On Preservation:

Reinventing the Cave: Competing Images, Interpretations, and Representations of Matera, Italy

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Matera, Italy, is currently the subject of a municipal tug-of-war over image and significance. Infamy resulting from poor living conditions in its extensive cave dwellings led to the expansion and recasting of the city in the 1950s as a modernist utopia. This was followed by decades during which these areas, known as the Sassi, were allowed to deteriorate. Today, renewed interest in the historic city and an internationally visible preservation program are allowing Matera to pursue a program of tourist redevelopment as a cave city. However, tension is emerging among residents on how and what to preserve, and even whether or not to preserve. The present conflict has taken form according to a rhetoric of tradition versus modernity, but both arguments and results represent modern interpretations of the past influenced by outside perceptions.

The southern Italian region of Basilicata is home to numerous treasures that stand witness to millennia of political and cultural change. Here can be found, for example, Greek temples and theaters, Roman, Norman and Islamic towers and towns, a Jewish diaspora cemetery, and stupendous Byzantine and Romanesque churches. The only site currently singled out for UNESCO World Heritage Monument designation, however, is the historic sectors of the city of Matera: a concentration of thousands of grotto structures called the Sassi (Figs. 1, 2). This recent honor has brought Matera, which had been forgotten by the world for half a century, both national and international fame.

Matera’s old quarters are composed of a breathtaking, Piranesi-esque, vertical labyrinth of part-cave, part-constructed homes carved from the soft tufo limestone of a steep ravine (Fig. 3). These extraordinary dwelling formations, infused with human creativity, are an architect’s paradise. But what is equally compelling, and what is key to

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understanding the culture of Matera both past and present, is
the story of how the Sassi’s millennia of human habitation,
and an accompanying peasant agricultural lifestyle, have
been both “lost” and “found” in the last half century.

The story begins in the 1950s–70s, when the Italian gov-
ernment, citing deplorable living conditions, evacuated the
Sassi and transferred the population to a new city, intended
to provide these people with a more dignified, modern
lifestyle. However, barely ten years after the expropriations
ended, submitting to local and international pressure, the
government reversed this course. It has since allowed the
reinhabitation of the caves, and has even helped by subsidiz-
ing the effort. What is most important about this tale of gov-
enment intervention, however, has been that the lifeways
dismantled in the first move remain irrevocably lost. Thus,
while considering the preservation of the Sassi today, one
must also consider what is not being preserved, and why.

World attention to the Sassi contributes to the fact that,
unlike most towns and villages of Basilicata, Matera’s streets are
lined with elegant clothing stores and sumptuous jewelry
shops, and its various cultural organizations offer nightly musi-
cal concerts and poetry readings and support a thriving artist
community. Matera is also home to numerous Italian dot-com
companies, and many households there own personal comput-
ers — far above the average for the region. Thus, a visitor to
Matera today may be entirely unaware of the poverty and prein-
dustrial lifestyle prevalent in nearby villages. Indeed, in social
and economic terms, Matera belongs less to its region than to a
worldwide network of influential, affluent, artistic cities.

There are many reasons for Matera’s unique position.
The media keep the image of the city circulating in the nation-

![Map of Italy showing Matera’s position.](image1)

![Panorama of the Sassi’s northern-most sector. Visible are the constructed portions of the houses; not visible are the cave extensions piercing the hillside. Light-colored stone indicates recent preservation work. Cranes on the horizon mark new construction in the modern city on the piano, beyond.](image2)
A large number of Materans have sought university education in Bari, Rome, Florence, Milan and Venice, and have brought the cultural authority of these places back with them. Even uneducated laborers who have ventured forth from the city to northern Italian or foreign factories have returned with knowledge of distant, prosperous parts. But, most significantly, the preservation of the Sassi has brought considerable economic benefit and cosmopolitan influence. The national subvention of the preservation effort has injected large quantities of money into the local building industry. The expectation of profits from cultural tourism has inspired entrepreneurs to open restaurants, bars, and hotels (thereby providing new jobs). The promise of work from such capital investment has brought some emigrants home. And, of course, the burgeoning of cultural tourism has introduced to Matera a sophisticated (though transient) population with ties to other parts of the world.

The above effects have energized the economy in general, resulting in the construction of thousands of new housing/office units (not out of housing need — because there has been no real growth in population — but as real estate investment of excess income) (fig. 4). The South of Italy, in general, has also been the recent recipient of other state-financed economic development projects (for example, support for female enterprise), and the savvy Materan population has been adept at taking advantage of these. Matera, in particular, was successful in attracting a major new state-funded hospital, which in turn has brought educated, affluent medical personnel to the city. Such economic, political and social developments have fed upon each other and fueled a new dynamism in the streets of the city. Thus, not only is Matera

Figure 3. View of the Sassi descending from the Civitá (high point with the cathedral and noble palazzi) on the left to the gorge on the right. Doors and shutters on the light-colored, recently preserved structures are painted green as prescribed by the official preservation program. Photograph by author, 2003.
today a member of a club of cities beyond its regional borders, but within its region it now wields considerable influence.

The new outside interest in Matera is not for the generic modern city that it became in the 1950s–70s. A few Italian architecture students may inquire about the exurban agricultural community of La Martella, designed in the 1950s by the famous Roman architect Ludovico Quaroni and his associates. The principal concern of most visitors is the city and culture that were figuratively and literally buried during the modernist era, when the Sassi were shunned and used as a municipal dump (figs. 5, 6). It is also for the recent elegant modification and rehabilitation of Sassi structures to meet contemporary, affluent lifestyles (figs. 7, 8).

Such outside interest is being encouraged by websites, television documentaries, films, and academic, tourist, and UNESCO literature. And to accommodate outside expectations, entrepreneurs and cultural leaders in the city are not only working to preserve its built past (though largely renovated for contemporary uses), but to resuscitate some cultural practices (for example, the hand-production of stone and clay building elements). Inevitably, such efforts have led to disagreements among residents on how to preserve the culture, what to preserve, and even whether to preserve. Many feel that dredging up the past is painful and simply a foolhardy and extravagant trend. They regret the decision taken by the government to preserve the Sassi. Some staunch preservationists also oppose a majority of the work accomplished there, due to its fashionableness and lack of academic rigor.

