

Policy brief

Cultural heritage in urban areas: Sustaining heritage in cities and towns

This policy brief highlights the approaches aimed at securing the sustainable management of cultural heritage in urban areas.

1. Introduction

The report of the Horizon 2020 working group on cultural heritage highlighted the potential of cultural heritage to generate benefits for the economy, society and environment. It also noted the changing perceptions of cultural heritage, moving away from it being seen as a financial burden towards recognising it as an asset which can provide a catalyst for enhanced growth and wellbeing. This view was shared also by the conclusion of the Council of the European Union (education, youth, culture and sports), adopted in May 2014, which labelled cultural heritage as a ‘strategic resource for a sustainable Europe’. The study “Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe” notes that built heritage has been recognised as a ‘source of socio-economic development through urban regeneration’ since the late 1970s. However, this was rather linked to physical conservation. Only in 1990s the definition of what heritage is and entails expanded, placing new emphasis on intangible heritage and resulting in a more holistic understanding of the historic urban environment.

Economic benefits can originate from a wide range of factors and may manifest as jobs and businesses supported by the need for repair and maintenance of historic features/buildings, the impact on property values following refurbishment of historic areas and the attractiveness of historic cities as a location for businesses, particularly the creative and cultural sectors. All these factors help to support economic competitiveness. Cultural heritage also enhances quality of life, helping to make a location more attractive as a place to live and work, and also creating a powerful sense of civic pride and identity. Finally, cultural heritage can help support sustainable development, particularly through the regeneration of urban areas and bringing historic buildings back into use.

One of the four recommendations made by the working group concerned heritage-led urban regeneration. The report noted that many cities are already using their historic environment as the basis for regeneration. Urban actors have recognised that heritage acts as ‘a powerful magnet for attracting talent, tourists and investment’. Regeneration can provide means to support cities struggling with unemployment, areas of dereliction and economic stagnation. The working group report proposed that sharing knowledge and good practice from the 30 towns and cities, which have already been successful in using their cultural heritage as a catalyst for regeneration, would help to inspire others to do the same.

2. Financing

EU cohesion policy continues to provide an important source of funding for cultural heritage in urban areas as part of efforts to support more sustainable and more balanced development of regions. In the 2014-2020 programming period, investment in cultural heritage can be supported by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund, the European Fund for Agricultural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.

Member States can also choose to invest some of their structural fund allocations in revolving funds which support sustainable urban development. For example, the Joint European Support for Sustainable Investment in City Areas (JESSICA) is a joint initiative developed in conjunction with the European

Investment Bank and other financial institutions and supports a range of project types including development of heritage or cultural sites for tourism or other sustainable uses.

In addition, URBACT supports sustainable, integrated urban development in cities by enabling partners to work together and develop solutions to common challenges. Culture and heritage is one of many themes supported by URBACT III which runs from 2014-2020. It covers restoring and finding new uses for historic buildings and also support for the creative and cultural industries.

Another possible funding source is Horizon 2020, the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation for 2014-2020. Support for heritage-related research is available in three pillars of the programme: excellent science, industrial leadership and societal challenges. It is intended that Horizon 2020 will provide support for further research and innovation in the field of cultural heritage preservation, restoration and valorisation.

3. Cultural heritage: challenges in an urban context

[The policy brief on protection and sustainable management of cultural heritage](#), developed by Environment and Resource Efficiency Platform in November 2016, sets out some of the general challenges, such as funding availability, which equally apply in an urban context. Income generation is perhaps less of a concern given the opportunities for sale or generation of rental income associated with bringing historic buildings in a city back into productive use.

Cultural resources in cities and towns are likely to be relatively accessible given the availability of public transport in urban areas, although the potential impact on the demand for existing infrastructure must be properly considered to ensure that it does not put undue strain on the heritage resources.

Challenges such as increasing urbanisation, density of population and other socio-economic factors experienced by cities may threaten the identity and character of historic areas and undermine the benefits that may be achieved by heritage-led regeneration. It is important that regeneration is based on collaboration with local communities and businesses and that steps are taken to avoid potential undesirable effects, such as gentrification, which can result in existing residents leaving the area.

