NEW INHERIT

THE PLAYBOOK

INNOVATION 4 HERITAGE
NURTURING TALENT THROUGH
ADAPTIVE REUSE OF HERITAGE
AND CO-CREATION OF CULTURAL
SPACE ACTIVATION

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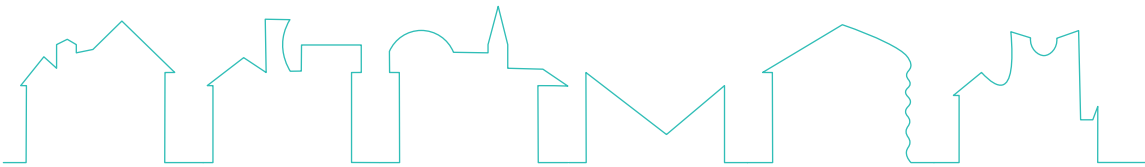
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WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

WHAT IF HERITAGE BUILDINGS COULD BECOME ENGINES OF CO-CREATION AND COMMUNITY?

The NEW INHERIT Playbook is an invitation to re-think heritage as spaces for creativity, collaboration, and community life and not as static monuments of the past. Across Europe, many culturally significant buildings carry deep historical value, yet remain underused, overlooked, or disconnected from contemporary society. This book explores how these spaces can be reimagined, reopened and reactivated.

At its core, this Playbook tells the story of how heritage meets innovation. It captures a journey of co-creation[1], experimentation, and learning, led by a multidisciplinary European consortium of eight organisations from Germany, Belgium, Spain, Cyprus, Italy, and Bulgaria. The question is no longer about how to preserve cultural monuments and buildings protected by state regulations. But how to transform these heritage spaces into platforms for people, ideas, and collective futures.

Through the project, six heritage buildings - from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries - became our testbeds. Located in Weimar, Brussels, Omodos, Sofia, Palermo, and Murcia, these spaces were transformed into Agora Cultural Labs: open and dynamic environments, where communities, creatives, and local actors come together to explore new uses, narratives, and forms of belonging.

This is a Playbook for action. It shares a empirical framework on how adaptive reuse[2] can spark social innovation and nurture creative talent. It offers insights into participatory

(1) See more information about Co-creation in the Appendix under Glossary.

(2) See more information about Adaptive Reuse in the Appendix under Glossary.

processes, its challenges, and lessons learned. However, this Playbook is not a manual for restoring heritage.

It is not about architectural perfection, technical blueprints, or large-scale investments in heritage renovation. You will not find step-by-step construction guidelines, nor definitive formulas for "successful" redevelopment. This book is also not about preserving heritage as something untouchable, frozen in time, or disconnected from present-day realities. It questions the idea that heritage spaces must remain static, exclusive, or accessible only to a limited audience. Moreover, it is not a collection of ready-made solutions, because there is no one-size-fits-all model for activating cultural spaces[3]. Every place, every community, and every practice is different, and this book embraces that contextuality.

(3) See more information about Cultural Space in the Appendix under Glossary.

Finally, this is not a top-down narrative. It does not present transformation as something designed solely by experts or institutions. Instead, it challenges traditional power structures in urban and cultural development, opening space for collective authorship between communities, cultural practitioners, artists, local actors, and institutions.

This Playbook is an invitation to imagine differently, and to see heritage spaces not only as reminders of the past, but as platforms for new futures. Inside these pages, you will encounter stories of collaboration, challenges, creative interventions, lessons learned, and evolving ideas from across countries. Some initiatives succeeded, some struggled, and many are still unfolding, but they reveal the value of co-creation and shared stewardship in transforming heritage.

More importantly, we hope it encourages you not only to read, but also to play, and become part of the ongoing conversation about how we shape the spaces we share.

Dr. Ammalia Podlaszewska

Project Leader, NEW INHERIT on behalf of the Consortium

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

WHY DOES ADAPTIVE REUSE MATTER AT THE PRESENT TIME?

Across Europe, many heritage buildings stand underused while cities and communities face growing social, cultural, and environmental challenges. At the same time, community spaces are shrinking, cultural sectors are increasingly precarious, and many young people struggle to find places where they can participate, create, and feel a sense of belonging. Climate change and unsustainable construction practices also force us to rethink how we build, use, and take care of the environment where we live.

Heritage in contemporary life becomes even more relevant in the face of the faster urbanisation and expansion into wild landscapes. To be contemporary is to live in a world where "all that is solid melts into air"[4], no matter if it is on infrastructure, mobility or housing. Adapting today's heritage and integrating it into our cities can help us slow the inevitable process of "melting" and offer the possibility to preserve and create collective meaning.

In this context, adaptive reuse becomes more than a heritage strategy, it becomes a social, cultural, and ecological necessity. Reusing existing buildings is not only about preserving history; it is about reducing waste, strengthening local identity, supporting cultural ecosystems, and creating spaces where communities can reconnect and imagine shared futures together.

However, conventional approaches of Adaptive Reuse of Cultural Heritage[5] (ARCH) have primarily focused on

(4) As the american author Marshall Berman rightfully notes, quoting Marx (Berman, 1982: 15).

(5) See more information about Cultural Heritage in the Appendix under Glossary.

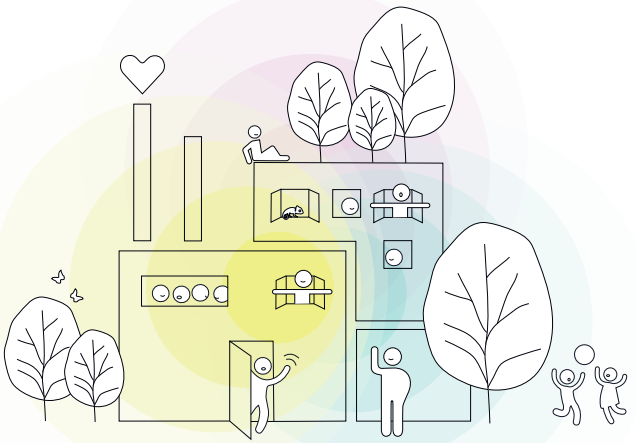
architectural conservation, engineering, and physical restoration. It seems obvious that preserved heritage spaces cannot ensure long-term sustainability without strategies that foster continuous governance[6], cultural relevance, and contemporary use.

In this project, we believe that heritage spaces hold untapped potential to become platforms for collaboration, experimentation, learning, and civic participation. When communities are actively involved in shaping these spaces, adaptive reuse can help counter social fragmentation, empower local actors, support emerging cultural practitioners, and foster more inclusive and resilient cities and regions.

We unraveled, and want to share with you in the following chapters, that successful adaptive reuse depends on aligning physical interventions with social innovation[7] and economic viability.

(6) See more information about a related term, Collaborative Governance, in the Appendix under Glossary.

(7) See more information about Social Innovation the Appendix under Glossary.



WHAT WILL THE READER GAIN?

This Playbook will help you better understand how heritage spaces can become active, inclusive, and meaningful places for communities. Through the experiences, methods, and lessons gathered across the NEW INHERIT Project, readers will discover how adaptive reuse goes far beyond restoring buildings. It is about creating spaces where people can connect, collaborate, and learn.

One of the key ideas explored throughout this book is PLACEMAKING: the process of transforming spaces into vibrant environments that foster belonging, participation, and community life[8]. In the context of adaptive reuse, placemaking helps to ensure that heritage sites remain relevant and connected to the people who use them today, while still respecting their historical and cultural value.

At the same time, this Playbook encourages readers to critically reflect on some of the challenges connected to cultural activation and urban transformation. Across Europe, cultural regeneration projects can sometimes prioritise tourism, branding, or investment over local needs[9]. When this happens, heritage spaces risk becoming disconnected from the communities around them. This book explores why meaningful community involvement is essential for creating spaces that are not only attractive, but also socially inclusive, accessible, and rooted in local identity.

(8) One of the founders of the idea, Jane Jacobs (1961), noted, placemaking involves creating spaces that reflect the identity of the people who use them.

(9) Urban sociologist Sharon Zukin (2010) highlights how placemaking can lead to gentrification, revitalised spaces cater more to affluent visitors than residents.

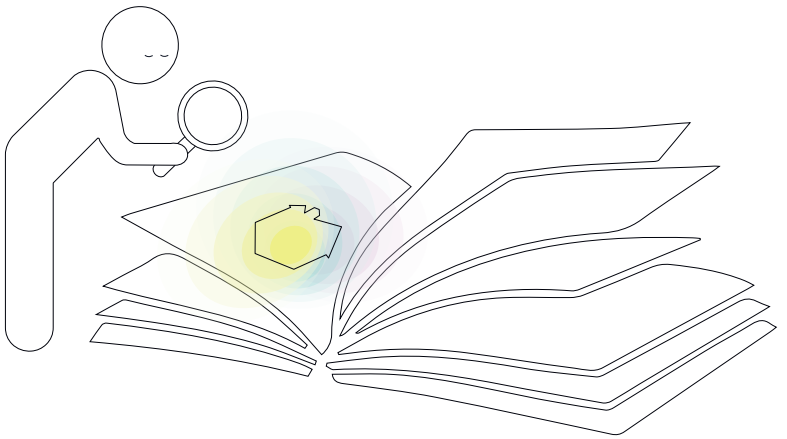
Readers will gain practical insights into:

- **how to involve communities in adaptive reuse,**
- **how cultural activation can strengthen local identity and social cohesion,**
- **how co-creation and participation can build long-term ownership,**
- **and how heritage spaces can support creativity, learning, and civic engagement[10].**

The Playbook also highlights the realities and complexities of adaptive reuse. There is no single formula for success. Projects often need to balance preservation and innovation, economic sustainability[11] and cultural values, environmental responsibility and everyday usability. Through examples, reflections, and experiences from different European contexts, the book shares both opportunities and challenges that emerge throughout these community processes.

(10) See more information about Civic Engagement in the Appendix under Glossary.

(11) See more information about Economic Sustainability in the Appendix under Glossary.



HOW TO READ THE PLAYBOOK?

This Playbook is for everyone who cares about places, whether you are a cultural practitioner, artist, architect, community organiser, student, activist, researcher, or simply someone curious about how heritage spaces can become more alive, inclusive, and meaningful.

So, feel free to use this book creatively:

- **take inspiration either from general or specific methods and stories;**
- **adapt tools to your own needs, combine ideas, or adapt them;**
- **challenge the approaches presented on the playbook by thinking critically;**
- **and create new practices that make sense for your local context.**

That is the reason why we intentionally call this publication a Playbook, because it is not meant to be read like a strict manual or technical guide. Instead, it is an invitation to explore, experiment, reflect, and adapt ideas to your own context. Therefore, the main chapters tell story about:

Chapter 0: The motivation behind the NEW INHERIT Project and therefore this Playbook: The Why, What and How.

Chapter 1: The NEW INHERIT vision, its objectives, partnership structure, and working methodology.

Chapter 2: The importance of understanding local realities before activating heritage spaces; including participatory action research and Competences for action.

Chapter 3: The Agora Cultural Lab is the core methodology of NEW INHERIT. The six Agora Cultural Labs in Germany, Belgium, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Italy, and Spain are showcased.

Chapter 4: The major lessons learned throughout the project; including the project's overall impact and our recommendations for practical guidelines.

Chapter 5: This chapter positions adaptive reuse as a broader social and political movement: one that sees heritage not only as something to preserve, but as a platform for democratic participation, cultural innovation, sustainability, and community-driven transformation.

Throughout the Playbook, some topics are intentionally simplified or summarized to make the content more accessible and easier to navigate. If you would like to explore certain themes more deeply, additional resources, links, and references are provided throughout the publication.

To help you navigate the Playbook, you will also find the Appendix, under Chapter 6:

- **interesting and relevant bibliography,**
- **a glossary explaining key concepts and terminology about the thematic of the book,**
- **and practical resources and tools.**

You do not need to read this Playbook from beginning to end in one sequence. You can move between chapters, return to sections later, and use it as an evolving resource for your own practice, projects, and conversations.

Last but not least, have fun playing with this book!

THE PROJECT

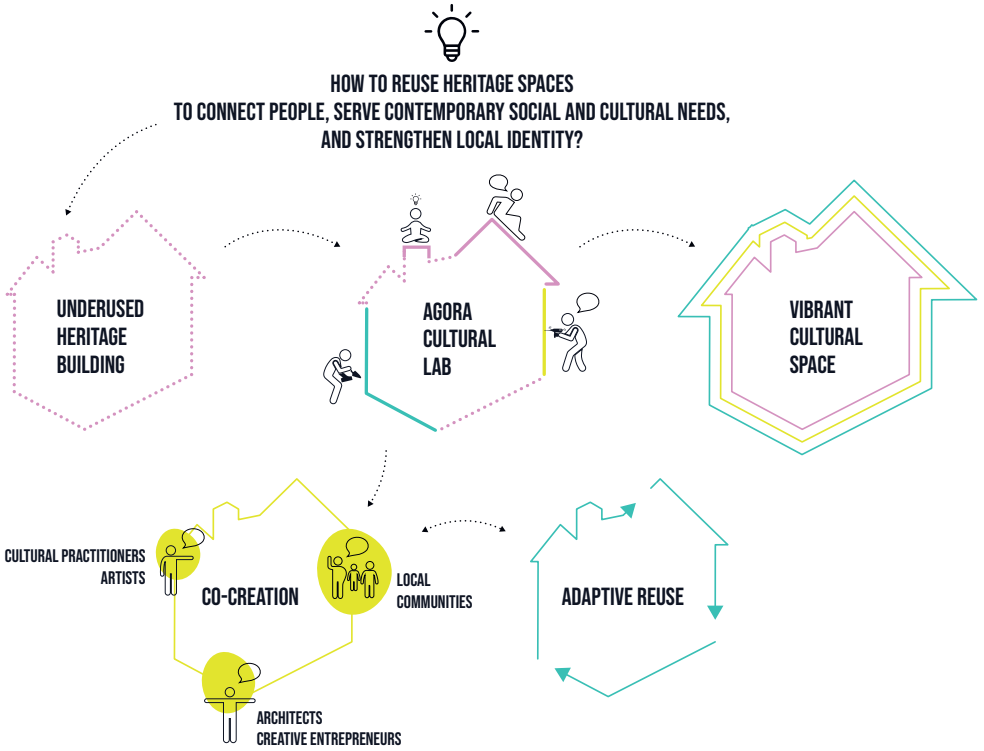
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1.1 NEW INHERIT AT A GLANCE

NEW INHERIT was created to support cultural and creative communities by turning underused heritage buildings into vibrant spaces for culture, collaboration, learning, and social innovation. The project explored how co-creative adaptive reuse can unlock new opportunities for cultural practitioners, artists, architects, creative entrepreneurs, and local communities. By doing this, NEW INHERIT transformed heritage spaces into places[1] where people connect, create projects, and strengthen local identity.

(1) See more information about Place Identity in the Appendix under Glossary.



With our experience in non-formal education, placemaking, social entrepreneurship, and community engagement[2], the consortium developed practical tools and learning approaches that help communities rethink how heritage buildings can serve contemporary social and cultural needs. Community consultation and participation were central throughout the process, which included experimenting with new ways of using heritage spaces for cultural activities, creative work, workshops, exhibitions, social initiatives, and community-driven programming.

(2) See more information about Community Engagement in the Appendix under Glossary.

PROJECT DESIGN

NEW INHERIT was built around the idea of the Living Lab — a collaborative and community-based approach where people work together to experiment, learn, and create solutions in real-life environments. The project focused on testing them directly within heritage spaces together with communities, cultural practitioners, researchers, municipalities, and local organisations. In this project, we refer to them as Agora Cultural Lab[3].

(3) Skip to Chapter 3 for an in-depth look at Agora Cultural Lab.

Agora Cultural Lab framework helps to create open and participatory environments where different stakeholders could co-create new ways of reusing heritage buildings for culture, learning, creativity, and social innovation.



HERITAGE VALUE RECOGNITION

The project started by exploring the cultural, social, and local realities surrounding heritage spaces in the six partner countries. Partners researched how communities interact with heritage, what challenges they face, and how cultural spaces can become more inclusive and accessible.

This phase also focused on identifying important skills and competences related to placemaking, cultural entrepreneurship, and community activation.

STAKEHOLDER[4] CO-CREATION



In the second phase, partners co-created the Agora Cultural Labs, where we organised local workshops, discussions, and exchanges with communities, experts, and cultural actors. These activities helped shaping the NEW INHERIT Tool Package, as a collection of methods, tools, and approaches for adaptive reuse, placemaking, and cultural activation.

Then, the tools were tested directly in local heritage sites through pilot activities and participatory experiments. This allowed partners to learn what works best in different contexts and how communities can actively participate in shaping cultural spaces.

(4) See more information about Stakeholder in the Appendix under Glossary.

ENVISIONING AND KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

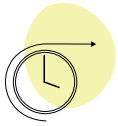


The third phase focused on sharing knowledge and strengthening collaboration across Europe. The project launched its digital platform and communication tools with the goal of exchanging experiences, showcasing results, and connecting stakeholders.

During this phase, the project also developed the Community Cultural Ambassador[5] Network, bringing together young cultural practitioners and local changemakers who helped activating spaces, organising activities and engaging communities. The project also developed recommendations for future adaptive reuse and cultural activation practices.

(5) See more information about Cultural Ambassador in the Appendix under Glossary.

ACTION & ESTABLISHED COMMUNITY



The final phases focused on ensuring that the project's impact[6] would continue beyond its period. Partners worked on integrating the project results into their future activities, expanding networks, sharing tools, and continuing community engagement.

The project aimed not only to activate heritage spaces temporarily, but to create long-term cultural ecosystems

(6) See more information about a related term, Collective Impact, in the Appendix under Glossary.

where communities, organisations, and local actors could continue collaborating, learning, and developing new initiatives together.

WHO ARE WE[7]?

The consortium brings together experienced partners from six european countries with different, but complementary, expertise and backgrounds.

Our consortium brought together partners who have:

- **Relevant experience and skills.** Each partner contributed knowledge and competences[8] related to adaptive reuse, cultural activation, community engagement, education, placemaking, or creative entrepreneurship, helping to shape the project's innovative approach.
- **Strong commitment and shared motivation.** Partners were chosen for their reliability, active engagement, and genuine interest in the project's goals and long-term impact.
- **Connection to local communities and target groups.** All partners have strong networks and direct access to local communities, cultural practitioners, and young people. This helps ensure that the project results can continue to be used, developed, and integrated into future activities beyond the project itself.

