

1

## PIAZZA DUOMO VIEW POINT

We are looking at the town from Largo Duomo, the wide courtyard of the cathedral that occupies the summit of Matera's first urban nucleus.

From this point, it is possible to admire the complex structure and layout of the ancient town and glimpse the monuments that we shall visit: the Sasso Barisano, where, on the right, the monastery of Sant'Agostino stands and, looking slightly to the left, the church of San Pietro Barisano, immersed in a cluster of houses and buildings; in front of us, the three arches looking on to Piazza Vittorio Veneto, surmounted by the facade of the complex of the Annunziata.

On the left, looking carefully, it is possible to also make out the battlements of the Tramontano Castle and the gables of the bell tower of the church of San Francesco.



2

In 1203, Matera was raised, along with Acerenza, to the status of archbishopric and, at the will of archbishop Andrea, the new church was built by 1270, in Apulia Romanesque style, on the highest point of the Civita.



### 3 CATHEDRAL (EXTERIOR)

*We saw it from  
a distance.  
Its silhouette  
dominates the view  
of the town...  
and now, here  
we are  
in front of it.*

The side facade is the one that first attracts our attention.

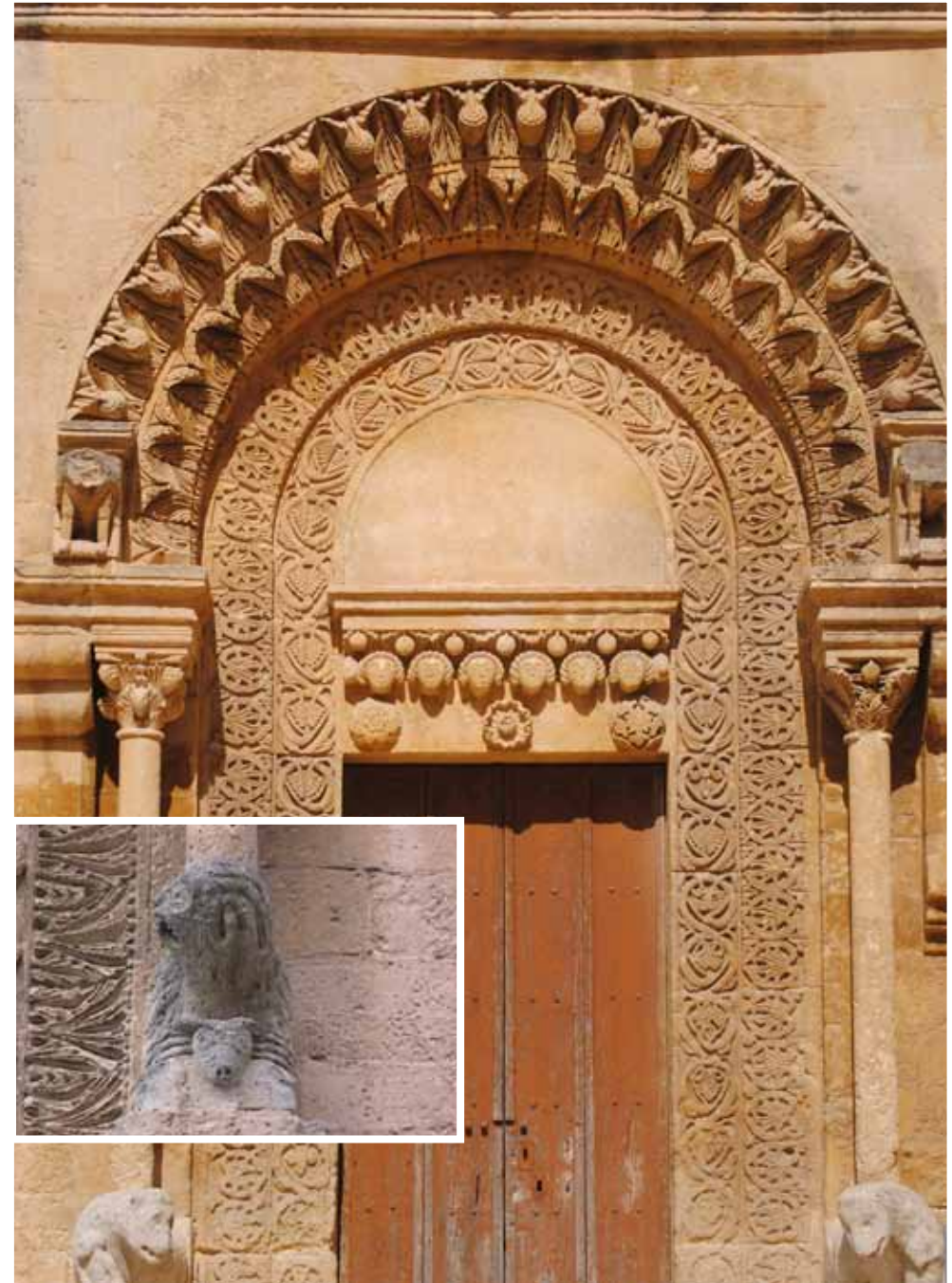
The monks and the patriarch, the sphinxes and the judge, the eagle and the lions.