4. Meeting the challenges

There are numerous examples of good practice in the use of cultural heritage as a catalyst for successful regeneration of urban areas. Previous interregional cooperation programmes supported urban cultural heritage and historic landscapes, and two examples of funded projects are provided below.

- ***EUROSCAPES (European landscapes management)***. This INTERREG IVC project focused on the issue of managing natural and cultural heritage landscapes in urban and peri-urban areas. This included consideration of green spaces like parks and gardens, as well as landscapes formed of built heritage and other historical sites. The project was successful in raising awareness of landscape management issues and ensuring that it was integrated into local planning in the participating locations. It also highlighted the importance of fostering landscape management as a driver to create identity and as an asset for sustainable tourism, as well as importance of community involvement at local level through public consultations, volunteer groups and open debates.

- ***INHERIT*** (*investing in heritage to regenerate cities*). The objective of this INTERREG IIIC project (funded from 2005-2007) was to increase the capacity of cities to regenerate in physical, economic and social terms by harnessing the potential of investing in cultural heritage. The project researched the experiences of several locations in order to identify the key factors for success. This work identified four themes: think and act strategically; focus on identity and diversity; invest in regeneration – especially the public realm; and work in partnership. Together these themes form a framework which can guide local and regional authorities about to embark on their own programme of heritage-led regeneration.

The current Interreg Europe programme also provides support to partners working together on the challenges of sustaining cultural heritage in urban areas. One project on this theme which has recently been approved is SHARE:

- ***SHARE*** (*sustainable approach to cultural heritage for the urban areas requalification in Europe*). Recognising the role that cultural heritage assets can play in achieving the Europe 2020 goals for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, this project aims to exchange experiences of cultural heritage policies in urban settings, in order to identify best practices and innovative methods to develop a sustainable and smart approach to its management and use. The project builds on two concepts: 1. the recognition of the role of culture in sustainable development of urban areas and 2. the possibility to better exploit the new ICTs to provide services to citizens (Smart City). The project aims to improve regional policy instruments towards a more effective development of both concepts. Project will run from January 2017 until December 2020.

5. Concluding comments

Cultural heritage in urban areas can provide a cornerstone for regeneration activity and support achieving sustainable and inclusive growth. Previous INTERREG projects have contributed to these efforts by sharing experiences and drawing out factors for success. Recommendations from past experiences include:

- Working in partnership to ensure that heritage issues are given due consideration in local decision making processes.
- Involving the local community and other user groups to ensure that their views and needs are taken into account when developing policies.
- Taking an integrated approach to urban planning which considers the preservation of both natural and cultural heritage alongside other considerations.
- Recognising the importance of cultural heritage in creating identity and a sense of place, thereby generating benefits for the wider community.

The current Interreg Europe programme continues to offer support for regions willing to work together to address the challenges associated with sustainable management of cultural heritage in cities and towns.

The Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platforms stimulate knowledge exchange in four thematic areas, one of these is the Environment and Resource Efficiency Platform, which includes cultural heritage activity. The Platforms provide a space for projects in the same family to share experiences and learn from each other. To ensure that the services and products provided by the Platforms meet user needs, we encourage you to share your ideas with the relevant Platform managers and thematic experts. You will find their contact details below.

Sources of further information:

- Cultural heritage counts for Europe. Full report (2015).
- Getting cultural heritage to work for Europe – report of the Horizon 2020 working group on cultural heritage (2015).

- [Interreg Europe](#).
- [INTERREG IVC. Approved projects database](#)
- INHERIT. Investing in heritage – a guide to successful urban regeneration (2007).
- The Economics of Uniqueness, Investing in Historical City Cores and Cultural Heritage Assets for Sustainable Development (Licciardi and Amirtahmasebi, 2012).
- Mapping of Cultural Heritage actions in European Union policies, programmes and activities, EC (2014)
- [Urban Agenda for the EU](#).

#policylearning, #culturalheritage, #urbanregeneration, #sustainablemanagement

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