Wooster Square in the Context of the Italian Renaissance

Curriculum Unit 86.03.05
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Preface

This unit is designed for the art classroom and middle school students. Though it was designed for such a classroom, it can be used with different aged students or with either a history or social studies class. And though it focuses on Wooster Square, the basic principle behind the unit might be applied to other areas of New Haven. That is the notion that our past is everywhere present, that our art has enriched our past, and that we should recognize it and work to preserve it.

This unit will look at Wooster Square in comparison to the Italian piazza of the Renaissance though the square is in many ways more like the English Common since it was created in 1825 by Englishman Abraham Bishop, it is decidedly Italian in flavor today. And, as we shall see, it is in many ways like the piazza.

Introduction

Today Wooster Square, nicknamed the Little Italy of New Haven, has preserved many traditions of an old Italian village. The park in the center of the square is framed with precision by an iron fence, and with an oval path laid out inside it. Throughout the year the park is filled with festivals and surrounded by parades in honor of patron saints of native Italian towns. The restaurants and pizza parlours along Wooster Street have retained their old family recipes through many generations. And at the heart of the neighborhood, beside the Square itself, stands the oldest Italian church in Connecticut, St. Michael’s, whose gold dome can be spotted from all over New Haven. Along the park at Chapel Street are two major sculptures, one dedicated to the square’s Italian past, and another to the neighborhood men who gave their lives in World War II. Using these various images, this unit will emphasize the importance of preserving our past.

The New Township: Wooster Square

In the late 18th century, the eastern side of New Haven became the center of the seaport, through its eastward growth toward the harbor. By the Revolution this part of town was known as the New Township; the very name revealed a great confidence in the future and a sense of separateness from the rest of New Haven (see fig. 1). To further emphasize this confidence, Wooster Square was created in 1825 on lower Chapel Street, which led directly to the harbor. When the land was first settled, Long Island Sound stopped just three blocks away of what is now Wooster Street. Wooster Square was named after General David Wooster, a hero...
of the Revolution and a native of the neighborhood. Although the character of Wooster Square today is mostly Italian, the community was begun almost 100 years before the arrival of immigrants from Southern Italy.

Many fortunes were made during New Haven’s golden age of 1835-1865, because of the construction of the first railroad and the multiple industries that followed this. The community prospered within its self containment. The main streets of the neighborhood—Chapel, Academy and Wooster—were the homes of the manufacturing aristocracy. These homes were finely planned around the square so the entire landscape would be harmonious. The New Township became a summer resort for Southern aristocracy, and by 1850, it had become known as the city’s most beautiful and fashionable neighborhood.

The Industrial Revolution brought drastic change and decay to the summer haven. The new industries depended on the cheap labor of Italian immigrants, who first began to arrive in the 1870’s. Factories and railroads grew around the neighborhood, bringing great wealth to its industrialists. By the end of the 19th century mostly all of Wooster Square’s summer people had found new resorts. The Sargent Company factory, Smoothie Garment Company, and the New Haven Casket Company are current examples of what replaced the resort areas of Wooster Square’s past. By the turn of the century immigrants flooded in, and by 1915 the “New Township” had become known as Little Naples.”

During the 1900’s overcrowding, industrial pollution, and lack of money to maintain Wooster Square’s older buildings caused the neighborhood to deteriorate physically. Life was not easy in the first half of the century, but the neighborhood provided its people with all their needs: a live chicken market, Italian banks, bakeries and drug stores, pushcarts loaded with homemade sausage. The founder of Pepe’s pizza used to have a wagon from which he’d sell hot pizzas for 25¢. In the summer, children played baseball in a vacant lot or at Waterside Park, at the site of Long Wharf.

Good times were not just for kids; the Amendola Brothers had a music store, with all kinds of instruments. Every Sunday morning, after Mass, there would be some kind of performance. People would gather around the piano and sing. During the summer, the windows were all open, operas would be playing and people would sing along. The bakers in the neighborhood cooked during the night and they delivered on foot at five o’clock in the morning—one baker known for his singing would often wake up the entire neighborhood!

