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## Cultural Innovation and Local development: Matera as a Cultural District

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### Abstract

Is culture a strategic tool for local development? Cultural resources do foster physical, economic and social renewal? We have attempted to answer yes through the analysis of the Matera 2019 cultural capital project, using some fundamental drivers like: quality of cultural supply, development of local talent and attraction of external talent, capability building, education of the local community and internal or external networking. The Matera case study configure an extremely articulated aggregation of Universities, Research Centres, Associations and Enterprise and, more importantly, a strong social mobilitation in the field of cultural production. This aspect occur in the wide use of open data and in the networking of cultural circles, films archives as well as history archives with the aim to invent and re-invent forms of collaborative memory. Above all here culture is a system of coordination among local actors within a social learning activity.

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### 1. Introduction

In scientific literature, regional growth is one of the most analysed areas, often according to the overused expression “local development”. Given the ambiguity of this expression and the need to define it for each case, the aim of this paper is to compare a combination of immaterial factors, such as culture, social innovation, and governance, with

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the increase in the human and material capital of an area, set within an economically fragile area, such as the one in Matera. In fact, in 2014 the European Union designated Matera the 2019 European Capital of Culture<sup>1</sup>. One of the objectives of this paper, keeping in mind that little time has gone by since this announcement, is to verify whether there has been an increase in cultural activity linked to the pre-existing resources and whether there has been an increase in the number of businesses and services connected to them. In light of this, culture is to be understood as being consistent with the cultural planning approach and, hence, according to a broader meaning than that of culture as merely a work of art, and closer to the anthropological meaning of the word as regards people's way of living (Della Spina e Calabrò, 2013; Cassalia e Ventura, 2015). Secondly, we aim to thoroughly examine to what extent the cultural district model is applicable in the case of Matera, based upon a mix of top-down and bottom-up policies as well as the drivers used in other contexts (Sacco, Blessi, Tavano, Nuccio, 2008). This model has actually identified culture, along with some other specific variables connected to culture, as being a catalyst for physical, economic, and social regeneration. Some of the most significant variables we have taken into consideration are: the quality of the culture offered, of the production of knowledge, of the development of businesses and local talent, while also the attraction of outside talent, the development of individual and group skills, the education of the local community, external and internal networking, and governance quality.

## 2. The Cultural District.

The analysis of industrial districts dates back to the work of Marshall (1920), who, after defining districts as “socio-economic entities made up of clusters of companies belonging to the same production sector and situated in a defined area”, and highlighting that, among them, there was “collaboration, but also competition”, talked about external economies and clustering, or rather urban concentration, to indicate the possibility of accessing a larger market, with social, cultural, and trade institutions outside the company. Beccattini (1987) built upon Marshall's analysis and became an essential point of reference in the scientific literature on districts. Also part of this are concepts relating to “industrial atmosphere”, referring to the exchange of information and the learning of production technology in a defined space, and to the “community market”, connected to containing transaction costs as well as to economies of scale.

The scientific literature on industrial districts subsequently expanded into a vision oriented toward including the spatial concentration of cultural activities, to the extent that the idea of the cultural district acquired its own independent validity. Cultural districts were considered the post-industrial transformation of the classical district, placing greater emphasis on intangible qualities connected to creativity and to the cultural dimension. In many cases, the latter has been linked to the construction of an image that is attractive to tourists and oriented toward increasing tourist flows. The information provided thus far does not take into account social relations in the myriad forms that characterize them within districts. On the other hand, the attention given to the role of “human capital” in regional development is nothing new. In fact, it has long been known that “human capital”, or more generally, those belonging to the more highly educated classes, are a crucial factor in regional development (Jacobs 1984; Glaeser, 2000). From this point of view, Richard Florida has developed a theory explaining how the creative class is a fundamental variable for the economic growth of a city as well as of a region, describing the factors that influence the “geography of creativity”. For Florida (2002), “creative places” do not owe their success to a system of efficient infrastructures or abundant natural resources as much as to the fact that they are inhabited by creative people. The latter, in turn, again according to Florida, are not attracted to urban centers with dislocated attractions, such as stadiums, sports facilities, shopping malls, and highways, as much as by urban centers that are cosmopolitan and open, where they can easily reinforce their own attitudes and strengthen their own identity.

