CULTURAL INITIATIVES AS SUSTAINABLE TOOLS FOR PRESERVING URBAN IDENTITY IN HISTORIC MIXED-USE AREAS/

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Abstract. The dwelling with a shop or workshop represents an emblematic part of urban heritage, portraying not only a defining element in the development of the built environment but also an important aspect of urban identity that has shaped numerous cities over the centuries and still characterises many historical urban centres today. In Bucharest, abandonment, demolition, and inappropriate interventions, combined with a lack of an appropriate protection framework and support, are currently leading to the rapid disappearance of this heritage and a substantial change in the urban landscape, primarily due to a general lack of awareness regarding the value of these buildings. This not only leads to the loss of significant urban identity but has also given rise to vulnerable areas, abandoned buildings, and residual spaces. This paper aims to explore how cultural initiatives can contribute to the preservation of urban identity of historical areas characterised by mixed-use buildings that combine residential and commercial or manufacturing spaces. The study focuses on the valorisation of cultural heritage integrating both tangible and intangible aspects, outlining the strong connection between the interior space and the urban context, the capacity of the spaces to support human interaction and communities, as well as a sense of identity and belonging. Cultural initiatives such as maker spaces, workshops, exhibitions, pop-up galleries, digital archives and social media strategies, cultural events and programs promoting community engagement, local economies, social inclusion, and cultural promotion can have a huge impact on preserving cultural identity and integrating these sites into the contemporary urban life, not only in terms of conservation but actual participation which can re-anchor them into the public imagination. Therefore, they promote low-impact physical interventions, concentrating on the role of social and cultural initiatives, aligning with the view of Agenda 2030' Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG11) on safeguarding cultural heritage, UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation advocating for an integrated approach of social, economic, environmental and cultural aspects, and the Faro Convention, focusing on the value of people-oriented perspectives. The study will draw on national and international literature, as well as case studies from a worldwide perspective, analysing how cultural initiatives can support raising awareness towards urban heritage preservation and ultimately contribute to the reactivation and sustainable development of historic mixed-used areas characterised by dwellings with artisanal and commercial spaces, ensuring the continuity of meaningful cultural identity, and how this can be relevant in the case of Bucharest.

Keywords: cultural initiatives, sustainability, urban identity, historic mixed-use urban fabric, heritage;

Introduction. Historic urban areas are increasingly threatened by rapid urbanisation, real-estate speculation, tourism pressure, and the homogenising effects of globalisation. These dynamics are particularly evident in the historic mixed-use environments, where residential units have long coexisted with commercial and manufacturing activities, and are now at risk of fragmentation, displacement of local communities, and the loss of distinctive cultural identities.

This is also the case of Bucharest, where even though many of these buildings are located within protected areas, current regulations often prove insufficient to safeguard the specific character of the traditional urban fabric. While the original commercial and artisanal activities largely disappeared under the communist regime, many of these structures remain today, testifying to a housing model that has shaped urban identity over centuries. However, new functions often result in the loss of distinctive qualities, subsequent interventions frequently alter the relationship with the urban space, while abandonment and gradual deterioration, together with neglect and a general lack of awareness, lead to the disappearance of an important part of urban heritage.

Despite growing recognition of the value of historic urban landscapes, policies still tend to privilege the physical conservation of buildings and public spaces over the socio-cultural practices that animate them. As a result, the intangible dimensions like craft traditions, community networks, patterns of use, and cultural meanings are often insufficiently addressed. This is especially important in contexts where lived-in cultural practices are essential to the authenticity of a place.

This paper argues that cultural initiatives can play a critical role in bridging this gap, by fostering awareness, reinforcing local identity, and supporting social and economic growth, strengthening the resilience and sustainable development of these areas. They not only support heritage preservation but also help reactivate historic urban environments and ensure the continuity of meaningful cultural identities.

Cultural Initiatives in Heritage Preservation. In recent decades, the concept of heritage has acquired a new dimension, expanding beyond the initial idea of monuments to a more comprehensive one that encompasses both material and immaterial aspects, natural or cultural, analogue or digital, that have emerged over time from the interaction between people and their environment, and that exist within a process of continuous change (Council of Europe, 2014). These elements reflect legacies of the past that constitute valuable resources for present and future generations (UNESCO, 2008).

Culture is understood as a multifaceted concept that generally refers both to the broader domain of the arts and to a way of encompassing lifestyles and collective identities (Marzano & Castellini, 2024). Considering the dual physical and non-physical dimensions of heritage, cultural values are recognised as playing an essential role in urban development, with the built environment acquiring significant symbolic meaning as part of wider cultural frameworks (Fahmy & Thamarat, 2025).

In this context, heritage conservation practices have increasingly shifted towards the social sphere, transitioning from a mostly physical approach to a value-based one that engages diverse stakeholders and acknowledges multiple perspectives (Rosetti et.al., 2022). As a result,

the development of participatory processes and the role of local communities have become key concerns in contemporary heritage management (Fahmy & Thamarat, 2025).

