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# 12. Urban heritage fragility and antifragility: Matera and the 2019 European Capital of Culture[1]

**Davide Ponzini, Zachary M. Jones, Enrico Tommarchi, Stefano D'Armento, Alessandro Scandiffio and Franco Bianchini**

## 12.1 MATERA'S HERITAGE AND THE 2019 EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE MEGA-EVENT

Matera is a medium-small city of 60 000 inhabitants located in the region of Basilicata, in Southern Italy. It is the third-oldest continuously inhabited settlement in the world and the oldest in Europe, founded during the Palaeolithic era. It is renowned as the City of the Sassi, or stones, which are the city's oldest neighbourhoods, comprised of many cave dwellings and churches hewn into the rock face of the ravine that the city is built upon. These rock settlements are noted for being adapted to their geomorphological setting and for a sustainable relationship with the environment (Damiano et al., 1998; ICOMOS, 1992).

Due to the extreme poverty and insanitary living conditions of the inhabitants in the Sassi, after World War II the national government set up a large-scale new housing plan to relocate the Sassi's residents. This made the city a sort of international laboratory for urban planning, but ultimately left the Sassi partially abandoned until relatively recently (Mininni and Dicillo, 2012). In the late 1980s and in the 1990s a resettlement programme sought to encourage people to return to live in the Sassi and restore homes and other buildings, with the support of the national Law 771 of 11 November 1986.

Because of their cultural relevance, in 1993 the Sassi and the Park of Rupestrian Churches were listed as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations

[1] This chapter derives from and includes substantial excerpts and materials from the HOMEE Research report: Ponzini et al. (2020b).



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Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In 2014 the city was awarded the title of European Capital of Culture (ECoC) for the year 2019. These two moments were important turning points in overcoming negative stereotypes of the city, as well as working towards the revitalisation of the Sassi area and of other parts of the historic core, in synergy with other national and local policies. At the same time, the increasing tourist pressure raised new socio-economic issues for local residents, and had negative effects in terms of preserving the tangible and intangible heritage of the Sassi and of the historic centre of the city, with many dwellings turned into bed-and-breakfasts (B&Bs) or hosting new activities for mass tourism (Comune di Matera, 2016; Picascia et al., 2017). Within a few years after the awarding of the ECoC title, the properties listed as B&Bs had more than doubled to over 1000 in 2019. Almost half of these are located in the Sassi. Despite the political narrative attached to it, the 2019 mega-event could not act as a panacea for all the problems of the city and region, from decreasing population to the out-migration of skilled and knowledge workers, and reduced economic activity compared to the north of the country.

The 2019 ECoC had a regional scope, and the intention of spreading the effects of the event was made clear in the bid as the event was officially entitled the Matera-Basilicata 2019 ECoC, with 130 other municipalities in the region participating in the initiative.

The relationship between the 2019 ECoC and heritage is complex, as the Sassi hosted a number of events and the organisers also intended to promote other heritage narratives and places beyond the historic city centre. The 2019 event was able to address long-standing regional problems only to a limited extent. Matera's accessibility has been one of the main challenges facing the city, in terms of both growth and development, as well as becoming a mass tourism destination (Baldassarre et al., 2017). The 2019 mega-event was planned within a broader policy framework of urban and regional plans and policies that are worth considering before analysing the plans for the ECoC and their implementation. This chapter provides an analysis of the strategies and planning measures in Matera with a focus on the plans, projects and governance of the mega-event, of its urban effects, and finally, it discusses if and how the mega-event experience affected the fragility and antifragility of heritage areas in Matera.