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<sup>1</sup> The European Capital of Culture is an initiative established in 1985 to promote awareness of the historical-artistic heritage of the EU member states. This title is designated in turn to two of the states that are part of the European Union. In 2019, it will be Italy's turn, along with Plovdiv in Bulgaria.

Recently, the idea of the living lab best summarizes the mix of social, environmental, and cultural factors that tend to foster regional growth. The precise definition of this expression, provided by Stahlbrost (2009) and Bevilacqua (2014), is that of public-private partnerships thanks to which companies, researchers, authorities, and citizens work together to create, validate, and verify new services, products and social infrastructures. The living lab is, in fact, a powerful tool for social innovation. The latter, actually meant to be understood as the rearrangement of social relations, develops when faced with the inadequacy of innovation considered from a sectorial perspective, in the fields of technology, politics, and economics. This point of view implies the collective participation and mobilization of cultural and artistic variables, in addition to political and economic variables. In particular, in areas where the economy is weak, lack of opportunity provides the impetus to create new opportunities. In this way, urban areas are potentially decisive areas as regards the networks of relationships that take form within it.

### **3. Matera between the past and the present.**

#### *3.1 The past*

The description of the socio-cultural context of Matera is important, in that it represents “a synthetic interpretation of the places and spatial relationships between them”, and, as such, an interpretation of social and ecological relationships (De Matteis, 1995). Therefore, it is essential to retrace the steps leading to a few of the milestones that have led to Matera’s current arrangement. In the 1950s, the Sassi, the oldest part of Matera, were a series of caves and hovels inhabited by farming families and animals. It was an ancestral world, which Togliatti defined as “a national shame”. By means of a series of special laws, the Sassi were evacuated. However, in 1945, in *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, Carlo Levi had already described the farming world that had settled in the Sassi as an ancestral universe that was “sacred, arcane, and magical”, while at the same time poor, unhealthy, and backward. The men and animals confined together in hovels in humiliating hygiene/sanitary conditions were physically and socially distant from the petite bourgeoisie of local bureaucrats and notable people. By the mid 1960s, the Sassi had been almost completely evacuated, “leaving the feeling that the city’s identity had also been stripped away”, and the problem of how to deal with the future of the Sassi. It is likely that the regeneration process was triggered at this stage in Matera’s history. It was then that people realized that the Sassi, besides being a symbol of farming culture, were a rich, heterogeneous urban cluster: the city’s rocky, rural foundation, with the architectural features of Gothic and Norman civilization as well as Renaissance civilization, up to Baroque civilization and that of Spanish origin.

#### *3.2 The present.*

Matera has been a World Heritage Site since the beginning of the nineties. The decision was made to nominate Matera as a candidate for the 2019 Capital of Culture in 2013. In the dossier presented and approved by the European Union, 52 million euros were allocated for cultural planning and 650 million euros were allocated for infrastructure, transportation, urban regeneration, energy, and the digital agenda. Of the amount designated for cultural planning, as demonstrated by some of the items in the table below, only 3% should come from the European Union whereas the remaining amount should be covered by the Basilicata Region, by the Municipality of Matera, and by the Government. It is evident that many participated in the process of Matera’s candidacy for the European Capital of Culture. A vast network of members of the local community formed: hundreds of cultural and social organizations, political parties and religious congregations, as well as private individuals. Some of the most important hubs that have been connected online are: La Scaletta Cultural Organization, the Oppido Lucano Film Library, and the land reform archives from the 1950s. These hubs have been brought together under the Institute for Demo- Ethno Anthropology (I-DEA), the main project in its candidacy. One of the key ideas of the project, the Open Design School, aims to relaunch the long-standing tradition of the furniture industry, currently undergoing a crisis. To do so, it will be bringing together authors, bloggers, designers, artisans, hackers, students, and academics. Of these, it will draw upon the input of a group of avant-garde designers and European institutions in particular in the field of design and open culture. However, the School for Advanced Training in Restoration will become a centre for research and innovation to support the Ministerial Superintendencies in southern Italy. The instruction offered will be the joint fruit of an agreement between