While, on the surface, this tension appears to be one of tradition versus modernity, it might more accurately be described as involving different perceptions of this dichotomy. No one in Matera is advocating the return to a premodern lifestyle or livelihood. In fact, due to the intensity of the shame the community was made to feel fifty years ago, few, if any, residents will admit their families’ roots in the Sassi. The conflict is instead over the presentation of the city’s past: whether or not to look back (and what this would mean for the future); which stories to tell; and what image to give.

The magnetism developing in Matera today is also shifting the cultural focus of Basilicata away from the capital city of Potenza and the tourist center of Metaponto. From practically zero tourists ten years ago, Matera now receives 200,000 visitors per year. This surge has led surrounding towns to develop their own tourist attractions, history muse-
ums, craft shops, and accommodations. Instead of reasserting the historical identities of town and region, however, the results of these commercial efforts are the development of new traditions and hybrid cultures that incorporate globally reproduced and transmitted values.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In theoretical terms, this article aims to contribute to the erosion of the dichotomy of tradition and modernity by complicating this reductive opposition. In doing so, it will invoke several complementary definitions of tradition. Among these is the view that modernity is negatively defined by tradition, and therefore that tradition is a product of modernity. Another is the view that the meanings attributed to tradition are constantly produced according to the contexts perceived. Third is that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past; that it is a dynamic, volitional, temporal, and continuous process situated in the present; and that it is a process of cultural construction. And fourth is that change is integral to tradition, which is open and not fixed. Using these definitions, in this article I consider tradition within the context of Matera to be a contemporary construction of selective elements of the perceived past of the city and its culture.

I adhere to Marshall Berman’s definition of modernity as “the unity of disunity,” reiterated by David Harvey as ungroundedness. That said, I am dubious of Berman’s and Harvey’s view that the idea of modernity contains inherent contradictions (i.e., that it seeks both change [progressiveness] and nonchange [immutability]). I question this binary, as I do the oppositional relationship of tradition and modernity, which I see, instead, in filial relation to each other.

I find that Jacques Lacan’s linguistic concept of eximité provides a theoretical platform that resolves the difficulties located in both questionable pairs. In this article, therefore, I refer to modernity as the perceived antithesis of tradition. For example, if tradition is equated with authenticity and nostalgia, then modernity may be thought to be novel and progressive. In fact, I believe, and will try to show, that they are complementary, i.e., that they are accomplices of change.

HISTORY OF THE SITE

From the city’s organization around 900 AD until the mid-twentieth century, the citizens of Matera included peasants and aristocrats (both clerical and secular). All lived in the Sassi or on the projecting spit of land that bifurcated it (called the Cività), where the cathedral, castle, and leading aristocrats’ homes were built. At this time the Sassi itself contained both tiny peasant cave homes and opulent palazzi. Beginning in the seventeenth century, however, wealthy Materans moved to the flat plain above the ravine, the piano; and so began a
process of hierarchical ordering of space by class. This separation continued over the following centuries, and resulted in the emergence of two antithetical worlds, the Sassi and the piano, which did not meet physically or interact socially. Dominating physically and economically, the elite became like spectators at the theater, watching from their windows and balconies as the peasants acted out their lives in the Sassi below. Due to geographic constraints (i.e., the edge of the steep ravine below and the elite construction above), the area of the Sassi could not expand; therefore, as the peasant population grew, overcrowding increased, and living conditions worsened. By the time the famous writer, artist, physician, and political exile Carlo Levi and his physician sister visited Matera in the 1930s, the living conditions had become deplorable, as described in his book Christ Stopped at Eboli. Yet, despite the horror and shock expressed in these pages, Matera’s poverty, ill-health, and preindustrial lifestyle were less extreme than in many other southern Italian towns and villages. What made Matera’s misery and squalor more visible were its compression into the dense Sassi environment, the city’s relatively large size, its political importance as a provincial capital, and the contrasting opulence of its elite architecture. In fact, the city acquired the title “la capitale della civiltà contadina” (“the capital of peasant civilization”) due to its sizable populace. Yet, apart from its extensive cave architecture, Matera could culturally and economically have been considered a typical southern Italian town in the first part of the twentieth century.

Since Carlo Levi was celebrated in both political and literary circles, his book was widely and quickly distributed upon publication following World War II. And due in large part to his negative portrayal of Matera, the town soon came to be labeled “vergogna nazionale” — which literally translates as “national shame,” but which the anglophone press reproduced as “the shame of Italy.” During his years in power, Benito Mussolini had attempted to improve the Sassi through the addition of a modern road and an aqueduct to replace the ancient system of collecting water in cisterns. But in national elections after the war, the Communist Party attempted to take full advantage of Matera’s calumny of shame and premodernity. A growing anxiety was also present in these elections over the Questione Meridionale — that is, the Southern Question — a discourse of economic imbalance between northern and southern Italy and the resultant strain in social and political relationships between the two regions. Following the descriptions in Levi’s book, Matera became known as the “symbol of peasant misery,” the very emblem of the Southern Question. Thus, even though the Communists lost the election, the winning Christian Democrats were forced to address living conditions there, and Matera became a case study for the solution to the Southern Question.

After the elections, the Italian government passed legislation (Legge 619 of 1952), providing funds for the “refurbishment” of the Sassi. A study at the time had concluded that fewer than one-third of the Sassi were uninhabitable, and the Materan elite strongly argued for the rehabilitation and continued use of the two-thirds of the Sassi that were sound. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi turned the already high-profile project into a national design project, and tied the building program to the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe. His solution to the Matera problem became the translocation of the entire Sassi population into new, subsidized, government rental housing.

Harnessing a land-reform program already in motion, this project eventually employed famous Italian architects to design new, modern rural villages and a new, modern city for the 16,000 (eventually 20,000) people who were to be evicted from and dispossessed of their ancient, vernacular homes (Figs. 9, 10). Using sociological studies and contemporary urban planning theory, these architects produced modernist, utopian translations of the local culture. Their new rural complexes attempted to bring the Sassi peasants closer to their fields to reduce transit time (which usually ranged from four to six hours per day by foot). As part of this effort, the government promised that a house, garden plot, stable, mule, and irrigated, arable land would be given to each former Sassi family. But, as often happens with such nationally funded projects in Italy, the fields and irrigation ditches never materialized, and the rural villages failed.