Despite its liveliness, the neighborhood continued to deteriorate so that by 1938 the city designated “little Naples” as a blighted area. In the late 1950’s, Wooster Square became the first urban renewal project in the country. The City separated industrial and residential areas by channeling a highway through the neighborhood, demolishing the most rundown buildings, and gave financial and technical assistance to homeowners in rehabilitating their homes. These improvements turned Wooster Square into one of New Haven’s most popular areas, and helped make it one of the three areas in New Haven on the National Register of Historic Places.

Rehabilitation also brought diversity to Wooster Square. Most of the residents in the Court Street townhouses and the Chapel Street row houses are new young professionals. Many are attracted by the fine architecture—the population also includes a large number of architects—and the small village atmosphere. Wooster Square in general bears the stamp of a place that’s been discovered. The crowds that gather along Wooster Street to eat pizza and calzones include many from outside the neighborhood. Compared to the fourth generation of Wooster Square, Italian children, of course, the newer residents are transient. Many are students, and the newer small apartments attract singles.

For all its new found glamour, Wooster Square still remains the haven it was to the first Italian immigrants. St.
Joseph’s Guest House, on Greene Street provides room and board for sixty-four women at inexpensive rates. St. Michael’s School, staffed by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, stands as a symbol of neighborhood stability, and continues to provide a traditional education for neighborhood children.

The group of concrete buildings adjacent to St. Michael’s is the Harry Conte Community School. This school was built in 1962 in honor of Dr. Conte, who was a well-loved, well-known family physician who cared a great deal for his neighbors and friends in Wooster Square. His office was in his home on Greene Street. He charged his patients only what they could afford, which was usually just a dollar. He lived and worked in the area which is now Conte School. The school itself is a concrete square with many slender arcades surrounding the exterior’s two floors. The entire interior is a large green courtyard with trees, a garden cared for by students and mushroom shaped tables and stools. The school was built for the entire Wooster Square community; it is equipped with a 400 seat auditorium, a senior center, library, recreation room, gym, pool, and game field for sports. The school playground (facing Chapel Street) has a hockey rink, swings, monkey bars and other playground equipment for the community to use at its disposal. A concrete plaza joins the school with the Board of Education on Wooster Place and, together with the park and auditorium, forms a unit. This plaza also has benches, stools, and tables, a bocci ball court, and grassy areas for picnics. In 1980 Harry Conte Community School became Conte Arts Magnet School. This change meant that the school incorporates students from all sections of New Haven. Students participate in an art program of visual arts, dance, music, and theatre as well as traditional academic subjects. Unfortunately the pool, recreation room and library are no longer available for use. The school’s concept has presently changed from a community school to a performing arts school.

**Town Planning**

The public space of Wooster Square has its place in a long history of urban design, one phase of which was the Italian Renaissance piazza. Just as Wooster Square is the focus for a whole neighborhood, so the focus of civic life in all of the Italian cities and towns is the piazza. A great square centrally located in the city, this space is surrounded by the church, government buildings, marketplace, civic buildings, arenas, and the palace of the ruler. The piazza is the place to be seen, to promenade, and gather with other citizens. Merchants assemble for weekly or daily markets to sell their fruit, meat, and game. Every town has a large gathering of people with various assets, each involving a particular area around it and often spread out over wide distances. Every town is foremost a market; it needs to be rooted in and nourished by the people and the land that surrounds it.

Preceding the Italian piazza was the Roman forum, a central space within Roman towns for people to congregate. The forum was an open marketplace, into which main crossroads united and buildings were grouped. The Forum of Julius Caesar was carefully planned; consisting of a large plaza enclosed on four sides by a portico housing shops. When Augustus became Caesar, he built a forum in his own honor with a large temple at one end and a statue of himself in the open square.