the University of Basilicata, the University of Bari, and the University of Lecce. The first two have even come up with the idea of creating a PhD in open data. Alongside this, there is the creation of a new university campus hosting up to 2,500 students. This project is meant to regenerate the urban area connecting the city center with Lanera, a neighborhood in the outskirts of Matera. Even the village of La Martella is experiencing an interesting regeneration phase after a period of decay. La Martella was created in the 50s as an experimental district to accommodate the people displaced from The Sassi. Today its artistic vigor has been revived with the completion of the building of a theater, temporary housing for artists and scholars, and a centre for documentation on The Sassi. This project triggered a totally inclusive form of governance, involving all the municipalities in the region, the regional government, the national government, and the European Union. Internal and external networking activities were also particularly dynamic considering the creation of a dense network of projects connected to other cities throughout the Basilicata region, Italy, and Europe. The project for Matera's candidacy is open and many are able to join it at the local and international level through various agreements. For instance, the media in Bulgaria has joined to broadcast joint productions. On the other hand, there are projects that see the community as an active participant and foster its emancipation. In light of this, the Edgeryders conference will take place in Matera, a think tank of citizen experts to come up with suggestions for the Council of Europe regarding European policies for young people. Due to its international nature, in Matera innovation has developed also thanks to its ability to attract outside talent. In particular, in selecting an artistic director a person was chosen who is not only an expression of the local reality, but who has a great deal of experience in the field of architecture (the Chicago Biennial), design (the Istanbul Biennial), and interiors (the Kortrijk Biennial). In addition, for The Tomorrow Project 27 young intellectuals that live periodically in Matera will be selected to describe their local area and work in local schools while living with Matera families, who will be chosen according to an official selection process<sup>2</sup>.

#### **4. Economic performances.**

Strictly from the point of view of material development, over the last year, there has been a slight increase in information and communication services (publishing activities, television and cinema production, software production, and computer services). There has also been a rise in financial, insurance, and real estate services. Moreover, the number of businesses related to tourism has gone up; in particular, the number of those offering artistic, fun, and entertainment activities has increased, accompanied by a leap in the number of more traditional types of cultural activities, such as archives, museums, and churches. Finally, the number of businesses in the tourism sector (tour operators, accommodation, and restaurants) has risen. (Table 3).

More specifically, in 2014 there was a 16.4% increase in arrivals and an 18.5% growth in overnight stays, which, in terms of numbers, translates into 153 tourists and 244 thousand more overnight stays than in 2013. Throughout the Basilicata region, there has been an 8.7% growth in tourism. An analysis of this data shows that the increase in foreign tourists over six years has more than doubled, with most tourists coming from France, the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. However, most of the Italians that choose to visit Basilicata come largely from Puglia, Campania, Lazio, and Lombardy. The development of mobility toward the Basilicata region probably depends on the driving force of the image generated by "Matera 2019 European Capital", from the attention given to it by large media companies in national and international film productions, from the increasing amount of accommodation, and from the strengthening of the beachside resort and rural tourism industry. The positive figures highlighted above have emerged from within a weak economic situation with high youth unemployment as well as a state of crisis in various production sectors, including the once prosperous furniture sector. Between 2007 and 2013 GDP in the Basilicata region dropped 6.1%, also due to a crisis in the mechanical and transport industry, and reported the worst outcome of all the regions in southern Italy<sup>3</sup>. Within this framework, the growth in the highlighted areas in the city of Matera are

<sup>2</sup> The Tomorrow is a media platform for discussions on the future of culture in Europe. Through The Tomorrow people share ideas, perspectives, and reports on the International European scene.

<sup>3</sup> The complete data may be found in the 2014 Svimez Report.

particularly significant in that they demonstrate that the driver of urban regeneration, even through the use of its cultural heritage, as foreseen in the 2014 Svimez Report, is one of the crucial drivers to stimulate growth in southern Italy.

#### 4. Conclusion.

The core feature of this case is not only the concentration of large institutions but also the mobilization of the highest number of people in the area of the production of culture, often through the use of open data. This also involves, for instance, getting cultural organizations, film libraries, and historical archives online in order to invent or reinvent new forms of collaborative memory. This experience has improved the building of individual and group skills and, through the use of material from the archives and, therefore, the education of students and the professionalism of politicians, artists, and entrepreneurs. Essentially, for us the internal and external networking driver can be translated into the re-arrangement of the social relationships capable of triggering a process of innovation. This re-arrangement occurs through the work of people who belong to the same place, yet have never been brought together before, or who belong to different territories but who are able to foster new visions in the production of cultural activities. At the same time, the development of the capacity for knowledge, another driver previously identified as a productive instrument for local growth, emerges by combining prior knowledge re-arranged in such a way as to give rise to new things, which in turn is a harbinger of an increase in individual knowledge.

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