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03 Parabiago City of shoes

Located 20km north of Milan, Parabiago has been linked to the shoe trade since the end of the 19th century. The Città della Calzatura (or “City of shoes”, as it is known), together with neighbouring communities, is home to more than 100 manufacturers and suppliers and employs several thousand craftsmen. The area was once populated by dozens of artisan workshops making footwear for Milan boutiques. This was before bigger producers emerged during Italy’s post-war boom to meet demand from home and abroad for the latest styles. Today, firms in the area remain invisible to passers-by, tucked away in nondescript buildings off main roads, fulfilling orders for brands including Chanel, Tom Ford, Manolo Blahnik and Christian Louboutin.

Despite the industry trend to consolidate into larger firms to compete, various tasks here are still carried out by specialised craftsmen. Based in a basement studio beneath his home, modeller Angelo Rancilio uses his half century of expertise to interpret sketches from fashion brands and convert them into real-life prototypes. For a new mid-heel pump design he has recently received he takes a shoe last, places strips of tape over it and redraws the design onto the mould to calculate the number of pieces required to build the shoe. Drawings are then scanned so each piece’s measurements can be taken before being printed out as fibreboard sections that will then be used by craftsmen as a guide to hand cut segments from swathes of leather. “We are part artisan, part creative. We need to make the sketch a reality and make sure it works ergonomically,” says Rancilio.

Not everyone in Parabiago works for outsiders, however. Founded in 1953,

- 01 Prototype for a high heel
- 02 Angelo Rancilio (left) with a colleague
- 03 Toledo-painted shoes
- 04 Hand-dyed shoe upper
- 05 Shoe upper being shaped onto last