



The Sansevero chapel, Naples's most visited cultural site. Opposite: Vico Fico al Purgatorio, in the city's historical center.



VERY GOOD BONES

NAPLES HAS LONG BEEN A CITY OF SHADOWS, BUT THANKS TO THE EFFORTS OF A FEW PASSIONATE CITIZENS, THE TREASURES THAT LIE BEHIND ITS SHUTTERED DOORS ARE FINALLY BEING UNCOVERED.

BY WILLEM MARX
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THE CAPODIMONTE IN NAPLES SLOPES up from the impoverished neighborhood of Rione Sanità. Close to its peak, beside an unremarkable church, a worn set of stone stairs leads down to a small entranceway. Several times a week a thirtysomething Sanità resident and guide named Enzo Porzio crosses the threshold. When I visited the site with him, he paused while his eyes adjusted to the gloom, then entered. More stairs descended to a vast arcaded city of the dead.

The Catacombs of San Gennaro date from the second century, a time when early Christians from across the Mediterranean began to settle in Naples (*Neapolis*—new city), and the teachings of a long-dead carpenter's son from Galilee gained adherents among the region's Greek-speaking natives and more recent arrivals from imperial Rome. Images of Jesus adorn a handful of tombs, alongside saints and bishops.

The eponymous San Gennaro was interred here in the 5th century A.D., and his tomb became the city's first major tourist draw. As a consequence, the soft, porous rock beneath the Capodimonte was hollowed out continuously for generations, forming an extraordinary necropolis of passages and chapels. The expansion continued well into the 8th century, when one of these consecrated caverns served as the seat of the Naples episcopate. As Porzio reminded me, the catacombs also served as bomb shelters during World War II.

But until several years ago, much of this remarkable site remained buried beneath centuries of mud and accumulated debris, with just a fraction of it accessible. It is perhaps appropriate that one of the greatest treasures in this beguiling but occasionally sinister city was hidden underground, shrouded in darkness, rendered essentially invisible by a bureaucratic fog that dates to the foundation of the modern Italian state. And it is fitting that the effort required to unearth this cultural monument was a largely private one.



For decades, local and national authorities have generally failed to recognize, monetize, or prioritize Naples's unparalleled cultural heritage, abandoning it to the predations of time, civic dysfunction, and organized crime. But ordinary citizens and nonprofits are working to save the city from these forces, and their efforts are beginning to bear fruit for visitors. In the case of the San Gennaro Catacombs, for instance, neither the Catholic Church nor the city government can claim credit for the thousands of tourists who now flock each year to the subterranean marvel. Instead, the man responsible is a local parish priest, who operated outside the traditional hierarchies.

Don Antonio Loffredo, Porzio's boss and mentor, arrived in Rione Sanità in 2000, after a stint working with heroin addicts in a Naples suburb where he learned firsthand how the city's

public finances frequently failed to solve underlying social problems. He said youth unemployment in Sanità was at 60 percent when he took charge of the neighborhood's Basilica Santa Maria, and he focused on finding purpose for the youngsters who thronged the area's alleyways and *piazzettas*. After taking dozens of them—including Porzio—on educational trips to cities like Barcelona and Paris, Loffredo began to realize that there was a project with great potential under their own feet. The mostly abandoned catacombs could yield real value, financial and societal, for his forgotten flock.

For a year starting in 2007 he fought officials at the Vatican, which owned the land, to have them open the site to a paying public. He launched a cooperative that trained local youth to act as tour guides, cajoled leading Neapolitan businessmen to become sponsors,



and eventually won a grant of more than \$600,000 for renovation from a private foundation that supports southern Italian culture. A Milan-based lighting specialist donated his time and expertise, flying in to work on the project regularly for more than a year. He installed an innovative lighting system in a place that for a millennium and a half had only ever been illuminated by the odd candle or torch. This allowed scholars to unearth, clean, and preserve many of the tombs, with help from groups of volunteers who had grown up in Rione Sanità oblivious to the archaeological treasures beneath them.

Catacomb visitors now frequently venture out into nearby streets that would never have graced the guidebooks, bringing business to shopkeepers and craftsmen, which in turn has boosted employment. "It's amazing to think

how many things are happening here as a result of this project," said Porzio as I prepared to leave the catacomb complex and walk across the viaduct that separates down-at-the-heels Rione Sanità from the rest of the city center. He noted that artists have begun to move into the famously crime-ridden neighborhood, bringing with them sculptures, paintings, and colorful murals. "It's fighting the darkness with art that gives light. Beauty is the object and the instrument."