Last but not least, we valued cross-border cooperation as European values embedded into the project. The consortium includes partners from different European countries and from various types of organisations, including cultural organisations, municipalities, universities, and community-based initiatives, as the following:

CGE Erfurt e.V. is a non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Erfurt, founded in 2005 and run by migrant-background professionals. Within the framework of non-formal education, CGE empowers participants and the

(7) See more information about parterns website in the Appendix under Resources.

(8) See more information about a related term, Cultural Competence, in the Appendix under Glossary.

respective (often marginalized) communities as active agents in their learning journey. CGE is the lead coordinator of the New InHerit project.

Urban Foxes is a multi-disciplinary placemaking collective based in Brussels. Through youth work, the facilitation and creation of participatory processes and interventions on different levels (from local and regional, to national and European) they aim to successfully fulfil a important mission: improve urban wellbeing.

Up Project is a medium-sized Enterprise located in Murcia which focuses on digital tools and innovative solutions. UP Project is also in close collaboration with the Institute of Cultural Managers of the Region of Murcia, which is a non -profit organization that brings together 57 professionals of the cultural management of different disciplinary areas.

Emphasys Centre offers a wide range of non-formal training courses and has trained a large number of participants from Cyprus and all over Europe over the last few years. Emphasys is experienced in the implementation of projects promoting cultural heritage and the re-development of rural areas through entrepreneurship.

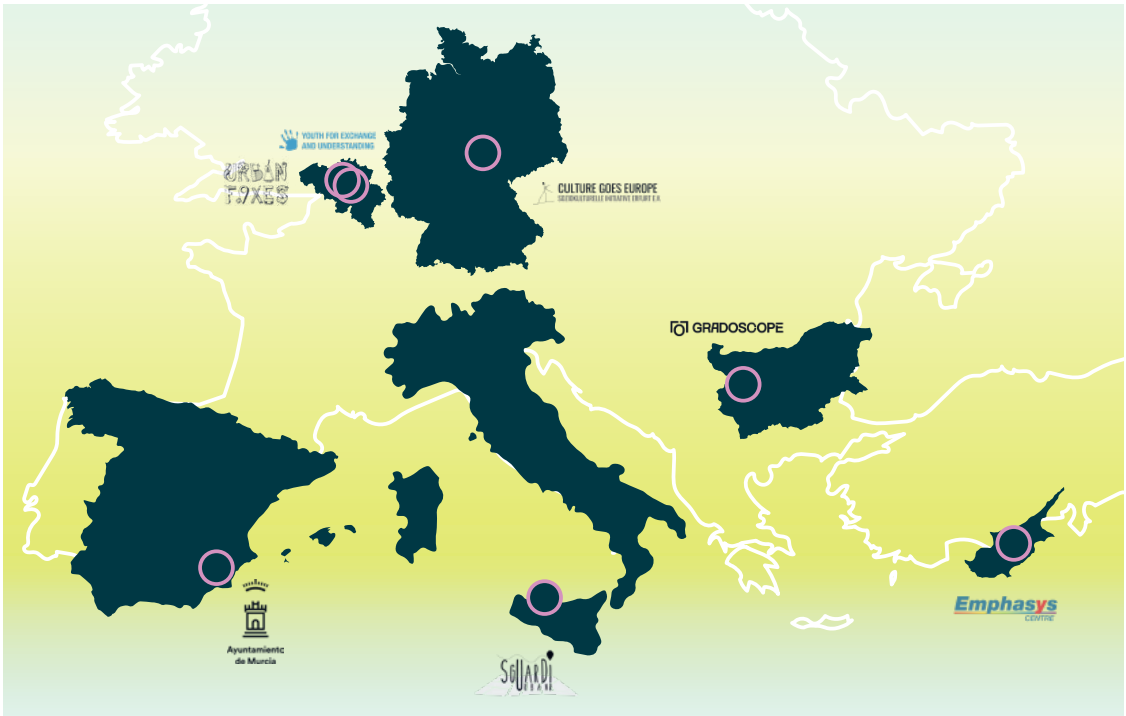
YEU International, is an international Non-Governmental Youth Organization established in 1986. It is a member of the European Youth Forum (YFJ) and Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP) in Brussels and officially reconized by the European Union and the Council of Europe. YEU has a long experience in organising successful youth projects throughout the years.

Sguardi Urbani was founded in Palermo in 2014 with the mission to promote urban sustainability and to foster citizen participation. Their main activities regard the planning and implementation of non formal education workshops with youngsters, urban regeneration projects in the field of participatory planning and deliberative democracy.

Gradoscope is a Design Association Initiatives with the main vision to bring the development of the local culture of architecture, urban environment through partnership with international networks. The association is one of the first Bulgarian organizations to become a partner of the European Commission's large-scale initiative - New European Bauhaus NEB, which ensures the link between the European Green Deal and the urban environment.

Municipality of Murcia has ample experience in the management of culture and cultural heritage, managing and re-designing public spaces and both historical as well as natural heritage. Furthermore, Murcia is a member of Eurocities network, in which they co-chair the Digital Citizenship Taskforce.

Schematic map of the partners location



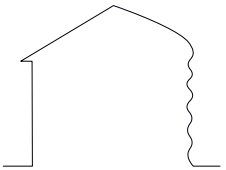
1.2 PROJECT VISION

From early initiation of the project's concept, the NEW INHERIT Project wanted to challenge the traditional understanding of heritage preservation[9] by asking a simple but transformative question:

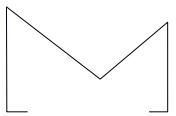
(9) See more information about a related term, Cultural Preservation, in the Appendix under Glossary.

What if underused heritage buildings and spaces could become laboratories for new social, cultural, and economic possibilities?

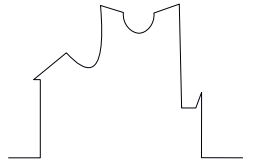
At the heart of NEW INHERIT, we believed that adaptive reuse is not only about restoring buildings, but about activating people, relationships, and collective imagination. The project envisioned heritage spaces as dynamic ecosystems to shape more inclusive and resilient futures together.



ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

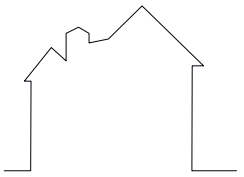


CO-CREATION

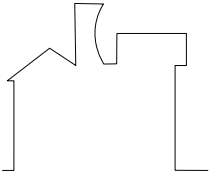


TRANSFORMATIVE VISION

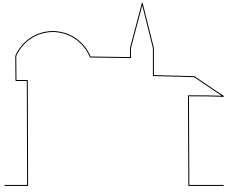
FOUNDATION FOR **ADAPTIVE REUSE**



SHARED STEWARDSHIP



EMERGING TALENT



CIRCULAR ECONOMY PRINCIPLES

INCLUSIVE LIVING LABS FOR CO-CREATION

Through the creation of the Agora Cultural Labs, NEW INHERIT introduced experimental spaces for co-creation, participation, and cultural innovation. These Labs became platforms where local communities could test ideas, prototype new uses, and explore how heritage sites can respond to the contemporary social, environmental, and economic challenges.

The Agora Cultural Labs consist of six heritage sites across Europe. They serve as living labs, in which we developed and validated the inclusive model of adaptive heritage reuse. In each Agora Cultural Lab, Cultural Ambassadors and the local teams implemented play-based and participatory activities, ensuring engagement by those directly involved in the testbeds. Shared templates and protocols[10] provided consistency across testbeds while allowing local adaptations.

(10) Skip to Sub-chapter 2.3 for an in-depth look at Competences for Action.

As a substantial body of participatory engagement and local knowledge production, key elements of the action research were community consultation processes conducted across the six New InHerit testbeds. They unfolded within distinct spatial, institutional, and socio-cultural environments, each of which significantly shaped the design, tone, and outcomes of local engagements.



Img. 01 (Community consultation)



Img. 02 (Cultural Ambassadors)

NURTURING EMERGING TALENTS

The project also introduced a new generation of cultural roles emerging from adaptive reuse processes in the form of Cultural Ambassadors and mentorship. We launched an Open Call for Emerging Talents through online applications in 6 partner countries. The selected candidates were chosen based on their visionary approach, their experiences and their mission to co-create in their testbeds.

Participants successfully developed skills in cultural space activation and adaptive reuse of heritage spaces, contributed to local activities, promoted non-formal education, and ensured the inclusion of socially excluded groups within these processes. The Cultural Ambassadors[11] program involved continuous engagement in the Agora Cultural Labs over a 12-month period. In this sense, NEW INHERIT positioned heritage activation as a driver for new forms of employment, learning, and civic participation within the cultural and creative sectors.

(11) Skip to Sub-chapter 3.2 for an in-depth look at Cultural Ambassadors.

EUROPEAN IDENTITY & SHARED SENSE OF BELONGING

Through NEW INHERIT, the consortium envisions to promote the importance of Europe's cultural heritage[12] in relation to urban planning and sustainable development through non-formal education activities built on the creation of synergies with the community and stakeholders. Europe's rich cultural heritage, dynamic cultural and creative sectors strengthen European identity, creating a sense of belonging. Through different activities, the project expects to empower young people to use culture in order to promote active citizenship for urban activism, common values, inclusion and intercultural dialogue within Europe.

At the same time, the project connected adaptive reuse with broader transitions toward sustainability and resilience. By integrating circular economy[13] principles, low-impact interventions, local knowledge, and collaborative economies, NEW INHERIT demonstrated how heritage activation can contribute to greener, more socially connected, and culturally vibrant communities.



Importantly, NEW INHERIT reframed governance as a creative practice. The project explored how temporary use, grassroots initiatives and culture-led social innovation can transform not only spaces, but also the ways institutions and communities collaborate. The focus shifted from top-down management toward shared stewardship, where heritage becomes a collectively negotiated and evolving common good.

(12) See more information about Cultural Heritage in the Appendix under Glossary.

(13) See more information about Circular Economy in the Appendix under Glossary.

Img. 03 (Community consultation)

OUR RESEARCH

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2.1 CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION TO THE SITE ANALYSIS

Cultural space activation does not happen in a vacuum. Every project takes place within a broader landscape of policies, institutions, funding mechanisms, community dynamics, and understanding that landscape is the first step toward meaningful action.

This chapter presents the research conducted to map those landscapes and stakeholders across Europe. It draws on a comparative analysis of the six partner-countries participating in the project, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Italy and Spain, examining how each of them approaches the Adaptive Reuse of Cultural Heritage (ARCH): the practice of giving new life to heritage sites by repurposing them for contemporary cultural, social, or economic use.

The research was built on three complementary angles: a study of the policy[1] and legal frameworks governing heritage in each country; a series of focus groups discussions and interviews with practitioners and experts; and a collection of 15 observatory cases per country documenting real adaptive reuse projects in their full diversity from early-stage ideas to complemented interventions, from successes to failures.

What this body of research revealed is a landscape of both striking variety and shared challenges. The legal tools, funding instruments, institutional actors, and community dynamics differ significantly from one country to the next. And yet, when practitioners across all six countries speak about their work, the same core difficulties surface again and again: around resources, governance, engagement, participation and sustainability[2].

(1) See more information about a related term, Policy Advocacy, in the Appendix under Glossary.

(2) See more information about a related term, Cultural Sustainability, in the Appendix under Glossary.

This tension between local specificity and shared experience is what gives the research its practical value. It does not offer a single universal model. Instead, it builds a foundation of knowledge that can be adapted to context. Moreover, each country participating in this project had a particular context:

Germany operates within a complex regulatory landscape where heritage conservation is often portrayed as a barrier to adaptive reuse, and it is managed at the regional level, and where civil society groups, particularly in Eastern Germany, where vacant cultural buildings are common, have often shown more creativity and flexibility than formal institutions in finding new uses for heritage spaces.

Belgium is navigating growing pressure to repurpose vacant heritage and religious buildings in cities like Brussels, where population growth and sustainability concerns are making adaptive reuse an increasingly urgent priority, though translating ideas into feasible, high-quality interventions remains a significant challenge.

Bulgaria faces a difficult balance between speculative development pressure and a legal framework that favours restrictive conservation over active restoration, leaving many heritage sites, particularly post-socialist buildings, vulnerable and unprotected.

Cyprus has seen growing national investment in cultural reuse through governmental-led schemes and university training programmes, with heritage spaces increasingly activated through collaboration between local authorities, tourism bodies, and cultural operators.

Italy contends with a fragmented decision-making process in which those who manage heritage spaces are frequently not the same as those who control funding, leaving many sites (especially in smaller towns) underused, under-resourced, and disconnected from the communities around them.

Spain has seen growing public interest in industrial and cultural heritage over the past two decades, but most of this heritage, particularly in rural areas, remains without legal protection and is increasingly threatened by urban expansion, making community-led reuse initiatives both more necessary and more urgent.

POLICIES TO IDENTIFY POTENTIALS AND CHALLENGES[3]

(3) See more information about the policy reports in the Appendix under Resources.

Before starting any project that involves a heritage site, it helps to understand the landscape. Rules, institutions, funding sources, and community dynamics all shape what is possible, and they differ significantly from one country to another. To make sense of this complexity, the NEW INHERIT research looked at each country through five lenses. Together, these give a picture of both the obstacles that might appear and the opportunities to take into consideration.

POLICIES AND REGULATIONS



Heritage has a different meaning in different places. Each city and country has its own legal definition of what counts as heritage, who has authority over it, and what people are and are not allowed to do with it.

Knowing who the key stakeholders are, how decisions are made, and where the rules are flexible can make a project. And since this landscape is always evolving, keeping track of it is an ongoing task. This axis covers: laws and regulations, key stakeholders, and main policies and strategies.



FUNDING AND RESOURCES

Money is almost always a challenge in heritage reuse projects. But the funding landscape is richer than it might first appear, and the most resilient projects tend to combine multiple sources rather than relying on just one core source.

Public grants, private investment, European programs, crowdfunding, and in-kind contributions can all play a role. The key is knowing what exists, what it supports, and how to access it. This axis covers: funding programs, and incentives and resource allocation[4].

(4) See more information about Resource Allocation the Appendix under Glossary.



GREEN TRANSITION PRACTICES

The construction sector is responsible for 35-40% of global carbon emissions. Reusing an existing building rather than demolishing and rebuilding is one of the most impactful environmental choices a project can make, and European policy increasingly recognises this.

Integrating sustainability into a heritage project is not just good practice. It can also open doors to specific funding streams, regulatory support, and new professional profiles. This axis covers: environmental policies at urban scale, environmental regulations on heritage reuse, and green skills and jobs.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT



A reactivated heritage space only truly works if the community around it feels ownership over it. Participation is not a box to tick, it is what turns a building project into social.

This means involving people early, communicating openly, and finding the right tools to facilitate genuine dialogue. It also means understanding which legal and civic mechanisms exist to support community involvement within each context. This axis covers: bottom-up stakeholders, civic engagement and legal support, engagement instruments, and communication[5] and transparency.

(5) See more information about a related term, Cross-Cultural Communication, in the Appendix under Glossary.

CAPACITY AND INNOVATION



Individual projects or initiatives can be inspiring, but they remain isolated if the people and institutions involved do not grow through them. Building lasting capacity, either in professionals, communities, or organisations, is what allows adaptive reuse to become a widespread model rather than a series of one-off successes.

This means investing in knowledge-sharing, education, and the kind of cross-sector collaboration that keeps expertise alive and evolving. This axis covers: access to expertise, institutional and corporate support, and capacity building[6].

(6) See more information about Capacity Building in the Appendix under Glossary.

2.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

Understanding the policy landscape was only the starting point. Knowing what the rules say tells us what is formally possible. But it does not tell what people actually do, what obstacles they run into in practice, or what solutions they have quietly invented along the way.

To get that deeper layer of knowledge, the NEW INHERIT research was built around three complementary methods. Each one captures something the others cannot, and together, they give a much fuller picture of what it takes to bring a heritage space back to life.



STEP 1

MAPPING THE RULES: COUNTRY POLICY REPORTS

The first step was a desk research, focused on structured analysis of the legal, financial, and institutional frameworks in each of the six countries, across five axes: policies and regulations, funding, green transition, public participation, and capacity building, which were developed in the previous section of the research.

This layer of research focused on the institutional framework that makes one or another project possible. We look at the bigger picture and the groups involved partly in a given regulatory landscape.

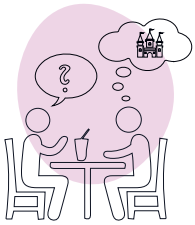
STEP 2

LISTENING TO THE PEOPLE: FOCUS GROUP[7] DISCUSSION

Policies are written by institutions. But heritage spaces are reactivated by people (activists, practitioners, community

(7) See more information about the Focus Group Discussions in the Appendix under Resources.

organisers, entrepreneurs) who navigate those institutions every day and know exactly where they work and where they do not.



To capture this knowledge, the team held focus group discussions in each of the six countries. These were semi-structured conversations, not formal interviews, designed to create space for open exchange between citizens, experts, and practitioners speaking from direct, but also often unwritten experience.

What came out of these conversations was valuable on two levels. On one hand, they produced a "living inventory" of practices and how things actually get done in each context –the habitats, workarounds, and informal practices that never appear in any official document–. On the other hand, they surfaced honest criticism of the institutional systems: where the bureaucracy gets in the way, where policies fail to recognise or support, what practitioners are already doing, and where change is most needed. This was valuable for the later formulation of policy recommendations.

STEP 3

LEARNING FROM REAL PROJECTS: OBSERVATORY CASES[8]

The third method was to look at real examples. Fifteen observatory cases per country were selected (90 cases in total) to showcase examples of heritage adaptive reuse projects, covering a wide range of heritage types, functions, scales, and stages of development. These cases represent diverse typologies and highlight the broad social and institutional frameworks necessary for the sustainable implementation of such projects.

The selection was deliberately broad. It included projects led by public institutions, private developers, and civil society groups. It covered industrial buildings, cultural venues, and

(8) See more information about the Observatory Cases in the Appendix under Resources.



social spaces. It featured projects at early conceptual stages, others fully completed, and some that had failed. Some sites were officially protected heritage, others were not. This diversity was intentional. The goal was not to collect a gallery of successful stories, but to build a realistic picture of the full spectrum of what adaptive reuse looks like, with all its complexity, contradictions, and creativity.