As new housing was completed, the evacuation of the Sassi took place from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. Sassi residents and ex-residents themselves were employed to carry out much of the housing construction. Meanwhile, the consolidation of fields (as opposed to their distribution) and the modernization of agricultural methods forced peasant farmers off the land. With the availability of construction work, as well as the emigration of those unable to find new work, the dwindling city population was stripped of its long-established peasant lifestyle and economy, self-sufficiency, groundedness, and self-identity. Many Materans were thrust completely and irreversibly into being an apartment-dwelling, wage-earning, welfare-society dependent upon the government for work, money, housing, and even self-identity.

The transformation also meant that during the 1960s–80s the Sassi experienced much deterioration. Shunned by the new city, the old quarters were even used as a municipal dump. By literally and figuratively turning its back on the Sassi, the new building effort mimicked the pattern established in the seventeenth century when the elite rose to the piano level. And as they emptied, the Sassi became ghettoized as a place of crime to be avoided by upstanding Materans.

Predating the expropriations, however, and continuing through the early 1970s, academic discourse and government lobbying by local intellectuals demanded both continued residence of the Sassi and recognition of their artistic and historic value. Thus, as early as 1954 Mauro Padula had written: “In the enactment of the law for the refurbishment of the Sassi, a serious study needs to be carried out on these
interesting beehives which are not a museum by way of being a vital part of a city but which merit being jealously cared for like a gigantic work of art.” Such persistent entreaties, spurred by several structural collapses within the Sassi in 1965, finally led to passage of new legislation in 1967. Legge 126 defined the Sassi as “a zone of historical, archaeological, artistic, scenic, and ethnographic interest.” And although not tied to new funding, it did officially transform a stigma of shame into a title of monumentality.

Following the new law, the intellectual community hosted an international conference entitled “The Sassi of Matera are our National Heritage to be Conserved and Protected.” Participating in this conference in 1967, Carlo Levi described the Sassi as equivalent to the Grand Canal of Venice. Acknowledging the public’s doubt in this matter, he also foreshadowed the UNESCO title by twenty-six years: “it is a question of truly defending and protecting a value which I don’t know if everyone realizes is an immense value of unique urban and architectural history not only of peasant civilization but of world civilization.”

Despite officially recognizing the value of the Sassi, however, through the mid-1970s the government continued moving families out and encouraging the renunciation of the area. But the intellectual community’s petitions also persisted. In 1968 Prof. Nicola Strammiello wrote:

It must be clarified that the Sassi in themselves do not constitute national shame; what is shameful is that men live — as they do in the Sassi — in unsanitary and unhygienic conditions and that they do not enjoy the comforts that our civilization has to offer. . . . We need to rescue the

Sassi by creating within them a modern life in keeping with the needs of human life. In doing this the Sassi would cease to be the shame of Italy and would become the pride of Italian culture and civilization.”

In 1974 the architectural community again entered the debate with a much-publicized international design competition to discuss the Sassi’s fate. The question then was much the same as it is today: leave the area as an open-air museum, or restore it for contemporary use? At that time 640 families still lived in the Sassi (not yet transferred to new housing). The conventioneers were divided on whether they should be evicted like their neighbors, or allowed to remain. The rationale for their remaining was that the Sassi should not be allowed to further degrade, becoming “a useless monument, a dead city, a Pompeii.” Politicians, on the other hand, continued to cast doubt, expressing the view that all the technology in the world would not make the Sassi livable.

It was not until 1986 that the preservationists ultimately prevailed in this fight, when Legge 771 officially reversed the earlier forced Sassi abandonment policy. It also provided funds for Sassi rehabilitation, gave custody of the Sassi to the city of Matera for ninety-nine years, and established a regulatory power, the Ufficio Sassi. This office immediately set about designing a preservation program and preparing the infrastructure to allow it to go forward. But at first the only individuals who responded to the opportunities were a few aesthetes (mostly architects), who restored Sassi homes for themselves.

Finally, in December 1993, UNESCO placed the Sassi on the World Heritage List. Two reasons were cited: the Sassi had been a place of continuous human habitation for at least
350,000 years (averaging the established date range); and it illustrated a harmonious relationship between human culture and natural environment over a series of stages in human history. The expression of interest in the Sassi from the international community validated the history of the Sassi for many Materans. It also sparked a land and subsidy grab. The potential for tourism development represented by the neon letters of UNESCO inspired much of this activity. Today, about 50 percent of the ancient structures have been restored, while most of the rest have been claimed. And the expectation is that within the next five to seven years the Sassi will be completely rehabilitated and occupied. However, the vulnerability of the soft tufa stone will require constant maintenance, consolidation, and replacement.

In the forty-year battle between the intellectual elite and the national government over the fate of the Sassi, the government won more skirmishes. However, Legge 771 and the UNESCO nomination brought final victory to the intellectual community. Even the national government now proclaims the incalculable value of the Sassi and provides generously for their rehabilitation.

IMPOSITION OF MODERNITY (PROGRESS) OVER TRADITION (THE PAST)

To understand the cultural circumstances behind the Sassi evacuation, one must view it in a fuller historical context. Italy in 1950 had been humiliated by its role in World War II. And it had been stigmatized for grinding poverty, disease, and primitive living conditions. Many areas had no electricity, gas, water or sewerage, and overcrowded living spaces were sometimes shared with mules, pigs and chickens. Illiteracy was also prevalent in the peasant South. These were hardly conditions acceptable to a country that aspired to be as modern and First World as its Western peers. Therefore, the Italian government could not simply accept the refurbishment of the Sassi. To do so would be to admit that Italians still lived in caves. No, the cave image was a blemish on the Italian national image, and needed to be extinguished.

At the time the concept of urban renewal was also young and vigorous in the United States and other Western nations. A common reformist antidote to squalor was to label old neighborhoods “urban blight,” raze them, and build new highrises in their places for the displaced population. In Matera the Italian government essentially carried out this formula on a huge scale. However, due to the impracticality of building over the steep, crumbling stone bank of the Sassi’s ravine, a new city was built on the piano level as an extension of the aristocratic and bureaucratic sector of town (fig. 11). At the same time the Sassi were abandoned to deterioration, and Materans were encouraged to bury their former homes under countless layers of refuse (fig. 12). This move horizontally redefined the city’s spatial social hierarchy of rich and poor on the piano level (the rich in the center of town, and the poor on the outskirts), a pattern that was less performative than the previous vertical, social segregation. In other words, it symbolically reunited the two classes, leaving their shared history to sink back into the hillside.

