

Rome, 9th February 2021

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(sent by e-mail and ordinary mail)

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SUBJECT: Open Letter - Request for urgent action/inspection for the protection of the archaeological, cultural, artistic and naturalistic heritage of the **Murgia area** overlooking the **Sassi of the City of Matera**, which forms an integral part of the site inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Dear Ms Azoulay,

Dear Ms du Vignau, Ms Rössler, Mr Shadie, Mr Patricio, Mr King.

We respectfully enclose a copy in English of the open letter we sent to several Italian Institutions in January.

Our aim was, and still is, to create awareness about what is happening in the immediate surroundings of Matera, where a large part of the site inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List is now subject to considerable building works that are severely altering its shape, characteristics and contents. Annexed to this letter, you shall find a selection of photos documenting our appeal.

This letter is also a request for support and help in the defence of a site that, as it rarely happens, offers a superb concentration of nature, history, art, manifestations of human capabilities and beliefs across eras, together with examples of long-lasting coexistence between human communities, animals and plants in an environment which was until recently respected. These are precious and evocative examples of the epochal challenges that humankind must face to reconcile lifestyles and production systems with the safety and health of the planet.

We are now addressing directly the UNESCO Headquarters and some of their related specialised Units, Divisions and Committees because we strongly believe that, if no action is taken, the situation in Matera can evolve into a case of reputational risk for UNESCO.

The UNESCO World Heritage recognition is not, in our opinion, only aimed at giving notoriety and global fame to places previously known exclusively to experts or niche travellers. Also, it cannot

and should not be confined to marketing the brand of a site to the widest touristic circuits with the purpose of maximising economic returns for local communities.

However, despite UNESCO's best intentions, this is what we perceive is happening in Matera. At the time of the city's application to the list of World Heritage Site List, in Matera UNESCO was perceived as an Institution endowed with strong reach and influence. Now that the site has joined the List, in the public eye those powers have been downgraded to soft ones, providing little sway against decisions taken by national or local governmental institutions.

Without change, we shall bear witness to the paradoxical effect that, by granting the site official recognition, UNESCO has involuntarily accelerated its deterioration and, step by step, also the fading and disappearing of other sites judged, only few years ago, worthy of exploration, study and conservation in the interest of humankind.

While we write, the works on the Murgia Plateau near Matera are rapidly advancing. Together, citizens and Institutions, we must not remain silent.

We hope you will heed the urgency of our plea, as our purpose of preservation coincides with UNESCO's purpose in creating the World Heritage List. We need your voice, through all the instruments UNESCO will consider appropriate.

We thank you for your attention and look forward to receiving your support. It is our true belief that even a simple UNESCO public statement would go a long way in finding a rapid and sound solution.

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Open letter (English)

We deem imperative to inform you, and the Institution you represent and lead, of the situation developing on the Murgia plateau, directly overlooking the historic district of the Sassi of Matera. The profound and unreasonable transformations that are affecting this area put at risk the characteristics and values that prompted UNESCO to inscribe it on the World Heritage List.

- Introduction -

The Murgia area is under a double level of heritage protection.

Firstly that of the 'Archaeological Historical-Natural Park of the Rupestrine Churches of Matera' (also known as the Murgia Natural Park), established by the Basilicata Regional Government in 1990.

Secondly, that of UNESCO, which in 2007 expanded the definition of the World Heritage Site to include both the Sassi (already included since 1993) and the Park. Such an expansion was necessary because, since the dawn of time, the Sassi have enjoyed a close relationship with the neighbouring Murgia area and the vast gorge of the Gravina river flowing through it, to form a single biological and cultural habitat for the communities which have successively resided here over the millennia, as well as a joint ecosystem involving man and nature and resting on a delicate balance which has remained intact since prehistory.

In addition to these archaeological, historical, geological, naturalistic riches, the Murgia area preserves unique traces of the innate need for spirituality and devotion always expressed by man.