The process was built around a shared matrix of parameters, developed to evaluate each case through three main categories, which were further broken down into the following sub-categories:

STAKEHOLDER INTEGRATION

ACTORS INVOLVED GOVERNANCE MODEL MAP OF OPPORTUNITIES

RESCOURCES INTEGRATION

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY ORGANISATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

IMPACT

SOCIAL IMPACT ECONOMIC IMPACT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

This matrix gave all six country partners a common language framework, making comparison possible despite the enormous diversity of projects involved.

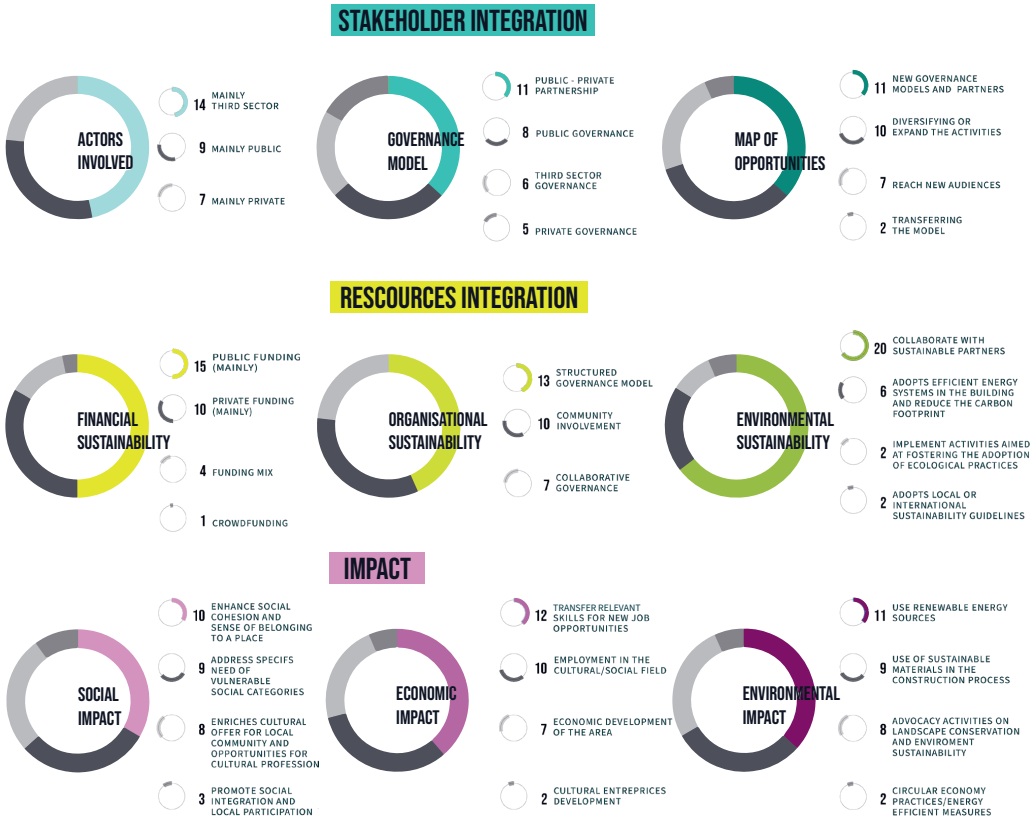
Data[9] collection combined desk research with direct fieldwork. For each selected case, partners drew on existing research and findings from previously conducted focus groups, and carried out up to five dedicated interviews with key figures –initiators, policymakers, or close external observers–. A shared interview outlined was used across all countries to ensure that the data collected was comparable. Each case was then written up as a narrative report, capturing not just outcomes but the full arc of the experience: the

(9) See more information about a related term, Open Data, in the Appendix under Glossary.

decisions made, the relationships built, the obstacles faced, and the factors that contributed to success or, in some cases, they leads to failure.

The final step brought all the individual case analyses together into a comparative overview. The patterns that emerged across cases were used to identify criteria for transferability, guidance on which approaches from one context might be adapted and applied in another. These findings fed directly into a set of recommendations for heritage reactivation professionals, as well as inputs for a practical toolbox covering community and stakeholder engagement, resource integration, capacity, and territorial development.

Comparative overview of Case



2.3 COMPETENCES FOR ACTION

Research is mainly useful if it leads to some action. The policy analysis, the focus group discussions, and the observatory cases described in the previous sections were not ends in themselves, they were the groundwork for something more concrete: a framework that helps people actually do things.

This section explains how that translation happened. How the findings from the research shaped a set of competences, and how these competences connect to real action on a real (and historic) site.

FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION[10]

The research revealed something important early on: the biggest barriers to activating a heritage space are rarely just technical or legal. They are human. Projects can get stuck for a few different reasons: because people might not have the confidence to keep going; because communities might not be genuinely involved; because teams cannot navigate uncertainty; or because no one knows how to have a productive conversation with local authorities.

The NEW INHERIT Competence Framework[11] is specially designed for Creative and Cultural Practitioners, based on principles of non-formal education. Its main focus is on creative cultural entrepreneurship and cultural space activation, this mainly benefits: young professionals from the cultural and creative sectors; entrepreneurs; and cultural and artistic organizations. The goal is that target groups: learn to start and encourage new eco-innovation ideas within their fields; are encouraged to participate in initiatives and

(10) Skip to Chapter 3 for an in-depth look at The Action.

(11) See more information about the Competence Framework in the Appendix under Resources.

sustainable activities, while strengthening the promotion of social issues. This is why our Competence Framework[12] is built around capabilities that people can develop and apply across very different contexts.

(12) See more information about Competence Framework in the Appendix under Glossary.

Fifteen competences were identified, grouped around two core skill areas:

- **Community Skills.** The ability to work with people and places. This includes facilitating participatory processes, engaging diverse stakeholders, understanding local dynamics, and building the kind of trust that makes collaboration sustainable over time.
- **Creative Skills.** The ability to generate and develop ideas. This includes spotting opportunities where others see obstacles, thinking across disciplines, communicating a vision clearly, and finding innovative solutions to problems that have no standard answer.

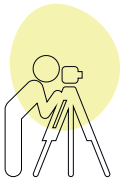
NEW INHERIT COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK

EU reports highlight cultural heritage as a key resource for the European Union. Creative cultural entrepreneurship[13] brings together the cultural and creative sectors, creates employment opportunities for young professionals (such as artists, cultural practitioners, designers and architects), and encourages young people's active participation in society, which is an important factor for social stability.

(13) See more information about Cultural Entrepreneurship in the Appendix under Glossary.

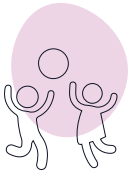
However, there is a risk that cultural space activation can be driven mainly by profit, neglecting the needs of local communities. To avoid this, young professionals need specific skills, competencies, and knowledge related to sustainable, adaptive reuse of cultural heritage. In this context, non-formal education plays an important role in developing awareness and sensitivity toward these issues.

Accessible and engaging education helps learners to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed for the sustainable reuse of cultural heritage. Non-formal education can take many forms. For example, e-learning offers easy and inclusive access, while mentoring programs and hands-on participation in sustainable cultural space activation allow learners to engage directly with local communities and cultural activities. In this section, we address key competences for adaptive reuse in Heritage.



COMPETENCE 1 - SPOTTING OPPORTUNITIES

The capability of learners to use their imagination and abilities to identify opportunities for creating value. An opportunity could be a business idea that has the potential to benefit both the customers and the entrepreneurs.



COMPETENCE 2 - CREATIVITY

The ability to generate original and valuable ideas and solutions. It involves thinking innovatively, solving problems by incorporating artistic and cultural ideas, and collaborating effectively through diverse experiences, knowledge, and interdisciplinary approaches to produce unique outcomes.



COMPETENCE 3 - VISION, FUTURE LITERACY[14], EXPLANATORY THINKING

This competence integrates creativity and cultural awareness with abilities to envision and shape future trajectories. It involves vision, the ability to craft imaginative ideas and scenarios embracing innovation; future literacy, which allows us to navigate the complexities of cultural evolution and societal change, fostering inclusive and sustainable futures; and explanatory thinking, the capacity to share and effectively communicate narratives right from the beginning of our ideas, deepening cultural understanding.

(14) See more information about a related term, Cultural Literacy, in the Appendix under Glossary.

COMPETENCE 4 - VALUING IDEAS, ETHICAL & SUSTAINABLE THINKING



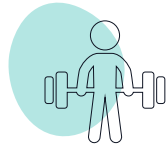
Recognising creative and innovative ideas, along with the ethical and sustainable considerations essential for the adaptive reuse of heritage spaces. This competence emphasises the importance of nurturing creativity and innovation while ensuring that projects align with ethical standards and promote sustainability. By valuing diverse ideas and incorporating ethical and sustainable thinking, individuals can contribute to projects that not only transform heritage spaces into vibrant community assets but also preserve cultural heritage and respect environmental limits.

COMPETENCE 5 - SELF-AWARENESS & SELF-EFFICACY, MOTIVATION & PERSEVERANCE



This competence supports an essential set for personal and professional growth. Self-awareness involves understanding and accepting yourself with your desires, concerns, and imperfections, while self-efficacy is believing in your ability. Motivation drives action and goes beyond duty, while perseverance ensures consistency in facing adversity, fatigue, or frustration.

COMPETENCE 6 - MOBILISING RESOURCES & OTHERS

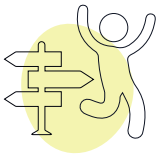


This theme refers to the capability of learners to identify resources available to them or their organisation to reach a certain goal or undertake a certain action. Thus, resources are defined as material (e.g., financial, physical), immaterial (e.g., time), and human (e.g., skills, power, motivation).



COMPETENCE 7 - FINANCIAL & ECONOMIC LITERACY

The competence will allow participants to scout, search and find funding opportunities for adaptive re-use. They will also understand how to create a financial feasibility study, mobilise non-monetary resources and create a holistic financial vision for their creative projects.



COMPETENCE 8 - TAKING THE INITIATIVE & INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE

This competence highlights the importance of independent decision-making, accountability, and the ability to drive projects from inception to completion. With emphasis on the importance of entrepreneurship and innovation, the aim is to encourage participants to pursue creative solutions and sustainable business models contributing to the adaptive reuse of heritage spaces ensuring they are transformed in ethically sound and sustainable ways for future generations.



COMPETENCE 9 - PLANNING & MANAGING CREATIVITY, ADAPTABILITY

Cultural and Creative Entrepreneurship is a set of activities to harness a cultural and creative business opportunity. The novelty lies in being innovative in transforming cultural values into economic values. This competence will give new skills for early planning to transform cultural and creative assets (heritage buildings reactivated by cultural and creative enterprises[15]) into innovative cultural products, services, uses, and organisational forms that generate financial revenues, positive societal impacts, and new talent for creative and cultural markets.

(15) See more information about a related term, Social Enterprise, in the Appendix under Glossary.

COMPETENCE 10 - COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY & PROBLEM FRAMING



This competence is crucial for navigating life's challenges. It involves developing strategies to navigate situations where outcomes are unpredictable or unknown.

COMPETENCE 11 - WORKING WITH OTHERS & COLLECTIVE ACTION



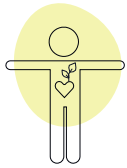
Collaborating in a collective environment involves interacting with diverse individuals and groups to achieve common goals. It includes understanding group dynamics, fostering inclusive communication, resolving conflicts, and leveraging the strengths of team members. This competence is important for creating synergies, driving innovation, and achieving collective success.

COMPETENCE 12 - LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE



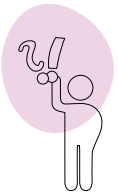
The competence focuses on acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes by engaging directly in activities and reflecting on those experiences. This hands-on approach emphasises practical involvement, critical thinking, and continuous improvement, enabling individuals to adapt and grow from real-world situations and challenges.

COMPETENCE 13 - EMBODYING SUSTAINABILITY VALUES



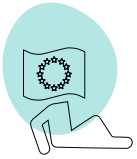
Refurbishing urban Cultural Heritage buildings (which may face energy efficiency or thermal comfort challenges) is a critical path towards adaptation and meeting EU's climate change mitigation goals[16]. This competence addresses the cultural, social, and environmental principles that directlly support the European Green Deal and make up the building blocks of the sustainability competence for Cultural Creative Industries (CCI).

(16) As described by the group of authors (Foster, 2019; Napoli et al., 2020; Potts, 2021).



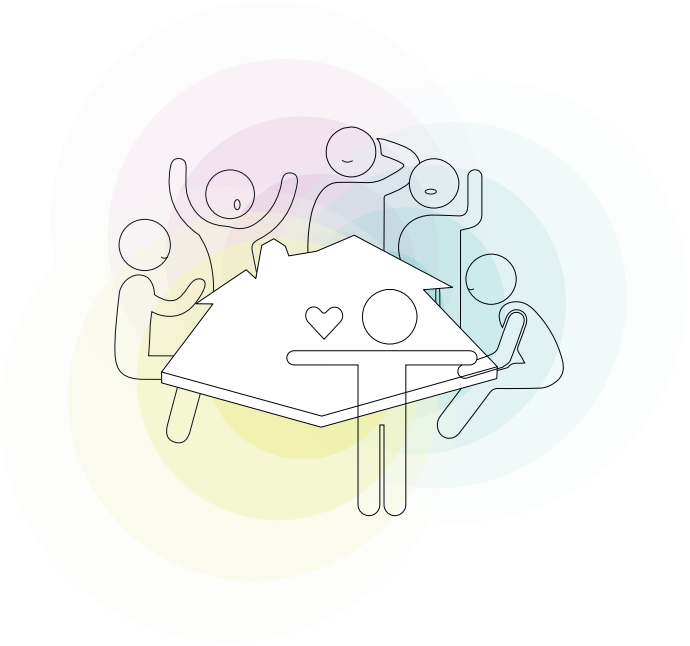
COMPETENCE 14 - SYSTEMS & CRITICAL THINKING

It is the ability to perceive a system as a complex, interrelated whole rather than merely the sum of its parts and to leverage the dynamics within the system to address multifaceted problems effectively. Critical Thinking is the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking, evaluate information and arguments, identify biases, and make reasoned decisions to understand the logical connection between ideas.



COMPETENCE 15 - POLITICAL AGENCY

The competence will allow participants to read the current political climate of European policies and understand how they influence local strategies for adaptive re-use. The participants will gather knowledge on the history and formation of European political agendas for support of their creative work and will also learn how to enter into dialogue and structure a conversation with various political actors.



THE ACTION

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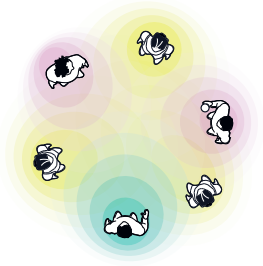
3.1 AGORA CULTURAL LABS

AGORA AS CO-CREATION FRAMEWORK

An Agora Cultural Lab is the practical framework NEW INHERIT used to turn participatory research into action. It brings together three core activities: mapping of local cultural spaces, the exchange and knowledge transfer between professionals and experts, and directly involving local communities in the process. The approach is to build solutions from co-creation, meaning that the people who live and work in and around a heritage space are active participants in shaping what it becomes.



The word Agora refers to the ancient public space of gathering, exchange, debate, and civic life. NEW INHERIT uses this idea in a contemporary way. The heritage space becomes an agora when people do not only visit it, but participate in shaping it. It becomes a place where memories, needs, skills, conflicts, and future ideas can meet.



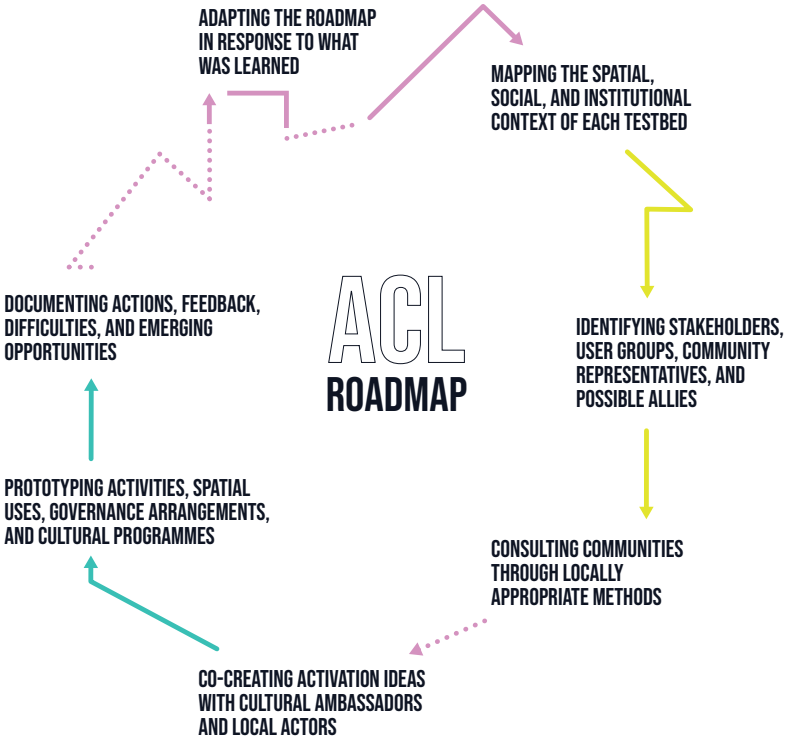
The word Lab is equally important. A lab is not a finished solution. It is a place for testing, observing, adjusting, and learning. This is why an ACL is more than a workshop or an event. A workshop can be one tool inside the Lab, an event can be one moment of activation. But the Lab is the wider process that connects mapping, co-creation, prototyping, governance, documentation, and reflection.



The Agora Cultural Lab method is based on a simple understanding: cultural spaces are living systems. They are

shaped by physical conditions, but also by social relations, organisational capacity, decision-making structures, cultural practices, and the ways people feel about a place. Activation cannot follow a straight line, it needs to be iterative.

The Agora Cultural Labs typically moved through the following steps:



This sequence was shared, but it was never rigid. Each testbed adapted it to local conditions. In Bulgaria, the Lab became a large-scale temporary opening of a long-closed station. In Belgium, it became a youth-led cultural infrastructure[1] inside a complex urban transport environment. In Cyprus, it became a distributed rural Lab across village spaces, craft practices, and community relationships. In Germany, it became a series of artistic residencies that turned

(1) See more information about a related term; Green Infrastructure, in the Appendix under Glossary.

co-creation into consultation. In Italy, it became a careful process of co-governance and neighbourhood stewardship. In Spain, it became a municipal cultural site reimagined through artistic participation and public dialogue.