Anne Buttimer has described the mentality of the time and the use of social science as rationale for such violent acts of “renewal”:

**Figure 11.** Bird’s-eye view of Matera, ca. 1970. The ancient Sassi sectors are outlined in white. The modern city (postwar urban neighborhoods and administrative buildings) fans away from the Sassi onto the piano. The gorge fills the base of the drawing. Adapted by Patrick McMillan from a drawing courtesy of Enzo Viti.
Science and rationality had triumphed over other all-competing alternatives. That countries and places should be planned within a wider socio-spatial horizon was taken for granted. World depression and war justified managerial convictions that people and their home places should no longer be trusted to carry on in the traditional way. An old stoic idea that rational order should be imposed on nature and society became an apparently workable dream because of developments in science and technology.

When social scientists got involved as consultants either to redevelopment plans or to their evaluation, they usually brought along the older models of place identity which had been tried and tested in the twenties and thirties. Myths of “community” and “territoriality” had enjoyed a long popularity. It appeared ideologically desirable for many political authorities to sponsor such people-oriented research.²¹

As described here, the design for the new Matera also heavily (or at least apparently) depended upon social science research conducted on the Sassi. But the goal was contradictory: to replace static, old, harmful, irrational ways of living with new, salubrious, rational, modern ways which in some (nominal) way would also incorporate the essential regionalisms (i.e., the old ways) of the group.

The main socio-physical element of the Sassi studied by sociologists and incorporated into the new plans was the vicinato (fig. 13).²² These semipublic courtyards were the principle social and physical organizing elements within the Sassi. Onto each opened groups of houses belonging to extended families and kin-like neighbors. Not only did vicinati function as exterior living spaces for the inhabitants of dark, humid caves, but they were also the location of communal work, communal water, communal assistance, and all communication. Individual vicinati were in turn linked to form a system throughout the Sassi by a complex network of stairways and footpaths.

Transferred to the new housing, this feature completely failed. To begin with, the scale was totally wrong. The new vicinati were large and meant to serve many times the number of families served by the old system (fig. 14). Second, extended family groups had been disbanded by the translocation, breaking relationships that were not easily reformed.

![Figure 12](image1.png)

**Figure 12.** This recent photograph of a vicinato, taken from above, shows the continued use of the Sassi as a dump by many Materans. The fact that preservation work crews often discard their construction debris in neighboring, unoccupied spaces shows the persistent lack of respect of this heritage. Photograph by author, 2003.

![Figure 13](image2.png)

**Figure 13.** Taken in 1949, this image shows a typical vicinato in use as an outdoor communal living and work space. Serving two levels of houses, it accommodates its occupants’ varied activities: domestic chores (e.g., laundering clothes), wood storage, agricultural-tool storage, rainwater collection, social intercourse, and play. Photograph courtesy of Enzo Viti.

![Figure 14](image3.png)

**Figure 14.** Pictured here is the translation of the vicinato into a post-war housing complex. Increased in scale and meant to serve many more families, the space is nondefensible and has become a no-man’s land. Photograph by author, 2003.
Third, in the new regime, state-dependency replaced self-dependency, and thus one of the key purposes of the vicinati was eliminated. The only function left for the new vicinati was that of communication. But lacking a system of linkage among them, not even this could be achieved. Could social scientists in the 1950s have erred this badly? Or was the design error intentional and politically and socially subversive — a desire by the government to feign concern for local culture, while in fact controlling and reshaping people by breaking their old system of strength and solidarity? Robert Mugerauer has asserted:

Given Western culture’s sustained interest in the formal and aesthetic aspects of modernity, it is easy to forget or ignore today that subversive social agendas once drove much modern planning and design. Architects, planners, and designers of all sorts developed the clean forms and materials of modernity not only in response to the new industrial and social world around them, but as an explicit rejection of what they took to be atrophied traditional symbols and social systems.

To comprehend the extent of its social agenda, one need only remember what a sweeping change it was to propose that architects should design housing for ordinary and working-class people — and that even beyond housing, they should take responsibility for designing workplaces, social-service spaces, and even entire cities.

[The process of global domination was guided by a “social evolutionist teleology.” . . . “Modernity is associated with rationality, empiricism, efficiency, and change; tradition connotes fatalism, veneration for custom and the sacred, indiscipline, and stagnation.”]

Regardless of government intentions, it is interesting to note that the researchers valued the vicinati’s social element of “human communication” over their architectural character. Indeed, these scholars and designers hardly commented on the Sassi architecture — whose intricate forms were carefully woven out of the natural stone, whose virtuoso vaulting cannot be duplicated today, and whose spatial complexity defy understanding. Instead, they espoused the environmental determinism of their time: a belief in the power of architecture to teach and improve — as well as corrupt. Thus, they held the Sassi responsible for people’s social and economic debasement, and proposed modern urbanism as a remedy. Planners and architects would show these peasants a “correct” and “civilized” lifestyle (to use their terminology).

In this act of violence, the government of Rome essentially colonized Matera. In addition to saving face among peer nations, its paternalistic purpose was to transform a self-governing, self-sufficient peasant society into Italian citizens dependent on the political and economic systems of the modern state. Thus, under the guise of social reform, the government intended to create national citizens through city planning.

Until this time, the peasants of southern Italy had considered themselves a world apart from the Italian nation — a perspective described by Levi. They believed they belonged to a different race with a different religion, different dress, different languages, and different lifestyles. For these peasants, the laws, taxes and wars of the Italian nation were incomprehensible obstacles to such an independent culture. They were the means by which “the fellows in Rome” enforced their subjugation. Not until Rome had enticed these people to leave their homes, fields, livelihoods and customs was the government able to conquer their minds and transform their beliefs and allegiances, values and ideology.

The tactic used in this indoctrination was vocally and physically expressed humiliation and shame for their past: both their former culture and its physical setting. The result was the forced forgetting of their peasant culture and “inferior” past, and the adoption of the glorious culture and history of the fledgling nation. This policy was physically reinforced by the convenient fact that the Sassi are completely invisible from the piano level, separated from the new city by a wall of elite palazzi. According to Paul Connerton:

The attempt to break definitively with an older social order encounters a kind of historical deposit and threatens to founder upon it. The more total the aspirations of the new regime, the more imperiously will it seek to introduce an era of forced forgetting.