Just as the forum was the center of the Roman town, so the piazza was the center of later Italian towns. Florence, Italy is a good example of the Renaissance’s first development of deliberate town planning (see fig. 2). Florence was designed like the Roman colonies with a grid or chessboard pattern. This map illustrates the growth of the Italian city state, oriented from east to west in the ordinary manner of the ancient Roman town, the original square Roman city plan. Within it, all the streets are straight, and intersect at right angles. By the 13th century there were more inhabitants in the suburbs clustering around the gates than remained inside the Roman walls, so a second circle of walls had to be built. Again, in the 14th century a third circle of walls were constructed.
Wooster Square park is similar to the Italian piazza; it is in the center of the neighborhood, which includes markets of nearby Wooster Street. It’s surrounded by St. Michael’s Catholic Church, exquisite old Greek and Italian-villa styled homes, fashionable row houses, and religious societies that provide a link with Italy.

The Fine Arts

Throughout its history, but perhaps especially in the Renaissance, the piazza or public space has also been a focus for the arts—for the development of maps, of views, and perspective paintings, of sculpture and of architecture. In what follows, I will discuss some examples of how the arts of the Renaissance were related to the life of the piazza, and I will suggest some exercises by which students may rediscover these connections for themselves.

Previous to the period of the Renaissance, paintings and murals were very flat in depth and highly ornate in color, especially gold leaf paint. By contrast, the early Renaissance paintings are often quite intensely preoccupied not only with theme and subject matter but also with technical problems—the mastery of perspective and anatomical proportion. These new concerns were related to Renaissance humanism and to a flowering urban life, both of which led to a new focus on the urban space and the citizens who inhabited it. Working with color and line, they undertook to transform a threedimensional linear environment into a twodimensional surface. Italian painters experimented with foreshortening and attempted to reduce the principles of perspective to scientific law. They also studied anatomy, practiced dissection, and made careful drawings of bones, organs, and tissues.

Perspective and Leon B. Alberti

Leon Battista Alberti was an important figure in the arts during the Renaissance; he was a brilliant man with many talents, the greatest of which was architecture. He is especially known for the Palazzo Rucellai in Florence erected from 144651 and designed in the major style of the Renaissance.

Alberti’s perspective treatise produced a result that was visually convincing. First, the artist must establish the height of a human being in the foreground of his drawing or painting, then divide the base of the field in segments (braccios) corresponding to 1/3 of the human’s height (see fig. 3). At the height of the person above the base line, the artist is to set a vanishing point and connect this point with diagonal lines (orthonogals) to the divisions of the base lines (braccios). Next, to determine where the horizontal lines will be placed, on a separate sheet of paper the artist draws another horizontal line divided into segments in the manner of the original line; he sets the distance point perpendicularly about it and the same height as the vanishing point in the first construction, again drawing a set of diagonal lines from point to base. The viewer’s distance from the picture is then expressed in terms of a vertical intersecting the new diagonals at whatever point the artist wishes. Then placing these two constructions on the same level at any convenient distance, the artist can draw horizontal lines from these intersections in the second construction across to the first. The horizontal lines become the transversals in the first construction and form trapezoids in conjunction with its orthogonals. The results can be easily counter-proved by drawing diagonals through the corners of the trapezoids. These diagonals will always pass through the centers and corners of all diagonally related trapezoids in the first construction.

Alberti’s perspective is a graph of space; it provides a single, harmonious system for the relative proportion of every figure, object and special division within a pictorial field. Renaissance artists began to use this perspective technique in all the fine arts: maps, painting, murals, facades and planning of architecture.
Maps, the Oldest Graphic Arts

One aspect of Renaissance artists’ interest in perspective was the mapping of their cities. They used 1) The overhead view where the map shows the shape and direction of the street accurately but only the roofs of the buildings. 2) The frontal view shows only the elevations of the buildings and nothing of the streets. 3) And the oblique view is from the top of an imaginary tower, which gives a realistic impression of the buildings but it involves foreshortening of the streets running directly towards or away from the observer (orthogonal). So the streets are distorted, appearing shorter than the streets of the same length running across the scene. These three viewpoints were often combined especially if the artist wanted to illustrate the facade or as much of a building as possible. Most artists preferred the oblique view because it showed what the city looked like from the air. With the use of perspective in maps, mapmaking turned from graphics to fine art.

