

# Creation of a Cultural Ecosystem: *The Experience of Matera—2019 European Capital of Culture*

Rossella TARANTINO\*

## Abstract

*This article focuses on the experience of Matera as a European Capital of Culture in 2019 in promoting a different model of cultural production based on horizontal and participative practice. The experience is interesting in consideration of the long-run process to create a cultural ecosystem ready to build a European Capital of Culture, the low rates of cultural participation in the region, and the challenges of the Matera 2019 program.*

*Can a city without big monuments and great cultural centers become a European Capital of Culture? Can a small city produce culture instead of importing it? How can the city build a cultural ecosystem? How can it mobilize the highest number of citizens including those with limited access in cultural production? How can the city widen the notion of “heritage” to include the people who take care of it? What is the meaning of open culture and collective intelligence? What are the impacts of co-creation and participative practices in terms of well-being and social empowerment?*

**Keywords:** ecosystem, European Capital of Culture, trust-building process, empowerment, collective intelligence, open culture, co-creation, participation, Faro Convention

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\* Rossella TARANTINO is an economist specialized in the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies, with a focus on culture, urban regeneration and social innovation. She has been part of the Matera 2019 European Capital of Culture project since its inception in 2010, designing the bidding strategy and the process of re-imagining the city, guiding it through its eventful year and, as Director, coordinating the evaluation studies and drafting the legacy plan. She is currently a member of the Panel of European Capital of Culture.

## 1. Matera Designated as a European Capital of Culture for 2019

After a four-year bidding process that involved 21 Italian cities in a very challenging and fascinating competition, Matera was designated as a European Capital of Culture for 2019 on 17 October 2014. This title was particularly precious as Matera won in the year with the highest number of competing cities in history and was one of the smallest cities to gain this designation.



*Source:* Fondazione Matera-Basilicata (2019).

Matera is a city in the South of Italy, with a population of 60,000 inhabitants, located in a region (Basilicata) with a declining population of 550,000 scattered over 131 towns. It is one of the oldest cities in the world—probably the oldest city in Europe—with a history of nearly 10,000 years of uninterrupted human presence dating back to the Paleolithic age.

*Throughout history, Europe has been a hub of artistic development characterized by exceptional richness and great diversity with European cities playing a vital role in the formation and spread of culture. This is why in 1985, upon the initiative of Melina Mercouri, the European Union launched the European Capital of Culture action. Since then, more than 60 EU cities have been awarded this title. “The initiative aims to highlight this richness and diversity as well as common cultural aspects in Europe and to foster the contribution of culture to the long-term development of cities at economic, social and urban level.”<sup>1</sup>*

*This opportunity is a catalyst for cities to reflect on themselves through a large process of public involvement and to launch new cultural endeavors with vast European resonance.*

*Each year, two European Capitals of Culture from two different EU Member States<sup>2</sup> are given this title according to a specific calendar. They are designated on the basis of a two-round EU standard competition launched by the selected host Member State usually six years before the title year.*

*In the case of Matera for instance, the competition was launched by the Italian Ministry of Culture in 2012; a shortlist of six preselected cities was admitted to the second round in 2013 and in October 2014, Matera was selected as European Capital of Culture for 2019. The city candidatures were reviewed against a set of established criteria by a panel of independent experts in the field of culture or culture-based city development. Matera spent the four subsequent years preparing the programme delivered in 2019.*

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1. DECISION No 445/2014/EU OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 16 April 2014.
  2. Generally, every three years, a third ECoC is selected among EU candidate countries, potential candidates or members of the European Free Trade Association party to the Agreement on the European Economic Area (so-called EFTA/EEA countries).

Though a small ancient city, it has a compelling story of significant reversals over the last 60 years. In the 1950s it was declared the “Shame of Italy,” as it hosted almost 20,000 people in the “Sassi,” a large neighborhood of partly excavated rock with very poor living conditions. As a consequence, a massive forced exodus was organized with the population relocated to new social houses and the old quarter was abandoned for decades.

Yet, a new consciousness about the cultural and ecological value of the abandoned “town” emerged, thanks above all to a group of intellectuals. Thus, after more than 30 years, in 1986 a specific regeneration programme was financed, bringing back 3,000 people to live in the Sassi. This was an almost unique case where an abandoned town came back to life after evacuated people returned to inhabit it.