In a recent ethnographic study of former Sassi residents, Patrizia Zuccari admitted surprise in finding them proud of and happy in their present, homogenized, standardized homes and reluctant or unwilling to discuss their lives in the Sassi. Only with embarrassment did they describe their former sacrifices, poverty, filth and degradation. Some older people outright refused to recollect, declaring an era of memory and incomprehension at the new attention heaped on the Sassi. The one aspect of Sassi life over which these people did express nostalgia and loss was the vicinato, which they described as “a place of solidarity, fraternity, and relations,” lost forever in the individualistic modern world.

Prof. Giovanni Caserta has articulated the feelings of many ex-Sassi residents. “We are not nostalgic for the water [collection system] nor the filtration system, which at the time of our childhood, brought a trickle of water into the spaces where our beds (or rather our pallets) were placed.” He has also criticized the rehabilitation and re inhabitation effort, writing: “. . . to think of the recuperation and inhabitation of the
According to David Lowenthal: “By shunning the Sassi, the former residents rationalize their abandonment of family memories. In this regard, John Gillis has written: In fact, this is already happening today to a certain extent. One young architect admitted to me that his grandparents (and, by extension, his parents) had been moved out of the Sassi. Reluctant to acknowledge his personal connection to the Sassi due to his family’s recent social and educational rise, he is, however, a Sassi-phile. While the parents and grandparents of many present-day Materans experienced the actual trauma of displacement, feelings of loss and a sense of dislocation are now beginning to surface with later generations. Such hints of nostalgia among Materan youth are facilitated by distance — be it in space or in time. They do not result from the “failure of our collective cultural confidence in the modernizing impulse.” Nor do they result from our declining collective spirit and the privatization of our lives. But the issue remains: would these youth have developed an interest in the Sassi had UNESCO and the international community not done so first? And have there not been economic incentives to do so? I would venture to guess “no.” Or at least the interest would not have developed as soon as it has. This confrontation with a forgotten past has been accelerated by others who have foisted significance and celebrity onto their recently forsaken homes.

My interpretation above of the former residents’ perspective as monolithic and lacking agency comes from numerous interviews in which the same themes have been iterated. My initial skepticism about this consistency led me down two avenues of research. First, I tried to understand the workings of collective memory. This led me to believe that even though the former Sassi residents’ experiences were not singular,
their recited memories have coalesced into a single, collective narrative.\textsuperscript{41} Second, I sought responses outside this norm. Thus, for example, after replying to my questions with the usual memory narratives, some respondents have answered further questioning with positive recollections of Sassi life, remembering also their considerable resistance to pressures to move and their regret at having done so.

I also located a nonvocal group of current Sassi residents who never left their ancestral homes or who have recently moved back to the Sassi.\textsuperscript{42} Generally reluctant to speak with me, and communicating partially in Materano, these people provided alternative, positive perspectives about life in the Sassi to those usually expressed. That said, they do not understand and do not support the preservation effort. They would be happy to receive the government’s subventions for work on their houses. But they reject the prescriptions that accompany this money — for example, the requirement that they replace their very practical aluminum-framed windows with what they describe as absurdly impractical, wooden frames, which need constant maintenance, yet are defined as “historically accurate.” They also resent the presence of tourists (like me) who peer at them and violate their privacy, and therefore do not support any cause that will bring more tourists.

\textbf{IMPOSITION OF TRADITION (PRESERVATION) OVER MODERNITY (MODERNISM)}

Forced to recognize the historical value of Sassi architecture (if not that of the lived culture), the government now supports its preservation. But the preservation of both tangible and intangible culture has been met with mixed sentiments by different sectors of the Materano population. Most people involved in the preservation effort do not belong to the evicted populace. Rather, they are members of the intellectual or financial elite who appreciate the Sassi for their artistic integrity, entrepreneurial potential, or fashionable appeal.\textsuperscript{43} Even among this sector, however, the effort did not gain widespread community support until after UNESCO’s 1993 designation of the Sassi as a World Heritage Monument. Still, the preservation effort continues to have many detractors (especially among the expropriated), although these people are becoming less numerous or less vocal as the financial benefits of preservation begin to reach the city at large, and as media exposure brings admiring tourists. They criticize the people moving into the Sassi as being “trendy,” and as pretending to live in the past while knowing nothing of it. “It won’t be long before they see their folly,” is a phrase I have heard many times. Such detractors remain proud of their modern lifestyles, and they resent the imposition of tradition — whether in their own lives or in those of other Materans.

The more mercenary, however, see the current trend as a financial opportunity. And many of these people, old and young, are participating in the rebirth of building crafts. Every year, additional artisan workshops open in the Sassi. The materials worked are the local stone, clay, and to a lesser degree wood and iron. Masons have relearned stone construction methods, including the erection of vaults (Fig. 15). Formerly practiced regional crafts outside the building industry (for example, ceramic repair, saddlery, and weaving), however, are not being revived. In other words, the extent of this renaissance is limited by modern needs (including tourist art). Likewise, following forty years of decline, the demand for quarried stone has dramatically increased in the past decade. The methods used in active quarries today, however, differ considerably from those used in both the recent and the preindustrial past — the only constant being the material itself.

Similar to the rebirth of artisanal crafts and the Materano language is rekindled interest in the regional cuisine, cucina lucana. Although many traditional dishes (for example, oven-cured olives, artichokes under oil, and limoncello) have never been culturally lost, many others have. The opening of new restaurants offering this cuisine has sparked a veritable craze for such forgotten dishes as fried dried red peppers, mashed fava beans, fried chicory, and sweet ricotta ravioli with savory tomato sauce. With the tourist market young, and consequently small, the major clientele for these restaurants is affluent local residents. Their enthusiasm for cucina lucana is even bringing its reproduction into the home, and regional cookbooks as well as anthropological studies of local food preparation are appearing in bookstores for the first time.