Two crouched monks seem to remind the Square of the distant filial relationship between God and man, of which the Patriarch Abraham, commemorated in the lunette, is the first of a long list.

Two sphinxes and two lions honour the memory of the Saracen Judge who worked in the town in the middle of the thirteenth century.

Two lions support a pair of columns and give the name to this entrance door, even if above them an eagle stands out, but, having lost its head, cannot show its regalness.



CATHEDRAL (EXTERIOR)



The statues of Saint Paul on the right and Saint Peter on the left, who protect the Madonna with Child, honoured by Saint Eustace and his wife Theopista.

If the figure of this "Lady" has already fascinated us ...all we need to do is win her heart.



Let's go to the main facade. We'll turn our back on the Sasso Barisano and admire the ornaments of this "beautiful lady".

The small arches of the crown and the four small columns; perhaps signs that no longer talk of ancient times: the Apostles who follow Christ with his Cross positioned above and the Evangelists, witnesses of the story of Salvation.

The rose window with sixteen spokes, the wheel of Life or of Fortune, surrounded by the Archangel Michael who looks over it, and the three social strata of the Matera community who turn it.



The cathedral, as is written in the inscription on the architrave above the bell tower's entrance door - was completed in 1270 and later dedicated to the Madonna della Bruna, who was nominated patron saint, without forgetting the original patron, Saint Eustace.

To fully understand the devotion of the people of Matera to the town's two Patron Saints, let's listen to a passage of the chronicles by Francesco Volpe:

*"In Matera there is age-old veneration for the glorious martyr Saint Eustace, a great General at the time of Trajan and Hadrian.*



4 CATHEDRAL (INTERIOR)



*stace, a great General at the time of Trajan and Hadrian.*

*It is said that, before the year 1,000, when the town was besieged by the Saracens, the Saint appeared with his glorious Family, came to the town's aid and saved it, and the Matera people, later told of the miracle that had occurred, rapidly acclaimed them as their Patron Saints and Guardians. Every year, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, when it is said that the apparition took place, their Feast day is formally celebrated with veneration and splendour.*



*It is celebrated in a more decorous manner on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, when their glorious martyrdom occurred. A long time ago, it was an ancient custom for the Knight Commander of the town to go on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May to the Church of Saint Eustace for the first Vespers, taking an offer - a tribute - consisting in a torch covered in silver coins and numerous baskets of fruit, flowers and other things, and accompanied by music and songs in honour of these Patron Saints."*

In exchange for this offer, the Commander was given "a loaf of bread, a barrel of wine and numerous hard ricotta cheeses, plus a torch of pure wax."

The Cathedral preserves "The image of the Vergine della Bruna", so-called due to the darkness of her face, and also known as Santa Maria di Matera in a testament, or Santa Maria dell'Episcopio.

