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# Bari

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## A “MASERATI” WITH AN ENGINE READY TO START

Dear traveller, just arrived in town, introducing the city of Bari is not an easy task. It's not easy to provide you with a user's manual. Bari is like a custom-built car that should not forget to always fill up the tank, though. Bari is a volcano, but like any volcano it is not always spitting fire. Bari has an aggressive and winning character, at least when it wants to. Bari means striving for success, working at a frenzied pace, with the fury of a competitive spirit, at least when it's at its best. Bari is Bari when that underground stream of values, moods, traditions, eagerness, character emerges, which it has always resorted to when the bell tolled, and God only knows how often it has happened. Bari is above all “baresità”, the peculiar quality marking this town, an absolutely rare bird. And “baresità” is the main trait of its inhabitants, an often as invincible as tough band.

Dear traveller, just arrived in town, what is even more difficult is introducing the people of Bari to you.

They are so matter-of-fact to appear almost brutal. They are so practical to seem rough. Terse to the utmost. Active to the point of

looking frenzy. Touchy to the point of sickness. Self-conceited to the point of looking maniac. Self-important to the point of mythomania. Unshakable, even on their last legs. Intractable like fanatics. Sharp like a slash. More eager to mock you than to shed tears with you. They don't know the meaning of melancholy, which would presuppose a past, whereas they know the thousand routes of the world that entail a start and a bet: because wherever you go, you'll always find somebody from Bari, and you will recognize him by his unmistakable accent, by his capability to settle down as well as by his diversity, since a person of true Bari extraction will stick to his roots all over the world. Being born in Bari gives you a special chromosome, which you will always carry along with you. But also the town itself is a museum piece. No frills, not even in its geometric layout, a perfect grid of long roads as straight as a gunshot, not one square instead of a crossing, not one curve to round off the corners. Sharp-edged like its character. And rational, reflecting the calculating personality of its people, able to pry into your affairs before you even had time to look at them. And the total lack of any monuments shows, as well, how non-

rhetorical they are. They have no heroes, no martyrs, no “condottieri”. Not one flight of steps with a view, only a few fountains, some parks. In their place, a lot of prima donnas, instead; and many shops and shop windows, one next to the other, which you will soon be exhausted to watch. It looks like a permanent exhibition. And the big portals, one after the other. An impenetrable front of “palazzi”, a breath-taking array of windows and balconies within the endless riot of concrete obscuring the sky with its modernist mysticism. Bari tastes of the wet and warm Mediterranean “Scirocco” wind, as well as of the dry and cold northerly “Tramontana”. Overexposed to its sparkling classic light, but also infected by an unctuous fog. On one side vanishing in a sea with no horizon, on the other clasped by the maze of dry stonewalls of its hinterland. Its conservatism is almost as frightening as its love for new adventures is thrilling.

Gossipy and solitary, sometimes friendly, sometimes too individualistic, too impudent, but at the same time rigorous, envious and unselfish. A town of contrasts and discrepancies, a giving and taking, continuously promising what will never get a chance to become true,

and will turn false and disappoint you like an old courtesan’s tales. But its people will still try to allure you, and talk to you; in Bari they can wear you out by talking, or drive you to despair by totally ignoring you. Bari is a contradiction itself. Like its inhabitants.

#### THE MARKET TOWN BUILT BY A SWAGGERER

Dear traveller, this has been just an introduction so far. Or, let’s say, the story of a broken dream. The dream started on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1813, when Joachim Murat, King of Naples and brother-in-law of the great Napoleon, started to build Bari number two. It was a new town, *extra moenia* – which means outside the town walls –, beyond the Illyrian, Roman, Lombard, Byzantine, Norman, Swabian, Angevin, Aragonese and Spanish vestiges, the old core still surviving with its historic heritage and the extreme peculiarity of being the real nucleus, but today representing only a suburb of the new central area. This explains a town made of two, now even three towns, with the “latest” Bari grown out of all proportion beyond the boundary of the railway line. Or rather

a town made of four towns, with the lost satellite district of San Paolo and the exclusive residential neighbourhoods along the roads leading outwards. Four times Bari, four towns finding it difficult to link, being themselves as individualistic as their inhabitants.

Sociologists and town planners, dear traveller, say that Bari number two was designed and built rather like a market than like a town. We know what a market looks like. Many stalls, one after the other, so easily foreseeable that you can see the last one while still being at the first. A pure checkerboard, explains town-planning sociologist Giandomenico Amendola, “without a hierarchy of space nor preset functions”: i.e. so similar from one part to the opposite one, that no centre can be made out, no “highlight”, a wall, a turn, a square, a flower-bed, which might interrupt and break up this ideal harmony, always repeating itself as if repetitiveness were its sole and highest function. Why? Because within a market demand and offer, buyer and seller must be able to meet freely, without obstacles or complications on their route. A continuous face to face like on a ring. This also explains, says sociologist Franco Cassano, the missing of