## 12.2 STRATEGIES AND PLANNING MEASURES IN A FRAGILE HERITAGE CITY

The context of the 2019 event planning and operations shows several problematic issues of strategic and land-use planning, heritage policy and preservation, as well as of unregulated tourism growth in the historic city centre. The

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General Master Plans of 1956 and of 1975 (whose preparation was led by town planner Luigi Piccinato) established the structure of contemporary Matera. The 1999 General Modification to the 1975 plan was approved only in 2007. The new plan was approved only in April 2018, based on a 2013 document that did not consider the 2019 event and its urban implications. Rapidly growing tourism and its effects on the city centre were not addressed in a consistent and comprehensive manner. In particular, specific regulations and guidelines were recently introduced in the Sassi area to begin to deal with accessibility issues, and the management of a massive influx of tourists in a fragile and layered urban fabric. In addition, the Integrated Territorial Investments Strategic Document, approved in September 2018, earmarked total funding of €43 million with the aim of reinforcing 'the role of the City of Matera as a tourist and cultural magnet, pursuing sustainable urban development based on the knowledge economy, innovation, quality of urban space and the enhancement of social, cultural and environmental capital' (Città di Matera, 2018, p. 2, translated by the authors).

The first Strategic Plan of the City of Matera (Comune di Matera, 2009) was developed under the leadership of architect and urbanist Francesco Karrer and completed in 2009. The plan included the analysis of the city and its surroundings, and a series of proposals that were not implemented. The City Council, with the support of SVIMEZ (a prominent non-profit organisation dedicated to the economic development of Southern Italy), intended to create a Strategic Plan for the period 2018–2020, but never finalised the document (Comune di Matera, 2017a). The City Council also created a list of projects to be completed in anticipation of the event, but this was not part of a comprehensive plan for the city's development (Comune di Matera, 2017b; 2018a).

The two ECoC bid books tried to outline city-wide strategies, but they never had the technical and political legitimisation to do so. Tourism development plans or policies made very little or no contribution to handling the expected increase in tourist numbers at local and regional level. The planners of the ECoC predicted a 200 per cent increase in tourists by 2020, which the city did eventually achieve. The lack of systematic preparation to manage tourism was clearly recorded during interviews and fieldwork and it emerged as one of the key issues during 2019. This clearly impacted upon Matera's heritage.

The UNESCO Site Management Plan (SMP) (Comune di Matera, 2014) was created in 2014, and led by a group of local researchers and architects who included Angela Colonna and Domenico Fiore. A major component in the creation of the plan was a series of public participation workshops that involved local residents. A Permanent Observatory was proposed for the future maintenance and protection of the Sassi. While completed at nearly the same time as the city was awarded the 2019 title, there was no mention in the document of the ECoC bid, and of the implications of Matera's designation as ECoC for

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the city's heritage. Likewise, the first ECoC bid book (completed in 2013) did not mention the SMP and how the two documents might inform one another. The proposed Observatory is not yet fully operational, and only a small group of key stakeholders have been consulted. None of the projects proposed in the SMP have been implemented.

## 12.3 THE MEGA-EVENT AND MATERA'S HERITAGE: PLANS, PROJECTS AND GOVERNANCE

The Matera-Basilicata 2019 ECoC has been at the centre of analyses and debate in Italy (see, e.g., Argano and Iasevoli, 2014; Bencivenga et al., 2016; Bernardo and De Pascale, 2016; Fusco Girard et al., 2017; Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation, 2020; Percoco, 2018; Fox et al., 2020; Mininni et al., 2020). Some heritage-related issues have been touched upon by existing publications. This chapter offers a distinctive contribution because its main focus is the relationship between the planning of the mega-event and Matera's heritage.

The process of planning and implementing the mega-event and its legacy can be summarised in five main phases. During the first phase (2009–2011) the idea of bidding for the event emerged and the mobilisation of institutions and organisations started. The second phase (July 2011 to October 2014) structured the official proposals (the first and second bid books) and led to the third phase (October 2014 to February 2016) of actual planning of the event. The fourth phase comprises the implementation of the event (October 2016 to December 2019), while the design and delivery of the legacy (from 2020 on) went through a period of significant uncertainty due to limited planning and the unpredictable Covid-19 pandemic.