PRACTICE, REFLECTION AND COLLECTIVE LEARNING

One of the defining features of the Agora Cultural Lab approach was that learning happened throughout the process. Partners were encouraged to continuously document their process: the steps taken, the decisions made, the challenges encountered, and the reflections that emerged along the way. This ongoing documentation was supported by a shared digital tool, the Agora Living Lab Whiteboard[2] – a collaborative Canva template –, which made the work of each partner visible to the whole consortium.

(2) See more information about the whiteboard in the Appendix under Resources.

The Agora Cultural Lab therefore works on three levels at the same time. It activates space by opening, testing, and programming it. It activates people by giving them roles, voice, and opportunities to create. And it activates governance by making decision-making, responsibility, and future use visible and negotiable.

This is the central shift proposed by NEW INHERIT: adaptive reuse is not only about preserving a building. It is about building the social, cultural, and organisational conditions that allow the place to live again.

LOCAL ROADMAPS FOR AGORA CULTURAL LABS

While the overall framework was shared, each one of the six Agora Cultural Lab followed its own locally defined roadmap, developed together with cultural ambassadors, community members and local stakeholders. This approach allows for responsiveness to local complexity while simultaneously contributing to a shared European learning on inclusive cultural governance and sustainable heritage transformation.

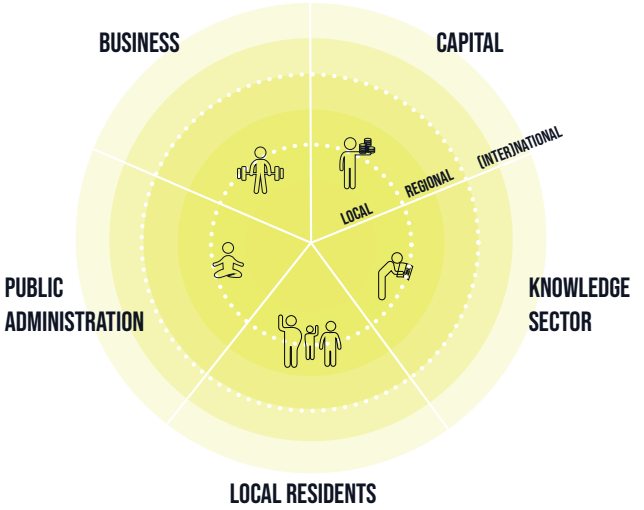
IMPLEMENTED ACTIVATION STEPS

STEP 1 - STAKEHOLDER MAPPING[3]

We identify Stakeholders for each test bed carried out using the Penta-Helix model. This model serves as a straightforward discussion tool to map diverse interests and explore ways of maintaining balance within a project. While it appears simple, it is highly effective in making social complexity visible and in highlighting the importance of alliances and collaboration among stakeholders.

The Penta-Helix[4] framework identifies five stakeholder groups: businesses, public administration, local residents, the knowledge sector, and capital. It is particularly useful in multi-stakeholder contexts, where diverse and sometimes conflicting interests converge around a site or issue.

Each stakeholder type can be considered across different scales: local (micro), regional (meso), and national or international (macro). The level at which a stakeholder is positioned often shapes both the nature and intensity of their interest in the project.



(3) See more information about a related term, Community Mapping, in the Appendix under Glossary.

(4) See more information in the Appendix under Resources and the diagram on this page.

Diagram of the Penta-Helix framework

STEP 2 - STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Building on the stakeholder mapping, we then specify how different stakeholder groups have been engaged within the Agora Cultural Labs in their test beds. The objective is to identify effective formats of engagement, adapt approaches to different types of actors, and compare strategies across countries. This step highlights which methods work best in practice and where improvements may be needed.

STEP 3 - SITE ANALYSIS

Analyze a site and problem appropriate methodology to carry out the ACLs's inclusive management model, with organising the first stakeholder panels and starting the community involvement programs. The testing of the inclusive model begins with site appropriate programmes.

STEP 4 - GOVERNANCE MODELS[5]

The fourth step describes the governance model in each test bed, with a focus on which stakeholders are directly involved in decision-making and how responsibilities are shared. By linking this to the earlier mapping and engagement analysis, we assess the level of commitment of various actors and better understand why some groups are more consistently engaged than others.

STEP 5 - EXCHANGES BETWEEN ACL

The final step brings together the findings from all test beds in a comparative analysis. This analysis looks at both individual Agora Cultural Labs and cross-country differences, generating insights into effective governance and engagement strategies. The results form a roadmap for a governance model of multi-stakeholder partnerships[6]. We use this as a practical reference for adaptive re-use projects across Europe.

(5) See more information about Governance Model in the Appendix under Glossary.

(6) See more information about a related term, Public-Private Partnership (PPP), in the Appendix under Glossary.

3.2 ACTION STRATEGIES

The six Agora Cultural Labs took a different path. The local contexts[7] were too varied for a single approach to work everywhere. And yet, looking across all six testbeds, a set of shared principles emerges: a common logic that each partner translated into strategies suited to their own reality. At the core of each strategy was one guiding question: **How can this place be opened to be meaningful for community?**

The answers differed. But the commitment to finding them collaboratively, rooted in the specific conditions of each place, was consistent across all six countries. What follows are the main action strategies that emerged from this process, and the ways in which they took shape in practice.

CULTURAL AMBASSADORS AND DRIVEN INNOVATION

Across the project, Cultural Ambassadors brought their own artistic practices, social commitments, local knowledge, and personal motivations into the activation process. They were chosen not only for professional experience, but for their ability to imagine, connect, and act. Their work showed that activation becomes stronger when it grows from the talents of people close to space.

The project empowered Cultural Ambassadors interventions that arose from:

- **Their talents, such as visual arts, performance or craft;**
- **Their interests, for example in nature connection, migration narratives, and intergenerational dialogue;**
- **Their situated understanding of the cultural and social dynamics surrounding each testbed.**

(7) For example the spaces, the communities, the institutions and the histories

For example, in Germany, this resulted in residencies where the Cultural Ambassadors used their own artistic languages, collage, embodied experiences, nature walks, symbolic reinterpretations, to generate participatory processes rooted in authenticity and personal expression. In Cyprus, ambassadors mobilised their craft-based knowledge to anchor activities in local heritage practices. And, in Italy, ambassadors leveraged their community work and neighbourhood expertise to shape governance-oriented interventions. In Belgium, youth-led projects supported through open calls, mentorship, and access to space.



Img. 04 (Collages from community workshop at OMA, Weimar)

This approach validated a core Living Lab principle: the people closest to a space, its users, emerging leaders, and cultural practitioners, are best positioned to imagine new futures for it. By encouraging Cultural Ambassadors to lead with their strengths, NEW INHERIT supported interventions that were creative and deeply connected to the lived realities of each site.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION AS A CO-CREATION TOOL

Across all six testbeds[8], consultation was not treated as a preliminary step to be completed before the real work began. Instead, it was part of the work itself.

(8) Skip to Sub-chapter 3.3 for an in-depth look at each testbed.

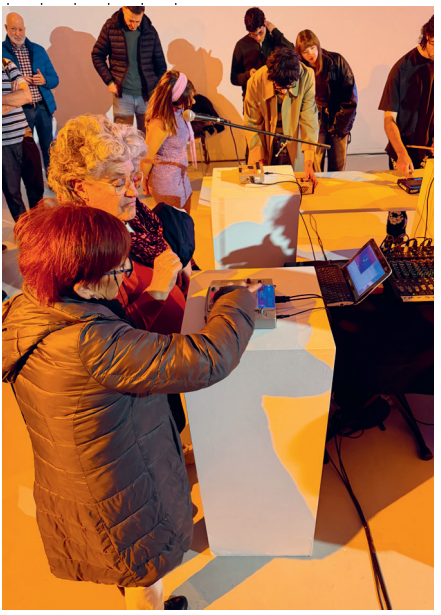
Partners used a wide range of methods, for example neighborhood walks, workshops, World Cafés, artistic exercises, emotional mapping, focus groups, interviews, online conversations, and public discussions. What these approaches had in common was that they did not simply ask people what they wanted. They invited people to make, discuss, test, and reflect together. This made consultation

generative rather than extractive: a process that produced ideas, relationships, and shared visions, not just data.

The results were tangible. In Spain, residents and artists imagined the future of the Artillery Barracks through visual and performative formats; this translated into programming centred on family-oriented activities and flexible, multi-use spaces, responding directly to what residents had asked for. In Bulgaria, public[9] activation events allowed citizens to experience the future potential of the Freight Station instead of only speaking about it in abstract terms; here the activation content was shaped around stakeholder concerns about mobility, ecological restoration, and long-term redevelopment of the area. In Belgium, young people did not only contribute opinions about TRACK; they proposed and implemented their own projects, becoming active co-authors of the space, this showed how the needs of young people facing social precarity and limited platforms for expression became the foundation of the entire intervention strategy.

(9) See more information about a related term, Public Realm, in the Appendix under Glossary.

Img. 05 (Interactive exhibition at Artillery Barracks, Murcia)



This approach also meant that the questions driving each activation were grounded in real community needs. Partners worked with residents, youth, cultural operators, municipal staff, NGOs, and local businesses to understand what functions the space should serve, which groups needed better access or representation, what social or economic challenges the activation could help address, and how heritage reuse could contribute to long-term community resilience. This was important because the testbeds were never isolated

buildings. They were part of neighbourhoods, villages, stations, landscapes[10], and social ecosystems. In Cyprus, heritage activation was connected to rural livelihoods, sustainable tourism[11], environmental vulnerability, and youth futures. In Bulgaria, it was connected to mobility, green corridors, ecological restoration, and post-industrial urban transformation. In Belgium, it was connected to public space, safety, youth empowerment, and the social conditions of the North Quarter.

(10) See more information about a related term, Cultural Landscape, in the Appendix under Glossary.

(11) See more information about Sustainable Tourism in the Appendix under Glossary.

PROTOTYPING

Many heritage projects fail because they try to define the final model too early. NEW INHERIT tested the opposite approach. Temporary actions were used to make possibilities visible and to learn from them. A temporary exhibition can test public interest. A workshop can test accessibility. A public meal can test social trust. A festival can test organisational capacity. A residency is useful to test whether a space can become a home for new communities.

Prototyping was especially powerful in Sofia. Opening the Freight Station for several weeks transformed the building



Img. 06 (Crowded pilot visits at the Freight Station, Sofia)

from an abstract redevelopment idea into an experienced civic space. Visitors, families, professionals, institutions, and creative actors could enter, imagine, and discuss the site in real time. This changed the conversation with authorities because the potential of the building became visible.

OPEN CALLS FOR CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

The other intervention pathway, pioneered most explicitly in Belgium, was the use of open calls as engines for youth-led activation. Recognising that many young people possess creative or socially innovative ideas but lack the space, mentorship, resources, or institutional recognition to realise them, Urban Foxes, through the NEW INHERIT project, TRACK and the local Space Pioneers project (Ruimte Pioniers) launched an open call inviting youth to propose projects aligned with: social impact[12]; artistic or cultural experimentation; community engagement; democratic participation; or urban transformation. In this way, the selected young people were offered: access to TRACK's space; a dedicated budget; mentorship from cultural workers and youth professionals; administrative and organizational support; and visibility through public presentations or events.

This model not only activated the cultural space but also generated youth citizenship, micro-entrepreneurship, and democratic involvement in cultural life. It demonstrated that cultural activation can be a pathway to: building leadership[13] capacity; strengthening civic agency; nurturing emerging creative careers; and redistributing access to cultural infraestructure in a socially equitable way.

One highlight from this strategy also validated the insight that funding is not only for buildings, it is for people, and that even modest financial support combined with space and mentorship can unlock significant creative potential in local youth populations.

(12) See more information about a related term, Socio-Economic Impact, in the Appendix under Glossary.

(13) See more information about a related term, Creative Leadership, in the Appendix under Glossary.

GOVERNANCE AS PART OF ACTIVATION

Cultural programming alone cannot sustain a heritage space. Someone must decide how access works, who is responsible, how conflicts are managed, how costs are covered, how partners are included, and how the space remains open without becoming chaotic. Governance is often invisible, but the testbeds acording to the testbedsit determines whether activation will last or not on the long term.

Italy made this especially clear. The House of Participation in Palermo required time for co-managing organisations to define roles, build trust, and negotiate responsibility. Belgium also showed that youth-led activation needs organisational support, mentorship, and reliable structures. Spain showed that even a formal municipal framework needs transparent procedures and responsive communication to become a truly participatory process.

CONTINUOUS REFLECTION AS LEARNING[14]

After each action, partners documented what happened, what worked, what did not work, who participated, who was missing, and what should change next. This transformed activation into a learning cycle. The Agora Cultural Labs were not judged only by final events, but by the knowledge, relationships, and capacities created along the way.

Taken together, the action strategies show that cultural space activation is not one type of activity. It can be a residency, a mapping exercise, a festival, a public debate, a craft workshop, a governance assembly, a children's activity, an exhibition, a neighbourhood lunch, a guided tour, an open call, or a temporary use experiment. What matters is not the format itself, but whether it creates meaningful connection between people, place, and future use.

(14) Skip to Chapter 4 for an in-depth look at Lessons Learned.

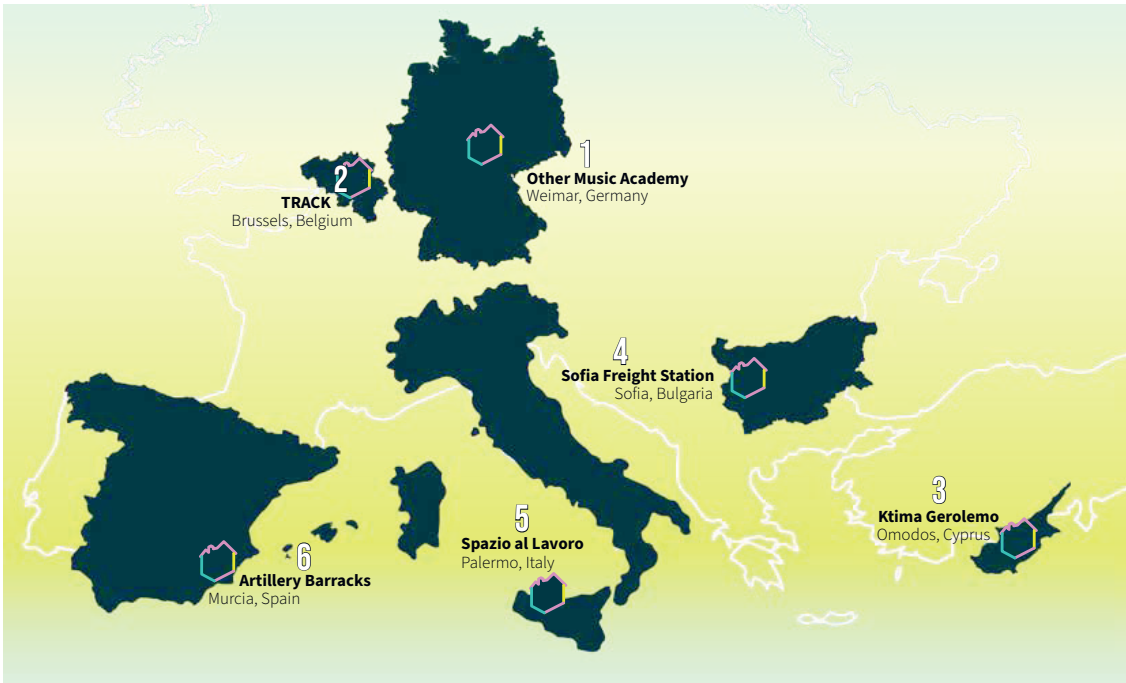


Img. 7 (Community meeting at OMA, Weimar)

3.3 CASE-BASED APPLICATIONS

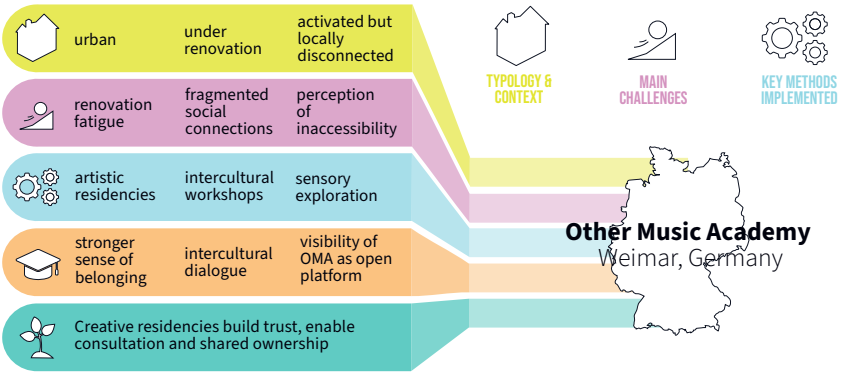
The six chosen testbeds are distinct in their settlement typology, spatial condition, and degree of cultural and social activation. The application of the Agora Cultural Lab method across the testbeds offers a nuanced and multilayered picture of the conditions under which adaptive reuse of cultural heritage can succeed, and the institutional constraints that shape such processes throughout Europe. Across all cases, the Agora Cultural Lab method proved most valuable where it remained flexible. It allowed each place to develop its own rhythm while contributing to a common European understanding of adaptive reuse as a social, cultural, environmental, and governance process.

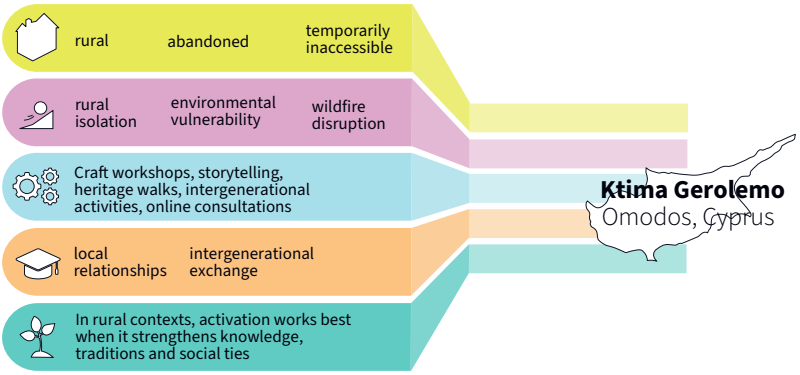
Before the a comprehensive comparative analysis, the contextual introduction to each one of the testbed will be discussed on the following pages.