Farther down the hill is a 16th-century farmhouse that became an 18th-century palazzo and has just reopened as a 21st-century exhibition space. The 45,200-square-foot Casa Morra is the largest private contemporary art institution in the city. Giuseppe Morra, a Neapolitan gallery owner and collector for more than four decades, has overseen the building's ten-year

Above: The Teatro di San Carlo, the world's oldest opera house. Opposite: The 1,600-year-old San Gennaro Catacombs.



Left: The contemporary art gallery Casa Morra. Opposite: The Girolamini library.

FOR DECADES, LOCAL AND NATIONAL AUTHORITIES HAVE GENERALLY FAILED TO RECOGNIZE, MONETIZE, OR PRIORITIZE NAPLES'S UNPARALLELED CULTURAL HERITAGE.

reconstruction. Dressed all in black with a pair of blue-rimmed glasses, Morra ascended the building's imposing main staircase and settled on a couch in a high-ceilinged room with huge, ornate mirrors and views of the glittering bay.

Morra has little faith in the government's ability to revitalize the city's cultural patrimony. "There's no such thing as a politician who can understand artistic people," he said. Last year he curated an exhibition on the American neo-avant-garde, which included works from Marcel Duchamp and composer John Cage, but Morra says he has always supported local artists too. "We are trying to spread culture in the neigh-

borhood," he said. As part of that effort, he founded a residency in the palazzo for roughly a dozen young artists. With this burgeoning network of talent, Morra hopes to develop from scratch a new artists' quarter for his city. He is a modern inheritor of a tradition in Naples that stretches back centuries, to a time when aristocratic patronage generated such an overflowing bounty of artistic wealth that the city's current administrators now struggle to maintain it.

Nowhere is that challenge more apparent than at the Teatro di San Carlo, the world's oldest opera house. In the recent past the San Carlo has faced financial difficulties far graver

than those afflicting its often cash-strapped global peers. On my most recent visit the evening's performance was scheduled not in the cathedral-like San Carlo but at the smaller, adjoining Teatrino di Corte, a jewel-box theater that the opera-mad monarch Don Carlo Borbone had constructed inside his royal palace. The music of Giovanni Paisiello's *La Grotta di Trofonio*, first performed in Naples 232 years ago, soared to the ceiling's bucolic frescoes, entrancing the few spectators perched along the horseshoe rows of red velvet chairs. The royal balcony sat empty. Set lights flickered on occasion, and the supertitles began obstinately out of sync, then vanished altogether. The libretto was rich with Neapolitan dialect that often strayed far from modern Italian, but toward the end of the first act an all-too-apt phrase jumped out at me. "*Ma pecunia niente affè*," sang one buffoonish character. "There really is no cash."

"I lose money when I use the Teatrino," admitted Rosanna Purchia, who has run the San Carlo, a neoclassical shrine to Italian opera, for the best part of a decade. Sitting in her cavernous office, she pulled on a cigarette. "When I do *Grotta*, I lose money. When I do *Traviata*, that helps balance the accounts." A decade ago the San Carlo's mounting debts prompted the appointment of public administrators, followed by a \$90 million restoration. Since then Purchia, who had spent the morning at emergency meetings with her unions, has slashed staffing and upped the frequency of performances.

"In Italy the administrators have no certainty at all about income," lamented Purchia, exhaling smoke. "Everything can be changed in a moment by the central government, city, and regional government." With contributions from the public purse stretched and frequently late, the San Carlo's management is aiming to double the share of its annual budget derived from private funds. But despite a new tax incentive introduced by the Ministry of Culture in 2014 to encourage philanthropy, much of Italy's wealth remains locked in the country's north. Meanwhile poverty, corruption, and bureaucratic inertia stalk Italy's southern Mezzogiorno region and particularly its largest city.

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A vendor on
Via dei
Tribunali.

“IT’S STILL ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CITIES IN THE WORLD. IT’S EASY TO BECOME COMPLACENT.”

“IT’S A PROBLEM OF ALL LEVELS OF government,” said Antonio Pariante, who campaigns to preserve his city’s neglected architectural gems. I met him one evening on Piazza Dante, standing beneath a statue of the medieval poet, just a few feet from two armored military vehicles. A dozen soldiers in red berets lounged nearby. “It’s been an emergency posture the last few months,” said Pariante, gesturing at them. Gangs of kids involved in a turf war over drugs, he explained. “They ride up on their *motorini*, bang, bang, bang, then it’s finished,” he added. Naples recorded the highest murder rate among Italy’s major cities in 2014, the most recent year for which such statistics are available. The country’s security services say that around a quarter of the murders in southern Italy involve criminal organizations like the Camorra, the powerful regional mafia.