In the simplicity and silence of Murgia Timone (the site of the contested contractions works) an important page of Western monasticism was written and anchorites and cenobites found shelter. The walls of the Gravina gorge are dotted with rock-churches where Christian practice served as inspiration for many Latin and Byzantine style frescoes. It is the search for this spontaneous and profound religious inspiration that pushed writers, poets and film directors to find here, on our Murgia, similarities to the Holy Land of Palestine. It is here that visitors still find it.

It is precisely the value of these ancient roots, which have been preserved over time by the spontaneous and measured actions of man, that was recognised by UNESCO in 2007. Indeed, as stated on the official website of UNESCO: “*This is the most outstanding, intact example of a troglodyte settlement in the Mediterranean region, perfectly adapted to its terrain and ecosystem. The first inhabited zone dates from the Palaeolithic, while later settlements illustrate a number of significant stages in human history. Matera is in the southern region of Basilicata*”. The phrase that it is ‘*perfectly adapted to its terrain and ecosystem*’ stands out.

However, the significance of not separating the Sassi from the context of the Murgia clearly emerges upon consideration of the three specific reasons cited for the inscription of Matera onto the list of World Heritage Sites: “1) *Matera's Sassi and park represent an outstanding example of a rock-cut settlement, adapted perfectly to its geomorphologic setting and its ecosystem and exhibiting continuity over more than two millennia*”; 2) *The town and park constitute an outstanding example of an architectural ensemble and landscape illustrating a number of significant stages in human history*”; 3) *The town and park represent an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement and land-use showing the evolution of a culture which has maintained over time a harmonious relationship with its natural environment*”.

Once again, reference is made to the Murgia National Park, an integral element of the habitat of the Sassi, with which our ancestors built and maintained a constant relationship of intimate adaptation and exchange, and whose salient features of *integrity* and *authenticity* must be preserved. We draw your attention to the two distinctive qualities which are highlighted by UNESCO: *integrity* and *authenticity*.

Additionally, in the section of the website dedicated to Matera, UNESCO mention two of the most important legislative measures adopted in recent times regarding the recognition and recovery of the Sassi and the context of the Murgia in which they are located.

Firstly, the Special Law no. 771/1986, the purpose of which was to conclude a lengthy and complex process that began with the first Special Law no. 619/1952 regarding the Sassi in the Republican period, ordering the evacuation of the area and directing the inhabitants towards new

accommodation in purpose-built neighbourhoods. According to UNESCO, *“The Special Law 771 led to the establishment of a management plan between private and public parties to ensure the architectural, urban, environmental and economical conservation of the ancient Sassi districts and to safeguard the Murgia highland plateau”*. In this case, too, the safeguarding of the Sassi was considered inseparable from, and indeed seen as one and the same as, the safeguarding of their Murgia surroundings.

Secondly, the aforementioned Regional Law no. 11/1990, which established the ‘Archaeological Historical-Natural Park of the Rupestrian Churches of Matera’ (or Murgia Natural Park). This was greatly appreciated by UNESCO, which viewed it as the natural completion of the process started with the inscription of the Sassi on the list of World Heritage Sites: *“This institution [the Park] provides protection for some 6,500ha to effectively protect the natural open space and archaeological sites of the Murgia, including the recovery and valorisation of areas of prehistoric and historic archaeology. This law further provides for the protection, conservation, safeguarding, valorisation and management of the rupestrian habitat, of the natural ecosystems, biotic communities and their habitat, biotypes and the relevant geological, geomorphologic and speleological formations, watercourses and related hydrological systems”*.

It is perhaps the most beautiful, moving and meaningful passage to be found on the pages dedicated to Matera on the UNESCO website, since it highlights the rare occurrence of concentrating, in a small area straddling the ravine of the Gravina river, rocks and caves formed over the course of various geological eras, archaeological traces (both prehistoric and historical) of the communities who lived there, in the context of a true ecosystem with access to water that has remained alive since the dawn of time, always sustainably inhabited, men acting not as dominating protagonists but as part of a delicate balance that should not be altered in time. Indeed, this old and wise ecosystem is to be admired, particularly today in the face of current environmental challenges. *“Among the scrubland and Mediterranean brush, in the remaining groves of oak trees and fragni, in addition to the intriguing rupestrian flora, a rich and colourful fauna lurks”*, as we read on the official website of the Murgia National Park.