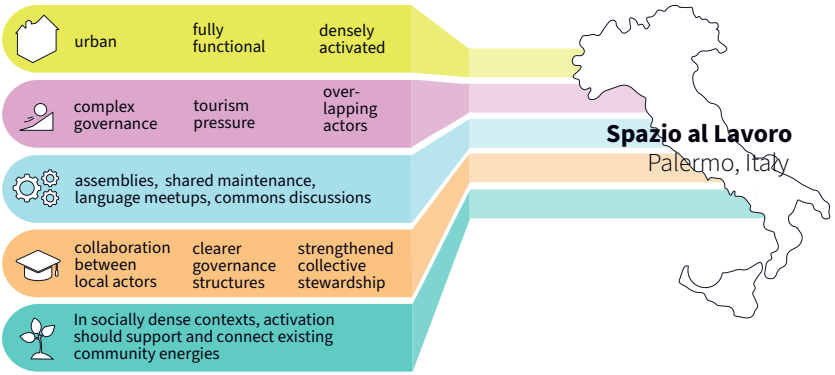


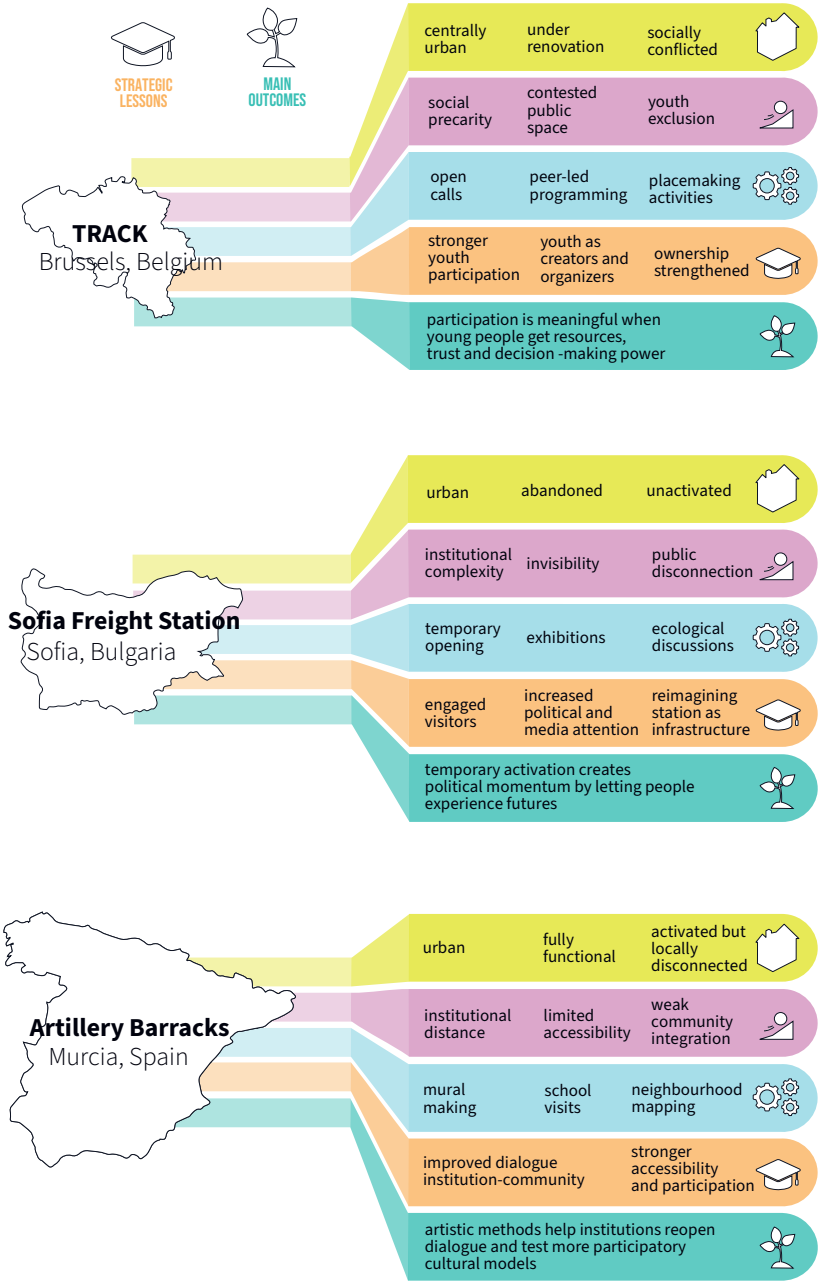
Schematic map of the Agora Cultural Labs location.

COMPARATIVE TESTBED OVERVIEW

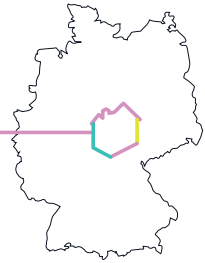







STRATEGIC LESSONS
MAIN OUTCOMES
TRACK
Brussels, Belgium
centrally urban
under renovation
socially conflicted
social precarity
contested public space
youth exclusion
open calls
peer-led programming
placemaking activities
stronger youth participation
youth as creators and organizers
ownership strengthened
participation is meaningful when young people get resources, trust and decision -making power
Sofia Freight Station
Sofia, Bulgaria
urban
abandoned
unactivated
institutional complexity
invisibility
public disconnection
temporary opening
exhibitions
ecological discussions
engaged visitors
increased political and media attention
reimagining station as infrastructure
temporary activation creates political momentum by letting people experience futures
Artillery Barracks
Murcia, Spain
urban
fully functional
activated but locally disconnected
institutional distance
limited accessibility
weak community integration
mural making
school visits
neighbourhood mapping
improved dialogue institution-community
stronger accessibility and participation
artistic methods help institutions reopen dialogue and test more participatory cultural models

1. OTHER MUSIC ACADEMY
WEIMAR, DE



The Other Music Academy (OMA) resides in a multi-story building in Weimar's northern inner city—a city synonymous with Goethe, Schiller, and the Bauhaus movement. Once a ducal customs office, then a school in East Germany, followed by yet another school post-Reunification, before being abandoned. This space has been reborn as a dynamic center for music, education, and intercultural dialogue.

Img. 8 (Ideas to repurpose the OMA building)



OMA's home is a testament to Weimar's evolving identity, offering inclusive, multidisciplinary projects whose artistic and scientific practices are guided by the goal of individual and social empowerment. Divided into distinct phases of use, the building now harmonises its historical legacy with contemporary creativity.

The process was handled in two levels:

- **Cultural Hub[15].** Hosting the renowned Yiddish Summer Weimar festival, workshops, and performances that redefine musical traditions. A non-profit initiative fostering inclusivity, where artists, scholars and social actors co-create in a space where generations of Weimar citizens were educated.
- **Archival Layers.** Retaining traces of its past lives—from customs office to socialist school—visible in its high ceilings, weathered floorboards, and repurposed classrooms.

(15) See more information about a related term, Creative Hub, in the Appendix under Glossary.

Img. 9, 10 (Workshop invitation)





It is operating under a time-limited hereditary rights agreement. Due to the size of the building and the degree of decay, the renovation process is ongoing. The perpetual state of “not being finished” is a deliberate decision to make it responsive to ongoing social change and Weimar’s past.

WHAT WE IMPLEMENTED AT OTHER MUSIC ACADEMY WEIMAR

At the Other Music Academy in Weimar, activation took the form of ART’kademie, a series of artistic residencies led by Cultural Ambassadors. The process responded to a context of renovation fatigue, social fragmentation, and the need to reconnect OMA with surrounding communities. Instead of organising a single public event, the German testbed created recurring moments of participation.

The residencies used collage, sensory exploration, nature walks, storytelling, mural-making, and reflections on home and belonging. Participants engaged through making rather than formal discussion. This lowered barriers for migrants,



Img. 11 (Sensory workshop)



Img. 12 (Finished mural)

international students, residents, and people who might not usually enter cultural governance conversations.

The outcomes were social and symbolic as much as artistic. Participants developed a stronger sense of belonging to OMA. New relationships formed between groups who often remain separate in everyday life. The final vernissage and Multiplier Event made the process visible to a wider audience and positioned OMA as an open platform for experimentation, intercultural dialogue, and community-rooted cultural practice at Weimar.

Highlights of this case: creative residencies can be more than artistic programmes. They can become tools for consultation, trust-building, and shared ownership.

Img. 13 (Roots workshop)



2. TRACK
BRUSSELS, BE

The Belgium testbed TRACK, housed in the former Train Museum of Brussels-North Station, stands as a bold response to the area's complex urban history. The Northern Quarter (Noordwijk) was once a vibrant working-class district. In the 1960s, large parts of the neighbourhood were demolished to make way for the „Manhattan Plan" and its office towers, displacing entire communities. Today, the station is both a crucial metropolitan gateway and a difficult everyday environment for many vulnerable residents. The infrastructure of TRACK as a transformed space for art, collaboration, and social reinvention mediates between social conflicts, past and future.

Img. 14 (TRACK's multipurposed hall under renovation)



Brussels-North Station has undergone significant evolution over the years, reflecting broader urban and societal changes:

- **The Birth of Continental Rail Travel in 1835.** The Allée Verte/Groendreef station becomes the departure point for continental Europe's first passenger railway service.

- **Modernisation and Expansion in 1952.** Designed by architects Paul and Jacques Saintenoy, the current Brussels-North Station opened as a key transportation node, embodying mid-century modernist principles of functionality and efficiency.

Adaptive Reuse and Community Engagement in the 2020s. The former Train Museum inside the station has been repurposed as TRACK, demonstrating how industrial heritage can be preserved through sustainable renovation. By incorporating salvaged materials and hosting cultural programming, the project takes a thoughtful approach to urban regeneration[16], balancing historical significance with modern utility.

(16) See more information about Urban Regeneration in the Appendix under Glossary.

Img. 15 (TRACK's entry, a memory of its former purpose)

Img. 16 (Youth-led planning meeting)





WHAT WE IMPLEMENTED AT TRACK BRUSSELS

At TRACK in Brussels, the action strategy focused on youth-led activation and long-term cultural infrastructure. The space is located inside the North Station, in a neighbourhood marked by commuter flows, social precarity, urban trauma, and contested public space. The activation therefore had to create a safe and empowering environment rather than simply fill a venue with activities.

Urban Foxes and partners developed a phased process. Early activities built relationships and tested formats through workshops, social justice discussions, partner events, and public milestones such as the one-year TRACK anniversary. A key intervention was the open call developed with Ruimte Pioniers and young Cultural Ambassadors. Young people with social or creative ideas received access to space, budget, mentorship, and organisational support.



Img. 17 (The hall hosts a giant bouncy castle)



Img. 18 (Invitation to youth organized film festival)

The supported projects included fashion, film, podcasting, placemaking[17], public-space imagination, artistic exploration, workshops, and regular youth meetings. These projects demonstrate a core Belgian outcome, that the activation was not only programmed "for" young people, but produced "by" young people, with TRACK acting as enabling infrastructure. TRACK became a platform where young people did not only attend cultural events, but created them.

(17) See more information about Placemaking in the Appendix under Glossary.

Highlights of this case: youth participation becomes meaningful when young people receive real resources, trust, guidance, and decision-making space.

Img. 19 (TRACK as cinema)



3. KTIMA GEROLEMO OMODOS, CY

Ktima Gerolemo in Omodos, Cyprus, is a historic gem nestled in the picturesque Troodos Mountains. The village is renowned for its winemaking traditions, cobblestone streets, and Byzantine heritage. Positioned near the Monastery of the Holy Cross, the estate holds both spiritual and agricultural significance, offering a window into Cyprus's rural past. Surrounded by lush vineyards and traditional stone houses, the area around Ktima Gerolemo presents a hub[18] of Cypriot culture.

Ktima Gerolemo stands as a testament to Cyprus's rich architectural and agricultural legacy. Originally built as a rural estate, it has evolved over centuries, adapting to the island's changing cultural and economic landscape.

(18) See more information about a related term, Innovation Hub, in the Appendix under Glossary.

Img. 20 (Ktima Gerolemo, traditional winery of Omodos).



Today, it serves multiple purposes:

- **Agricultural Heritage.** The estate remains a working vineyard, preserving traditional winemaking techniques while embracing modern viticulture.
- **Cultural Hub.** Parts of the estate have been repurposed for cultural events, wine tastings, and exhibitions.
- **Historical Preservation.** Careful restoration has maintained its original stonework, arched doorways, and courtyard layout. Ktima Gerolemo is a living monument to Omodos's past - a place where history is actively celebrated.

Yet, the area is vulnerable to environmental disruptions. Wildfires in the Limassol region challenged the ACL to cancel on-site activation and to rapidly adapt to online formats and new, emergency-oriented modes of community dialogue.

Img. 21, 22
(Craftship workshop under tree shades across the village)





WHAT WE IMPLEMENTED AT KTIMA GEROLEMO OMODOS

In Cyprus, the Agora Cultural Lab worked as a distributed rural testbed. Rather than focusing on one building, the activation moved through the village, the winery, community spaces, heritage walks, craft practices, and seasonal cultural events. The process was grounded in trust, local rhythms, and the strong connection between heritage, livelihoods, tourism, and family knowledge.

Workshops on soap-making, candle-making, wine, crafts, upcycling, storytelling, dance, yoga, and children's activities became tools for intergenerational learning and cultural continuity. They allowed residents and young people to experience heritage as something practical, social, and alive. When wildfires disrupted the region, the Lab adapted. Online consultations and resilience-oriented conversations showed that cultural activation can also become a structure for care and recovery.

Img. 23, 24 (Intergenerational learning in community)





The outcomes included not only stronger community relationships, new cultural learning formats, youth engagement, but also a clearer connection between heritage, sustainability, and rural resilience.

Highlights of this case: in rural contexts, heritage activation works best when it strengthens existing knowledge and relationships while opening new futures for young people.

Img. 25 (Multiplier event at the winery)



4. SOFIA FREIGHT STATION
SOFIA, BG



The Sofia Freight Station, built in 1929, stands as a silent witness to Bulgaria's 20th-century transformations. Located near the Vladaiska River, this architectural hybrid—part neoclassical civic monument, part pragmatic industrial hub—once thrived as a nerve center for trade along the Orient Express route. Designed by architect Panayot Kalchev, the Freight Station was conceived during Sofia's explosive interwar growth, its elegant functionalism reflecting European influences tempered with Bulgarian Revival motifs. Though freight operations ceased in the 1990s, the building avoided demolition—its grand hall became an unlikely film set.

Img. 26 (Collage of the Freight station with surrounding)



Today, its yellow-plastered façades and soaring colonnaded hall endure as a rare intact example of Interwar modernism being a physical and symbolic threshold: between the city's bustling center and its disconnected northern districts. It had been closed for over twenty years, surrounded by a fragmented landscape of railway lines, spontaneous re-greening, and neglected industrial structures. The station is architecturally remarkable but physically hidden and symbolically forgotten.

Now, the grassroots movement[19] seeks to reimagine the site as:

- **A living archive of Sofia's railway heritage, with restored offices and exhibits on the Orient Express era.**
- **A testbed for urban ecology, where the Vladaiska River's restored waterways could mitigate flooding.**
- **A connective tissue between divided neighborhoods, hosting markets, workshops, and performances.**

(19) See more information about Grassroots Movement in the Appendix under Glossary.

Img. 27 (Community visit of the abandoned Freight Train Station)



WHAT WE IMPLEMENTED AT SOFIA FREIGHT STATION

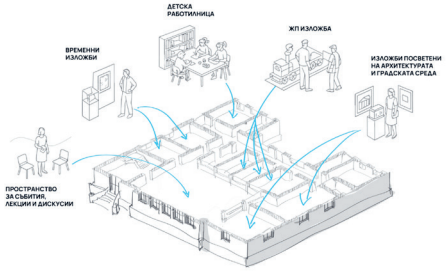
The Bulgarian testbed at the Freight Station was one of the most ambitious examples of spatial prototyping in the project. The building had been closed for more than twenty years and was embedded in a complex national railway governance system. Activation therefore had to work on several levels at once: public imagination, institutional dialogue, spatial testing, and strategic advocacy.

The process began with research, mapping, social interviews, living archives, spatial documentation, and meetings with public and institutional actors. It then moved into governance exploration and preparation. The central moment was the temporary opening of the Freight Station in June 2025 as a cultural centre for several weeks. The programme included exhibitions, lectures, workshops, children's activities, concerts, ecological discussions, urban planning forums, design[20] studios, and public gatherings.

(20) See more information about a related term, Participatory Design, in the Appendix under Glossary.

Img. 28 (Cardboard model of the station's great hall)





Img. 29 (Programming vision)

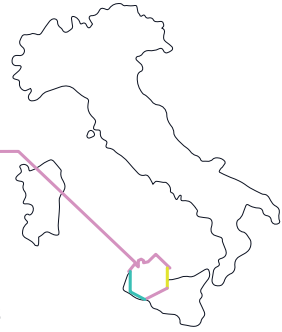
This activation transformed the station from a closed technical infrastructure into a shared civic space. It attracted thousands of visitors, generated media and professional attention, and provided tangible evidence that the building could become a cultural and ecological anchor for Sofia.

Highlights from this case: full-scale temporary activation can create political momentum by allowing people and institutions to experience a possible future before it is formally decided.

Img. 30 (Well attended presentation of the station's vision)



5. SPAZIO AL LAVORO
PALERMO, IT



Spazio al Lavoro stands on Via dell'Alloro, a street once lined with aristocratic palaces in La Kalsa— a socio-economically and culturally complex and one of Palermo's oldest neighbourhoods. Following decades of post-war disinvestment and more recent waves of tourism-led gentrification, the area exhibits an intricate mosaic of affluent newcomers, long-term residents in precarious conditions, informal economies, and a dense amount of social and cultural initiatives. Its name, derived from the Arabic "Al-Khalesa" ("the chosen"), reflects the district's medieval prestige as a center of Arab-Norman power.

Img. 31 (Music concert in the entire courtyard)



Today, the palazzo embodies Palermo's layered history, from its 17th-century grandeur to its wartime scars and modern rebirth. Surrounded by winding alleys, vibrant markets, and traces of Arab, Norman, and Spanish influence, La Kalsa remains a living testament to Sicily's cultural crossroads—a place where past and present collide.

Built in the 17th century by the Carretto family, Palazzo Castrofilippo passed through the hands of Sicilian nobility—the Lombardo, Morreale, and Valguarnera dynasties—before falling into decay. Bombed in WWII and left abandoned for decades, its frescoes faded and its columns stolen, the palace seemed lost in time. Yet, through European Urban restoration programs and private efforts, the palace has been meticulously revived.