Painting

In Italy any experiment involving perspective resulted in a passionate interest; the artists were so excited by their discovery of perspective rules that they indulged in exercises with no other reason but to demonstrate them. A group of four panels illustrates the “ideal city.” These topographical panels show the houses standing in an even line and at equal height. The buildings are 1/3 the width of the piazza and the streets between them are paved and clean. These panels are 4 feet high and were painted around 1470 by unknown artists.

Frescoes, murals, and other types of paintings were created for churches, the ruling government, the rich and the common man. They celebrate the color and pagentry of contemporary life in the Renaissance.

Sculpture

Like most of the fine arts during the Renaissance, sculpture also owed much of its development to the public space.

Donatello was a highly influential sculptor of the Renaissance; his two most famous works are David, one of the earliest known freestanding statues since antiquity, and the Equestrian Monument of Gattamelatu. Both of these sculptures are placed in a large piazza in the center of the town. In creating the equestrian piece, Donatello seems to have been influenced by ancient Rome, the general’s military costume, his armor decorated with victory masks, and saddle with winged genies endowing this leader with the glory of antiquity. On his breastplate, a winged victory crying out enhances by contrast the composure of the general. His compressed lips, firmly set jaw, heavy arched brows, close cropped curls, illustrate the ideal conception of a general in the prime of life. Furthermore a powerful diagonal line from the horse’s head down to his hind leg, forms the composition with the general’s baton and sword. The horse seems to be a powerful extension of the general’s overpowering personality. Every one of these elements contributes to the impression of great emotional and physical forces under stern control. The world is symbolized by the large solid sphere below the horse’s front hoof. This is the ideal Renaissance man—one who is in control of all.

Donatello’s sculpture compares nicely with the freestanding sculpture of Columbus within Wooster Square park on the side facing Chapel Street (see slide #1). The park is also known as Columbus park by some of the residents who think of Columbus as their hero. The statue was created and erected in 1892 at the time when Italian immigration was at its peak. The statue honors both America which Columbus discovered, and Italy, his native land. The granite rock statue itself is 8 feet tall situated on a 6 foot tall triangular pedestal. On the pedestal is sculpted in Italian “A Cristoro Columbo GL’ITALIAN’ Di New Haven 1892” and “1492 Columbus 1892” below on the base. Columbus stands erect and proud, his simple clothing is smooth and he wears a hat. His left hand is held up to the sky and holds a sphere, the symbol of a world that people believed was flat.
A second commemorative monument is to the west of Columbus, a polished granite pillar 2 1/2 feet tall with a pointed top (see slide #2). Two plaques attached to the stone read, “This area took form as a neighborhood in 1824 when the city acquired land for a park and named it in honor of the town’s revolutionary hero General David Wooster. This district is commemorated by the many significant examples of 19th century architecture which evolved in harmonious fashion around the square.” This pillar is framed by three posts connected by a linked chain. Within these posts and surrounding the pillar is a garden of various flowers, plants and bushes.

All of these sculptures in Italy and Wooster Square illustrate the great pleasure and pride their citizens have in honoring their heroes and their triumphs.

Architecture

As the Roman forum was the center of the city, the courtyard is the center of the home, and the Italian piazza is a room with walls (buildings) with their facades, so the piazza (square) is inside the city (house). Wooster Square is decorated by many buildings of different architectural periods, but taken together they form the facade that encloses the “room” of Wooster Square within the “house” of New Haven.

In the work of Italian architects we see the many concepts of line, perspective, form, symmetry, and balance at work. When applied to facades, however, these principles help to define and decorate the public space that lies outside. Therefore, the facade is not considered an essential part of the building. It is a ceremonial decoration for the piazza before it.

The great Florentine palaces provided models for most of the rest of Italy, and almost every Italian town can show several examples of the type of large house referred to in Italian as a palace.