Another form of this retrospection is taking place in the image of the city. Appearing all over the city — from its official letterhead to the sides of new police cars (and, of course, written in all tourist literature) — is the slogan: “Matera, Città dei Sassi” (“Matera: the Sassi City”). During my last five years of observation, I have seen this slogan become

\textbf{FIGURE 15.} Using the traditional method of wooden centering, a mason rebuilds a collapsed barrel vault in the Sassi. Photograph by author, 2003.
more and more prevalent." I asked the Chamber of Commerce if it represented an organized campaign. They professed not to have noticed the transformation; however, upon having it pointed out, they fully acknowledged its growing presence. As its claim to fame, Matera has replaced the modern architecture of such notables as Quaroni with the historic Sassi sector, and this fame is growing through the diffusion of media and through association with UNESCO.

The government-led evacuation of ancient, vernacular Matera, the site’s dissociation from recent socioeconomic ties (the stones having been cleansed of the poverty they once sheltered and left only to tell the story of virtuoso masons), and its current repopulation recall Timothy Mitchell’s discussion of the Egyptian government’s attempts to displace the village of Gurna.

The Gurnavis were to be portrayed as ignorant, uncivilized, and incapable of preserving their own architectural heritage. Only by constructing them in this way would the architect have an opportunity to intervene, presenting himself as the rediscoverer of a local heritage that the locals themselves no longer recognized or understood. As the spokesman bringing this heritage into national politics, the architect would enable the past to speak and play its role in giving the modern nation its character. Thus, the people of Gurna could only enter into national politics by submitting to an act of violence. And to preserve their heritage, the architect had to first destroy it. . . . The preservation of the past required its destruction so that the past could be rebuilt. Likewise, performing the nation required that every one of its rural inhabitants be declared outside the nation, uncivilized and unhygienic, so that in rendering them civilized and clean, the nation could be made."

This story of paternalism, villainization, expropriation, gentrification, and nationalism resonates strongly with the situation in Matera. Yet, while the cases of Gurna and Matera overlap somewhat, their timing is displaced: the case of Gurna is integrated, while that of Matera has two distinct episodes. I do believe that the Italian (like the Egyptian) government’s intentions in removing the Sassi population were subversive, as suggested above; however, I do not believe that these 1950s actions forecast the current processes of preservation and reuse by a different social group.

That said, there exist serendipitous parallels between the two Materan stories. For example, in the 1950s story, the Sassi and its residents were “othered” as premodern and non-Italian — the intent being to assimilate the peasants. Now, the Sassi (without the residents) are being “othered” again, but this time as premodern and exotic (temporally) — the intent being to commercialize the location and previously associated culture. In this scenario, the Southern Question is transformed from an economic problem to an economic motor and a source of spectacle.

**PERCEPTIONS AND PROJECTIONS OF IDENTITY**

Materans are quick to blame weak political power for their historical poverty and physical remoteness. Despite fifty years of promises and plans, and despite the city’s prominence as a provincial capital and regional co-capital, to this day Matera is not connected to the state railroad system, and no major roads lead to it. The nearest airport is in Bari, in the neighboring region of Apulia, and the only way to reach it is by private automobile via indirect and poorly indicated roads.

Notwithstanding this geographic isolation, various media allow the city to communicate with the outside world, and, in fact, place it in a realm apart from its neighbors. Besides the press, the international film industry has exploited the Sassi as a biblical film set. Scenes from the recently released, controversial Mel Gibson film *The Passion of The Christ* were filmed there. So were scenes from the 1985 production of *King David*. And since UNESCO recognition of the site, countless television documentaries on the city have been aired in Italy.

The intellectual community and a majority of preservation professionals downplay the significance of World Monument designation. They assert that their efforts had previously established the site as a national monument, initiated the preservation program, and instigated the development of cultural tourism to Matera. But, despite these proclamations, the impact of UNESCO has been undeniable. Most importantly, UNESCO’s imprimatur has greatly increased the value of the Sassi in the eyes of local Materans. Clearly, endorsement by an external, objective, and well-respected entity has had greater influence than decades of support by the local elite or official recognition by the national government. It has also placed Matera on the international map of cultural tourism. While the result of this placement has tremendously increased tourist traffic, its larger effect has been to excite entrepreneurial activity among Materans.

As with the slogan “Città dei Sassi,” the image of the Sassi is collectively being developed and disseminated as the identity of both the city and the region of Basilicata, despite numerous other cultural treasures. This representation is generating expectations among cultural tourists that emphasize a marginalized and mostly forgotten historical community. In order to meet the outside expectations (and to accommodate the tourists’ money), entrepreneurial Materans are actively creating a new, old Matera and establishing its identity through the renewal, reinterpretation, and commodification of lost traditions.

Such processes of identity and tourism development are ultimately causing a rewriting of the city’s history (based on selective recollection and myth) and a physical transformation of its fabric. Matera is presented as “the capital of peasant civilization.” Except for the frescoed Byzantine chiese rupestri (cave churches), which are given some attention, little mention is made of the city’s past ecclesiastical glories (witnessed...
by its several hundred Byzantine, Romanesque, and Baroque chapels, churches, and monasteries). The same follows for its aristocratic history (witnessed by the numerous medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque palaces and castles). The peasant image is also informing decisions made on the refurbishment and reuse of areas of the Sassi meant for the tourist public. For example, most restaurants in the Sassi have peasant-themed décor, and selections of materials and structural systems are being based largely on peasant crafts — although many refurbishers are introducing modern materials and methods considered to be incompatible with traditional ones.

Application of this peasant theme is limited by contemporary aesthetic sensibilities, however. Thus, all structures that are considered ungainly, or that are arbitrarily and subjectively described as “unoriginal to the Sassi” (an undefinable term), are being destroyed. Meanwhile, in many homes being renovated for private use traces of peasant lifestyle (e.g., brick or tile floors) are being unceremoniously replaced with high-style alternatives (e.g., marble floors) (Fig. 16).

The peasant theme is also limited in anthropological scope. For example, little reference is made to fields, crops, or any extramural activities that would have filled peasant life. Only domestic life is presented — and even then only when scrubbed clean of witchcraft, folk beliefs, and other questionable values. Thus, most tourist, economic or other material being produced about either Matera or Basilicata (including that to be found on a proliferation of websites) presents the same sanitized image of the city. This essentialized version of the city’s history emphasizes its peasant identity and the World Heritage Monument recognition, and is usually accompanied by the UNESCO logo.