The two bid books for the ECoC (the original one submitted in 2013 for the initial shortlisting, and the second version submitted the following year by the team representing Matera as one of the six finalists) show an important shift in the focus of the mega-event: from heritage-centred to technology-driven. The first bid book used the city's heritage as a symbol of the citizens' spirit and resilience. Heritage was depicted as a motor for new creative enterprises (Matera 2019 Committee, 2013). Some restoration projects for historically or culturally valuable buildings were mentioned specifically, including Mulino Alvino, Castello Tramontano, Complesso del Casale, La Martella neighbourhood and the DEA (Museo Demoetnoantropologico di Matera) ethnographic museum to be located in the Sasso Caveoso.

Conversely, there was not a strong emphasis on built heritage in the second bid book (Matera 2019 Committee, 2014), though the intangible heritage/identity of the city is seen as central to the development of the proposal. The core theme is instead to create an 'open future' for the city by bringing together

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Matera's rich source of open data and a future of cultural production. While cultural heritage is noted as having served as an attractor of tourism in the past, the bid proposes to use the event to go beyond just attracting tourism, by testing radically new approaches that challenge the tourism-based economic model. The Open Design School (ODS) and the I-DEA exhibition project are framed as the two cornerstones of the bid and of the mega-event's legacy.

The bid books contain few heritage-specific projects. Of those, some were completed as part of the year, while others were cancelled or modified, mostly due to governance complexities. For example, 'Ars Excavandi' was proposed as the opening exhibition, which was intended to take place in the Palombaro Lungo, the city's largest historic cistern, and would focus on the art of excavation in clear relation to the city's peculiar urban fabric. The location was moved to the Archaeological Museum and the relationship with the city's heritage was redefined. Among other projects, 'Caring City' would have created 'sensory trails' through the Sassi, designed in cooperation with architects and city planners, while 'Open House Matera' would have showcased the architectural heritage of the city by opening, for one weekend of the year, spaces which normally were not accessible to the public. These events did not take place, for a number of reasons, ranging from delays in the availability of funding to logistical issues and lack of permissions from the institution in charge of preservation.

A number of restoration/transformation projects can be found in the bid book, as presented in Table 12.1. Among these, only the New University Campus and the Restoration School were completed as originally envisioned and on schedule for 2019. Both of these projects were planned and funded outside the scope of the 2019 ECoC. While both the I-DEA exhibition and the ODS were provided with spaces, neither of those were located in the Sassi as originally proposed. While the heritage narrative formed an important base for the bid, the majority of the proposed projects/events had relatively little to do with the city's heritage, and many were ultimately not implemented as originally conceived. While the bid book did heavily promote the city's future as an open and digital city, it did not actively address the city's heritage in terms of the innovative re-use and re-activation of abandoned spaces.

The majority of the proposed heritage-related physical projects were not completed as planned for the event, or were relocated to other areas of the city, with the exception of the new University Campus. This was the case with both I-DEA and the Open Design School, the two pillar projects of the year, which were originally to be located within the Sassi and ultimately located elsewhere. One of the most important projects carried out by the Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation was the completion of a new theatre venue created within the Cava del Sole former tufa quarry, which hosted a handful of larger events throughout the year including part of the opening ceremony. While this project represents

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*Table 12.1 Heritage-related project presented in the bid books and their implementation*

| Heritage-related bid book projects | Realised? |
|---|---|
| Open Catasto project | Yes |
| Lumen event | Yes |
| Invisible Pavilions event | Partially |
| Living the Opera event | Yes |
| Ars Excavandi Exhibition | Partially |
| Playspace event | No |
| Instant Architecture event | No |
| Caring City event | No |
| Open House Matera event | No |
| I-DEA exhibit space in the Sassi | No |
| Restoration of the Casale Complex | Yes |
| New University Campus | Yes |
| Restoration of Cava del Sole | Yes |
| Restoration of La Martella Theatre | Partially |
| Relocation of L'Arca di Promoteo | No |
| Citadel of Space | No |
| Greenways and crossroads stations | No |
| Creation of the Advanced School of Restoration | Yes |

an important re-use of an abandoned quarry, it has remained difficult to access, with only limited public transport options and safe pedestrian routes.