In 1993, Matera and the Sassi entered the “World Heritage List” and the vernacular architecture of the area was considered an example of a rock-cut settlement, adapted perfectly to its geomorphological setting and ecosystem while also exhibiting continuity over more than two millennia. Its heritage became a “world heritage” not because it was created by famous architects or artists, but as result of the collective and layered work of many “capomastro” (foremen) who over the centuries have been able to find a harmonious relationship with the natural environment.

A number of famous movie directors selected Matera and its landscape as an ideal set: the most prominent was Pasolini in the 1960s, who filmed *Gospel According to St. Matthew*, followed by a number of Italian and American directors such as Mel Gibson who chose Matera for *The Passion of the Christ* in 2003. Starting from 1990s, these films and the city’s designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site have transformed Matera from an almost unknown city symbolizing poverty and shame into a reputed tourist attraction to visit.

Yet, when in 2009 a group of citizens proposed to start the candidature process for the title of European Capital of Culture (ECoC), most of the population expressed strong skepticism. Over the previous decades, the processes that positively changed the image and destiny of Matera were jumpstarted and managed by a few intellectuals and external events, but in

2009, the candidature process for the title of ECoC offered the opportunity to reimagine and rethink the city through a large process of citizen involvement.

## **2. “Can We Compete with Venice or Palermo?”**

General skepticism concerned two questions:

- Can a city without Brunelleschi, Biennale, or la Scala become a European Capital of Culture?
- Can a small city produce culture and become a European Capital of Culture?

The rest of this article focuses on how Matera faced these two questions and big challenges and contributed to a new ecosystem, in which all the organic parts of the city and of the region (institutions, cultural institutions and NGOs, social organizations, business, and especially citizens) were put together to build a new cultural proposal to Europe.

## **3. Can a City without Brunelleschi, Biennale or la Scala Become a European Capital of Culture?**

Matera had a compelling history as it was part of UNESCO heritage and attracted intellectuals to its symbolic story of resilience. Yet, it could not boast famous cultural institutions or internationally reputed festivals. When we started to initiate the bidding process for the title of ECoC, one of the challenges it decided to address was to give a primary role to the cultural producers working in the region, closely linked to the local communities by a rooted tradition of cultural care. The city prompted them to think bigger by building ties with international artists and cultural institutions. This investment would be the most fruitful in terms of social and cultural sustainability.

Most of these cultural producers had taken part in a project called

“*Visioni Urbane*” (“Urban Visions”) conducted for three years by the Regional Administration. The objective of this project (2007–2010) was to design a new cultural and creative policy through an intense dialogue with regional cultural organizations. The purpose of this dialogue was to balance the information asymmetry between policy-makers and grassroots cultural producers.

The project was unfolded into different steps:

- single interviews;
- mapping of the sector based on a viral method (“can you please suggest a cultural organization?” was the question put at the end of the interviews) and a wider understanding of culture (to include also bloggers, makers, and visual designers);
- shared analysis of the sector based on the results of the interviews and mapping;
- a conversation with various groups, which was developed through a blog and a number of workshops with internationally reputed experts;
- co-drafting the document and outlining the regional cultural and creative strategy.

This method aimed to create conversation on specific topics with all the participants and not on a “one-to-one basis.” The usage of a blog was ground-breaking as it guaranteed a transparent consultation process and prompted the participants to discuss concrete issues and to better get to know each other. The workshops with international experts on specific themes (i.e. technologies and arts, storytelling and new identity, cultural planning, creative centers, and fund-raising) were conceived as a “culture shocks” with the aim of going beyond the localist perspective and building alliances with international networks.

At the end of this process, a number of relevant results were achieved:

- **Community-building:** the process triggered an evolution that brought together several single producers, who were mostly unaware of the activities of other colleagues, to evolve into a cultural scene. At the

end of the process, most of them started to cooperate in co-producing performances or exhibitions, in distributing their products, and in organizing festivals;

- Thinking bigger: most of the producers started to work beyond the region and to have national partners and international partners;
- Revamp of abandoned and spoiled spaces and launch of a network of independent cultural centers;
- Implementation of a new cultural and creative policy to include an art-residential programme, calls for emerging producers, and calls for international projects.