Today, it blends residential lofts, coworking spaces, and offices, while its courtyards and basement host cultural spaces, among them our experimental ACL.

Img. 32 (Neighbours using the community space)



WHAT WE IMPLEMENTED AT SPAZIO AL LAVORO PALERMO

In Palermo, the action was less about opening an unknown space and more about weaving together an already active but complex neighbourhood ecosystem. The Kalsa district has strong grassroots traditions, many NGOs, social challenges, and pressures from tourism-led change. The House of Participation, governed through a collaboration pact, required careful work on legitimacy, responsibility, and trust.

The Italian process began with internal assemblies, mapping, walks, and first encounters. It then expanded through public consultation, World Café formats, meetings with local actors, and a workshop on commons for culture. Later, physical restoration became a social practice: shared painting, cleaning, reorganisation, and work with people on probation turned maintenance into participation. The space then hosted book clubs, after-school support, language meet-ups, civic assemblies, neighbourhood lunches, recycling workshops, urban walks, and also experimental memory-based artistic activities.



Img. 33 (Neighborhood picnic in the entire courtyard)

The activation showed that adaptive reuse in a socially dense context is a slow choreography of care, negotiation, and everyday practice. The strongest outcome was not a single event, but the emergence of a more legible and shared framework for collective stewardship.

Highlights from this case: when many actors already care about a place, activation must connect and support existing energies rather than replace them.

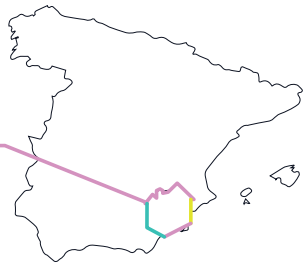
Img. 34 (Workshop on the history of the place)

Img. 35 (Mapping the various initiatives involved in the Spazio)





6. ARTILLERY BARRACKS MURCIA, ES



The Artillery Barracks in Murcia, Spain, is a historical landmark located in the Barrio del Carmen. This vibrant neighborhood is known for its blend of cultural heritage and modern urban life. Positioned near the Segura River, the barracks hold a strategic and picturesque location that offers a glimpse into the military history of the region. Surrounded by lively streets filled with local shops, cafes, and traditional Spanish architecture[21], the area around the Artillery Barracks provides a unique juxtaposition of historical significance and contemporary living.

(21) See more information about a related term, Sustainable Architecture, in the Appendix under Glossary.

Img. 36 (Historical facade of the Artillery Barracks)



The Artillery Barracks forms an architectural complex divided into six pavilions, each serving a distinct cultural or educational purpose. Currently, Pavilion 3 houses the Municipal Library “Río Segura”, Pavilion 4 hosts the Museum and Aquarium of the University of Murcia, Pavilions 5 and 6 have been transferred to the Autonomous Community of the Region of Murcia, with Pavilion 5 housing the Párraga Center and CENDEAC, and Pavilion 6 housing the Professional Conservatory of Music of Murcia. Pavilions 1 and 2, the last to be renovated, are spaces for artistic and cultural production managed by the Murcia City Council. Thus, the importance of the Artillery Barracks goes beyond its historical and architectural value. This building has become a meeting point for citizens, where cultural events are held, and citizen participation is encouraged. It is a space that promotes creativity and the exchange of ideas.

Img. 37 (Community consultation in the Barracks)



WHAT WE IMPLEMENTED AT ARTILLERY BARRACKS MURCIA

In Murcia, the Artillery Barracks was already an active municipal cultural site. The challenge was to make it more open, responsive, and connected to everyday community life. The Spanish testbed combined during its activation brainstorming, stakeholder mapping, artistic co-creation, public events, and dialogue formats.

Cultural Ambassadors developed participatory actions such as collective illustration, mural-making, pop-up exhibition formats, collective music-making, art residencies, open music days, school visits, round tables, neighbourhood mapping, and a public festival. These activities helped residents and cultural operators imagine the Barracks as a hybrid cultural-community venue, not only an institutional programme.

Img. 38, 39 (Interactive exhibitions)





The process revealed practical needs, including clearer access procedures, better communication, more flexible support for cultural initiatives, and stronger links between indoor and outdoor spaces. It also showed how artistic formats can help people express concerns and aspirations that may be difficult to communicate in formal meetings.

Highlights from this case: even an established cultural institution can become more participatory when artistic methods are used to reopen and reinforce dialogue to test new forms of access.

Img. 40 (Collective music making)



LESSONS LEARNED



4.1 THE ACTIVATION IMPACT 84

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4.1 THE ACTIVATION IMPACT

The impact assessment[1] provides strong validation across evaluation dimensions, and continuation beyond the project is widely viewed as realistic.

(1) See more information about a related term, Cultural Impact Assessment, in the Appendix under Glossary.

NEW INHERIT demonstrated that heritage activation is practical when approached systematically. The project's strongest contribution is not one output, but a transferable operating model: blended programming grounded in community co-creation, strengthened by cross-border peer learning, and amplified through structured communication and digital infrastructure.

Its legacy spans methods in testbed (Agora Cultural Labs), policy (recommendations enabling reform), people (Cultural Ambassadors), and infrastructure (scalable digital tools). Across Observatory Cases and testbeds, adaptive reuse is framed not as preservation alone, but as a dynamic process of reimagining heritage as a living resource for community renewal, social inclusion, and urban transformation.

IMPACT ON TESTBED AND COMMUNITY

Overall, testbed representatives describe NEW INHERIT as a catalyst for activating heritage spaces and strengthening their legitimacy as open, relevant, community-oriented places. The key risk is not the perceived value of the model, but the ability to maintain the "backbone" function (coordination/ facilitation, access to space, and basic operating resources) once project support ends.



Img. 41 (Community event at TRACK, Brussels)

More concrete recurring concerns and ideas are:

- Community impact is consistently high, with community engagement and perception improvements unanimously positive.
- The programme mix (artistic, educational and community-oriented activities) is rated as the strongest design feature.
- Continuation beyond the project is widely seen as realistic, but depends on securing coordination capacity and resources.
- Resourcing[2] is the main bottleneck for sustainability and scaling: the resourcing outlook indicator is the lowest-rated and has the highest share of negative responses.
- Replication is perceived as feasible when paired with governance and facilitation: digital tools support replication, while open comments stress the need for clear roles, stable funding and community participation.

(2) See more information about a related term, Crowdsourcing, in the Appendix under Glossary.

The Testbed Activation (Agora Cultural Lab) across the testbeds are as versatile as their contexts and participants. We have summarised the most striking interventions from each ACL to highlight which approach could lead to a positive impact in the respective context.

OTHER MUSIC ACADEMY E.V, GERMANY

The Agora Cultural Lab activation focused on bridging the gap between OMA and local communities, repositioning the building as an open, inclusive, and community-rooted cultural space. The testbed activation was beneficial for OMA itself. It helped OMA to reflect on its role, accessibility, and communication towards local communities and helped to eliminate bias.

The testbed also validated that creative residency can function as facilitators and engagement tools, not only as artistic space for events and workshops where one can "experiment without fear," "speak through images rather than language," and "feel part of something bigger." As stable, recurring formats, the creative residency helped to build legitimacy and trust. The success of the residency pilot provided a foundation to continue collaboration with community groups.

TRACK, BELGIUM

A key choice of the Belgium testbed was to position TRACK not only as a venue for cultural production, but as a platform for youth-led initiatives and cross-sector collaboration.

The deliberate approach was very successful in strengthening active ownership, allowing structures and roles to evolve alongside emerging initiatives and partnerships. The ecosystem was held together by the organisational capacity, time, coordination, and facilitation of Urban Foxes, enabling cultural programming by users themselves.

The activation approach built a strong identity as a shared cultural commons, also and especially among young people. The testbed proves: providing them with control over decisions and meaningful resources strengthens their civic engagement, well-being, and long-term socio-cultural participation processes.

KTIMA GEROLEMO, CYPRUS

The Agora Cultural Lab came alive through a dense series of hands-on cultural practices, shaped by Cultural Ambassadors and the local community.

Cyprus activated a network of spaces. While Ktima Gerolemo Winery provided an anchor point, the community centre and public village spaces allowed activities to spill into everyday life. Activities expanded into the village landscape, reframing streets and paths as cultural assets.

The Cyprus experience offers a transferable lesson for rural Europe. When cultural activation is grounded in local traditions, yet oriented toward contemporary challenges (e.g. sustainability and inclusion), heritage can become a living resource for long-term social value, not only a tourism asset. Activities can strengthen intergenerational relationships and create new opportunities for youth engagement. Here again, key is the emergence of continuity, trust, and local ownership.

SPAZIO AL LAVORO, ITALY

The House of Participation, where the testbed activation took place, is a space governed through a civic pact between citizens and the municipality. Unlike contexts where cultural infrastructure is absent, the Kalsa neighbourhood is marked by a high concentration of informal, self-organised, and institutional actors.

The Italian testbed demonstrated that cultural space activation in contexts of high social density produces strong

social impact when it operates as a mediating infrastructure, one that does not seek to dominate or replace existing initiatives, but rather to connect them, amplify them, and provide a shared framework for collective stewardship. In Palermo, NEW INHERIT did not introduce participation, but demonstrated the importance of maintaining it.

TRAIN STATION SOFIA, BULGARIA

Gradoscope positioned the Agora Cultural Lab activation as both a spatial experiment and a governance and advocacy process, aimed at reopening the station to public life, testing potential future uses, and building institutional legitimacy for long-term transformation.

The decision to transform this testbed into an urban prototype - a realised vision of a potential use - proves that demonstration is more compelling than discussion in mobilising public support and institutional will. For sustainable collaboration between governmental institutions and civic initiatives, an understanding of decision-making chains and institutional logics is key. Clear governance models can serve as concrete negotiation tools for future agreements. The testbed demonstrated that in contexts of institutional complexity, activation must operate simultaneously on spatial, social, and political levels.

ARTILLERY BARRACKS, SPAIN

In order to reconnect local residents with the site, transform it into an accessible cultural commons, the ACL in Spain focused on a wide range of activation, including Multiplier Events, art residencies, community consultation and dialogue, and education formats.

The combination of activities significantly expanded the reach and depth of the Spanish testbed. It moved beyond isolated events toward a more systemic and inclusive approach to cultural space activation. The testbed



Img. 42 (Community meeting at Artillery Barracks, Murcia)

(3) See more information about a related term, Organizational Learning, in the Appendix under Glossary.

exemplified the Agora Cultural Lab ethos: learning[3] by doing, co-creating with local actors, and testing futures through action. Cultural spaces mean inclusive environments for prototyping and experimentation.

IMPACT ON PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

The partner debrief demonstrated a clear shift from "project participation" toward ownership, adaptation, and forward use of the New Inherit approach. Across the discussion, partners did not frame sustainability as repeating activities, but rather they described how NEW INHERIT has changed how they activate heritage spaces: through stronger community relations, practical governance habits, and a more confident willingness to test, learn, and iterate.

GERMANY

Partners surfaced a complementary lesson: the challenge of sustaining engagement when governance conditions are uncertain, and the value of participatory cultural methods as a durable response. Where activation is slowed by time-

consuming renovation processes, time-limited space access, or bureaucratic constraints, stakeholder fatigue can become a real barrier. Against this backdrop, NEW INHERIT's emphasis on creative, people-centred participation—especially through research-led or arts-based formats—proved especially effective at keeping momentum alive. By using accessible, non-technical methods (visual storytelling, collective making, informal encounters, public-facing showcases), partners were able to engage diverse groups and maintain a sense of shared purpose even when structural timelines moved slowly.

BELGIUM

Partners highlighted a practical scaling lever focused on capacity building: selecting ambassadors with research placements, internships, or related investigations can create a win–win model. Ambassadors gain experience aligned with their professional trajectory, while the testbed gains analytical capacity, documentation, and structured learning that can be fed back into the ecosystem. This points to an efficient sustainability mechanism: embedding NEW INHERIT into professional development pathways so that activation work is not an add-on, but part of people's career structures and institutional roles.

CYPRUS

Partners offered a compelling example of resilience-based sustainability, where continuity is achieved through relationships and reciprocal value rather than through additional funding. After a fire near the testbed over the summer, the team established collaboration with a neighbouring community grounded in an exchange of services and skills. The arrangement presents a pragmatic sustainability mechanism: long-term engagement supported by mutual benefit. This shifts sustainability from a purely financial problem to a social contract: partners stay connected because each side gains something tangible.

ITALY

The discussion surfaced an important lesson about audience development and the unexpected power of culturally familiar formats. A social lunch in the neighbourhood attracted a new and more diverse audience than anticipated, showing that food-sharing cultures can create low-barrier entry points for groups who may not respond to formal cultural invitations. Particularly noteworthy was the attraction of elderly participants and the way activities connected to a community archive and shared memory. Palermo reported a shift toward self-organisation: activities increasingly sustain themselves within the existing flow of community life. This is a strong impact outcome—where the project's role evolves from organiser to enabler, and the space begins to function as a platform for community-driven continuity.

BULGARIA

The discussion highlighted the value of activation as proof-of-possibility in complex, large-scale heritage contexts. The approach centred on opening the site to public life through diverse programming and visible use, so that residents, cultural actors, and institutional stakeholders could experience the space as a living civic asset rather than an abstract planning challenge. This kind of prototyping matters for sustainability because it converts uncertainty into momentum: public presence and multi-stakeholder participation help build legitimacy, demonstrate demand, and strengthen the case for longer-term commitments (whether financial, institutional, or partnership-based).

SPAIN

The most concrete indicator of institutional uptake emerged: Murcia Municipality explicitly recognised the value of the project's actions and stated its intention to implement the NEW INHERIT methodology within the activation of a newly



Img. 43 (Community event at Sofia Freight Station)

restored heritage site. This is significant because it signals more than satisfaction; it signals mainstreaming. When a municipality chooses to reuse a methodology in a new site, it suggests the approach has proven feasible within public-sector constraints (administrative procedures, stakeholder dynamics, political accountability) and has generated a form of internal legitimacy. In impact terms, this is a strong marker of scalability: the project's learning is not ending with the grant period but being carried forward as a reusable operating model.

IMPACT ON THE CULTURAL AMBASSADORS

The Cultural Ambassadors model emerged as a particularly effective mechanism for participation and local ownership. The most valued elements were hands-on testbed work and international peer exchanges indicating that learning-by-doing are central to talent retention and meaningful engagement from different perspectives.

PERSONAL GROWTH, CONFIDENCE & IDENTITY BUILDING

The Cultural Ambassador (CA) programme had a strong personal and developmental impact on participants. Many described the experience as enriching, empowering, challenging, and deeply connected to building relationships and confidence. The programme not only produced activities and events, but also helped participants strengthen their identity as active cultural actors and community contributors. This combination of growth, responsibility, and real-life experience became an important foundation for long-term engagement beyond the project itself.

FROM PARTICIPANTS TO COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

The most significant CA experiences were highly practical and community-based. Participants were actively involved in organising events, activating spaces, facilitating collaborations, and communicating the project to wider audiences. Through these roles, Cultural Ambassadors became important connectors between heritage spaces, local communities, and the project vision itself.

The programme demonstrated that Cultural Ambassadors were not passive participants, but active facilitators, hosts, organisers, and storytellers capable of translating ideas into visible local action.

STRENGTHENING PARTICIPATION & INCLUSION

CAs identified their strongest impact in the area of community participation and inclusion.

Participants felt they contributed most significantly to:

- **increasing local engagement,**
- **making spaces more accessible,**
- **encouraging collaboration,**
- **and supporting community involvement.**

The programme proved especially effective in generating community-facing impact, helping people feel more connected to heritage spaces and cultural activities. While direct influence on policymaking remained limited, the programme created strong local social impact and highlighted the need for stronger future connections between grassroots initiatives and institutional structures.

LEARNING THROUGH PRACTICE & INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE[4]

One of the strongest drivers of impact was the combination of hands-on work within the testbeds and international peer exchange. Cultural Ambassadors valued practical experimentation, collaboration, and cross-border learning more strongly than formal mentorship alone.

Study visits, exchanges, and collaborative activities allowed participants to:

- **share experiences,**
- **build international networks,**
- **gain inspiration from other contexts,**
- **and develop new ideas for their own communities.**

This demonstrated that peer learning and real access to spaces and projects are essential for meaningful engagement and long-term sustainability.

MEANINGFUL & EMOTIONALLY RESONANT EXPERIENCES

Final events and public activities were described as highly participatory, creative, and meaningful experiences. Participants associated these moments with feelings of pride, joy, visibility, and collective achievement.

Importantly, these activities were not experienced as formal project obligations, but as emotionally engaging community moments that validated participants' efforts and

(4) See more information about the Toolbox with all of our learnings in the Appendix under Resources.

strengthened their sense of belonging. The success of these events highlighted the importance of participation, visibility, and shared experience in cultural activation processes.

LONG-TERM MOTIVATION & FUTURE CONTINUATION

The programme also created strong momentum for future initiatives. Many Cultural Ambassadors expressed intentions to:

- **continue activating heritage spaces,**
- **organise recurring public events,**
- **develop new collaborations and residencies,**
- **replicate formats in other locations,**
- **and explore longer-term cultural programming and funding opportunities.**

Some participants even discussed long-term operational models and sustainable use agreements for spaces, showing that the project generated real continuation potential rather than one-off engagement.

Img. 44 (Intergenerational learning in community at Ktima Gerolemo)



Overall, the Cultural Ambassador programme demonstrated that adaptive reuse can become a powerful tool for youth empowerment, community leadership, cultural participation, and long-term civic engagement. The strongest elements of the model were community co-creation, practical involvement, and transnational peer learning, all of which created meaningful experiences capable of continuing beyond the lifetime of the project.

4.2 OUR FINDINGS

CHALLENGES OF THE TESTBED ACTIVATION

Across six national contexts the same idea was being perpetually demonstrated: adaptive reuse thrives when regulation is proportionate, finance is blended, environmental performance is specified for reuse (not only for new buildings), participation matures into co-stewardship, and skills are built as work advances.

What changes from place to place is the configuration of those elements—the sequence in which they are available, the actors who can mobilise them, and the points at which energy is lost. Every country in the partnership protects heritage through layered instruments (national legislation, regional rules, municipal planning), but the pathway from a temporary activation to a longer-term use is not always explicit. Where that "ladder of licences" is unclear, pilots stall at precisely the moment they generate demand. Focus groups and country scans report the same friction: multiple authorities, sequential approvals, and uncertainty about competences when assets sit between levels of government or involve mixed ownership.