His Holiness Pope Urban 4<sup>th</sup> [who was Bishop of Matera from 1365 to 1377], having seen the great devotion of the people of Matera for this Holy Image, in 1389 established a festivity in its honour, on the 2nd of July [making it coincide with the celebration of the Visitation, established that same year].



— She was therefore confirmed as the patron Saint and worshipped with the name of Maria Santissima della Bruna, with such a wonderful, characteristic and baroque celebration that she seems mid-way between legend and reality.





5

Let's go down from Via del Riscatto to Vico Conservatorio and continue along Vico Civita towards the church of the Madonna delle Virtù, observing the space that opens up between small roads and impressive noble palaces.

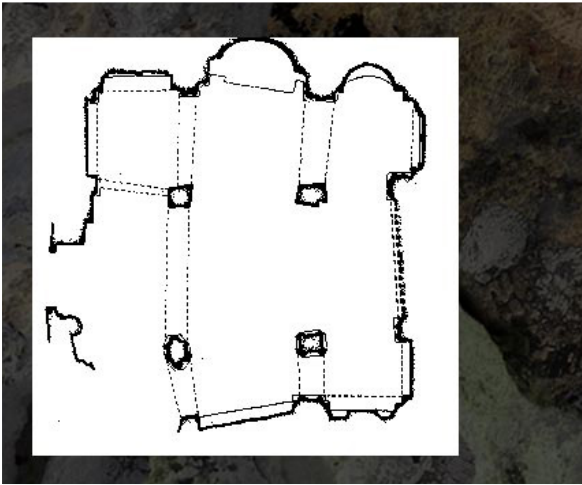
In a town like Matera, one of the most common jobs was that of a tuff quarryman. The houses, churches, palaces, squares, everything in this town took shape from the first stroke of a pick given to a calcarenite wall. That muffled noise accompanied the days of the Matera people, who lived with that series of endlessly repeated strokes for entire working days. Excavating blocks of tuff required hard work, patience and concentration. The skill and toil of the quarriers made the realization of the new built structures possible, as well as perpetuating the ancient practice of constructions built by removal...

6

## CHURCH OF THE MADONNA DELLE VIRTU'

It is one of the most important cave churches in Matera, even if the entrance has a modest appearance. This small door leaves us rather perplexed as to what to expect from the interior. In fact, the spectacle that we are met with is diametrically opposed to the outside one.

It is a church with a basilica layout, with three sumptuous naves hewn from the tuff. The precise respect of the perspective proportions is the most obvious demonstration of the skill of Matera quarrymen.



In fact, the church seems to converge on a single point, the apsidal basin that immediately attracts observers' attention, as it is embellished with a magnificent crucifixion, with figures whose clearness will have made believers who have admired it through the centuries kneel at the foot of that Calvary.

On the right, the ample zone excavated to obtain blocks of tuff when the church was no longer used as a place of worship seems to bear witness to a sort of inverse destructive process: rather than space being reduced, as happens with collapses and ruins, the addition of space - due to the excavation work - nevertheless caused its original proportions to be lost. Fortunately, not its beauty.