At the end of process (2010), *Visioni Urbane* had built a **cultural ecosystem**, creating a breeding ground for *Matera 2019*: a region-wide cultural community was ready to take up the challenge of producing international-wide events for a European Capital of Culture. As a result, the cultural and creative community from Basilicata played a pivotal role in the programme of *Matera 2019* both in the bidding phase—giving insights in the design of the bid book and in citizen involvement strategy—and in the delivery of the events of the European Capital of Culture year.

Around forty percent of the *Matera 2019* cultural programme was implemented by *Matera's* cultural operators in partnership with artists from around the world. The capacity-building process started with *Visioni Urbane* continued during the bidding phase and most importantly during the preparation phase. Cultural producers had the opportunity to take part in a cycle of workshops and co-creating labs aimed at refining project ideas and upgrading their skills. Through a voucher called “Go and See,” cultural producers (project leaders) had the opportunity to travel within Europe to meet partners and artists and participate in events and programmes similar to those they had in mind. They partnered with 150 artists, bands, and collectives from Europe and the rest of the world. Most importantly, all of them produced international events by adopting the participatory or co-created method, i.e., by involving many citizens in the creation, production, and delivery phases.

*Matera Basilicata Foundation* after the year of Capital commissioned

an evaluation study<sup>3</sup> to investigate on the upgrade in basic and transversal skills among the producers who took part in the Matera 2019 programme. The highest upgraded skills were networking, managerial skills, and the ability to set up secure locations and inter-cultural competence and interpersonal communication. Before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in the early months of 2020, each project leader had already distributed their products more three times, mostly beyond local and national borders.

#### **4. Can a Small City Produce Culture and Become a European Capital of Culture?**

In the process of the city's reimagination in its bid for the title of European Capital of Culture, it is extremely important to view the city under a different perspective and to identify its resources as well as critical issues. In this sense, Matera faced a question about its small to medium size. Admittedly, Matera shared the same destiny as all the small and medium cities that import culture, which is mostly produced by big cities and great cultural institutions. In this sense, it was a consumer of centralized culture that originated elsewhere.

Could a small city like Matera produce culture? And if so, how? Matera addressed the challenge faced by small cities on the margin of the cultural markets to produce culture by opting for a new model of production based on participatory and horizontal practices. Rather than a model that removes the barrier between creators and artists on one side and passive audiences on the other, it was quite the opposite, encouraging the increasing involvement of citizens in the creation or production process (**co-creation or participatory culture**).

In this sense, Matera adopted the **open culture** model which stemmed from the open-source movement, based on the principle of sharing, peering, and openness that could generate new forms of culture. It

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3. PtsClas S.p.A. "In Matera we produce culture. Effects and impacts on the skills of the cultural and creative sectors" (2020).

promoted a cultural production model by placing emphasis on public participation and on the removal of all the barriers to cultural access. This shift in the cultural production pattern was facilitated by the growing democratization of the cultural creation processes enabled by digital technologies and the open licensing movement.



*Source:* Fondazione Matera-Basilicata (2019).

The cultural statement on which the Matera 2019 programme was based was as follows: As Matera had been created by the collective work of many “capomastro” (foremen) who over the centuries improved embedded knowledge, likewise culture can be created by leveraging cultural and artistic organizations to involve many citizens in the creation, production, and delivery process (by the collective intelligence process). This new mode of cultural production could also reduce the cultural divide as well as

prompt active social involvement.

This challenge implied hard work to mobilize the greatest possible number of people, with special attention to those who felt excluded or “unworthy” of culture by motivating them to reinvent themselves in new roles and take part in the great play of cultural production.

This was not an easy task for several reasons. As underlined before, despite the UNESCO label and the increasing number of tourists, Matera’s citizens were not yet aware of the symbolic history of their city and of the peculiar value of its heritage. They lacked trust in their potential capacity to transform the city and to shape their collective future. A lack of self-confidence was one of the major flaws of people living in the South of Italy. However, this skepticism was also nourished by other reasons such as doubts on a transparent process, weak regional cohesive identity, and the incapacity to get rid of Matera’s stigma as a “Capital of Shame.” In addition, the region had the lowest rates of cultural consumption since the population is scattered across a wide area.