In Pienza there is a fine example of such a palace. Pienza occupies an important place in the history of town planning (see fig. 4). It was built and renamed by the humanist Eneas Silvius Piccolomini, who was elected Pope Pius II in 1458. The design was supervised by himself and executed by the Florentine architect Bernardo Rossellino, who had worked for Alberti. The centre of the town was planned as a single unit based on the cathedral. The cathedral is situated on the main axis of a piazza; the sides converge towards the town hall at the north end. The east and west sides of the piazza are bordered by Pius’s palace and the bishop’s palace, while the south side, apart from the cathedral, slopes very sharply downwards. The cathedral itself is very unusual since it is based on an Austrian church that Pius had admired on one of his extensive journeys. The palace also has new features. It is deliberately placed so that it is related to the cathedral, and the garden front looks out southwards to a magnificent view. Pius’s palace was designed to be strictly symmetrical following the classical principles of his fellow humanist, Alberti. The supremacy of the building block in the design of the confronting church and palaces, to which pilasters, columns, and arches are added as decoration conforms generally to Alberti’s notions. However, one exception is the southside of the palace which consists of three porticoes, one above the other, looking out across the garden to the distant view of the mountains; Pius caused these porticoes to be built simply for the sake of the view. So, the little city of Pienza contains one of the first pieces of regular town planning since Roman days—and it seems also to contain the first palace in which the view across an extensive landscape is an important feature in the design.

At one time, one could stand on the steps of St. Michael’s Catholic Church on Wooster Place and look out to New Haven harbor. Today the church faces Wooster Square, decorating the square with its white and blue facade, its sculpture and bright gold dome. This work of art has gone through many transformations like the neighborhood itself. It was originally built by a group of Congregationalists, acquired by the Baptists in 1857 and finally by the Catholics in 1899. Subsequently remodeling was done because of natural disasters and 2
fires. The second fire and subsequent repair in 1904 created the Italian Renaissance building that is seen today. The three windows on the front survived the fire and are souvenirs of 1874. Only the side walls and tall arched windows preserve the memory of 1855.

Other buildings that face the square, especially the private homes built during the Golden Age, have gone through urbanization and modern changes. In particular the villa style home at 323 Greene Street c. 1870 is a fine example of the traditional stately home of the square’s great days (see slide #4). To a simple villa cube have been added elaborate mouldings and a very large front porch. An example of a GreekRevival townhouse or a flattopped villa, is at 40 Academy Street (see slide #5). It was built around 1846; in the 1870’s a 3rd floor was built, and in the 20th century the columns were taken off the porch. In the 1960’s shutters were added and it was renovated. Presently it is being renovated into condominium units.

**In Conclusion**

Just as Renaissance man sought to keep alive the treasures of antiquity, so have people in contemporary New Haven worked hard to preserve the beauties of Wooster Square.

Throughout history art and man have walked side by side, hand in hand. We have used our artistic creativity to tell others about our society, our world.

Today, New Haven history should be of great interest and importance to our students, as it’s part of the heritage of us all. Within this unit, you will have some information to perform the crucial task of awakening in your students a sense of history and a sense of art as an expression of that history.

**SOME EXERCISES FOR THE STUDENT**

**Mapping Project**

This art project is suitable for 7th12th grade students. The objective for this project is to have the student draw and map out an old historical city such as Rome, Greece or an Italian city, then to do a map of Wooster Square, and finally to draw out a map of their own city.

Step #1. Exhibit the three various drawings from this unit fig’s. #1, #2 and #4. Discuss the geometric design used in town planning.

Additional Questions for Discussion:

- What is in the center of a city?
- What surrounds the city’s center?
- What buildings are important to the city?

Step #2. Using the following materials:
a. 12 x 18 white drawing paper
b. drawing pencils
c. rulers
d. tracing paper
e. colored pencils
f. pen and ink

Students will draw the three maps. The first and second map could be traced from one of the texts in bibliography. However, the third map, "Their Own City," must have a center space, government building, school, church, or cathedral, outdoor sculpture, theatre, and auditorium.