The experiences across the Agora Cultural Labs (ACLs) showed that adaptive reuse is not only about transforming buildings, but also about navigating complex governance systems, social realities, and community relationships. **Each testbed faced different challenges shaped by its local context, institutional environment, and social dynamics.**

GOVERNANCE COMPLEXITY

In Germany, uncertainty around temporary access agreements limited long-term planning and investment. In Bulgaria, the large-scale railway site required coordination between multiple institutions, highlighting how fragmented governance and bureaucracy can slow cultural activation. In Palermo, Italy, the challenge was managing relationships between many existing community actors and organisations, requiring continuous mediation[5] and trust-building. Belgium revealed another important issue: participation requires time and resources, and many organisations struggled to engage consistently due to precarious working conditions and limited staff capacity. Meanwhile, Spain showed that even when governance structures already exist, successful participation still depends on transparency, accessibility, and effective communication.

(5) See more information about a related term, Cultural Mediation, in the Appendix under Glossary.

SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY-RELATED CHALLENGES

In several contexts, heritage spaces carried complex historical meanings and social tensions. In Spain, some residents were emotionally attached to the former military identity of the building and felt uncertain about its transformation into a cultural space. In Palermo, tourism-driven gentrification created tensions between long-term residents and newcomers, raising concerns about exclusion of population and territorial identity.

In Germany, the OMA building attracted creative communities but remained disconnected from many local residents, showing the challenge of bridging social fragmentation. In Belgium, the TRACK activation took place in a socially contested environment shaped by marginalisation, insecurity, and transience. This required approaches that focused not only on cultural programming, but also on creating safe and welcoming environments for social connection and empowerment. The Cyprus testbed highlighted how rural

cultural activation is deeply connected to local traditions, livelihoods, and environmental realities. When wildfires affected the region during the project, activities had to adapt quickly to support resilience and collective recovery. This demonstrated the importance of flexibility and strong community relationships in times of crisis.

SKILLS GAP

Skill gaps surface also across all six contexts: audience development, financial management, inclusive practice, environmental operations, and—across the board—intermediate digital skills for content, data and tools, hence the NEW INHERIT consortium's response, building a competence framework and a shared learning structure (website, e-learning, immersive app). The point is operational: when training is packaged in accessible modules and usage is visible (course completions, toolkit downloads, repeated app journeys), coalitions can allocate scarce support where it compounds value —toward organisers and venues that convert learning into practice.

EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES[6]

(6) Skip to Chapter 5 for an in-depth look at The Outcome (incluing the Big Picture and So, What now?):

Despite the diversity and challenges of contexts, the NEW INHERIT testbeds revealed a remarkable convergence of aspirations and possibilities. Across all contexts, communities expressed a strong desire for participation, cultural expression, youth involvement, and collective stewardship of heritage spaces. The project demonstrated that adaptive reuse unlocks its greatest transformative potential when communities are positioned not as passive users, but as active co-authors of the spaces they inhabit.

The Agora Cultural Labs emerged as a powerful and flexible framework for supporting this transformation. Rather than imposing fixed solutions, the Labs enabled iterative, community-driven activation processes that evolved

alongside local needs, institutional realities, and emerging social dynamics. Through this approach, several key opportunities became visible across the project.

CO-GOVERNANCE AS A NEW MODEL FOR CULTURAL INNOVATION IN COMMUNITIES

The testbeds revealed growing openness toward shared governance and collaborative stewardship models. Communities, cultural actors, and institutions showed readiness to experiment with more horizontal forms of decision-making and responsibility-sharing. This presents a major opportunity for future cultural policies and urban governance models that move beyond top-down management toward more democratic and participatory model structures .

HERITAGE AND SUSTAINABILITY PRINCIPLES AS CONNECTED AGENDAS

Across all six contexts, participants increasingly connected heritage reuse with ecological transition, resilience, and sustainable urban development. The project demonstrated that adaptive reuse can become a practical pathway for climate-conscious urbanism through circular renovation practices, low-impact interventions, biodiversity-sensitive approaches, and modular reuse strategies. Examples such as Buda Fabriek and BE HERE in Belgium, Le Serre dei Giardini Margherita in Italy, C*Space in Germany, and La Cárcel Vieja in Spain illustrated how environmental responsibility can be integrated directly into cultural activation practices.

Importantly, the testbeds showed that sustainability works best when environmental principles are embedded into everyday governance, maintenance, procurement, and programming—not treated as isolated technical upgrades.

PROTOTYPING AS A TOOL FOR MOMENTUM AND CHANGE

The Bulgarian activation especially demonstrated the power of temporary interventions and visible prototypes to mobilise public imagination and political support. Experiencing a possible future use of a heritage site often proved more convincing than strategic documents or long-term planning discussions alone. Across all testbeds, temporary activation became a valuable tool for testing ideas, building trust, and creating momentum for longer-term transformation.

BUILDING NEW SKILLS AND LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS

The project also identified important opportunities for strengthening skills and capacities within the cultural sector. Across all contexts, recurring needs emerged around audience development, financial sustainability, inclusive practices, environmental operations, and digital competences. In response, NEW INHERIT developed a shared competence framework, e-learning resources, digital tools, and immersive learning formats designed to support long-term knowledge exchange and capacity building.

The project showed that when learning is accessible, practical, and connected to real local challenges, communities and organisations are better equipped to transform knowledge into action.

TOWARDS LONG-TERM CULTURAL ECOSYSTEMS

While many funding opportunities for cultural activation already exist, the project revealed that the greatest challenge is not the lack of ideas, but the lack of stable operational support and long-term stewardship models. At the same time, this challenge also represents an opportunity: to rethink how heritage activation is funded, governed, and sustained.

Ultimately, the NEW INHERIT testbeds demonstrated that adaptive reuse can become far more than a strategy[7] for

(7) It is about managing relationships, negotiating governance structures, building trust, and creating long-term support systems around cultural spaces.

preserving buildings. It can create new cultural ecosystems, where heritage spaces evolve into living infrastructures for more inclusive, resilient, and connected communities.

Lessons from the Agora Cultural Labs. The experiences across the six Agora Cultural Labs demonstrated that adaptive reuse is never only about renovating buildings. While each testbed operated in a very different context, several clear patterns emerged about what enables cultural activation to thrive and what continues to hold it back.

WHAT WORKS:

01 - STABLE COLLABORATION & SHARED GOVERNANCE

Projects were most successful when communities, cultural organisations, municipalities, and local stakeholders worked together through transparent and participatory governance[8] structures. Across all testbeds, communities showed strong interest in shared stewardship and collective responsibility for heritage spaces. Co-governance created a sense of ownership and strengthened long-term commitment.

(8) See more information about Participatory Governance in the Appendix under Glossary.

02 - CULTURAL SPACES ROOTED IN LOCAL REALITIES

Activation strategies worked best when they responded to the social, cultural, and historical context of the place. In Cyprus, grounding activities in traditional artisanal practices strengthened local identity and social cohesion[9]. In Belgium, the approach shifted from “activating spaces” to enabling spaces that support people’s ideas, connections, and initiatives. These examples showed that heritage spaces become meaningful when communities recognize themselves within them.

(9) See more information about Social Cohesion in the Appendix under Glossary.

03 - YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND LEARNING-BY-DOING[10]

Young people emerged as key drivers of activation, especially in Germany and Belgium. Hands-on experimentation, cultural programming, and peer learning created confidence, participation, and long-term engagement. Temporary interventions, workshops, and creative prototypes helped communities imagine new futures for underused places more effectively than strategic planning alone.

04 - CULTURAL SPACES AS CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

The Labs revealed a growing need for spaces that foster wellbeing, belonging, safety, creativity, and exchange. Successful initiatives were not only cultural venues—they became platforms for social connection, dialogue, and collective care.

05 - FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY

Projects that remained open to change were more resilient. In Cyprus, when wildfires disrupted activities, the community adapted by shifting toward reflection, dialogue, and collective processing. This demonstrated that strong relational networks are often more important than fixed programming.

WHAT DOES NOT WORK:

01 - INSTITUTIONAL AMBIGUITY & UNSTABLE SUPPORT

Where long-term governance structures or access agreements remained unclear, uncertainty weakened motivation and limited investment in the space. In Germany, temporary agreements with municipalities created hesitation around long-term planning and organisational growth.

02 - COMPLEX BUREAUCRACY WITHOUT MEDIATION

Large-scale heritage sites often struggled with fragmented institutional systems and overlapping responsibilities. In Bulgaria, coordination between transport authorities,

(10) See more information about the E-Learning Platform in the Appendix under Resources.

municipalities, and cultural actors required extensive mediation and political support. Without dedicated facilitation, collaboration became difficult and slow

03 - PARTICIPATION WITHOUT RESOURCES

Participation processes often depend on unpaid or overstretched labour. In Belgium, many organisations lacked the time and resources to engage consistently due to precarious working conditions. This highlighted that participation itself requires support, coordination, and financial sustainability. The Belgian case highlights an often-overlooked dimension of participatory governance: availability is a form of resource, and without (sufficient) financial support for staff time, co-governance risks becoming inequitable or dominated by actors with more flexible organisational structures.

04 - CULTURAL ACTIVATION DISCONNECTED FROM THE LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Projects were less effective when cultural spaces remained isolated from surrounding neighbourhoods. In Germany, the OMA building attracted a specific creative audience but struggled to connect with local residents. Similarly, in Belgium, there was a risk of becoming an isolated cultural "island" disconnected from wider social realities.

05 - IGNORING SOCIAL TENSIONS AND INEQUALITIES

Adaptive reuse cannot succeed if it overlooks existing community tensions. In Palermo, tourism-driven gentrification created conflicts around belonging, accessibility, and territorial identity. Cultural activation risks reinforcing exclusion if vulnerable groups are not actively included in decision-making and programming.

4.3 OUR SUGGESTIONS

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES & STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the experiences of the Agora Cultural Labs and the broader NEW INHERIT process, the following recommendations translate the project's lessons into practical guidance for organisations, municipalities, cultural operators, and communities interested in implementing adaptive reuse and cultural activation initiatives in other different contexts.

01 - BUILD GOVERNANCE BEFORE PROGRAMMING

Adaptive reuse projects should begin by establishing clear governance structures, roles, and communication channels before launching cultural programming. Shared governance frameworks create trust, clarify responsibilities, and strengthen long-term sustainability.

Practical Guidelines:

- **Establish co-governance agreements early between municipalities, organisations, and community actors.**
- **Designate facilitators or mediators responsible for communication and conflict management.**
- **Allocate resources[11] specifically for coordination, participation, and relationship-building.**
- **Develop transparent decision-making processes accessible to all stakeholders.**

(11) See more information about a related term, Resource Mobilization, in the Appendix under Glossary.

Strategic Recommendation: Funding schemes and local authorities should recognise governance and facilitation as core infrastructure, not as secondary admin costs.

02 - ADAPT PARTICIPATION METHODS TO LOCAL CONTEXTS

There is no universal model for cultural activation. Successful participation depends on understanding the social, cultural, historical, and environmental realities of each place.

Practical Guidelines:

- Conduct contextual mapping before the design of the activities itself.
- Use different participatory methods depending on local needs[2].
- Integrate local histories, traditions, and community narratives into programming.
- Remain flexible and responsive to crises or emerging social tensions.

Strategic Recommendation: Adaptive reuse projects should prioritise context-sensitive and place-based methodologies rather than replicating fixed models across different territories.

03 - TURN CONSULTATION INTO VISIBLE ACTION

Participation becomes meaningful when communities can see how their contributions influence decisions, programming, and spatial transformation.

Practical Guidelines:

- Create visible feedback loops between consultation and implementation.
- Communicate clearly how community input will shape the outcomes.
- Implement small, tangible actions early in the process to build trust.
- Allocate budgets[12] for pilot interventions and quick-win community initiatives.

(12) See more information about a related term, Participatory Budgeting, in the Appendix under Glossary.

Strategic Recommendation: Participation frameworks should include implementation resources to avoid consultation fatigue and symbolic engagement.

04 - TREAT CULTURAL SPACES AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Heritage spaces should function not only as cultural venues, but as inclusive platforms for social connection, wellbeing, learning, and civic participation.

Practical Guidelines:

- Design multi-functional programming that combines culture, education, social activities, and services.
- Encourage intergenerational and intercultural community participation.
- Support activities that strengthen local belonging and collective care.
- Position cultural spaces as accessible everyday environments rather than exclusive institutions.

Strategic Recommendation: Urban and cultural policies should recognise cultural spaces as essential civic infrastructure contributing to social cohesion and democratic participation.

05 - INVEST IN LONG-TERM ECOSYSTEMS, NOT TEMPORARY PROJECTS

Adaptive reuse requires long-term commitment, stable coordination, and sustained community engagement.

Practical Guidelines:

- Develop multi-year strategies beyond temporary activation phases.
- Secure stable staffing and organisational continuity.
- Build long-term partnerships between actors[13].
- Prioritise gradual and iterative development over short-term visibility.

(13) Such as public institutions, communities, and cultural actors.

Strategic Recommendation: Funding frameworks should move beyond short project cycles and support long-term cultural ecosystems that allow relationships, governance, and participation to mature over time.

06 - SUPPORT YOUTH AS ACTIVE CO-CREATORS

Young people play a crucial role in reimagining and activating underused spaces when they are treated as co-creators rather than passive participants.

Practical Guidelines:

- Include youth in governance, programming, and decision-making processes.
- Use hands-on and experimental learning methods.
- Support peer learning, temporary interventions, and creative prototyping.
- Create accessible entry points for citizens, first-time cultural participation.

Strategic Recommendation: Future adaptive reuse initiatives should integrate youth participation as a structural component of governance strategies.

07 - ADDRESS SOCIAL INEQUALITIES DIRECTLY

Adaptive reuse processes must actively respond to social fragmentation, exclusion, gentrification, and unequal access to culture and public space.

Practical Guidelines:

- Identify vulnerable or underrepresented groups[14].
- Design accessible and low-threshold participation.
- Monitor potential exclusionary effects on the population during cultural activation.
- Balance cultural visibility with local social-economic needs and affordability.

(14) In particular still early in the process.

Strategic Recommendation: Inclusive adaptive reuse should be understood as both a cultural and social justice practice, requiring continuous attention to equity and accessibility.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DECISION-MAKERS

Across Europe, heritage and contemporary culture are still too often treated as separate policy areas. Heritage policies mainly focus on preservation and protection, while cultural policies tend to support artistic production and creative activities. As a result, adaptive reuse projects — which combine heritage, culture, community engagement, and innovation — frequently fall between these systems and struggle to find long-term support.

However, NEW INHERIT demonstrated that heritage activation works best when these areas are connected rather than separated. Adaptive reuse requires integrated thinking: heritage funding can support restoration and maintenance, cultural funding can support programming and participation, innovation funding can encourage digital and creative experimentation, while social and environmental programmes can strengthen community engagement and sustainability goals.

For policymakers and municipalities, this means recognising heritage activation not simply as a conservation task, but as a cross-sectoral strategy that contributes simultaneously to culture, sustainability, social cohesion, youth participation, local development, and community wellbeing.

At the local level, municipalities play a particularly important role. Decisions around planning permissions, access to spaces, cultural programming, and public participation often shape whether heritage activation succeeds or struggles. Municipal cultural, social, economic, and environmental strategies already contain many objectives that adaptive reuse can directly support — from creative economies and tourism to inclusion, climate resilience, and active citizenship.

The key challenge is therefore not only creating new policies, but also connecting existing ones more effectively. Heritage activation should be understood through multiple lenses rather than confined to a single category or department.

The following recommendations are based on the experiences, challenges, and lessons learned throughout the NEW INHERIT project. They are designed not only for policymakers and municipalities, but also for cultural practitioners, NGOs, heritage activists, and local organisations working directly with communities and cultural spaces.

The recommendations aim to support a more inclusive, sustainable, and people-centred approach to adaptive reuse.

01 - GOVERNANCE & PARTICIPATION

Recognise Community Co-Creation as Essential. Successful heritage activation depends on trust, participation, and long-term community involvement. Cultural spaces become more sustainable when communities are actively involved in shaping programming, decision-making, and development.



Img. 45 (Cultural Ambassadors Capacity Building in Co-Space Berlin)

NEW INHERIT recommends establishing collaborative governance models such as the Agora Cultural Labs, where municipalities, cultural organisations, residents, artists, NGOs, and local stakeholders share responsibility and stewardship of heritage spaces.

This governance model means:

- **supporting community engagement as a core for project activity,**
- **funding facilitators and coordinators,**
- **and valuing social impact and relationship-building alongside physical renovation.**

Make Temporary & Experimental Use Easier. Many cultural initiatives struggle with rigid regulations and long administrative procedures, especially for temporary or experimental uses of heritage spaces. Simplified procedures can help cultural actors test ideas, and build momentum before long-term investments.

Cities or institutions should introduce more flexible systems and fundings for:

- **temporary cultural activities,**
- **pilot projects,**
- **reversible interventions,**
- **and community-led experimentation.**

Improve Collaboration Between Public Departments. Adaptive reuse projects often involve multiple public authorities, making processes slow and fragmented. Better coordination between cultural, planning, heritage, social, and environmental departments can significantly improve project implementation and accessibility for local actors.

02. SUSTAINABLE FUNDING & CULTURAL ECONOMIES

Support Long-Term Cultural Activation, Not Only Renovation. One of the biggest challenges identified by NEW INHERIT is that funding often supports physical restoration, but not the long-term cultural programming and coordination needed to keep spaces active. Without the following structures, even renovated spaces risk becoming inactive again.

Sustainable heritage activation requires investment in:

- Programming,
- facilitation,
- community management,
- and operational support.

Encourage Local Partnerships & Mixed Funding Models. Municipalities and governments can support this by creating simpler sponsorship systems, local partnership platforms, and financial incentives for cultural activation initiatives.

Heritage activation becomes more resilient when projects combine:

- public funding,
- local sponsorship,
- community partnerships,
- cultural entrepreneurship[15],
- and collaborative economic models.

03. GREEN TRANSITION & ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Treat Adaptive Reuse as a Climate Action Strategy. Reusing existing buildings is one of the most sustainable forms of development. The heritage activation is key solution[16].