The impression of the Sassi that remains (as devoid of life as the Sassi themselves were prior to preservation) is simply one of craft and ingenuity — for example, much is made of the Sassi’s extensive former water collection and condensation systems. Such a reduction of historical complexity to a few powerful images allows the past to serve the present as myth.46 These enshrined images provide essentialized meanings for the community — though what these meanings are is not always apparent. As Nandini Rao has stated, when the selective and symbolic reconstruction of history gives rise to myth, “[i]t lends sanctity and rightness to a course of action. Thus, creating a myth in the image of the present legitimizes and sanctifies actions undertaken in the present.”47

Such a hybrid of truth and myth establishes community identity, necessary in the face of incoming tourists. It also appeals to tourists seeking an exotic, “other” world within Europe — but who do not wish to experience the full measure of preindustrial conditions. Since Materans have adopted only images from their past, and have not reverted to lost lifestyles, livelihoods and customs (except in the way of building crafts and a few culinary specialties), Matera offers the impression of this preindustrial world, without the discomfort. Ironically, the world depicted (or alluded to) — that of mule-drawn plows, traditional garb, and local dialects incomprehensible to outsiders — does currently exist in the South, and not far from Matera. But these communities do not seek tourists, nor do tourists seek them. The real “other” of the South that has not been forced to modernize (as has Matera) provides no tourist amenities, hotels or restaurants. Tourists come to Matera only to find preserved images of that world, safely out of reach of the present.48 They are attracted to the dwellings that used to belong to that netherworld, now rehabilitated, modernized, and made romantically elegant. Their perception of tradition is based purely on image, not on reality.

In addition to creating the illusion of preindustrial culture for nostalgic tourists, local entrepreneurs are providing local residents with new activities within the setting of the Sassi, a sort of old, new Matera. Through the establishment of social clubs in the Sassi, bar owners are drawing the evening passeggiata from the piano level into the Sassi. This is the local custom of walking along a city’s main street (the corso) and casually socializing with acquaintances. Many hundreds of young professionals who five years ago would never have entered the Sassi, especially at night, now fill these bars and flow into the surrounding Sassi passageways.

FIGURE 16. In a cave room that probably served previous occupants as a stable, the new owner of this private Sassi home has installed an elegant marble and tile sunken bath. Photograph by author, 2003.
While good for the image of the city among Materans, this development has brought Sassi residents to arms over the noise pollution.

Another cultural novelty is the addition of decorative hand-sculpted tufo architectural elements to “restored” houses. The most prevalent of these are floral vent covers and doorbell plates (modern additions themselves). Although there are few precedents for them, their artistry seems to appeal to builders and their clients to complement the historic environment. Similarly lacking for historical precedent, the Ufficio Sassi recently decreed that all doors and shutters in the Sassi should be green (or at the limit, brown). The unfortunate result is that still-functioning doors and shutters that belong to the historic fabric (though admittedly somewhat shabby looking) are now being replaced with spiffy new green ones. Many of the (multicolored) old doors that have been replaced had slots cut in the bottoms to allow cats to come and go unattended (fig. 17). Though not domestic animals, cats were once welcomed to Sassi homes as a means of rodent control. Sadly, the new doors do not maintain this feature.

To place these few examples in perspective, one needs to step back and take a larger view. Imagine ancient cave homes that were only a few decades ago filled with squalid, poverty-stricken, overcrowded misery in which one can now find posh social clubs, discos, nearly sculpted decor, new matching doors and shutters, and four-star luxury hotels with elevators, private bathrooms, climate controls, DSL, Internet, and high-tech entertainment systems. The choice of tradition versus modernity is not being made or being disputed: modernity has won, hands down.

What is being hotly disputed among Materans today is the perception of tradition versus modernity. What shades of green will give the appearance of traditionality? What is the allowable size of a satellite dish? Should automobile traffic and discotheque music be limited? Should the Captain Morgan Pub, a bar in the Sassi, be allowed to have a pirate-ship theme on the inside, or is this inappropriate? Many Materans claim that the Sassi should bear only “traditional” (that is to say, “peasant”) themes. Do they fear that the pirate-ship theme undermines the integrity of the mythic peasant identity, and that tourists will not buy the authenticity of the peasant identity if they see it as one of several themes — apart from the peasant transformation into high-style elegance, like the metamorphosis of caterpillar to butterfly? It simply does not jive with the image that most other Materans are busy portraying of themselves.

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CITY AND REGION**

Despite the fact that the main campus of the University of Basilicata is located in Potenza, which is also the first seat of government for the region, this city seems provincial next to glorious Matera. Not only does Matera benefit from the agricultural produce of the rich soils around it (unlike Potenza and most of the rest of the region, which are dominated by forest and mountains), but it has also experienced an industrial boom in the past five years, and it is targeted for major expansion of cultural tourism. In addition, Matera has become a magnet for artists and musicians (it is home of the prestigious Duni Conservatory), and it is now known throughout Italy as one of the città dei arti (art cities), along with Urbino, Florence, Sienna, and Venice, to name a few. Recognition by UNESCO has, of course, bolstered its cultural clout. Economic power, artistic prowess, and extraregional repute all contribute to a general dynamism developing in Matera — and, in turn, this dynamism is redefining the entire region of Basilicata, despite its lack of political strength. Thus, the South’s first amusement park is being constructed nearby; history and art museums and galleries are being opened in Matera and surrounding towns; state-sponsored restoration work is being carried out on a variety of other monuments; and tourist infrastructure and interpretive materials are being produced throughout the province in preparation for increased demand. Although flavored with regional accents, these services are new and are not part of the heritage and history of Basilicata. The fact of their presence (for example, the restaurants specializing in and redeveloping cucina lucana, or the hotels located in monumentalized peasant hovels) illustrates their novelty and modernity. Like the city itself, they are hybrids of traditional and modern concepts.

Due largely to forced abandonment, Matera’s distinctive customs have been diffused over the past fifty years by generic modern culture. Unlike the rest of Basilicata, Matera’s modernity was imposed upon it by the national government.

**FIGURE 17.** This pair of images compares an old, yet functional, brown door (left) with its cat door (blocked), and a new, industrially manufactured, green door (right) that complies with the Sassi preservation code. Left photograph by author, 2003; right photograph by Katheryn Toxey, 2000.
For this reason as well, Matera has been the town in Basilicata most directly affected by extraregional influence, and it serves as the region’s main point of contact with the external world. Yet, because of the region’s remoteness, this communication (including publicity about its cultural resources and agricultural and industrial production) is taking place almost exclusively through television and Internet, since the region’s remoteness limits awareness of its existence.