This change has also been reflected in the various international instruments and conventions adopted in recent years. One of the most notable ones is the *Historic Urban Landscape* paradigm, which advocates for a holistic approach to urban heritage that encompasses socio-economic dynamics, environmental conditions, and cultural values (UNESCO, 2011). It emerged from the need to integrate heritage protection with the requirements of contemporary urban development, in response to challenges related to the dynamic nature of urban landscapes, cultural diversity, the impact of tourism, and economic sustainability, highlighting the strong relationship between physical and social dimensions, and framing urban landscapes as living environments in which people carry out a wide range of activities (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012).

This vision is closely aligned with the objectives of the *2030 Agenda*, particularly *SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities*, which promotes urban environments that are both environmentally and culturally resilient (UN, 2015). It acknowledges the role of culture in long-term development and articulates a people-centered perspective, guided by culturally sensitive policies and principles of accessibility, representation, participation, and inclusiveness (Naheed & Shooshtarian, 2022).

These aspects are also supported by the *Faro Convention* (Council of Europe, 2005) which defines heritage as a social resource and underlines its role in promoting accessibility and equitable participation in cultural processes, as well as its importance in sustainable development. It places particular emphasis on the intangible dimension, recognizing identity and memory as essential components of the urban environment. The convention has shifted discourse towards a bottom-up, more inclusive, participatory and future-oriented approach, reinforcing the importance of local communities, fostering dialogue between different stakeholders, as well as positioning heritage within the broader framework of economic, social and cultural development.

Culture-based regeneration refers to the strategic use of arts and culture as a catalyst for social and economic transformation (Evans & Shaw, 2004). Emerging in the 1970s in response to post-industrial urban decline, it encompasses a broad range of initiatives aimed at revitalizing places through investment in artistic and cultural activities (OECD, 2025). While culture is increasingly recognised as a necessary component of place transformation, the involvement of local communities has become a critical element of this process, which depends on supporting, nurturing, and developing existing cultural assets (OECD, 2025).

Inclusive and participatory processes play a key role in recognising heritage values, reinforcing connections with local identity, and fostering a sense of belonging, which in turn enhances the degree of responsibility and interest of residents towards them (Shih et al., 2021). In this context, the concept of socially produced space becomes essential to heritage practices, as identity and sense of place influence how heritage is perceived and approached (Schofield & Szymanski, 2011).

In recent years, the emergence of a digital dimension has transformed the perception and experience of space, introducing new possibilities for heritage conservation and community engagement. Digital technologies have profoundly changed the relationship between people and places, with digital environments and virtual communities becoming increasingly integrated into everyday life (Shih et al., 2021). Addressing these dynamics is essential in the cultural heritage field, as they transform the way it is contextualized, understood and experienced, while enabling new interpretations of place-based identities (Ducatteeuw et al., 2025). Consequently, digital technologies hold significant potential for the research, development and dissemination of cultural heritage, emerging as effective tools for enhancing communication and encouraging public participation (Lian & Xie, 2024).

Therefore, cultural initiatives have come to occupy a central position within contemporary heritage conservation practices, with people-centered strategies and community involvement increasingly recognized as key elements in the sustainable management of cultural values.

Culture and Sustainability. The understanding of sustainability has evolved from the initial intergenerational approach to a multidimensional framework structured around three "pillars": social, economic and environmental. This model has been further expanded, as recent research has highlighted the crucial role of culture in the sustainability discourse and proposed its integration as a new dimension (Soini & Birkeland, 2014). Consequently, from the beginning of the twenty-first century, culture has come to be recognised as the fourth "pillar" of sustainable development (Hawkes, 2001).

This shift has led to a reassessment of heritage management approaches, placing greater emphasis on local concerns (Marzano & Castellini, 2024). In this context, the involvement of local communities emerges as a key factor in culture-based regeneration, requiring both a deep understanding of existing assets and the active engagement of residents (OECD, 2025). Public participation is therefore considered a critical aspect of sustainable heritage practices, which extends beyond the social sphere and significantly influences the other areas (Rosetti et al., 2022).

This dimension of sustainability primarily focuses on ensuring the continuity of cultural values (Pop et al., 2019) and is associated with the conservation and development of both tangible and intangible heritage, as well as with its role in promoting inclusive development (Naheed & Shooshtarian, 2022). Culture thus serves as a foundation for the broader sustainable development goals and plays a mediating role in achieving economic, social and environmental sustainability (Soini & Dessein, 2016).