- Excavation and operations in progress at the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 -

For several months now we have observed with mounting concern a series of construction works involving both the Murgia plateau overlooking the Sassi and the first section of the ravine wall which slopes down towards the Gravina river. Our concern arises from the rarity and fragility of this unique site, as detailed in the reasons for its inclusion on the list of World Heritage Sites and for the establishment of the Murgia National Park.

These operations include excavation, the construction of stone kerbs and walls, the opening of access roads, dirt paths and unsympathetic panoramic decks equipped with electric cables, the widening of parking areas, the laying of long walkways and balustrades, and lastly the positioning of ostentatious benches with protective backs, right on the edge between the plateau and the beginning of the gorge. On account of their size and accompanying backs and floor lamps, similar flashy benches, some of which have already been erected in front of the Sassi, could be found in the parks which surround large rooms for wedding banquets or on some seafront promenade of trendy tourist spots.

The works are carried out by heavy machinery, such as vans, lorries, mechanical diggers and excavators. We are attaching several photographs, widely circulated within the Matera community during late 2020 and early 2021. Residents have begun to question the true purpose, but most of all the potential damage, that these works may cause to the historical remains (including the traces of the presence of man spanning a vast expanse of time, ancient burials and rupestrian churches), as well as to the Murgia ecosystem as a whole.

The materials, vehicles, nature of such works and their workforce, the breadth of the operations and indeed the apparently definitive alteration of the site would all point towards either the unregulated creation of a garden or other type of public area, or the creation of an adventure park similar to others currently under construction in Italy (under normal circumstances, not in the heart of World Heritage Sites!) based on Northern European models, or even, in certain areas, extraordinary works aimed at compacting landslide-prone earth and the stabilisation of mountain roadways.

Looking at the entire area from the above, one would never imagine ongoing works aimed at preparing these places for a better, more widespread sharing of nature, culture, art, beauty. On the opposite, one can perceive a basic, unrefined project aimed at standardisation and adaptation to the purposes of mass-market leisure and recreation, as well as a form of trivial commercialisation, significantly at odds with efforts to preserve and recognise archaeological, historical, naturalistic and landscape richness and beauty.

This building project appears entirely incompatible with the sensitivity and attention required when protecting a World Heritage Site, even, and especially, when that site is rightly made accessible to all. It is not easy to strike a balance between preservation and the need to appeal to and satisfy those flows of visitors upon which the economy of the city (and maybe not only the city) relies, but the ongoing works on the Murgia seem to ignore this necessity at its root.

- Request for Action/Inspection -

In light of the above, we respectfully ask you to:

- Request detailed explanations from the Municipality of Matera and other institutions involved in the administration of the Sassi and Murgia area;
- Request, as a precaution, the immediate suspension of any new works in the Murgia area overlooking the Sassi until the situation is fully clarified;
- Dispatch an on-site mission to verify the compliance of the above mentioned sites with the obligations and objectives of Matera as a UNESCO World Heritage City, which also served in 2019 as European Capital of Culture. We will be honoured to welcome and host your delegates for the time it takes to visit the places and make an independent judgment.

It is considered that a simple formal inspection, focussing on the obtention of all appropriate permits and authorisations, would not be sufficient. There is indeed no reason to doubt of the procedural correctness of what is occurring. It is feared however that, despite the legality of the

process, it would irrevocably compromise the integrity and authenticity of the Sassi and their Murgia environment. Since these operations and excavations are currently in full progress, there is great urgency.

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The open letter has also been published on www.reforming.it

Annexes:
Gallery 1
Gallery 2
Gallery 3