Therefore, the strategy to design an ecosystem based on wide public involvement started with the creation of the Manifesto of Matera 2019 community. The emphasis was placed on the social and civic dimension of culture and on the active role that citizens can play in changing and rethinking the city as though they are the “software” of the city.

## **5. Citizens Are the Software of the City**

A city is not only made of streets, buildings and urban infrastructure—not even if it has been granted UNESCO World Heritage status. A city is all these things, plus the knowledge and the skills—embedded in its local community—enabling the maintenance, adaptation, development and improvement of such physical artefacts. Such knowledge is more fundamental than the physical infrastructure: given the knowledge, a city destroyed by a cataclysm can be rebuilt, preserving its identity even though the stone and the steel are no longer the same. But once the knowledge has withered, time will reduce buildings to rubble, fill the canals, cover the roads with jungle and forest,

and scatter the population. A city—any city—is software.

Therefore, the Sassi are not Matera. We are.

The time has come to update Matera's software, and that means stepping forth in full awareness of being citizens of Europe and Planet Earth. We need to look beyond the Gravina, over to Europe, the Mediterranean and the planet with new eyes. Learn as much as we can; share our best; to rethink ourselves, with no reservations or prejudices, but also without losing sight of who we are. If we are Matera, it is we that need to walk this path; it is we that must regenerate in completing it. Matera's bid as European Capital of Culture 2019 is an opportunity to do just that. It is a challenge the city has never faced before. It obliges us to answer interesting (sometimes uncomfortable) questions about our role, both in Italy and in Europe. It forces us to be innovate, and get rid of a lot of accumulated ballast (Margherita Sani et. al. 2015, 63-64).

The Manifesto was launched through a cooperative platform where all Matera's citizens could contribute to the bidding process by launching new ideas or projects fulfilling two criteria: first, they should have based, developed, and implemented through cross-collaboration and second, they should realize these ideas. In this sense, this call for ideas was a call to action, empowering all the people to take part but also prompting them to look for cooperation.

It was a way to invert all the stereotypes and common attitudes like, "it is up to the government or the mayor to do it" or "I have a magnificent idea but no one allows me to act on it." Many projects emerged from this platform as a result of cross-collaboration among geographically dispersed people (including diaspora) and between citizens and institutions.

The platform unveiled and involved many young people, even those from small villages in the region or studying elsewhere, who felt that the "door was really open" and that the bidding process was transparent and safe. At the same time, a number of different initiatives were conducted to involve people of different ages, capacities, experiences, origins, and professions.

## 6. Faro Convention and Heritage Communities

As underlined in the Manifesto, the programme of Matera 2019 was designed in close relationship with the Faro Convention<sup>4</sup> which emphasized a wider perception of heritage and its relationship to communities and society. In line with the Faro Convention, one of Matera 2019's objectives was to kick-start "heritage communities" by guiding people to know and appreciate their heritage and then learn to take care of it.

In this sense, an example is provided by the Museum of Matera, which brought together art conservators and eighteenth-century paintings in the social houses of Matera. The inhabitants of these social houses, who had never before entered a museum, started to learn how to restore a painting and were very proud to open their houses to their neighbors to share these paintings and their restoration techniques. This and other initiatives radically changed the perception of the museum over the years. At the beginning of the candidature path, it was considered just a beautiful palace in a pleasant square; over the years, it came to be the house of Matera's citizens, where they could listen to classical or rock concerts played by young bands, to take part in light design workshops, to take part in co-creation labs on contemporary dance, or to attend the great exhibitions of the year of the Capital.

This participatory process continued after winning the title. In this way, the people of Matera and the region learned that culture is not a decoration or something that belongs to very few people, but a long process that must be built and invented together every day. In this process, the alliance with grassroots organizations (such as parishes, schools, LGBT+

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4. The Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, better known as the Faro Convention, is a multilateral Council of Europe treaty. The Convention "encourages to recognize that objects and places are not, in themselves, what is important about cultural heritage. They are important because of the meanings and uses that people attach to them and the values they represent." The Convention was adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 13 October 2005, and opened for signature to member States in Faro (Portugal) on 27 October of the same year. It entered into force on 1 June 2011. To date, 20 member States of the Council of Europe have ratified the Convention and 7 have signed it.

