

DIEGO CASALI

PEOPLE OF THE WALLS

An account of Lucca's monument by those who experience it throughout the year

portraits, stories, secrets

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Amid images and feelings

The Walls are not just history, but also a feeling. For us Lucchesi they are in our mind and under our skin, like something we were born with. Maybe it is because we have seen them, and experienced them, since childhood. Mysterious and indecipherable as they are, they take us back, with remote memories harbouring inside them, to a time when Lucca was no more than a little village. In Roman times, however, our city already had towers and a regular street grid, on a par with imperial Rome. It was within those Walls, whose remains still exist, that the meeting between Caesar, Pompey and Crassus took place. This was in 56 BC, when the city had ten thousand inhabitants. Another time, another story, but one that, in the face of eternity, was but the blink of an eye. Now the Walls, our Walls, turn 500 years old. On them lingered the gaze of our ancestors, and of countless others, be it tourists or occasional visitors. Sequences of a silent film, the same that is still projecting us and them, our moods shot against their background of colours and atmospheres. The Walls, in fact, warm and authoritative, await and welcome anyone, giving each what they deserve: something that depends on our inner dispositions. If we follow their path, with the sole intent of discovering their architecture, we will get very little in return. The Walls are not willing to indulge adventurers. Not even those from history and science. They want rather to be viewed as alive. We realize this when we walk along them; the roofs of houses, glimpses of streets and squares, gardens with statues, such as that of Palazzo Pfanner, all expressing our most cherished possession: life, with its thoughts and emotions. That is when time seems to vanish within us, and one has the impression of living in the eternal present of history which, while continuing to evolve, has left its indelible vestiges on the Walls. For instance, they have become a kind of symbol of peace. In fact, although built for military purposes, they never had to confront any much-feared enemies. Moreover, they are among the few built environments in the world where we can feel in tune with nature. Its trees (everyone remembers the ancient plane trees), its green pavilions, grassy borders, clear air and the breeze that blows even in summer, convey the atmosphere of a countryside hamlet, next to a wood. A perception which is intensified at night, especially on a full moon, when the glow pervades every corner, casting shadows like

silhouettes of ghosts. The nights on the Walls are of absolute stillness, and it feels like you can hear your own thoughts rolling. In those moments, when imagination takes over, our Walls become those of Troy, those of Saguntum besieged by Hannibal Barca, or even those in Jerusalem at the time of Christ.

At dawn, dreams fade away. And the Walls come back to be their usual selves, with their daily sounds and voices: crows, blackbirds and carrion crows, nowadays masters of our skies together with the seagulls. On the Walls activities resume early: the marathon-runners first, then the dog-owners, or, sitting on the benches, newspaper-readers. The traffic of the ring-road below does not break the quiet of the 'arbour'd circle', as the poet D'Annunzio called it: about twelve meters high, it seems to want to defend itself and its guests. Those who frequent it regularly, at some point can no longer do without it: it becomes a call, a need, a way to break free from everyday worries. In fact, in addition to being a magical, unique place in the world, there is also something therapeutic about it. As already mentioned, a myriad of gazes have lingered on the Walls, including those of local saints, like Saint Giovanni Leonardi, the apothecary saint from Decimo, reformer of the Church, whose story was so well narrated by the late Father Vittorio Pascucci. But also the Blessed Elena Guerra and Bl. Domenica Brun Barbantini, Saint Gemma Galgani, the greatest mystic of the twentieth century, who experienced the Passion of Christ within the Walls. Lucca and the Walls were her Jerusalem, too, as well as ours.

Vincenzo Pardini

Writer, journalist, editorialist, screenwriter. Natalia Ginzburg defined him as 'our Maupassant'.

STRAIGHT TO THE HEART

● ATMOSPHERIC ADVENTURE

*A conversation with Massimo Baldocchi**

Indelible in the memory of those who walk on them for the first time, the Walls strike at the heart of the imagination of today's globalized tourism. They fail, however, to do so when targeting the Lucchesi, especially the less authentic ones, those who consider the monument a 'part of the whole' and not a stable pivot on which to rest the promotion of the city. Among those who, from the beginning, have believed in the appeal of the tree-lined circle is Massimo Baldocchi, since 1969 the tireless driving force and deputy (and founding member) of the *Compagnia dei Balestrieri di Lucca* (Lucca's Company of Archers).

'At the end of the '60s – says Baldocchi – we were looking for a historic show to promote Lucca in Italy and in the world. The mayor at the time was Giovanni Martinelli. At first it was decided to run the Palio horse race, which for centuries had been part of the city's tradition, but the idea was scrapped immediately, perhaps because it was seen as replicating Siena's event. The right hunch came from Giuliano Marchetti, the true father of the crossbow in Lucca. Marchetti, in his continuous studies on the city, found the rule book of a Palio crossbow contest dated 1493. This discovery, the oldest document in Europe for this type of challenges disputed between the twelfth and seventeenth century, was a kind of flash of inspiration for all of us involved in this pioneering marketing project'.