Heritage sites were distinctive settings for a number of events. The Sassi's appeal and iconic value were, and still are, central to the image of the city. As Figure 12.1 shows, many event locations were clustered within the historic city centre and throughout the Sassi area.

However, the aims to creatively use heritage for the mega-event were largely redirected or impaired, largely due to institutional complexities and fragmented administrative powers and procedures. Many projects were redirected to areas outside the historic city centre, and stimulated the use of, and the discussion about, tangible and intangible heritage (the examples of the ODS and of the I-DEA exhibition are cases in point). Figure 12.2 shows that the mega-event's activities had fairly limited effects on the materiality and use of the core heritage areas.

A number of infrastructural projects, including road improvements, the creation of new parking spaces and, most visibly, the new central train station, as well as a number of heritage restoration projects, were also completed.

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*Source:* Zachary M. Jones.

*Figure 12.1* *The opening ceremony of the Matera-Basilicata 2019 ECoC in January 2019, with marching bands from across Europe and Basilicata at the Cava del Sole*

By the start of the 2019 programme, restoration works were completed for the Cathedral, the Mulino Alvino complex (though its use was changed from a museum to a hotel and resort), the Ex Carro Factory and the Cava del Sole. Some street improvement projects within the historic centre were also carried out.

In terms of governance, the Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation has relative autonomy from the local municipality, though the financing mechanisms tie the two organisations together. While the 2019 Foundation has created some partnerships with other stakeholders, there is an overall lack of integration in planning and implementing projects with other pre-existing organisations and institutions. Several other cultural organisations prepared their own cultural events during the year, separate from those of the Foundation and not promoted or advertised by it. Additionally, the municipality developed its own set of goals and legacy projects separate from those of the 2019 Foundation. While the regional Museum System (part of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities, MiBACT) was heavily involved in organising one of the four main exhibitions for the 2019 programme, other institutions such as the Restoration School and the UNESCO Chair in Cultural Heritage at the University of

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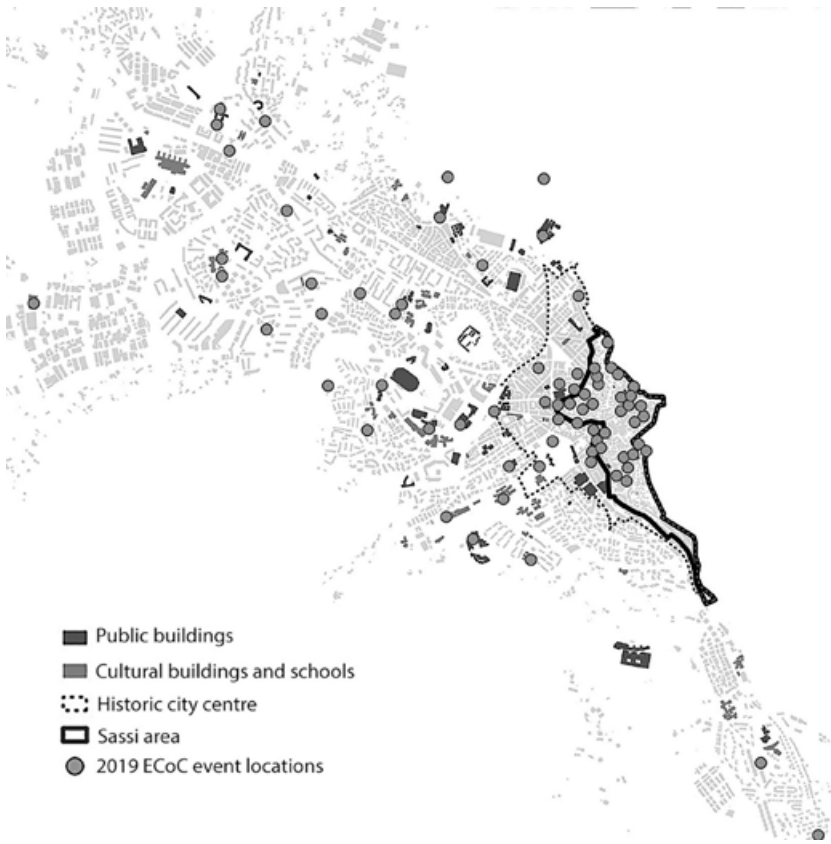