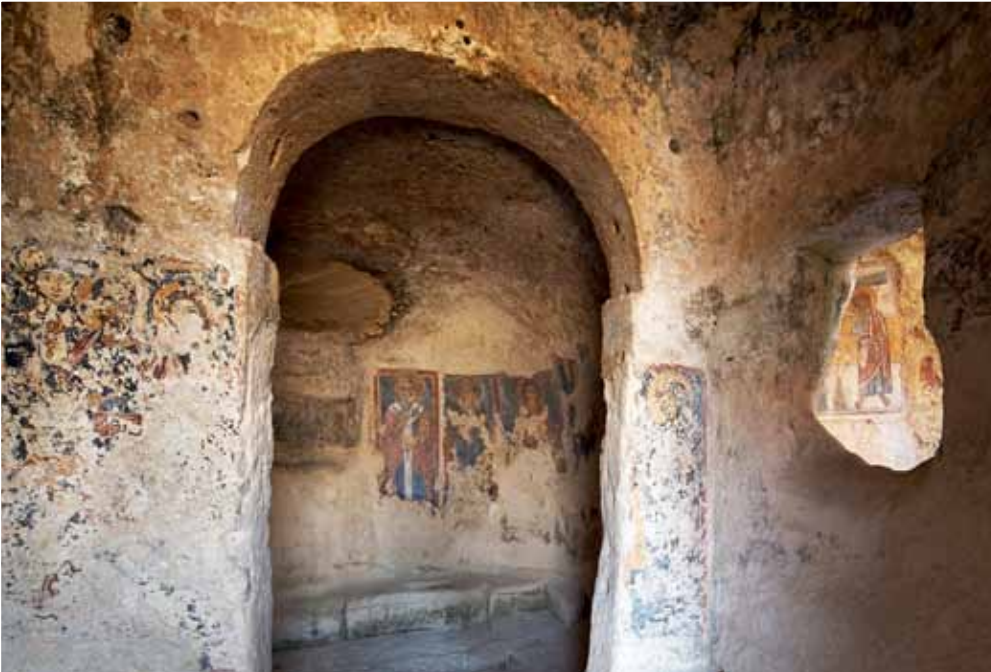
The visit, however, is not finished. A strange opening located at the end of the church provides access to the underground area of the monastery and the stairs that lead to San Nicola dei Greci.



7

However, the bare rock could not remain without the symbols, the images and the spaces necessary for making it a place in which to live... or in which to pray...

## 8 CHURCH OF SAN NICOLA DEI GRECI



A throng of Saints in regal clothing welcomes us when we enter this church. Saint Nicholas, from whom the church takes its name, stands out very clearly at the end of the left-hand apse, accompanied by Saint Barbara and Saint Pantaleon.

In the right-hand presbytery, a Christ on the cross shows His Mother the "disciple He loved", that Saint John who will also announce Christ's evangelic return at the end of Time.





Also on the right, but along the wall, Saint Anthony, forerunner of eastern monasticism, does not seem in the least frightened by the axe driven into the head of his neighbour, the Dominican inquisitor Peter martyr. The openings of the walls, the ambo and the iconostasis, the colours, ornaments and figures represented, offer observers an excellent cross-section of the traditional Byzantine figurative art that enriched and coloured the damp walls of Matera's cave churches until the 15th century.



*SASSO BARISANO*

9

Let's take Via Madonna delle Virtù to the left and continue to the crossroads with Via Casale and we'll go up the steps to towards the church of Sant'Agostino.

*Stinzeria*



10

## CONVENT OF SANT'AGOSTINO

The Convent of Sant'Agostino was founded in 1591. Its location at the entrance to Sasso Barisano and the characteristic position overhanging the Gravina River make it visible and easily identified from various parts of the town.



The Augustinian Complex was built in the area in which the ancient Church dedicated to San Giuliano stood, which became part of the new convent structure.

The Augustinian Fathers played a key social role in the Matera community, thanks also to the education of various exponents of the town's ruling class.



In fact, a space for training and higher education intended for the monks was created in the Convent, and remained in activity until the mid eighteenth century, when it was closed for problems of a financial nature, which arose following the need to restore the adjacent Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, damaged in an earthquake.

The educational institution was later re-opened.



11

## SANT'AGOSTINO VIEW POINT

Ravine, cliff and town. It's all one. The panorama we have in front of us clarifies any remaining doubts regarding nature and the town but, above all, regarding the nature of the town. The colours are the same, the materials are the same. Man's hands only intervened to shape the material that the areas offered him. The only differences are represented by the bell tower of the cathedral, which interrupts the continuous skyline, and by Via Madonna delle Virtù, which dulls the tones of the grey and yellow colour of the calcarenite rock.





12

Let's go into the heart of the Sasso Barisano, following Via d'Addozio to Piazzetta San Pietro Barisano.

What we see could seem to be without any logic, almost irregular, and yet it is precisely in this irrationality that it is necessary to look for the characteristic nature of the homes of Matera's Sassi. This group of houses one on top of each other seems inaccessible, without any way for access... but is not, however, able to hide its precious architectural treasures from us.