The Company of Archers laid her solid foundations from this experience. And in a context where Lucca was chasing – in terms of tourism promotion – the well-known locations of Sansepolcro and Gubbio, where, detail of no small importance, these ancient weapons were actually built. But the ambassadors of Lucca's shooting team were not discouraged and pursued their dream.

'It was my friend Claudio Marraccini – recalls Baldocchi – who built our first tools, using the leaf-springs of the legendary FIAT Topolino car. The enterprise was a collective one and followed closely by the then mayor. What we had left to figure out, was the ideal location for this new wealth

of knowledge, craftsmanship and tradition. It came almost natural to think of the Walls. And, although the crossbow had little or nothing to do with the monument, the Company put down roots here. The tree-lined circle, is not only our home, but it is also the means to promote our show’.

Overjoyed for the appointment as the ‘official representative of the city of Lucca’ by the Municipality, the historical group has in recent years also been honoured by the allocation, as exclusive venue, of the beautiful *casermetta* of the Baluardo di San Pietro, together with adjacent indoor (in the basement of the same rampart) and outdoor shooting fields (in the glacis opposite). ‘A privileged location for us – Massimo Baldocchi says – despite the meadows outside of the Walls are not the best for shooting arrows. In the orillions (the space between the rampart and the Walls themselves) there are eddies of wind which obviously interfere with the shot. When we train, however, we try to reproduce the conditions of the competition with particular attention to climate and light. And, although important, the aspect of the competition’s results comes just after the original mission of our group, which is to make Lucca known in the world and win the interest of tourists. And they do observe us with curiosity – given the privileged position of the shooting field – flocking to the tree-lined promenade every time we go on the training ground. It must be said that the relationship between the Company and the Walls has always existed and will never end. We wandered a bit, but it was for the better: from the current Ciscu home to the outer space by the rampart of San Paolino, from the venue on the rampart of Santa Croce to that of San Donato and finally now in the one of San Pietro. The latter is in itself a potential tourist attraction, as it is easy to access, coming from via Bacchettoni (in the district with the same name, well worth a visit) or even from the outside gate of Porta San Jacopo, a mysterious, (almost) secret entrance, dating back probably to the beginning of the twentieth century’.

Close to the mountains dominating Luni, there is a city, Lucca, around which many people live in villages. The town is well populated and provides many soldiers and a great number of knights, from among whom the Senate chooses its members

The erudite Strabo

Thinking about that hidden passage, Baldocchi evokes times gone by and his childhood, when the Walls were less of a snobbish location compared to now. Too bourgeois, too much the jogging-and-walking type, rather than popular and real-life. 'As kids – recalls the archer – this monument was like a game room. Hide and seek, blind man's buff, cops and robbers, the ball was banned, though: the municipal policemen on their motorbikes would confiscate it and fine you. It was nice to spend the afternoon among friends while our mothers were chatting and keeping an eye on us from a distance. Sometimes, however, they would lose sight of us: we would go off their radar when the ball fell from the Walls ... Then we would venture in the underground vaults with a flashlight. It was a great place for discovery. We were scared, even though we were in a group. Some people used to say that there were crematoriums and even corpses down there. Fear, of course, made our trips even more exciting, and picking up the fallen ball was the game within the game'.

Today it is no longer so. Children no longer go there to play or rather it's the kids who no longer do. The little ones are still there, accompanied on the ramparts by their grandmothers. In summer or winter, this heritage tree-lined promenade is a park of rare beauty and amenities. 'But – says Baldocchi – it is a sorry sight to witness their neglect. The Walls are an asset that is not exploited to the full. So far we have only been able to damage them. For this reason, Lucca's Company of Archers has always strived to counter this decline. We partnered with travel agencies to bring visitors to discover the monument. Not on the top, but in the underground vaults, the most extraordinary and impressive environment that the entire city has to offer. Unfortunately there are no plans to promote this area. Despite Lucca has increased its reputation as a destination for quality tourism, when it comes to the *Mura* we are still stuck in the Seventies. To hit the target of global promotion our archers, alone, are not enough'.

* Massimo Baldocchi was born in via della Zecca, Lucca on 13 August 1947. He is among the founders, in 1969, of *Compagnia Balestrieri di Lucca* and he is currently its *Vicario* (Deputy).

HYMN TO JOY

● DISCOVERING THE SOUNDS OF THE SOUL

A conversation with Gabriella Biagi Ravenni

It only takes a few rules. In fact, think about it, it only takes just one to live, taste, touch the beloved *Mura*. The rule is listening. Completely. That is to say, letting oneself be persuaded by a monument capable of telling stories and history, emotions and fears, encounters and farewells, noises and sounds. Whether recent or old, it does not matter because time crystallizes their memory without changing the sense of their real perception. So it would be an unforgivable mistake to approach them without expecting a mutual and symbiotic harmony, which is the gift of a heritage site enjoyed by all. Every day, every moment.