**Drawing and Painting Project**

This project will enable the students to draw in perspective and design a mural for their art room in their own school. This project is suitable for 7th-12th grade.

Step #1. Students will read the section on "Perspective’ and Leon B. Alberti." Students will follow the guidelines as stated and use fig. #3 as an example.

Step #2. Students must have at least two people in their painting.

The set must include a symbol of their school, e.g., Conte students might draw people participating in an arts project or performance; someone dancing, playing a musical instrument, or painting a picture of the Conte courtyard.

Optional ideas.

b. The background being an area of the school or New Haven skyline.
c. The middleground or foreground will have the persons involved in the activity.

Materials needed: graph paper, pencils, rulers, assorted brushes, acrylic paint, or tempera paint. Large cardboard 24 x 36 or bulletin board paper in rolls.

**Some Sculptural Projects**

This project would be appropriate for 6th-12th grade students. The objective is that the students will draw and sculpt a clay monument for their school (or neighborhood).

Step #1. Students must have an idea of what symbols represent their school. Example: Conte School has two meanings, it is a community and an arts school. Symbols could be: art materials, different people, musical notes, books, or faces, etc.

Step #2. Students will sketch out their ideas on paper.
Step #3. Using modeling clay (plasticene)—the student will mold, cut and carve out the image. The sculpture must be at least 6” tall but no taller than 12”. It must be free standing; it can be abstract or realistic in design.

The materials needed are: 9 x 12 white drawing paper, pencils, rulers, assorted sticks of plasticene—(3 per project), plastic utensils, or (wood clay tools, optional).

An optional idea for the same clay project could be another sculpture for Wooster Square or any other neighborhood in New Haven.

**Architectural Project**

This project is suitable for students in grades 7-12. The objective is for the student to be able to design and draw a new facade for their school or another building in New Haven.

Step #1. After students have viewed Slide Number 3 of St. Michael’s and #4 and #5 of houses facing Wooster Square. They will draw a new facade for their school.

Step #2. What is the purpose of a facade? To decorate and enhance the space it is placed in. So the design depends on where the building is.

Step #3. Students will plan out the facade with graph paper so it is symmetrical, and by using a combination of lines—brick, columns, windows, stairs, arches, porticoes, and entablatures. And by using geometric shapes—towers, rectors, pilasters, too—they will draw it. Then it may be transferred to another sheet of drawing paper to be painted: carbon paper, (or cardboard).

Other materials needed: pencils, rulers, tempera paints, brushes, pen and ink.

**Teacher’s Bibliography**

Argan, Guilo Carlo. *Brunellischi (the architect)*, Mondadori: Milan, 1955. (Biography and analysis of the Italian Renaissance architect and his work.)


Heydenreich, Ludvig H. Italienische Renaissance, Anfunge und Entfaltung in der Zeitron, 1400 BS 1460: Munich, 1972. (German text—excellent for visual work.)


The starred items are recommended resources for the student.

Student Bibliography


Macaulay, David. City; A Story of Roman Planning and Construction, Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1974. (Highly illustrated with interesting concise text. A must for this unit.)


Additional Resources

A field trip to the Yale University Art Gallery would be extremely helpful to visit the first floor exhibit of DuraEuropus. The sculptures and other works of art would greatly reinforce the content of this unit.

Another field trip that would be helpful for New Haven history is the New Haven Colony Historical Society on Whitney Avenue. The society offers tours, and lectures throughout the school year and they have many examples of art work on display.
Also contact the Teachers Center on Elm Street. They offer various talks, workshops, and materials to teachers in diverse subject areas.

*(figure available in print form)*

Figure 1. The New Township
*(figure available in print form)*

Figure 2. The Plan of Florence
*(figure available in print form)*

Figure 3. Design of Leon B. Alberti’s Perspective. a. height of human being b. base line c. vanishing point d. orthogonals e. distance point f. vertical intersection g. transversals
*(figure available in print form)*

Figure 3. The Plan of Piensa