*Figure 12.2 Map showing the 2019 ECoC event locations in relation to the city centre as well as cultural and public buildings*

Basilicata did not have any official connections with the event or the 2019 Foundation. None of the physical restoration projects described within the bid books were under the control of the 2019 Foundation; in most cases the municipality played a key role, in collaboration with MiBACT. Due to frictions between Matera City Council, the Region and the 2019 Foundation, and due also to Italy's governance complexities, there was not close coordination between public works to restore historic sites and their use within the 2019 programme.

The Municipality had a mostly conservative position, directing most of the funds at its disposal towards interventions aimed at the re-use and restoration of existing heritage assets (Rupestrian Churches Trail, Palazzo del Casale,

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Cava del Sole, Tramontano Castle, refurbishment of the Convent of Santa Lucia to create a home for the School of Restoration, Municipal Theatre, Auditorium in Palazzo del Sedile, hypogeum spaces in piazza Vittorio Veneto and piazza San Francesco), rather than at the construction of new cultural facilities (Comune di Matera, 2018b). Construction work started in the cases of some important infrastructural interventions, which broke the impasse thanks to the mega-event's hard deadline (for example, the FAL Railway Station, the state freeway SS99 Matera–Altamura–Bari, the intermodal terminal in the Serra Rifusa neighbourhood, parking areas, the renovation of streets and squares such as Via delle Beccherie, Via San Biagio, Piazza del Sedile, Piazza San Giovanni and Villa Comunale). However, in some cases, completion of the projects was delayed until after the inauguration of the 2019 ECoC.

## 12.4 URBAN EFFECTS AND MEDIUM-TERM UNCERTAINTY IN A FRAGILE HERITAGE AREA

In considering the mega-event–heritage nexus, the Matera ECoC can be interpreted both as an opportunity to make the historic city centre stronger, more resilient and diversified in its economic base, as well as a threat. In other words, one can try to assess whether and how the effects of the mega-event made heritage more or less fragile and, conversely, antifragile. In particular, this chapter highlights the material and functional aspects of the Sassi area, the governance of its spaces as part of the city of Matera and of a broader territory, their use as part of the mega-event, and wider implications in terms of tourism and gentrification.

Both bid books had the intention of strengthening the city's development trajectory over the long term. The first tried to put both tangible and intangible heritage centre stage and to strengthen the economic, social and cultural activities connected to it. One of the potential effects was to make the historic city centre and the Sassi area less prone to the negative effects of mass tourism and, over time, to gain strength from the presence of more diversified tourism. The second bid book envisioned technology as a driver to make the city a platform and an engine for the development of the region, but without giving any specific role to the city centre. However, one could expect that an economic system which relied on culture and creativity rather than on heritage tourism may relieve the historic city centre from excessive pressure. The shift from the first bid book to the second, in terms of placing less and less emphasis on the built environment and inner-city target places, seems largely due to the complexities of governance and regulation when dealing with cultural heritage in Italy. The spread of the events and the uses of intangible heritage in the 2019 programme appear to confirm this observation. In principle, the mega-event

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plans of the first bid book aimed to make the heritage areas more resilient – and to some extent more antifragile – by diversifying their economic and social connections. The second bid book limited itself to aiming to avoid excessive stress for the built heritage of the historic city centre.