“any dramatic high spot across its panorama. Something recalling the sunny ruggedness of Palermo, or the threatful sweetness of Naples”. “This dull pattern, unable to stir any emotion,” says Amendola, is rather remembered as a road system than as an actual place: “With no other kind of spaces except those useful for trade, such as squares and gardens”, Bari has extremely few “sites of collective imaginary”. But the same pattern has proved “perfect in producing profit and revenues”. Perfect in fulfilling Bari’s middle-class expectations, since it was created in their own image. A middle class of traders, who – according to Vito Masiello, scholar in Italian studies – follow only the *gospel of Mammonism*; a middle class, or better, a mentality free from ideologies, locked up behind doors with signs and brass plates, “indifferent, sceptical or distrustful of any form of a non-profit culture.” This town pattern is so perfect in its deliberate monotony to make it difficult to tell the houses of the wealthy from the less wealthy ones: beauty and vanity sacrificed for the sake of the more important requirement of not distracting the market with any kind of peculiarity or oddity, of passing unobserved to better strike.

The result is that we know of few other cases like Bari, where a town was better planned to suit its *genius loci*, the spirit of the place. And we can understand this, if we remember that it was built by one of the descendants of the first great middle-class revolutions in history. A middle class eager for purchases and assignments, namely for business, marked by an undying genius for trade. A middle class “off for conquering a leading role”, “determined to leave a mark of their supremacy and their space-planning”, but, after all, “incapable to go beyond the stage of a trade guild and, instead, impose themselves as a ruling class.” A lower-middle and middle class yearning for self-realization. It had already once played a crucial role for the future of Bari: It was the year 1087, when the town equipped and paid the sailors sent to steal the remains of St. Nicholas, in an age when stealing saints conveyed sanctity instead of damnation, and there was a great coming and going of more or less authentic relics, such as miraculous teeth or thorns from the cross; a time, when possessing at least one of them, even if from a second-hand saint, conferred enormous prestige and as much power, apart from the

lucrative benefits derived from pilgrimages and popular faith. And nobody else would have better suited Bari than Joachim Murat. A maniac of *look*, apparently, who might have rivalled Giorgio Armani, and to whom even not perfectly fitting trouser creases could become a source of anguish. He designed his uniforms himself, like the famous green one, with golden cordons, silver ribbons and red boots, which he wore when he conquered the heart of Caroline Bonaparte, sister of the great emperor, who used to consider Murat just a “guappo”, a person capable of heroic exploits thanks to his exhibitionism and his arrogance rather than to his courage. Indeed, wrote journalist Indro Montanelli, Napoleon even considered him an over-ambitious and noisy swaggerer, and a bungler. Murat was good-looking, young, vigorous, “his face framed by a mane of black curls, lit up by a pair of beautiful deep blue eyes”, probably of Arab extraction (his true name was Murad). Pressed by his brother-in-law and his wife, whom his brother-in-law detested as he detested Murat, he chose to devote himself only to women, horses and adventures, having just one weapon to make himself stand out:



popularity. He tried the utmost for the sake of it, to the point that even Napoleon ended up by calling him a “fool”. No wonder that he turned up to lay the foundation stone of the town he had designed on a showy white horse, and that the town itself was designed only to meet the requirements of appearance, like a permanent exhibition, mere good looks and cockiness like himself. Shaped like Paris to the point that the local impudence coined the famous saying “If Paris had the sea, it would be a little Bari”.

A town designed to put itself on display, along with its merchandise. For this purpose, it was necessary that each block should be like a booth you could walk along, where to watch and compare the merchandise, choose to buy or not to buy, have everything at hand. This “market” is perfect also because it succeeds in imposing certain goods and certain prices. A simple shop window ensures success, since it gives you an advantage over those, who don’t have it, a sort of “location revenue”. That is the reason why costs and rents of the premises rocketed, but not to the point of becoming no longer affordable. A mechanism that has not changed, even now, as globalization is

wiping away the small fry to replace it with large international groups, secluding quality in niches and replacing it with a quantity that is the same for everybody.

Well, dear traveller, take a walk through this Bari number two, and tell us if what we told you is true. Tell us whether the market isn’t a real throng “of individuals dominated by the idea of profit.” Tell us whether you felt the exciting but unstable thrill of competition in the air. You won’t find blocks of houses facing the streets, you’ll find stalls, not streets but passages between stalls. And every unit had to be so close to the next that there could be not even a tree or a hedge to distract you, to break up the pace; so, probably knowing that there had to be some open space left to nature, Murat issued an edict ordering that every house had to have a courtyard or garden on the back, like something disgraceful to hide. From the imposing main portals, reports architect Domenico Massimeo, “looking through an interplay of open-air stairs and loggias, you could catch sight of beautiful inner gardens with palms, orange groves and lemon trees”. You can still find a few of them, forgotten in some secluded nook, seeming



*The sea-front promenade called  
Lungomare Augusto Imperatore with  
the Muraglia (city walls), the cathedral's  
bell tower, San Nicola and Santa  
Scolastica in the background*