13

## CHURCH OF SAN PIETRO BARISANO

...it is immersed in the houses... almost hidden, imperceptible if one looks at it from a distance.

The parish church of Sasso Barisano hewn in the Sasso itself and dedicated to Saint Peter "de Veteribus". A church that is all one with the surrounding environment.

The bell-tower, the openings that surmount the three entrances and the curved crown of the facade characterize it as a place of worship inside a tuff cave featuring uniform colours.

A church with three naves, with the (with the) imposing pillars on which the building stands, is the age-old proof this rock wonder.

A story that, on one hand, recounts the splendour of the period in which it was the parish church of Sasso Barisano and, on the other, tells of the abandon, the looting suffered and the barbarous devastation, before the ancient memory was found again and the church, following recent restoration work, once again shone with its yellow tuff.



14

Let's take Via Santa Cesarea, behind the church, and follow the road to Piazza San Rocco.

This small square is bounded by the church dedicated to the Saint di Montpellier and, on the right, a real gem of medieval architecture, the church of San Giovanni Battista with its *talking* stones.



15

## CHURCH OF SAN GIOVANNI BATTISTA

The six innocent pure young girls, immersed in acanthus leaves and hackberry fruits, whose small heads look at us from the thirteenth century doorway are the first wanting to communicate something to us. Their story tells of nine nuns brought from the Far East - Acre, capital of the Latin Kingdom - by the bishop of Matera.



It was a time of crusades, a time of clashes and meetings between religions and cultures. It was a time to search for serenity and redemption, and Matera offered them this church, giving it the name of Santa Maria la Nova.



Let's go inside and listen to the voices of the stones which, using the architectural language of Cistercian origin written with acanthus leaves, palms, melons, pine cones and pomegranates, speak of childhood and spring, abundance and paschal joy. There are anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures on the four centre capitals.

On the left-hand side, we can listen to the dialogue taking place between the old man of the capital of senility and the young maidens of the capital in front of it, who are worshipping the Almighty.



On the other capital, a woman is covering herself with the mantle of virtue, and it seems she too wants to take part in this conversation.

On the opposite side, it is possible to hear the echoes of the clash taking place between the wolves of faith as they attack the gryphons of sin who are eating the leaf of the soul.



16

Let's go along Via San Biagio to Piazza Vittorio Veneto.

*Pineriva*

17

## CONVENT OF SAN DOMENICO

*The construction of the Convent of St Dominic of what was originally called the "Order of Preachers" dates back to 1230.*

This historical information assumes a particular meaning, as it would confirm a connection between the foundation of this monastic complex and Saint Dominic de Guzmán himself who, according to what was reported by the chronicles, wanted to show his personal gratitude for this building in a letter sent to the town of Matera:



*"The Convent of Saint Dominic of the Order of Preachers located on the lefthand side of the Town's main gate was built at the will of Blessed Nicholas of Giovinazzo, a worthy disciple and fellow of the Patriarch and Founder of this illustrious Religion, Saint Dominic.*

*The Town of Matera had a letter handwritten by the Patriarch Saint Dominic, with which he expressed it his gratitude, for having given hospitality to his religious order. When it unfortunately fell into the hands of a Spanish Governor of the Province of Matera, the letter was considered a good prey, and disappeared."*



In spite of the theft of the supposed letter of Saint Dominic to the town, the facade - with its rose window reflecting the style adopted for the cathedral - and the entire monastic complex - which since the nineteenth century has hosted government offices - are the most authentic proof of the contribution that the Friars Preachers left Matera as far as architecture was concerned, as well as from a spiritual point of view.





