On top of a hill in one of the more remote regions of Tuscany, where the nearest train station is half an hour away by car and the pulse of agriculture is still stronger than that of tourism, where the roads curve arduously up and down steep slopes and around sharp bends from one hilltop to another, is the village of Montisi.

Tuscany is built on the hilltops. The cities, the towns, the villages and even the individual palazzi (farmsteads) make the high hills seem higher, accentuate the distance between them and reinforce the sense that each built hill, from the larger towns like Siena to the smallest village, is in some sense one building, one house.

These "houses," claiming their hills with astonishing regularity (the zoning in Tuscany is dictated by topography, not town planners) are surrounded by moors of cultivated hillside and valley. From a distance the hill-town boasts its uniqueness, both individually and as a member of a type that has been much acclaimed for its picturesque image and way of life. At the end of a month-long visit, however, I was convinced that Montisi is in fact typical — not only of the Tuscan hill town but of all houses potentially: houses of unamed rooms.

On approach the town reads as a fortified cap. With no particular shape of its own, it hugs the convex hilltop as though knitted of stone. But although solid at this landscape scale, Montisi is a true vessel; it exists as both object and container. Like a nautilus, that which appears singular from the outside is in fact many-chambered.

Inside the walls of Montisi are the chambers. The streets are rooms, the private houses like thick walls containing closets and cupboards in which only the most private acts of daily life take place. All the rest — eating, talking, cooking, washing, working, playing, reading and resting — can and does happen in the rooms of the street. These activities are not paired with named spaces. The tiny piazzas at the top of the town is a parking place for six or seven small cars, but these are banished to the lower streets outside the walls on the eve of the Palio, when the square magically converts to an outdoor dining hall for 200 people.

One day a street is a workshop, full of cabinetmakers' windows, tools and sawhorses. That night the sawhorses multiply to dozens, as plank wooden tables and benches snake through the street to seat the entire contrada (a social group whose members generally come from a specific district in the town) for an eight-course meal. The event extends far into the night, but by
morning the tables and chairs have vanished, packed away into the "cupboard" of the confrade house like a set of kosher dishes to be used only at special times of the year. In the street, swept clean of debris but with rosebuds and song still lingering on the air, a young man dismantles his car in the street-cum-body shop. Vinyl upholstery lies on the cobblestones and chrome fenders distort the reflections of ancient walls. This village street is not an arbiter of taste; it offers a fair venue to anyone.

In these street-rooms, articulation is independent of use. No delineated sidewalk or curb separates "motorist" from "pedestrian." The street slopes to the center rather than to the edges, making the space an emphatically con-
cave container with a focus toward the middle. Walls meet the paving directly at right angles, but both walls and paving are strong, textured surfaces that hold fast to their intrinsic nature, in spite of the life that comes and goes.

The charm of a village like Montisi could easily be explained by the richness of these textures, colors, intense chiaroscuro and diminutive dimensions. These, we may say, are obsolete, out of our time and place and therefore irrelevant. But, perhaps blinded by the picturesque, we miss the more elusive lesson, which is independent of time and place — the lesson of unnamed rooms.

The eloquence of the Montisi street-rooms is in the mingling of children and grandparents, cars and peo-
ple, work and conversation, the con-
stant reappropriation and reinvention of
the same places, time and again.
This is exactly the opposite of our
American multi-purpose room, a fea-
tureless, textureless space that cannot
be appropriated because it has no char-
acter. No such programming pre-
ceded the construction of Montisi's
places, nor the kind that predicts:
"Here the children will play, here the
elderly will rest." The town seems
aware that such designations make
places mute.
Here then is the paradox of the
unnamed street-rooms. So particular
within themselves, each can neverthe-
less contain many things — the street-
room as kitchen, as parlor, as dining
hall, as playroom, as workshop, as
garage, as laundry, as garden, as porch.
Four women sit, each on her stoop,
the one-step threshold between the
street and private house. The street is
about two and a half meters wide, the
adjacent doors only a meter apart. In
their relationship to each other, the
stoops approximate the placement of
chairs in a conventional parlor. The
street is a parlor at first, a parlor with
a mezzanine, for the husbands occa-
sionally lean out from a second-floor
window to join a friendly argument. A
car comes respectfully by, a non-
unwelcome interloper whose driver
has time not only to slow down but
also to stop. The street-room can
accommodate this, for the car claims
nothing for itself. A temporary fur-
nishing, it moves on, making way for
the next event — a caravan of tricy-
cles and wagons.
This parlor is public; everyone is
uninhibited but welcome. It is also the
extension of the private house; each of
the four women possesses an invisible
porch that extends to the center-line
of the street. The existence of this
porch dissolves the street momentarily.
Like an optical game that presents two
images alternately, presenting both
equally the street-room is both public
and private, unnamed on any plan or
land-use study.
While Montisi is unpugnantly pic-
turesque, it is so only by default, by
the omission of any unified effort to
modernize. Television antennas, rock
music, polyester suits and dresses,
plastic toys, new (but small) cars, pack-
aged ice cream and video games have
moved in happily among the old clay
rooftops and cobbled pavement of
the eccentric plan. This is the evidence
of authentic reappropriation; the most
obvious acts are unpressed, unre-
viewed. The village is code free and
zoning free.
In front of the church and bar, the
two "public" buildings of the village,
the street widens enough to accommo-
date the card players and after-church
crowd, but not so much that it ceases
to be a street. The street exists in
Montisi everywhere that the buildings
are not. On a Sunday it contains the
unceremonious mingling of bells from
church and from pinball machines. A
motorcycle roars past.
The street rooms echo with the
complementary voices of ritual and
practicability, tradition and fashion, age
and youth. Their tolerance is their dis-
cipline. Accommodating change but
remaining themselves unchanged, they
hold the house together.
Montisi is not behind the times, but
neither has it left the times behind.