Why do Balconies Inspire Us?

By Vittoria Traverso, BBC 10th April, 2020

Federico Sirianni, a singer-songwriter from Turin, Italy, was used to playing small gigs in his neighborhood. But when he recently joined fellow musician Federica Magliano to play a live concert on the balconies of their building for their quarantined neighbors, things felt different.

“You could really feel a sense of wonder among those who were watching us from balconies,” Sirianni said. “A lot of people thanked us for making them feel less lonely.”

Like millions of Italians, Sirianni has been confined to his home since the country issued a nationwide lockdown on 9 March to slow the spread of coronavirus. And, like millions of people in urban centers around the world whose governments have imposed similar measures, Sirianni is rediscovering his balcony as a link to the outside world and a source of hope and connection at a time of forced isolation.

In the last month, quarantined Italians have taken to their balconies to sing the national anthem in unison, launch fireworks, belt out opera and applaud medical workers in an effort to boost the country’s collective morale. Many of these public pandemic practices have quickly spread around the world. Now, as more than half of the planet’s population is under some form of state-mandated, social-distancing measures, balconies from Madrid to Mumbai, Chicago to Zhejiang and Hamburg to Alexandria are suddenly taking center stage and reminding people of the importance to look outside and connect with something bigger than themselves.

Yet, despite balconies’ seemingly newfound cultural importance, these ancient platforms have long been used to captivate, unify and inspire the masses. After all, one of the most famous and romantic scenes in Western literature, from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, is played out on a balcony. It was on a balcony in Cape Town where a newly freed Nelson Mandela looked out upon the masses and promised a new chapter in South African history. And it is from a balcony in the Vatican where the Pope still blesses millions of believers each Sunday.

Balconies have been an architectural staple for thousands of years and their roles have evolved to adapt to local cultures and customs over the centuries. In her book Sunlight and Shade in the First Cities, urban archaeologist Mary Shepperson suggests that balconies may date back to 3000BC in Iran, where ancient Mesopotamians built overhanging parapets to shade the street from the scorching sun. Yet, by 1400BC, many historians believe that the Myceneans had started building balconies in what is now Greece for the opposite purpose: to increase natural light and air ventilation.

In Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization, British archaeologist Barry Kemp outlines how “palace-balconies" were designed as a “theatrical setting” for leaders to appear before their subjects. This practice has since echoed countless times throughout history. In ancient Rome, one of the earliest balconies, the *maenianum*, was an open-air platform for emperors and

senators to both watch gladiators compete at the Colosseum and be seen by the public. At the start of World War II, Adolf Hitler announced the annexation of Austria from the Imperial Palace balcony in Vienna. Seven years later, Winston Churchill famously joined the British royal family on the balcony at Buckingham Palace to celebrate the war's end.

As balconies evolved, their designs became more elaborate. Beginning in the Middle Ages, enclosed *mashrabiya* balconies with ornate latticework were built across much of the Arab world to allow residents to enjoy the fresh breeze while adhering to Islamic laws of privacy. In the Renaissance, balustraded balconies became a fixture of many Italian buildings after architect Donato Bramante unveiled the design of his bannister-bound Palazzo Caprini in Rome.

Venice was particularly famous for its many balconies, as architects looked for ways to offer access to fresh air in a cramped city. To visitors from northern Europe, such framed platforms often looked like exotic oddities: in his 1611 travelogue, Coryat's Crudities, British traveler Thomas Coryat explains that only in Italy had he observed the existence of "little terraces" whose purpose is to let people "contemplate and view the parts of the City round about them in the coole [sic] evening."

Colonization eventually took balconies around the world. Today, Malta's iconic closed-box balconies and the similarly enclosed balconies of Andalucia, Spain, are likely influenced by the territories' former Moorish landlords. In turn, the wrought-iron balconies found from Hanoi to New Orleans are flourishes from their former French rulers.

In the 19th Century, Europe underwent a period of intense urbanization and balconies subsequently became symbols of a modern metropolitan lifestyle, inspiring many writers, poets and artists. French painter Eduard Manet scandalised with his 1869 work The Balcony, with his portrait of urbanites looking at street life from a balcony causing one critic to proclaim, "Close the shutters!". Italian painter Umberto Boccioni depicted the intensity of 20th-Century urban life in his 1911 work The Street Enters The House, where street noises and chaos seem to enter the private space of a home through the balcony.