(15) See more information about a related term, Entrepreneurial Ecosystem, in the Appendix under Glossary.

(16) Heritage activation can reduce demolition waste, preserve embodied carbon, and encourage circular economy practices.

The Project NEW INHERIT recommends:

- **integrating sustainability into every stage of the adaptive reuse process,**
- **encouraging low-impact interventions,**
- **supporting reuse of materials,**
- **and strengthening traditional building skills connected to repair and maintenance.**

Environmental sustainability should not be treated as an "extra," but as a central principle of heritage activation.

04. INCLUSION, ACCESSIBILITY & COMMUNITY IMPACT

Measure Social Impact, Not Only Visitor Numbers. Cultural projects are often evaluated mainly through statistics such as attendance numbers.

However, the project demonstrated that the most meaningful impacts are often social and qualitative:

- **stronger community relationships,**
- **increased participation,**
- **inclusion,**
- **local pride**
- **and sense of belonging.**

Future evaluation[17] systems should therefore focus more strongly on community impact and lived experiences.

Strengthen Cultural Ambassador Networks. The Cultural Ambassador programme showed that young people and emerging cultural practitioners can become powerful drivers of heritage activation when they are given opportunities, mentorship, and responsibility.

(17) See more information about a related term, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), in the Appendix under Glossary.

The Project NEW INHERIT recommends creating long-term Cultural Ambassador programmes that:

- support young cultural leaders,
- strengthen peer learning,
- connect local communities,
- and create appropriate pathways into cultural work and civic participation.

Special attention should also be given to underrepresented groups and rural communities.

05. SKILLS, INNOVATION & DIGITAL TOOLS[18]

Invest in Skills for Community-Driven Activation. Adaptive reuse today requires more than architectural expertise alone.

Cultural practitioners increasingly need skills in:

- Facilitation for co-creation,
- community engagement,
- participatory governance,
- Sustainability,
- communication,
- and cultural entrepreneurship.

Non-formal education, mentoring, peer learning, and hands-on experimentation should become central parts of future heritage activation programmes.

Use Digital Tools in Accessible & Meaningful Ways.
Digital tools can help make heritage spaces more inclusive, interactive, and visible. However, technology should support participation rather than become an isolated technical layer.

(18) See more information about the Digital Tools in the Appendix under Resources.

The Project NEW INHERIT recommends:

- **small-scale digital experimentation,**
- **accessible digital storytelling,**
- **community-based digital tools,**
- **and lightweight systems for measuring participation and impact.**

Even simple tools such as QR codes, digital mapping, event tracking, or interactive interpretation can help communities engage more actively with heritage spaces.

NEW INHERIT shows that adaptive reuse succeeds when heritage spaces are treated not only as physical assets, but as shared cultural infrastructures shaped by people, participation, and collective care.

The future of heritage activation depends on: long-term collaboration, inclusive governance, sustainable funding, community ownership, and the willingness to experiment/ play with new ways of living, learning, and creating together in heritage spaces.



Img. 46 (Observatory visit in Co-Space Berlin with Cultural Ambassadors)

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5.1 THE BIG PICTURE

UNDERSTANDING THE BIGGER PICTURE OF ADAPTIVE REUSE PROCESS

Adaptive reuse is often perceived as an architectural or technical challenge: a matter of restoring buildings, preserving facades, or finding new functions for old spaces. However, the experiences of NEW INHERIT demonstrate that the real transformation goes far beyond physical renovation. Adaptive reuse is ultimately about people, governance, participation, and the collective ability to imagine new futures for existing spaces.

Across Europe, underused heritage buildings represent one of the continent's most significant untapped cultural and social resources. Studies show that a large proportion of heritage buildings operate far below their potential, particularly in peripheral areas and smaller cities. Many spaces remain partially active but disconnected from contemporary community life, functioning only minimally despite their historical, cultural, and environmental value. At the same time, Europe faces growing challenges linked to social fragmentation, climate transition, economic precarity, and declining trust in public institutions. In this context, adaptive reuse becomes not only a cultural strategy, but also a social and political opportunity.

CRUCIAL SHIFT IN THE UNDERSTANDING

The NEW INHERIT experience revealed a crucial shift in perspective: heritage buildings should no longer be understood as static monuments to preserve, but as living infrastructures capable of supporting creativity, civic participation, learning, and social cohesion. Successful adaptive reuse occurs when spaces are treated as shared



Img. 47 (Well attended presentation Sofia Freight Station)

commons, these are places where communities actively shape decisions, narratives, and everyday life through co-creation and collective stewardship.

One of the strongest lessons from the project is that participation cannot be symbolic or occasional. Meaningful engagement is continuous, iterative, and relational. Communities develop ownership when they repeatedly experience that their voices influence real decisions, programming, and investments. Trust is built slowly through visible feedback loops, long-term presence, and transparent governance practices.

At the same time, participatory governance requires substantial labour and resources. Co-governance is not spontaneous; it depends on facilitation, mediation, communication, and ongoing organisational development. These processes require dedicated staffing, institutional flexibility, and long-term financial commitment. Adaptive reuse fails when participation is expected without providing the resources necessary to sustain it.

Another important insight is that cultural activation cannot rely on universal formulas. Every heritage site contains layered memories, identities, tensions, and social realities that shape how people relate to a space. Successful activation responds sensitively to these local conditions, whether addressing gentrification, segregation, ecological vulnerability, generational divides, or contested stories. Participation methods therefore need to remain flexible, context-sensitive, and capable of adapting to changing community needs.

The project also demonstrated the transformative power of cultural activation. Across the Agora Cultural Labs, heritage spaces evolved into platforms for intercultural dialogue, creativity, and civic engagement. Temporary interventions, workshops, artistic residencies, and public events helped communities reconnect with places that had previously felt inaccessible or disconnected from daily life. In many cases, adaptive reuse strengthened local identity while simultaneously opening spaces to new forms of participation and collaboration.

Prototypes of successful adaptive reuse can be observed across contexts as varied as the Freight Station in Sofia, the Artillery Barracks in Murcia, Other Music Academy in Weimar, Omodos in Cyprus, TRACK in Brussels, and the Palazzo Castrofilippo in Palermo. Findings from these Agora Living Lab activations offer valuable guidance for policymakers, cultural organisations, and municipalities across Europe. In this sense, NEW INHERIT contributes to a broader European movement toward heritage as a platform for social innovation, democratic engagement, and commoning.

5.2 SO, WHAT NOW?

The experiences presented throughout this PLAYBOOK leads to an inescapable conclusion: the underutilization of European cultural heritage represents a considerable missed opportunity for sustainable development, social cohesion, and cultural vitality. The NEW INHERIT project has demonstrated that alternative futures are not only possible, but already emerging across Europe, with examples proving that heritage can be reimagined as infrastructure for contemporary life rather than monuments to the past.

The project demonstrated that adaptive reuse is not only possible, but already happening in different forms across Europe. Through the Agora Cultural Labs, Cultural Ambassador programme, observatory cases, and community consultations, NEW INHERIT explored what enables heritage activation to succeed and what is needed to sustain it in the long term.

The project's multi-method approach - combining Cultural Ambassador embedded practice, observatory case analysis, and stakeholder consultation - has generated ample and specific insights into the barriers of heritage activation. Besides those points, it is noticed also other aspects that worked at our testbeds.

COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP LEADS TO SUCCESS

Projects with formalized co-governance arrangements show times higher success rates than traditional management models, confirming that heritage activation is fundamentally about social relationships rather than physical interventions.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IS ACHIEVABLE

Blended finance models documented across observatory cases show clear pathways from grant dependency to operational resilience. The critical insight that many cases generated income by the second year of the project shows long-term survival is possible and provides concrete targets for support community programmes.

ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE IMPROVES THE HERITAGE VALUE

It approaches that achieve energy reduction while revealing original environmental design principles demonstrate that sustainability and conservation are complementary rather than conflicting objectives.

SKILL DEVELOPMENT IS KEY

The Cultural Ambassador programme's achievement proves that capacity constraints, while real, can be addressed through structured development programmes. The evidence presented throughout the project demonstrates that heritage activation can contribute to multiple policy objectives simultaneously: reducing emissions through building retention, creating employment through cultural economy[1], strengthening social cohesion through community programming, and enhancing wellbeing through meaning.

Looking ahead, policymakers would remind that the regulatory and financial frameworks proposed here are tested approaches and genuine contenders for implementation. The costs are modest compared to the social and economic value created. The takeaway for heritage professionals is to consider embracing change[2] and to encompass social and environmental dimensions. The skills and knowledge possessed are essential, but they must be complemented by new competencies and partnerships. Communities are not passive consumers, but active co-creators.

(1) See more information about a related term, Creative Economy, in the Appendix under Glossary.

(2) See more information about a related term, Systemic Change, in the Appendix under Glossary.



Img. 48 (Runway organised by youth at TRACK, Brussels)

APPENDIX

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6.1 PROJECT RESOURCES

This section brings together the tools, platforms, and materials developed throughout the New InHerit project. Whether you are looking to deepen your understanding of a specific topic, explore the full toolbox, access the observatory cases or get to know the consortium partners, everything is gathered here for easy reference so you can easily find additional resources linked to each chapter.

NEW INHERIT WEBSITE AND PARTNER CONSORTIUM

To learn more about the project as a whole, visit the New InHerit website:

To explore the work of each partner organisation and understand the local contexts they operate in, scan the individual QR codes below.

CGE Erfurt e.V.:

Urban Foxes:

UP Project:

Emphasys Centre:

YEU International:

Sguardi Urbani:

Gradoscope:

Municipality of Murcia:

OUR RESEARCH: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

The following QR codes give access to the full research reports produced by the NEW INHERIT consortium. The research was structured around five axes, each examining different dimensions of the landscape that shapes adaptive reuse of cultural heritage. Together, they form the evidence base that this playbook is built on. Scan the code for each axis to explore the complete findings.

Policies and Regulations - Laws, stakeholders, and strategies shaping heritage in each country.



Funding and Resources - Financial tools and funding opportunities for adaptive reuse projects.



Green Transition Practices - Environmental policies, regulations, and green skills in heritage development.



Public Participation and Engagement - Tools and mechanisms for genuine community involvement.



Capacity and Innovation - Knowledge-sharing, expertise, and cross-sector collaboration for long-term impact.



DESIGNING THE RESEARCH

Beyond the policy analysis, the NEW INHERIT research went directly to the people and projects shaping adaptive reuse in practice. The following two QR codes give access to the findings from focus group discussions held across the six countries, and to the full collection of observatory cases documenting real heritage reuse projects in all their diversity. Together, they bring the research to life, moving from institutional frameworks to lived experience and real-world examples.

Focus Group Discussions - Insights and testimonies from practitioners, activists, and citizens across the six countries.



Observatory Cases - Ninety real heritage reuse projects documented across the six countries.



THE COMPETENCES FOR ACTION

The NEW INHERIT Competence Framework identifies the fifteen core competences needed to successfully activate a cultural heritage space. Developed specifically for non-formal education and Creative and Cultural Practitioners, it serves as both a learning guide and a practical reference for cultural entrepreneurs, young professionals, and organisations working in the field. Scan the QR code below to access the full framework.

Competence Framework - The fifteen interlocked competences for adaptive reuse and cultural space activation.



DIGITAL INNOVATION

NEW INHERIT developed different digital tools to support the activation process, from day-to-

day documentation in the field to education and immersive heritage experiences. Scan the QR codes below to explore each one.

Agora Living Lab Whiteboard - A shared collaborative template used by all six testbeds to document their activation process in real time, making decisions, challenges, and reflections visible across the whole consortium:



Cultural Creator App - An immersive digital experience for thoses who seek information on the community-driven educational context. The App bringing heritage sites to life through 3D environments, interactive storytelling, and community-driven educational context.



E-Learning Platform - A training platform containing over 40 tools with the goal of enriching the observatory cases. It offers a collection of good practices, templates, and guidelines to support professionals and organisations working in cultural heritage adaptive reuse process.



Toolbox - The toolbox contains over 40 tools and aims to provide guidance for general recommendations regarding transferability of good practices and give input both for the development of an economic, legal, institutional toolbox for collective and participatory governance of cultural heritage and for the 6 Agora Cultural Labs. Specially for NEW INHERIT, we also created training materials, templates, guidelines and guidebooks to collectively transform heritage into spaces for creativity.



Take the opportunity to keep yourself updated on the websites of institutions that made this project possible. On our website you will find much more information, not only about NEW INHERIT, but many tools, content, opportunities about this other projects within this theme and more.

6.2 GLOSSARY

Adaptive Management: A systematic process for continually improving management policies and practices by learning from the outcomes of previously implemented management strategies.

Adaptive Reuse: The process of repurposing buildings for new uses while preserving their historical features.

Capacity Building: The process of developing and strengthening the skills, abilities, and resources that organizations and/or communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive.

Circular Economy: An economic system aimed at eliminating waste and the continual use of resources.

Civic Engagement: Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern.

Co-Creation: Collaborative development of a project with the active participation of all stakeholders.

Collaborative Governance: A framework where multiple stakeholders work together in the decision-making process.

Collective Impact: The commitment of a group of actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.

Community Engagement: The process of working collaboratively with community members to address issues that impact their well-being.

Community Mapping: A participatory approach to documenting and analyzing community assets, resources, and needs.

Competence Framework: A structured guide that defines the skills, knowledge, and behaviors required for a specific role or task.

Creative Economy: Economic activities related to the generation and exploitation of knowledge and information.

Creative Hub: A space where creative professionals can work, collaborate, and share resources.

Creative Leadership: The ability to guide a group towards innovative solutions and creative outcomes.

Crowdsourcing: The practice of obtaining input or information by enlisting the services of a large number of people, typically via the Internet.

Cultural Ambassador: A person who promotes and facilitates cultural exchange and understanding.

Cultural Competence: The ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures.

Cultural Entrepreneurship: The act of starting and running a business or organization that creates, promotes, or distributes cultural products or services.

Cultural Heritage: The legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes inherited from past generations.

Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA): An assessment of the effects of a project on the cultural values, practices, and heritage of a community.

Cultural Landscape: A geographical area that includes cultural and natural resources associated with historical events, activities, or people.

Cultural Literacy: The ability to understand and participate fluently in a given culture.

Cultural Mediation: The process of bridging and managing differences between cultures in a way that encourages understanding and cooperation.

Cultural Preservation: The act of maintaining and protecting cultural heritage and traditions.

Cultural Space: A venue or area designated for cultural activities, such as galleries, theaters, and museums.

Cultural Sustainability: The idea that cultural practices, values, and heritages should be preserved for future generations.

Cross-Cultural Communication: The process of recognizing, understanding, and adapting to cultural differences in communication.

Cross-Sector Collaboration: Partnerships that span across various sectors, such as government, private, and non-profit organizations, to achieve common goals.

Digital Heritage: Digital materials that are created, collected, and preserved for the benefit of present and future generations.

Economic Sustainability: The ability of an economy to support a defined level of economic production indefinitely.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem: A set of interconnected entrepreneurial actors, organizations, institutions, and processes which formally and informally coalesce to connect, mediate, and govern the performance within the entrepreneurial environment.

Governance Model: A framework for decision-making and accountability within an organization or project.

Grassroots Movement: A movement that develops organically at a local level before spreading throughout the wider community.

Green Infrastructure: A network providing the "ingredients" for solving urban and climatic challenges by building with nature.

Innovation Hub: A physical space designed to foster creativity, innovation, and collaboration among entrepreneurs, researchers, and businesses.

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E): A process that helps improve performance and achieve results by tracking progress and assessing outcomes.

Open Data: Data that is freely available for everyone to use and republish as they wish, without restrictions.

Organizational Learning: The process of creating, retaining, and transferring knowledge within an organization.

Participatory Budgeting: A process where citizens have a direct role in deciding how to spend a portion of a public budget.

Participatory Design: An approach that involves all stakeholders in the design process to ensure the result meets their needs.

Participatory Governance: A governance process where citizens have the power to make decisions and influence outcomes.

Place Identity: The unique characteristics of a place that contribute to its identity and sense of belonging for its inhabitants.

Placemaking: A collaborative process of creating quality public spaces that contribute to people's health, happiness, and well-being.

Policy Advocacy: Efforts to influence public policy through various forms of persuasive communication.

Public-Private Partnership (PPP): A collaborative agreement between government and private sector companies to fund, build, and operate projects.Social Capital: The networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.

Public Realm: The publicly owned streets, sidewalks, parks, and other outdoor spaces that belong to and are accessible to the public.

Resource Allocation: The process of distributing resources among various projects or business units.

Resource Mobilization: The process of gathering and managing resources to achieve a project's objectives.

Social Cohesion: The bonds that bring people together in a community, fostering trust and mutual support.

Social Enterprise: An organization that applies commercial strategies to maximize improvements in human and environmental well-being.

Social Innovation: The development and implementation of new ideas to meet social needs and create social relationships or collaborations.

Socio-Economic Impact: The social and economic effects of a project, policy, or initiative.

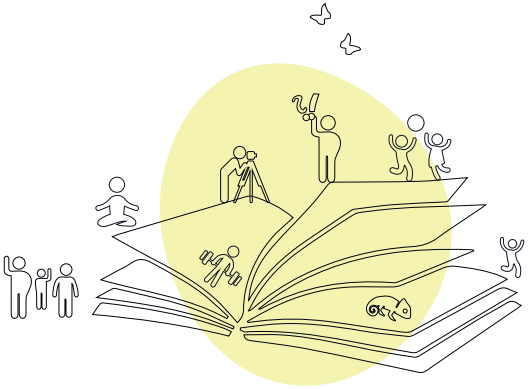
Stakeholder: Any individual or group that has an interest in the outcome of a project.

Sustainable Architecture: Architecture that seeks to minimize the negative environmental impact of buildings by efficiency in the use of materials, energy, and space.

Sustainable Tourism: Tourism that considers its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities.

Systemic Change: A change that affects the underlying structures or mechanisms of a system.

Urban Regeneration: The revitalization of urban areas through redevelopment and improvement projects.



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IMAGE SOURCE

Img1: Municipality of Murcia, Murcia, 2025.

Img2: CGE e.V., Weimar, 2025.

Img3: Gradoscope, Sofia, 2025.

Img4: CGE e.V., Weimar, 2025.

Img5: Municipality of Murcia, Murcia, 2025.

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Img7: Urban Foxes, Brussels, 2025.

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Img46: CGE e.V., Weimar, 2025.

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Img48: Urban Foxes, Brussels, 2025.

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