kamesha has become one of these characters in the story, and in her case Camper itself has been the unexpected twist that has changed her life after a decade of thankless retail jobs. All stories must have a teller and a listener (Scholes & Kellogg), but it is a true innovation to find a way to offer this third dimension in participatory characters.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

### What should Castel Pulci Do?

#### *Theory*

The idea that creative people thrive on the edge and exploit their edge position, and the parallel idea that creative institutions seek the edge because they also thrive on the edge, is not a breakthrough concept today. It is a well-documented, well-examined, and also brilliant observation that has been developed over time by urbanists and historians such as Sir Peter Hall in *Cities in Civilization*.

In this thesis, the importance of examining the edge position is to better understand Castel Pulci's potential as a center for innovation in fashion. While in Italy, MAS.967 heard concern that Castel Pulci, while a beautiful building, was too far from Florence to ever be a place that can achieve what Pulci hopes to achieve. But if promoting creativity and collaboration is Pulci's primary goal, its location could actually be perfect.

The second central idea to this thesis, that storytelling plays a role in successfully creative processes, is sparsely noted in academic literature and research. Its greatest champion is Charles Landry, in his book [The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators](#). I quoted Landry in the introduction to this paper. He wrote, "The challenge of creative urban initiatives is to embed narrative qualities and deeper, principled understandings in projects which have iconic power". This is precisely the challenge facing Castel Pulci.

The research presented in these three case studies supply remarkable evidence to support Landry's assertion. All three places are extraordinarily adept at imbedding narrative qualities in their projects. And all three have deep iconic power. The Pratt Incubator stands for the power of imagination and risk. The Bundoora Homestead Art Centre stands for the value of community context. And Camper stands for the human need to buy feelings, not just products.

Camper sells those feelings with stories, Bundoora develops the community context through storytelling, and Pratt imagines its future in the form of a long, ongoing and always unfolding novel.

These places are not special simply because they have stories or even because they use stories. Thousand of websites have a little 'our story' tab. Every decent entrepreneur has her 3-minute 'elevator pitch', a short story of her company, ready to spew out to any potential investor or client. In fact, anyone, any place, any object has a story. As Debera Johnson pointed out, a bottle of water has an important and interesting story. The reason that Pratt, Bundoora, and Camper are special, is that they constantly, consciously, and strategically use their story to plan their bright futures, in all the projects they undertake and products they make. Johnson of Pratt; Jacqueline Healy, curator of Bundoora Homestead; and Brian Collins, brand strategist for Camper, all make explicit, unprompted reference to the importance of stories on both a philosophical and practical level.

While everyone has a story, not everyone consciously thinks in terms of her story, and very few are actively aware of their stories in their day-to-day operations. Not every shoe store wants to sell its story with the shoe, let alone hear the stories of its customers and its employees.

All three of these places are unarguably creative. All three locate their creativity centers on the outskirts of the metropolis. In this thesis I present the possibility that, in addition to existing on the physical edge, another common quality of exceptionally creative institutions is their ability and instinct to rely on stories. The Pratt Incubator had a story before it had an office, a business to incubate, or a project to do. Castel Pulci could follow suit. It just needs some writers.

### ***Practice***

The introduction of this thesis defined innovation as the process leading to a product. Storytelling, too, is a process, leading to some end. Anna Karenina's graceful slide under the moving freight train took only three paragraphs to describe, but it would mean nothing without the eight hundred pages that came before it.

This thesis suggests several real ends for Castel Pulci: it could build a hotel, it could create a fashion business incubator or consultancy practice. It could develop a community exhibit gallery. Based on my research, I believe that all of these are great ideas for Castel Pulci, things that directly contribute to its goal of being a fashion, business and innovation center. Ultimately, Castel Pulci could

do a hundred different things to achieve its goals. It could undertake projects that do not yet exist in any case study. Castel Pulci should use this thesis, however, to understand its *process*. No matter its path, Pulci needs a group of people who can tell the story of this path.

As in the case studies, Pulci can tell its story on its grounds, in the architecture of its buildings, through the products it produces, and with the people it engages. In addition to these methods, there is a whole world of digital media that Pulci can use, including movie clips, websites, video conferencing, and networking devices. New products and platforms are coming out all the time. But no matter the device or the gimmick, a website or a hotel, at the heart of the strategy, there must be a story.

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## Appendix A:

### Interview Questions for Case Studies

These five interview questions served as the starting point for an open-ended interview process where interviewees were encouraged to offer openly whatever information they saw as relevant. I chose the open-ended interview format so as to not stifle interviewee though pattern or information. Question 5 proved to be the most valuable.

1. Tell me about your institution, how it came to be, and where you see it going in the future.
2. So you see this institution as creative? How is it creative?
3. How do you build connections with relevant people / places / companies / institutions?
4. How do money and finances impact your operations?
5. Is there any information that you would like to tell me, that you think is relevant based on what you know of this thesis topic and Castel Pulci? Are there any questions I have not asked that would prompt you to say something you feel is important about your institution?