According to Sheila Crane, chair of the Architectural History Department at the University of Virginia, part of our collective fascination with balconies lies in their unique position as gateways. "Balconies act as liminal spaces that bridge public and private life," she said, citing a line from French sociologist Henri Lefebvre's 1992 book *Rhythmanalysis*, where he honors the "marvelous invention of the balcony" as the place where one can best grasp the "fleeting rhythms of urban life".

In cities across the Mediterranean, these "fleeting rhythms" inspired by balconies were often immortalized in 20th-Century art. In the 1960 film From a Roman Balcony, a conversation on a balcony leads to an epic love affair. In an ode to Tel Aviv, the refrain of the 1961 Israeli hit song Mirspot (Balconies), goes: "balcony facing balcony… this is a city of balconies". And in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels set in the 1950s, balconies often serve as stages that blur the lines between public and private life.

Yet, in addition to their cultural importance, balconies have often served as spaces to launch political change. During Algeria's war of independence with France in the 1950s and '60s, balconies became the set for independent mass protests after the government banned public gatherings. As Crane explains, pro-independence women would go out on balconies and sing ululations– a series of high-pitch sounds used to express collective mourning – while those in favor of France would perform *concerts des casseroles*, concerts using pots and pans as instruments.

These coordinated performances are reminiscent of the social and theatrical roles that balconies have historically played. "Until the advent of TV, people-watching from balconies was a prominent evening pastime," said Carolin Aronis, a scholar and lecturer at the University of Colorado Boulder, who has spent years researching the balconies of Tel Aviv and the Mediterranean. "But technologies such as the telephone, TV and air conditioning gradually drove people indoors." According to Aronis, in the past 50 years, balconies across the world have lost part of the role they once played in urban life.

But today, the forced isolation of the coronavirus pandemic is, in a way, creating a new unifying experience. As much of the world quarantines at home, there are countless examples of balcony culture bringing people together and offering a source of connection.

"I have been living in this apartment for three years and never really interacted with my neighbors," said Antonia De Zarlo, a 28-year-old medical student in Florence. Since Italy's lockdown started, De Zarlo said she's spent many afternoons sipping coffee and chatting with neighbors from her balcony. On 23 March, the day of her university graduation, her neighbors surprised her by passing a laurel crown and gift bag over using the stick of a broom. De Zarlo's Facebook post describing her surprise ceremony soon went viral.

"Today, technology is no longer driving people away from balconies," Aronis said. "It's helping people to re-discover them as social spaces."

Indeed, thanks to social media, balcony performers can now count on both physical and virtual spectators. When Siranni played his first quarantine gig on 16 March, an estimated 3,000 people joined via Facebook Live from all over the world. "We had virtual neighbors sending us messages on social media, and physical ones clapping from their balconies," he said.

Rosalba Durante, a pensioner from Turin, is working on a pulley system to allow food to be passed to her neighbors. "The idea started when one neighbor texted our building's WhatsApp group saying she wanted to share a cake baked by her daughter," she explained. "We realized we would all benefit from sharing food and other items directly across balconies." Durante's pulley project currently involves five other neighbors. "We are all struggling right now" she said. "It's important to find ways to have fun together."

Similar scenes have started playing out in cities across the world. Beth Poe and her husband of

38 years, Joe, have been living under quarantine in different areas of the same retirement home in New Orleans. The two now connect via a balcony in a quarantine version of Romeo and Juliet: Beth stands in the car park, while Joe sits in his wheelchair on a third-floor balcony. In Madrid residents of the Hotaleza neighborhood are organizing bingo tournaments on balconies. People across Indian cities are hosting balcony concerts using pan and pots – much like the women of Algeria did more than 50 years ago.

Aronis hopes that these moments of connection will lead us to re-appreciate balconies as social spaces well after quarantine is over. “Balconies provide something that digital technologies cannot: a sense of community and an authentic feeling of standing for each other,” she said.

De Zarlo echoes this sentiment. “Quarantine will be over and everything is going to be okay again,” she said, “but we should not forget this sense of community.”