NGOs, migrants associations, disabled associations, mums association, scouts, etc.) was of paramount importance.

Likewise, the strategy for citizen involvement relies on the “invasion” of a range of places that were not considered “cultural spaces,” such as hospitals, prisons, call centers, schools, factories, crafts studios, peripheral commercial centers, remote villages, hard-to-reach places, and those with declining populations, to reach out to the people who live or work in these places and invite them to take part in cultural production. The aim was to encourage people with different stories, abilities, skills, origins, and ages to interact and mingle.

## **7. Co-creation, Participation and Well-being**

Co-creation and widespread participatory cultural production were the trademark of Matera 2019: 80 percent of the cultural programmes placed citizens at the heart of cultural production with a gradual breaking down of the barriers between artists and audiences.

Over 57,000 citizens took an active part in the events of Matera 2019, responding to the various “public calls” and open recruitment meetings held in the most disparate places in collaboration with civil society associations.

The productions and formats varied with gradual involvement of citizens in different phases of the production cycle:

- Co-creation: citizens were invited to participate in the creative process. Some co-wrote a libretto for a community opera<sup>5</sup> or mapped their “emotional city” and took part in the creation of the exhibition representing it;<sup>6</sup>
- Participation in the production phase: Migrants and citizens were engaged

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5. “Silent city—a community opera—l’Albero,” <https://www.matera-basilicata2019.it/en/programme-2019/themes/ancient-future/1336-silent-city.html>.

6. “Atlas of the Emotions of the Cities—Teatro dei Sassi,” <https://www.atlantedelleemozioni.it/?lang=en>.

by Milo Rau in a contemporary version of the *Gospel According to St. Matthew* while dancers of every age and ability questioned the authority of “dancing well” in favour of the pure joy of performing;<sup>7</sup>

- Participation in the delivery phase: Five thousand citizens produced the lights to spark the opening ceremony of the Capital.

This participation left a “hunger for dreams” in some of the citizens from which “they don’t want to be woken.” At the end of 2019, a group of 50 people involved in these participatory activities called some artists back to Matera to co-write the Matera 2020 Citizens’ Manifesto: “We want to open the city to artists from all over the world to develop residencies and creative paths. The active participation of citizens in the creative practices and paths will make it a unique celebration and will lead to the development of a conscious community.”

In 2020, Matera Basilicata 2019 Foundation commissioned a research to a group coordinated by Pierluigi Sacco to analyze the impacts produced by this approach on the participants in terms of building or enhancement of skills, relationships, and well-being.<sup>8</sup> The results underlined that “Moreover, it is possible to observe how MCEC [Matera Capital of Culture] 2019, for the majority of questionnaire and interviews respondents, had positive effects in terms of **increased confidence (about 46.5%), improvement of their skills (about 60%), greater ability to collaborate (more than 80%), cooperate, and understand others.** The most interesting results that emerge from the analysis of the data collected seem to confirm the value and potential of the ECoC experience in generating empowerment, in investing in personal and collective abilities of citizens in creating value and meaning around the shared construction of commons, thanks to artistic interventions.” The study concludes: “MCEC 2019 fully represents a good practice in the context of the European Capitals of

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7. “Jerome Bel—Arte Pollino,” <https://www.matera-basilicata2019.it/en/press/press-releases/project-pressreleases/2160-ka-art-in-scena-compagnia-compagnia-di-jerome-bel.html>.

8. Arteco, “Co-creating Matera” (2021).

Culture from the point of view of participatory practices, and this is even more significant in light of the cultural participation rates that are typical of the regions of Southern Italy: namely, among the lowest in the entire European Union. (. . .) The MCEC 2019 experience, according to what emerges from the results presented this report, confirms that culture is a key element for maintaining, generating or increasing the level of collective well-being, in close relationship with welfare and cognitive growth.”



*Source: Fondazione Matera-Basilicata (2019).*

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