

Sunday, December 15, 2002
Apulia Insert to the *Corriere della Sera*

John, a Californian Architect in Lecce

At 24 he came to study in Italy. Then he was enchanted by the love of a Salentina woman and the scent of ragu. Now he says "Bye Bye USA".

LECCE--Very little of John Duggan has remained authentically American. Surely his love of fried chicken, which for Americans is a sort of ritual and which he, John, knows how to excellently cook by himself. And also the irresistible attraction for certain Hollywood blockbusters, varying from action films to thrillers. It's no wonder that the family dog's name is Bruce Willis: first name Bruce, last name Willis. (*Correction: his name's just Willis....*)

John is an American in Lecce. He was born in Garden Grove, near Los Angeles, forty years ago. Top of his class, uncommonly creative, a degree from California Polytechnic State University, today he's an architect/artist. He's also an example of how, for the love of Apulia (and the Apuliese) one can betray even California.

Our appointment is at Porta Napoli. He arrives by bicycle, with an athletic gait. He leads the way, diverting into the narrow streets of the historic city center. "Good Evening, *Mesciu* John", an elderly man greets him below his house (*note: "mesciu" in Lecce dialect means "maestro"*). John answers him, raising his arm (his accent and gestures: these too, by now, are decidedly not American, being contaminated with Leccese). The house is a 1600's palazzo, on two floors. On the first floor, through a glass door, is his studio: a long, cluttered room where Margaret immediately appears, his 6-year-old daughter, with a face like Candy Candy (*note: a blonde girl from a Japanese cartoon--see "Barbie"*), in her socks, who is watching cartoons in English. "Today I get to watch her," says John, "my wife and my 4-yr.-old daughter Francesca are out." When he's not being Mr. Mom, Duggan travels Europe and Italy for his work. Or he stays in his studio to finish his projects. "Often I leave open the front door open. I enjoy watching the people pass by while I work, some stop by to chat awhile. It's a nice atmosphere."

In many ways, it seems like you've ventured away from your American origins. Am I right? "I'm not sure if that's true. I know I enjoy living here, and I enjoy going back to America to see my parents and my brother and sister when I can, but after my visit it sure is nice to come back.

When did you first come to Italy? I was a 24 year-old architecture student and I was convinced that I'd never be a good architect if I didn't study Florence at length. So I hopped on a plane, I had never been in Europe before.

Then one evening at a birthday party, I met Angela, my future wife, who lived in Manduria (*correction: Lecce*) and was studying agronomy in Florence. It was almost summer, so she invited me for a weekend in Santa Caterina, here in Salento (*heel of the boot*). And it was love at first sight.

With Santa Caterina or Angela? I'd have to say both of them.

Did you marry right away? After three years. We then came to live in Lecce, and I told myself: I'll try it for a couple of years. If things don't work out, we'll go back to America.

And instead you're still here. John, you're an architect who works with unusual techniques. One of these is rendering. What does that mean exactly? Renderings are architectural presentation drawings that have the same use as models. For example: a client is building a vacation complex. With the use of renderings, one can see what the individual units will look like when completed. I first do sketches with pencil on tracing paper, then I move on to watercolors and tempera.

Is this an unusual technique? Yes, it's a technique that nobody uses here. Too artistic for engineers and architects, too technical for artists.

Have you worked on many projects here in Apuglia? I worked on the John Paul II Seminary here in Lecce, inaugurated by the Pope in 1990; a residential complex in San Foca, another in Santa Sabina; a beach community in Campomarino; then the City Center building in Bari on via Brigata Regina, the Leader Palace building in Bari on via Amendola. I've also worked a lot in America, where I helped with the design of a large commercial complex in Sacramento.

Recently, instead, you've devoted your attention to other things. I've done some promotional tourism maps, but not in a technical manner: I always use freehand drawings, on colored paper, decorated with scrolls and illustrations. And lately I've moved on to mural painting.

What would that be? Graffiti on walls? Not exactly. I follow more of a *trompe l'oeil* style, that I paint on ceilings of historic palazzos; In this moment I'm working a lot in Campania and Calabria. This is a break from architecture, being true painting, and I find inspiration from painters of the 1700 and 1800's, particularly Tiepolo.

Was it easy to find your own niche in the professional world here in Apulia? It was extremely difficult. In the beginning people had no idea what I was talking about; my type of work was virtually unknown. So I had to work practically free for a long time to get my name out there.

Nevertheless, you've stayed. But what do you like most about this city? You know what excites me? The scents on the streets, the sounds. I like going out at noon, on my bicycle or vespa, through the narrow streets of the

historic center and smell tomato sauce cooking, hear the sounds of dishes on the table. And then during the summer, when the people sit outside in front of their houses. In America it's hard to imagine these things still going on.

By chance do any of your ancestors have Apulian origins? No, but my grandmother in her second marriage married a Calabrese. Nobody from our family knew Italian, and when my grandpa spoke it we would all listen fascinated.

Finally: do you feel more American or Italian? That's hard to answer.

Okay, let's try it again. Vacation in Italy or a coast-to-coast trip in America? Vacation in Apulia; there all still places in Lecce left uncontaminated by man.

Fried chicken or pasta with tomato and basil? I love chicken american-style, but I can't resist some of my wife's recipes.

The wines, then; better from California or those from Apuglia? I prefer the *Primitivo* from Manduria.

John Duggan, an American in Lecce. Better yet, an American who has abandoned his California. For the love of Apulia, and the Apulians.

Caption I : Part designer, part artist. He colors his projects with tempera and watercolors.

Caption II: He still loves american-style fried chicken, but can't resist his wife's cooking.

Photo: In His Studio. **CREATIVE:** John Duggan in his studio-home in the company of his daughter Francesca (*Error: that's Margaret*) The American architect specializes in a technique called rendering: drawings that have the same function as models, a cross between presentation drawings and small works of art.