A light rain began to fall as we passed under the arched Port’Alba entrance to the historic center. Graffiti covered most walls. Every few steps Pariante pointed to a darkened church doorway, recalling the well-worn nickname for Naples, *la città con più chiese che case*—the city with more churches than houses. Smiling wryly, he played with the phrase’s pronunciation in Italian, since every church we passed was also *chiusa*—closed. “In Rome all the churches are open from the morning to the evening. In Florence, all open. Venice, all open. Naples, no. There’s a lack of political will,” he said. “Naples is still paying the price of history.”

After the Bourbon dynasty that ruled the kingdom encompassing Naples and Sicily collapsed in 1860, Italy’s new sovereigns from Piedmont, in the far north, allowed the southern economy to gradually stagnate. This isolation was the start of an ongoing period of neglect from the Italian central government that still angers Neapolitans, as their city’s physical fabric continues to deteriorate. When Naples first sought UNESCO World Heritage status back in the early 1990s, the city’s hundreds of churches formed an integral part of that application. But at the last official count more than 200 were kept indefinitely closed to the public. Despite the European Union’s allocation ten years ago of more than \$100 million for more than two dozen specific restoration projects in the city, only a small fraction have been formally completed, and the official funding offer has consequently expired.

At one point on our evening tour Pariante came to a stop at the Girolamini church, which has a magnificent 18th-century façade.



Cristo Velato,
at the
Sansevero
chapel.

Declared a national monument more than 150 years ago, it has been fenced off from the street. Pariante described it with enthusiasm as “one of the most beautiful in Naples, in the world, a patrimony of humanity.” But the complex has been largely closed for the past 75 years, and inside, he told me, there was debris strewn across the floor and major cracks that split the priceless frescoes. “Terrible, terrible, terrible,” he said. Attached to the church is the Girolamini library, which houses priceless editions of some of Europe’s greatest works of literature. A few years ago thousands of volumes went missing under the auspices of its previous director, Marino Massimo De Caro, who is currently under house arrest. The prosecutor in that case, Giovanni Melillo, told me the library theft was a unique case, but that wealthy and fragmented criminal networks in Naples still pose a sizable problem. “Corruption,” he posited, “is the privileged entry point for organized crime into the private and public sector.”

IT WAS GROWING DARK AS WE WANDERED deeper into the ancient warren of alleys and squares. A complex system of rusted scaffolding had been erected between a tottering

palazzo and a small chapel on the other side of the street, the two buildings seeming to counterbalance one another. Taxis and scooters zipped through a gap in the scaffold structure, which was supposed to be temporary, but had stood untouched ever since the most recent earthquake to strike the city—in 1980. “However little the government does here, it’s still one of the most beautiful cities in the world. It’s easy for them to be complacent,” Pariante said. He singled out a faded piece of paper, dangling from a nearby wall and all but invisible to the hordes of tourists traipsing along the Via dei Tribunali. The damp scrap pointed to the nearby Sansevero chapel, home to one of the city’s most important pieces of religious art, the *Veiled Christ*. The *Cristo Velato* by Giuseppe Sanmartino is a world-renowned sculpture from 1753 depicting Jesus after death, draped in a shroud. The carving is so exquisite that for decades visitors believed the chapel’s patron, an alchemy-obsessed aristocrat named Prince Raimondo di Sangro, must have discovered a technique to transform cloth into marble.

Despite what Pariante considered negligent public signposting by the city, di Sangro’s per-

sonal chapel is today Naples’s most visited museum, evidenced by the crush of people streaming through the entrance when I arrived one bright fall morning. And like many other successful endeavors here, it is also privately owned. Fabrizio Masucci, a direct descendant of its original patron, manages it. When we met outside he apologized for the noise from a mechanical digger that was churning up the street. The nuisance was, in fact, a rare indicator of progress. It was Masucci’s father who had first proposed clearing the space outside the chapel for pedestrians, with the addition of a handful of benches and some lighting. It had taken more than two decades for the necessary permits to be issued. “Every time a city administration changed, we had to start again,” he told me over espresso at a nearby café. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the family has never sought public financing to run the chapel, since it would likely mean a loss of operational independence and potentially even more protracted delays to future restoration. “Naples is ultimately a city that has many reasons to attract visitors,” Masucci concluded, hands opening wide across the table. “But there is a lot of work to do.” ♦