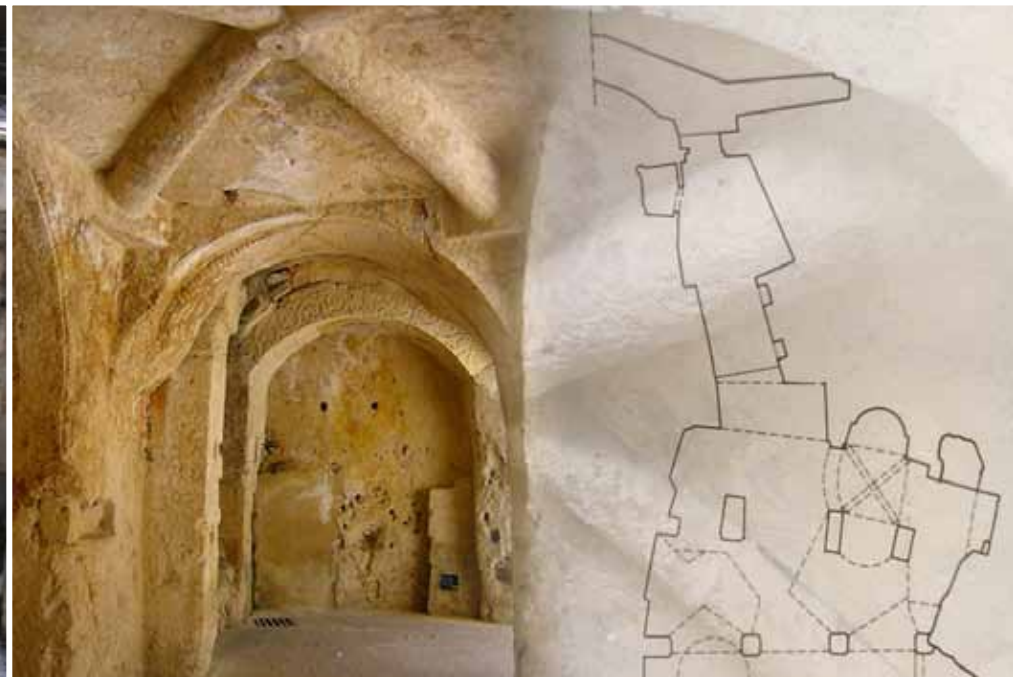
18

## CHURCH OF SANTO SPIRITO

Moving towards the middle of the square, we can look out over the balustrade, from which we can glimpse another hidden treasure: the Santo Spirito Church

It is a church of Benedictine origin that later passed to the Knights of Saint John, the Knights of Malta.

This underground church underwent expansion between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as the construction of the elegant bell-tower at the will of Commander Brother Silvio Zurla in 1680 as a symbol of the importance of the order in the town's social fabric.



## CHURCH OF SANTO SPIRITO



Following the miraculous apparition of the image of the Madonna inside the church, the direction of the liturgical space was changed and the name of Santo Spirito replaced with that of Mater Domini. With the construction of the Monastery of the Annunziata in 1747 and some private buildings, it was necessary to move the church to the upper level of the new public space, which was done rebuilding it alongside the bell-tower.

The Santo Spirito Church features both of the construction techniques used in Matera: the rear part is excavated, whereas the front is built.

As happened with many of the town's other cave churches, when Santo Spirito, was no longer used for religious purposes, the excavated areas were gradually occupied by the town's inhabitants.

In fact, if the three-nave layout with the tuff columns is the expression of a religious use, the transformation of the space and almost total loss of the frescos on the walls, bear witness to the civil use this space had up until the early 1900s, when the seventeenth century facade and adjacent nave were demolished and the area they stood in filled in and levelled out.

...but the secrets are not finished.

An Aragonese tower was unexpectedly discovered during recent work to upgrade the square, and was an integral part of the project of a perimeter defence wall conceived by Count Tramontano.





19

## CHURCH OF MATER DOMINI

The origin of this little church, dedicated to Mater Domini, is closely linked to the presence of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, the Knights of Malta, in the town of Matera.

The church was built following the abandon of the Santo Spirito church below, the ancient building of the Order of Saint John, from which it inherited the dedication to the Mother of the Lord as is borne out by the bas-relief of the mater domini transferred here from the facade of the ancient underground church and placed in the niche above the portal.

Go closer. The facade, with its very small construction body, joins the ancient bell-tower and ends with the characteristic Maltese cross of the Order of Saint John.