However, significant failures in completing heritage-related projects as well as other interventions located in the city centre dramatically limited the impacts of the Matera 2019 strategy. On multiple occasions, the local Soprintendenza (the area office of MiBACT, responsible for heritage preservation) slowed down and even halted some projects, as they were deemed to be harmful to the city's heritage. One such example involved an art installation that would have seen ropes strung across Matera's ravine, connecting the city centre to the Murgia Materana Regional Park. The Sopritendenza argued that it had not been involved early enough in the process of designing this artistic project to identify possible alternative solutions.

Several existing cultural organisations and institutions, in addition to the 2019 Foundation, also organised events to take place during 2019. These projects were outside the official 2019 programme and they were not promoted by the Foundation, so visitors coming to the city would not easily have found information about these events. Several of these events were sited in heritage locations in the city. While some of these events were promoted by the Tourism Agency of the Basilicata Region, they were not clearly connected with the programme of the ECoC. Also for this reason, heritage governance benefited little from mega-event planning and implementation. More generally, despite the significant opportunities and perhaps due, in part, to political instability, the ECoC could not overcome long-standing institutional fragility and limited networking capacity in the heritage field and in the wider cultural sector.

The 2019 ECoC was an important turning point for the city of Matera and a moment when several mega-event and urban planning measures became more evident (Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation, 2019). One can assess their contribution to the fragility and antifragility of the heritage of the historic city centre by discussing the implications for tourism, gentrification and the uses of this area.

The opportunity to strengthen the historic city centre in the face of the massive growth of tourism that occurred until the end of 2019 – with a trend to growth that was consolidated as soon as the city was awarded the ECoC title in October 2014 – was missed, as no systematic tourism management or sustainability plans were produced, despite the clearly stated goals of expanding tourism. As we argued in the previous sections, this led to complications in terms of accessibility and tourism overflows during the early months of 2019, as well as during the peak tourism and holiday seasons. However, the majority of visitors came to Matera to appreciate the impressive heritage of the Sassi rather than to take part in ECoC events. According to the 2019 Monitoring

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Report (Matera-Basilicata 2019 Foundation, 2020), approximately 293 157 non-locals participated in events during the ECoC year. However, there was a total of 730 434 stays in 2019, meaning that less than half of the total number of overnight visits attended or participated in events as part of the 2019 ECoC.

Given the turbulence introduced by the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020, it is as yet unclear what the long-term legacy of the 2019 ECoC will actually be for Matera. The ODS and an online archive of I-DEA projects have been proposed as potential continuations of events that took place during 2019 itself. During the pandemic there was a dramatic drop in tourist numbers and in attendance to heritage and cultural places, as well as general limitations to cultural and public life.

A clear long-term impact on the city's heritage can be seen in the Sassi where there was a significant increase in the presence of B&Bs, hotels and restaurants. While on the one hand this has brought about the improvement and reutilisation of structures that were previously abandoned or uninhabitable, it has also led to high numbers of tourists in this part of the city, and gentrification effects. This issue was also coupled with insufficient provision of ancillary facilities to support much higher tourist flows. The newly created UNESCO Site Management Plan did not anticipate these potential changes. Neither the SMP nor any other planning policies were able to respond to these fast changes in real time. It is also worth considering the role of the local tourism model, and the way in which the ECoC was presented as a crucial opportunity to support the local economy through the growth of the tourism sector. From this perspective, the risks associated with touristification were exacerbated by the fact that the local tourism industry consists mostly of small or family businesses, who invested heavily in the restoration of their properties in the hope of benefiting from the ECoC effect on tourism. Growing tourism pressures on the area suggest that the Sassi may be experiencing, as suggested earlier, 'heritage-led gentrification' (see, e.g., De Cesari and Dimova, 2019), where heritage contributes to rising land values and where the original population is replaced by tourism entrepreneurs and visitors.

