

A Chewing Gum Named Brooklyn

One of the coolest discoveries I ever made on an otherwise culture-shocked first landing in Italy decades ago was of a chewing gum named *Brooklyn*.

Even if gum stood next only to jazz as America's gift to world culture, it didn't take a genius to see what the added juice of "Brooklyn" could do for sales--one of those magical Italian code-names for *L'America*, part Promised Land, part farthest-away offshore Italian province.

In the years of the Great Diaspora before and after 1900, nostalgia like this was a marker of Italian identity. They came and went, back and forth, more than any other single group, maybe losing track of which was home. And maybe to and from Brooklyn more than anywhere, a borough so saturated with Italians and *Italianità* in the early 20th century that even now, if you say "Bruculinu" (as they do in the Italian South), everyone knows exactly where you mean.

Yet nowhere in the whole borough is there a single historic landmark to this history. Not even on all of Long Island, though it's where most Brooklyn Italians went when they left for the 'burbs, and where they're still better represented among second and third-generations than any other single ethnic group.

Now, as the wrecking ball virtually hangs over the Brownsville-East New York church called **Our Lady of Loreto**, we have an amazing and possibly last chance to change this--not just to landmark something--*anything*--Italian, but to capture the best of the best, and make it what people living there now want it to be: *both* a multi-ethnic Cultural Center *and* the first and only Brooklyn landmark of its Italian cultural history.

We should do this not just because the church is beautiful, though it *is* beautiful. And not just because it can still be useful, though it's that too. We should do it because--alive, reused--it can tell all the stories we'd expect such a landmark to tell. About the Italian passion not just to preserve culture, but to flaunt it. About bringing Italy home. About Brooklyn.

And, yes, about *change*.

Our Lady of Loreto is now Brooklyn's oldest standing "National" Italian church, meant for Italian-language services at a time when its booming immigrant congregation, tired of worshipping in church basements, needed and could clearly afford something new.

And so in 1906, Italian pastor Vincenzo Sorrentino launched construction, not just with the blessing of his Irish Bishop Charles McDonnell, but with an unsurprising bias in his choice of contractors. Driven, perhaps, by a certain sting at what elite New Yorkers had recently called *the scum of the European South*, he searched the region for the best he could find among immigrant Italians--builders, artists, artisans.

And his choices still make a cultural statement.

First, Armezzani, Federici & Sons, emerging "design-build" architects out of industrial Paterson, NJ, fresh from showcasing their skills at the St. Louis World's Fair, only too ready to do it again--in "purest" Roman Renaissance style and featuring their own special formula for "cast stone," a concrete as shapeable as clay but with the light-catching beauty and durability of marble. Gaetano Capone, skilled in the great tradition of Italian ceiling fresco, to depict the Loreto miracle high above the nave. Serafino Biancardi, rising decorator of elite New York banks and theaters, to design the gorgeous

interior. And in a final gesture of Italian audacity, Sorrentino offered the challenge of the church's nearly 40-foot pediment to the young Gaetano Federici, 26-year-old sculptor-son of his Paterson-based builder, inviting him to create a unique stone-defiant image of the very miracle the church was named for.

Over the two-year construction period Federici contributed five more works to the façade and two more inside, and in a career that lasted into the 1950s his remarkable pediment remains his largest sculpture ever. But it is awe-inspiring well beyond its size. The Mary of the traditional Loreto devotion is known as one of Italy's so-called "Black Madonnas," a compelling but typically small, static icon of Mother and Child. Representations of the 12th century miracle itself--the flight that was said to have "translated" her ancestral home from the Holy Land to Loreto, where the devotion was born--were virtually non-existent, even among the grand works Bramante later sculpted for the "Holy House."

But the young Federici, schooled in research-driven classical realism, discovered an early tract about the miracle and, deploying the patented family cast stone, transformed its crude woodcut cover-image into a blithe, softly-carved Mary and babe atop their windswept house amid an airy, wide surround of angels and clouds. His representation is itself a kind of miracle, capturing in stone the magical notion of flight then so fresh in the American mind. It is a true "translation" in every sense, perhaps the nearest thing we have to a Catholic Dorothy, safely borne on a wild storm-cloud from Kansas to Oz.

And we *do* have it--right here in *Bruculinu*--this still-sublime sculpture, atop this still-sublime neo-Palladian-Renaissance confection that, even if threatened, is by some latter-day miracle still standing, making its proud, incongruous statement about the need for something beautiful in an architectural wasteland.

How sad is it now that this brilliant creation by Italian American churchman Vincenzo Sorrentino is precisely what Italian American churchman Nicholas DiMarzio wants to destroy? What strange irony, in fact, has put almost all the power to save it into the hands of Italian Americans--not just the bishop, but the head of Catholic Charities--the mayor--the governor--even the chief State Preservation officer who deemed it landmark-eligible? It's not a stretch to think an Italian-American might even sign the demolition warrant.

And what does it tell us that the *Save* campaign, though vigorously supported by New York's Commission for Social Justice/Order Sons of Italy along with dozens of Italian American scholars and activists, is actually being led--and led passionately--by community representatives who are everything but: by the leadership of Brownsville Heritage House, Nia Theatrical Productions, Preserving East New York, and more?

Time and again we've been told that some unstoppable force knows--infallibly--what Brownsville really needs: another layer of "affordable housing" on a relatively small tract that has already lost its rectory and school to 66 units of it. Yet what are we to think when statistics tell us Brownsville is already housing-saturated? That it's not just dominated by public housing developments, but that the NYC Housing Authority, in control of more than one-third of its housing units, owns--*right here*, "the highest concentration of such developments in the entire city"??*

That Holy House has come a long way to stand in a cultural desert.

And so have we.

Perhaps the Italian Americans who now so firmly occupy places of power have forgotten what we faced at the turn of the last century--how a City fearful of the Italian reputation for anarchist acts of terror sent police to the doors of the church's opening ceremonies.

Clearly there was a time when this magnificent church was the statement Italians needed to make about who they really were.

It is now the statement we are bound to make about who we have become.

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**Wikipedia: "Brownsville"*

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