At the top of the small church the steps can be clearly seen, climbing upwards to enable access to the small bells and, as can be admired in a water-colour painting of Mater Domini in the eighteenth century, in order to raise the standard if the Order atop the church on the arrival of the dignitary.





Looking at the person climbing up the stairs to the bell-tower takes us into a timeless dimension, enabling us to almost hear the echo of the silvery sound of those two small bells ringing round the Sassi and across the square, advising the people of Matera of the beginning of the rare celebrations held in this small church on the occasion of the solemnities of Saint John the Baptist, the Order's patron saint, and of the Mother of the Lord, after whom the church is named.



20

## PIAZZA VITTORIO VENETO



The Convent of San Domenico, the Monastery of the Annunziata and the Mater Domini church define an ample space with numerous underground structures.



Under the square, there are the cisterns that have served the town for centuries.

Water, the most precious asset to be protected for a town like this, arrived here from the hill called "del Castello" or "del Lapillo" and was gathered in a large cistern at the foot of the ex convent of Santa Lucia and Sant'Agata, and from the hill of Macamarda.

The latter, at the end of the nineteenth century, when the population living in the Plain reached its maximum level and the need for water was therefore greater, was channelled into a new larger water container called "Palombaro Lungo".



*A passage from the Chronicles of the town of Matera published by Gianfranco De Blasiis in 1635 informs us of these characteristic structures:*

*"In the whole town there is a huge mass of stone called tuff, suitable for digging wells or water, grain, cheese and wine stores, which are so perfect in this town that they are unequalled, and in particular that for the wine, meaning that the wines are so cold for the excellence of the cellars, that in the height of the summer, there is no need for snow, as is in fact true. Of the grain stores and their perfection, it is sufficient to say that the grain is preserved for up to ten, twelve or fifteen years, as if it was in a chest."*



21



*The Civita and Sassi:  
a breathtaking  
panorama.*

## TRE ARCHI VIEW POINT

It is an extraordinary result of settlement activity by man who, through the centuries, was able to discover, appreciate and make use of what the surrounding nature offered him, to the point of recognizing himself in that Heritage of caves, cliffs and homes that now belongs to humanity.

We know of its historical developments thanks to the story by Francesco Volpe who, shedding for a moment the role of strict historian, decided to end his description with a dream-like image of the town:





*"This town's public Archive contains an edict by Philip, Prince of Taranto and Count of Matera, dated 1373, with which he includes the Town of Matera in his domain, along with its farmhouses, possessions, holdings, jurisdictions and competencies. From that period, the town changed appearance.*

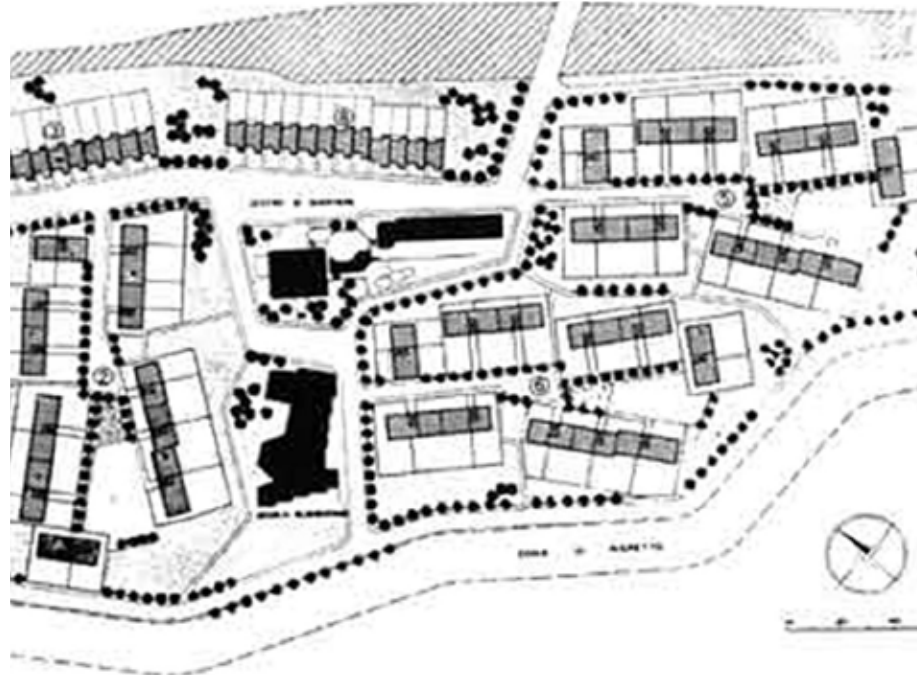
*The valleys were no longer considered as two boroughs of the ancient town, but as the main body of this town: and the name was changed to Sasso (Stone), due to the huge number of homes built on and hewn from the natural rock; as an indication, the one opposite of the town of Montescaglioso was called Sasso Caveoso, and the other, opposite the City of Bari, Sasso Barisano. Img11 116 The ancient town's name remained Civitas, nowadays Civita.*