At the time of writing (end of 2022), it is difficult to say what the implications of discontinuous tourist fluxes may be for the long-term management of the city. Local actors and public institutions found difficulties in driving the legacy of the ECoC, as this task is outside their scope and the mega-event delivery vehicle could not readily be converted into a long-term legacy company. As a result, the tardy legacy policy did not prompt special interest in heritage and long-term policies for its preservation and mobilisation. In addition, the skills and capabilities developed locally in relation to heritage conservation, and the delivery of large-scale cultural events, are at risk of being lost, as most experts and trained workers are not retained as part of a legacy plan. Policy makers in Matera could not strengthen the overall potential for improving cultural

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and heritage management that the ECoC provided, in order to make the city's heritage assets more antifragile and less fragile.

## 12.5 CONCLUSIONS: MEGA-EVENT PLANNING, HERITAGE FRAGILITY AND ANTIFRAGILITY

As the oldest continuously inhabited urban settlement in Europe, Matera represents in many ways a heritage-rich city and shows the complexity of discussing the heritage–mega-event relationships. The event heavily referenced the city's heritage, which, based on our observations, absorbed most of the visitors' attention despite the aims to diversify the city's image and activities. The mega-event's planning and delivery undeniably contributed to improvements (for example, in terms of accessibility and the creation of new public spaces). However, the impressive heritage of the city was not systematically integrated into the ECoC's programme as other ECoCs did in the past (see: Jones, 2020). Ultimately the 2019 ECoC did not have a significant long-term impact on the use and governance of the city's heritage. At the same time, heritage policies did not interact much with the mega-event, as for the UNESCO site, and did not respond to the mega-event's plans and projects. While keeping the focus on the heritage–mega-event relationships, there are more general considerations that can be derived from this case study in terms of epistemology, the fragility–antifragility continuum and uncertainty over time.

Although the epistemic question of how to investigate the effects of mega-events in heritage-rich cities in terms of fragility/antifragility has not been the main target of this chapter, one can clearly see that better and more usable knowledge can derive from a more in-depth understanding of the interplay between social and material features as they assemble in place (Farías and Bender, 2010; Lieto & Beauregard, 2015). In the case of Matera, the size and materiality (e.g. the built environment and its uses) of the Sassi area have characteristics that significantly influenced the planning of the event and its infrastructure. The research from which this chapter derives (Ponzini et al., 2020b) did not consider the materiality of the heritage areas, but a dedicated analysis may enrich such discussion in the future. This analysis should consider a longer time frame than that adopted by this chapter, as the complex entanglement of social activities (such as cultural events, tourism and related uses of urban spaces) and local conditions are very hard to affect, as they depend on the actions of a plurality of institutions and on long-term policies. Heritage regulations typically stand on the assumption that built heritage is materially fragile, and that increasing its uses exerts pressure, and risks making its preservation more difficult over time. The materiality of heritage areas and the potential of making such complex urban systems more antifragile by means of extended (and perhaps more diversified) uses have not been adequately

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explored in the literature nor in policy making. Clearly, the epistemology question has significant implications for planning practice.

This case study also shows that making a clear-cut assessment of how certain plans and projects affect the fragility or antifragility of a complex urban area is challenging. In the case of Matera this has not been possible, as a more nuanced continuum emerged, at least in two ways. First, the individual measures included in a plan such as the one for the ECoC in Matera may make the heritage more or less fragile or antifragile to different degrees, and may include interactions and other ways to counterbalance negative effects. The difficulties found in implementation make this exercise extremely hard to perform *ex ante*. Second, the fragility and antifragility of heritage areas may shift according to different conditions over time. The Covid-19 pandemic changed the situation quite abruptly, and increased uncertainty about the future of Matera's heritage.

The strengthening of institutions and networks may be a way to improve the situation over the long term. However, in a cultural policy field such as heritage where a high number of actors and regulations are in place, less opportunities for change mean lower risks, and vice versa (Jones & Ponzini, 2018). In this sense the limited impact of the mega-event's planning may depend on the intention of not affecting the policy powers and the political balance, while taking opportunities and distributing resources to organisations and projects where there were fewer potential frictions (Ponzini et al., 2020a; Ponzini & Jones, 2021). This conservative position reduced the mega-event's potential for experimentation (Ponzini et al., 2019).

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