

## NOTES from PUNDITALIA

### Commercial Decline

Medieval cities were not designed for automobiles. Until cars took over the landscape, these towns were wonderful, compact and relatively self-sufficient places to live in. In the past they functioned as economic centers for farmers, artisans and shopkeepers. With the wave of car ownership, shopping has moved to sprawling and usually characterless developments on the surrounding plains. Farming and trades employ fewer people today and the smaller cities now depend as much or more on tourism for their economic sustenance as on the traditional activities. While new industrial zones may provide some stimulus for the economy, in the post-industrial age they are unlikely to compensate for the collapse of the historic centers and the inevitable decline of the tourist traffic that will follow. There is some understanding of this in Todi, which explains the disproportionate number of festivals and other cultural events in a town this small. What seems not to be appreciated is the need to maintain a healthy level of commercial activity in the center. Shops along Todi's main street continue to close and many storefronts have been empty for twenty years or more. Merchants complain that the lack of parking means that not enough clients arrive, but this is a vicious cycle. The more empty shops there are, the less reason people have to go there. The merchants also complain of high taxes and bureaucratic obstacles. Certainly much of this derives from national laws which impose regulations and limit the local governments in their taxing policies. Yet something must be done, beyond more festivals, to assure the vibrant commercial activity needed to reinforce the public presence. Easy parking is not a real possibility. Access can be improved, but tax incentives and disincentives should be used to facilitate retail and crafts businesses and discourage empty and wasted storefronts on the main thoroughfares. When beautiful commercial spaces sit vacant for two decades on a main street, either the taxes on the property are too low, or the taxes and other obstacles to new business start-ups are too onerous. Too little has been done by any recent administration in this regard. It's not an easy problem to resolve but the prevailing passivity and resignation to decline contribute to the downward cycle.