Serving as the region’s intellectual and artistic hub, Matera is gaining economic and cultural significance within the region at the same time as it makes similar strides outside the region. I receive radically different responses from Italians throughout the country when I mention my classical archaeological work in Metaponto (cool acknowledgement) and when I mention my preservation work in the Sassi of Matera (warm enthusiasm). Ten years ago, most of these people either would not have known Matera and its Sassi or would have associated them with the shame of the 1950s. Positive press has completely reversed the stigma that negative press gave the city in the past. Matera is achieving the comforts of a modern city with the visual appeal of historicism: it is becoming both a new old city for tourists in quest of a comfortable experience of the past and an old new city for Materans desirous of a modern lifestyle set in the frame of the past.

REFERENCE NOTES

Many thanks to Patrick McMillan for preparation of my graphic materials.

6. I realize, of course, that this is the way in which tradition has been presented in modern thought since at least the Enlightenment, and that it is central to the work of Ferdinand Tonnies, Karl Marx, and Emile Durkheim, to name a few.
9. The first population boom occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Matera, like many Italian hilltowns, became an “agrotown,” i.e., a concentrated farming population which cultivated the surrounding lands. Also occurring throughout the South, a second, larger population boom occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. G. Barker, A Mediterranean Valley: Landscape Archaeology and Annales History in the Biferno Valley (New York: Leicester University Press, 1995), p.286.
10. Trained in medicine yet devoting himself to art, Levi is best known for his political and literary contributions. An Italian Jew from Turin, he was active in the antifascism movement as a member of the social-reform party, Giustizia e Libertà, which led to his 1935–36 exile in southern Italy. His famous book chronicling this sojourn, Cristo si è fermato a Eboli (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1946), was enthusiastically received in its postwar publication, and was quickly translated into many languages. On the literary front, it is credited for introducing the turn toward social realism. In social science, it opened new terrain for study by revealing a exotic Other within Europe. In the field of political economy, it was influential in the formation of a new national government and in the design of the postwar reconstruction program.
12. Of a total city population of 30,136, as calculated June 30, 1950, the Sassi housed 15,590, the majority of whom were peasants. F. Nitti, “Una Comunità in Cammino: Matera,” Basilicata, Vol.II No.26 (October 23, 1953), p.3.
13. Resulting largely from the unification of Italy in the mid-nineteenth century and already identified in academic discourse in the 1870s, the conditions producing the Southern Question intensified throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The discourse was catalyzed in the interwar writings of Antonio Gramsci, which were published after World War II, like Levi’s book. Although thought to have been resolved by the late 1970s/early 1980s, recent political developments show that this question continues to haunt the fragile relationship between northern and southern Italy. Volumes have been written on this topic. See, for example, J. Schneider, ed., Italy’s “Southern Question,” Orientalism in One Country (New York: Berg, 1998).
20. I have found little evidence of the Sassi residents participating in the discussion of their fate. The conversation appears to have been largely carried out between the city’s elite and national politicians, a situation that continues today regarding the fate of the Sassi (see note 42).
22. Of particular note was the work of German-American sociologist Prof. Friedrich Friedmann from the Univ. of Arkansas, who modeled the Matera project on the Tennessee Valley Authority relocation project.
26. M. Fuller describes a different yet interesting comparison in Rhodes where colonization within Europe — by Italy, incidentally — has led to feelings of humiliation and forgetting in “Good as Bread: Nostalgia and Forgivability in Postcolonial Rhodes,” (AAA, 1995) paper in progress.
29. Ibid., p.7.
31. Ibid., p.4.
33. Asking a Materan under the age of fifty if he/she speaks Materano is as insulting as asking if he/she were born in the Sassi. This linguistic shame may soon be reversed due to signs of a renaissance of the old language. These include the recent publication of Materano poetry, Italiano-Materano glossaries, and t-shirts printed with Materano expressions.
36. Ibid., p.7.
37. Connerton, How Societies Remember, p.37, develops the idea of mental maps.
41. This material was presented in my paper, “Co-remembering and co-forgetting: The Dynamics of Preserving the Sassi of Matera,” at the conference “Commemoration and the City” (Savannah, GA, February 20–22, 2003).
42. I describe them as nonvocal because of their general inaudibility, and in fact invisibility, within the society and its government. Many Materans do not acknowledge their presence. The term nonvocal can be applied more broadly to the ex-Sassi residents. For example, in newspaper coverage of a citywide preservation debate in the late 1990s, the voices of elite citizens were clearly and individually presented, while objections made by the rest of the community, referred to as “the people,” were lumped together sometimes under the name of a single representative, and sometimes under the anonymous title of “a southerner.” I document this debate in chapter four of my dissertation.
43. Please note that this article investigates the combined effect of preservation on this city and therefore addresses the preservationists as a group. Studied up close (as I do in my dissertation, in progress), I find that there is in fact no unity of purpose or method among them. I have identified at least eight subgroups of preservationists and numerous sub-subgroups arguing over this contested terrain. These include, for example, members of the social and intellectual elite, who formed the preservation initiative and who resent their loss of control to others (namely, the government); archaeologists and preservation purists who feel that the preservation carried out is destroying more cultural material than it protects; practitioners who see the government’s stewardship of the Sassi as being corrupt; groups favoring alternate interpretations of the Sassi (for example, the environmental-deterministic interpretation that was accepted by UNESCO); and residents of the Sassi who are at odds with Sassi busi-
ness owners over preservation legislation (for example, traffic and noise regulation).

44. Although I visited this site often during my 1990–93 summer campaigns with the Institute of Classical Archaeology at nearby Metaponto, my focused research of this topic began in 1999 when I began my preservation collaboration with the state preservation board (the Soprintendenza per i Beni Ambientali ed Architettonici), and when I determined to write my doctoral dissertation on the Sassi. This research has taken the form of: 1) extensive historical investigation of primary materials found in Materan libraries, museums, and archives (state, municipal, church, and private); 2) interviews of members of different social classes, present and former Sassi residents, preservation professionals, government officials, tourism developers, and tourists; and 3) photo-documentation of transformations inside and outside the city and Sassi. This research is bolstered by close collaboration with local professionals in the preservation of the Sassi.