*The houses that stand in these valleys are not on the same plane and level. They are one above each other, so they seem to be hanging above one another. So, when evening dusk arrives, spectators on the high ground can see the lights burning inside them like countless stars fallen from the sky."*





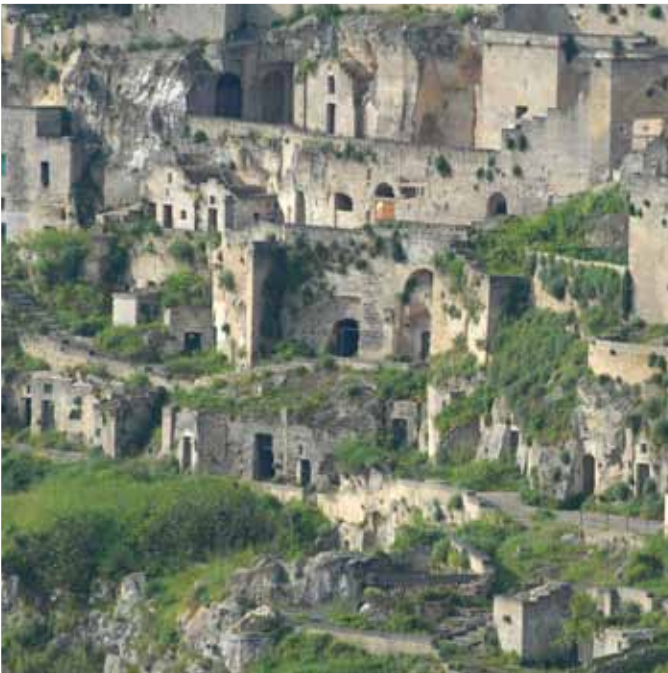
## 22 THE DISTRICTS OF THE MODERN NATIONAL TOWN-PLANNING



The "Città Del Piano" - Plan Town: this is the idea that followed the evacuation of the 20,000 inhabitants of the Sassi of Matera in the 1950s. The new districts, planned to host the evacuees of the place described as a "national disgrace", became a real town-planning workshop.

The most important designers were called in to build the new town. The Serra Venerdì district, designed by architect Luigi Piccinato, was the first to be built in chronological order.

The design ideas of the Neorealist school linked with Italian Rationalism led to the realization of Borgo La Martella - which was built a few kilometres from the town - and the Spine Bianche district.



The Villalongo, Lanera and Agna districts, and the other suburban district - Borgo Venusio - completed Matera's new town planning layout.

Around the seventies there was a new phase of town planning that led to the town assuming a narrow elongated layout stretching along a north-south axis, to avoid the natural obstacles represented by the Gravina and the steep slopes of the hills of the valley of the River Bradano.

The "new" Matera could not do without the "old" one and this necessity led to the start of the recovery of the Sassi district and the Murgia plateau facing it. The 1986 law marked the beginning of the work for the recovery and safeguarding of the Matera Sassi and the inclusion of the town in the UNESCO World Heritage List was the highest acknowledgment for this renewed feeling of identity that ties the town to its inhabitants and the people of Matera to their history.