Arrunte, who inhabited the walls of the abandoned city

To understand the essence of such an approach, it is crucial to be accompanied by a woman: Gabriella Biagi Ravenni, director of *Fondazione Giacomo Puccini* in Lucca. She is the kind of woman capable of transporting us into a context of deep introspection. No trivial feat. ‘Since 2005 – she explains – the Walls have become a second home for me. Before then, the *Centro Studi Puccini*, which I chair, was inside the *Teatro del Giglio*. The Foundation, too (which was officially housed at the Museum) was subsequently moved to the same municipal building. In 2005, instead, the then Mayor Pietro Fazzi and his council, decided to move the Centre and the Foundation from the theatre to the *casermetta* on Baluardo San Colombano, and their cohabitation continues to this day. An important step in terms of logistics (and not only of personal and professional relationships): we went from a small, badly-lit room to this beautiful place, spacious and full of a unique charm. In short, the change of location turned out to be a good choice. Even for the Centre’s reticent (only in the beginning) Simonetta Bigongiari and for Ilaria Monticelli’.

Lucian, second-century BC

Nearly two decades have passed and now, from this exceptional stage, Gabriella has the privilege to see the seasons pass, colours change, love stories develop. ‘But – the director of the Foundation says – it’s the *Mura*’s

notes' (and in this there is only a marginal deontological reference, so to speak, to her professional role) to catch my attention almost daily. They capture my curiosity, never completely satisfied, despite my detailed knowledge of the environment. Unique sounds from an unparalleled context, demanding a committed dedication should one want to enjoy its beneficial effects for mind and body'.

Gabriella Biagi Ravenni is a scholar, out of passion and profession. She divides her time between the commitment to promote throughout the world the name and work of the *Maestro* from Lucca, and the role of part-time grandmother. From Via San Girolamo the Walls appear protective, when proceeding from her home in via degli Asili to the office. When you return from a trip, rather than from an errand beyond the tree-lined circle, those very Walls represent a safe harbour. This distinction is worth expanding upon. 'The walled ring – she claims – means refuge. For me, it also represents a kind of extended house I long for when I leave it. It is symbol (therefore abstraction) but it is also, at the same time, monument (therefore matter). It speaks, moves, pulsates in spite of its physiological, static nature'.

And if the Walls are alive, it is thanks not just to the breeze that ruffles the planes' crowns like a tickle, but to the work of man. It's thanks to the *Lucchesi* who, after having preserved them for centuries, have learned to enjoy them with a passion. Gabriella Biagi Ravenni adds: 'The festival of colours during the *Lucca Comics & Games* springs to mind, when cosplayers (dressed as comic book characters) from all over Italy meet up on the curtains and ramparts to gain everlasting fame through their digital cameras or smart phones. Party-time, smiles, fun. It is meaningful, I think, that a war fortification is today synonymous with peace and joy, whether collective or individual'.

Perhaps for this reason it is not possible to single out the most beautiful places (in absolute terms) of the walls. 'No doubt that for me – confirms the director of the Puccini Foundation – 'the most exciting areas are the ones where the memories of the more or less recent past take shape. I love the stretch from the *Caffè delle Mura* to the rampart of San Regolo. And the harmony of forms near the botanical garden is magic, while behind San Frediano I recall wonderful moments of my life. There I met for the first time (to be precise I remember photographs he had taken of me on the *Caffè delle Mura* in San Colombano) with my current husband (I never had another before him and I do not think I'll have others!). I have shared my

days with him for the past 42 years (almost 48 if you include the engagement period). With Franco Biagi, Gabriella had two daughters, and the eldest celebrated her wedding day, with all the guests, just behind San Frediano.

And if love with the man of her life has blossomed on the perfect natural stage provided by the *Mura*, there was no shortage of occasions for excitement there in our protagonist's life. 'I was 14 – she recalls – and I had a crush on a boy. We went for a walk on the Walls. It was wonderful, but how scared was I all along. To go on the Walls with a male friend was a very compromising situation for a young girl ... What if someone had noticed me and told my mother? It would have caused total havoc'.

Love and contemplation. The monument should be experienced with an approach that does not exclude similar feelings. 'The experience of the Walls – continues Gabriella Biagi Ravenni – is pervasive. Scanning the steps without the headphones in your ears and walking, free to listen, not missing out the noise or the rustling of the planes, pierced by the wind. Nature allows us to trace the soul's inner thoughts'. These resonate like a merry band during outdoor concerts. 'With the *Centro Studi Boccherini* we have organized several – explains the director of the Foundation –. 'We have involved schools and it has always been a success. Can *Mura* and notes go hand in hand? Absolutely! They can provide, if required, the ideal location for opera performances, for example. And the idea of staging some of them is not at all far-fetched. We could for example transform the *Caffè delle Mura* in the *Cafè Momus* (in the second act of *La Bohème*) or set up under Porta Elisa a *Barrière d'Enfer*, the customs control gate (again in *La Bohème*). And many other places in the tree-lined circle could provide an adequate opera setting'. And the rest of the Walls are invariably one of the locations in Lucca where a romantic encounter between reality and fiction, memory and everyday life, silence and music is still possible.

* Gabriella Biagi Ravenni was born in Lucca on 14 March 1947.

Since 2002 she has been director of *Fondazione Giacomo Puccini*, and since 1995 she has been responsible for *Museo Puccini*.