

Foreword

by *Carlo Ratti**

Since the post-war period, few places in Italy have managed to transform their reputation in the eyes of international observers as radically as Matera and its surrounding region. For decades, a stigma hung over the area so deeply it seemed irreparable—beginning with the most famous of all literary references, Carlo Levi’s *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. Yet in recent years, readers of major international newspapers have encountered a very different narrative. Just before the pandemic, *The Observer* described Matera as a “diamond in the rough,” *Le Monde* spoke of a “revanche de Matera,” and *The Times* crowned it the new “rock star of Italy,” playing on the double meaning of “rock” in reference to the city’s ancient *Sassi* dwellings.

Behind this chorus of enthusiasm lies the extraordinary work of an entire community, which in 2019 staged one of the most successful editions of the European Capital of Culture in the program’s history—a collective achievement born of collaboration between politics, business, and civil society. Much of the credit, however, belongs to Paolo Verri, the driving force behind the entire enterprise.

Those who know Verri, as I do, are aware that his career had already reached remarkable milestones well before Matera 2019. In 2015, he directed the program of events for the Italian Pavilion at the Milan Expo. Many of the initiatives he has led have had Turin as their stage—from

* Architect and engineer, he heads the architecture firm CRA-Carlo Ratti Associati (Turin and New York) and founded the Senseable City Lab at MIT in Boston.

the Book Fair and the city's strategic plan to the promotion of the 2006 Winter Olympics—helping to give substance to that often-evoked yet elusive ideal of the “creative city.” The publication of *The Urban Paradox* thus arrives at a timely moment, as Turin, after years of uncertainty, seeks once again to look to the future with confidence.

But what, exactly, is the paradox Verri describes—one that clearly transcends the borders of Piedmont? “A city,” he writes, “is a tortoise of extraordinary longevity and beauty, to which no citizen will ever be an Achilles.” The lesson, valid for administrators and planners alike, is that success and decline in an urban setting are inseparable: each generates and sustains the other. “A city,” he warns, “can never say, ‘I made it.’” In other words, “the myth of perfection—of a balanced society, of a fully responsible relationship between power and democracy, between wealth and redistribution—is in crisis.” There is no perfect city, and no infallible citizen; only a dynamic, continuous relationship between the two. And this relationship embodies a paradox, mirroring Achilles' eternal pursuit of the tortoise.

Drawing on his Italian experience, Verri broadens his gaze to a series of international metropolises—Barcelona, Pittsburgh, Lyon, Istanbul, Wrocław, and Tokyo—that together outline the shared challenges of building the future. In the face of climate change, deindustrialization, automation, and geopolitical strain, the tools of culture may seem fragile. Yet they remain the essential ground on which identity, belonging, and, above all, civic participation can be rebuilt.

Accepting the paradox of cities does not mean rejecting change. As the author rightly observes, a “smart city” can hardly exist where “smart citizens” are lacking. Still, it would be mistaken to see digital innovation as serving only efficiency. The most interesting examples in this book show precisely how technology can be harnessed for inclusion and participation.

The chapters on Milan and Turin are particularly revealing when read together. A cosmopolitan *torinese*, Verri avoids the bitterness that has often marked local discourse. He regards the Lombard capital without envy, with curiosity—acknowledging both its strengths and its limits. With the end of the industrial era, both cities were forced to move beyond what had long defined their influence. Each pursued renewal through a major event—the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin and Expo

2015 in Milan. But while Milan seized the opportunity to design a medium- and long-term revitalization plan, Turin settled for a temporary repositioning that quickly lost momentum. “Behold, Turin,” Verri writes, “which loses Fiat and then returns to the top, loses everything again because its ruling class no longer has any external enemies, fights against itself and, like Cronos, eats its own children.” The Savoy capital must again ignite a process of innovation—one that, in my view, should begin with a renewed alliance between Milan and Turin. From historical rivals to partners, they could form a single metropolitan axis spanning the entire northwest of Italy.

Ultimately, Verri’s invitation is to use the leverage of “big events” as catalysts for lasting urban innovation—but only if they serve as the beginning of a broader, long-term transformation. Matera was able to reinvent itself as a European Capital of Culture precisely because it forged a new shared identity: from a cause of scandal to a source of pride. And even if the urban paradox remains—if Achilles still struggles to catch the tortoise—the two will at least have advanced together, covering a good part of the road.