The social dimension refers to the impact on communities and engagement with local inhabitants (Li et al., 2022). Effective management of cultural heritage can contribute to the achievement of social objectives by fostering dialogue among stakeholders, strengthening connections between residents and heritage sites, and enhancing overall community well-being through investments in education, as well as cultural and social initiatives (Marzano & Castellini, 2024). Collective events support both social relations and individual well-being, increasing community cohesion and cultivating a sense of belonging tied to shared identity, civic participation, and knowledge

exchange (Bagnall et al., 2023). These dynamics lead to greater acceptance and more effective outcomes of urban regeneration processes, as co-creating local narratives together with communities, meaningfully linking a place's past to the present and articulating a shared vision for the future can play a significant role in this process (OECD, 2025). Participatory methods further increase local commitment to heritage values and contribute to improved long-term development, while also strengthening socio-cultural identity (Fahmy & Thamarat, 2025).

The economic dimension is considered a key component for the sustainable improvement of residents' living conditions. The conservation of cultural heritage can generate a wide range of economic benefits, including job creation, opportunities for professional training, the preservation of traditional crafts, the promotion of cultural heritage tourism, and the revitalization of city centres (Marzano & Castellini, 2024). Local cultural facilities contribute to the development of vibrant urban environments and foster economic growth. Such initiatives often combine space-based and group-based interventions and typically require fewer resources, with community involvement helping to ensure that programs effectively respond to local needs (OECD, 2025). The economic sustainability of heritage is also frequently linked to the development and management of cultural tourism (Naheed & Shooshtarian, 2022). It encompasses the protection and valorisation of cultural heritage and has become a central component of strategic spatial planning at both local and regional levels (Lequeux-Dincă et. al., 2025).

With regard to the environmental sustainability, the primary focus lies in the responsible use of resources and the minimization of environmental impacts (Marzano & Castellini, 2024). Participatory processes can play a positive role in the preservation of both natural and cultural resources, while also contributing to the development of resilient cities and communities (Rosetti et. al, 2022). Knowledge exchange and citizen engagement are essential to fostering sustainable green governance, as they stimulate participation, capacity building, innovation, and dialogue, which in turn can reduce urban ecological footprints and encourage the adoption of circularity principles (Naheed & Shooshtarian, 2022). Furthermore, the adaptive reuse or temporary occupation of abandoned heritage buildings for cultural activities support both the efficient use of existing resources and the preservation of values at risk of disappearing (OECD, 2025).

Digital technologies create new opportunities for achieving sustainable development goals (Li et al., 2025). Digitization is emerging not only as an effective means of protecting cultural heritage, but also as a tool for its development and dissemination (Lian & Xie, 2024). Digital technologies show considerable potential in strengthening cultural identity and enriching research, communication, and educational practices (Li et al., 2025). The digital revolution has significantly expanded access to heritage, facilitating wider dissemination and increasing public awareness and respect for cultural values. Through new media, heritage can be experienced and interpreted in more interactive and inclusive ways, fostering greater community engagement by connecting cultural resources with user experiences, and, over time, supporting their sustainable development (Lian & Xie, 2024).

Culture-based initiatives can contribute to the sustainable transformation of places, generating positive impact across economic, social, environmental and cultural dimensions, which gives them a central role in urban revitalization processes, particularly by supporting the existing social structures (OECD, 2025).

Cultural initiatives in historic mixed-use areas. With increasing urbanization, cultural heritage has assumed a vital role in shaping development strategies for contemporary cities, which often face the loss of both tangible and intangible cultural values. Balancing heritage conservation with urban regeneration, as well as restructuring with the preservation of historical identity, has therefore become increasingly important (Naheed & Shooshtarian, 2022). In recent decades, historic city centres have played a crucial role not only in strengthening social identity but also in generating economic benefits associated with tourism and the creative industries (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012).

Sustainable development and the consolidation of local identity in historic areas are achieved primarily through the involvement of local populations. This enables urban regeneration initiatives to reconcile cultural conservation and economic revitalization. From this perspective, effective heritage management goes beyond the preservation of physical fabric to promote a sustainable and dynamic relationship between the built environment and its inhabitants (Fahmy & Thamarat, 2025).

Citizen engagement can be understood as any strategy that supports the capacity of local communities to participate in, or influence processes affecting their environment, and can be classified according to the level of public impact, ranging from simple information provision to empowerment (Shih et al., 2021).

Long-term regeneration usually involves multiple, complementary approaches over time. This process requires continuous and strategic planning, rather than focusing on a single type of cultural investment, as optimal results are achieved through the combination of various interventions. In this context, integrating culture into broader strategies, including creative industries development, tourism promotion, or resident upskilling, contributes to a holistic vision capable of generating benefits across multiple levels (OECD, 2025).

Community engagement tools can be classified as either physical or digital (Fahmy & Thamarat, 2025). Cultural facilities play a crucial role in enhancing resident participation, with cultural events often acting as catalysts for wider development policies and as means of reinforcing place identity. Transformative processes can emerge through the adaptive and temporary use of existing infrastructure for cultural activities, reducing vacancies, supporting local communities, animating urban areas, improving safety, and potentially leading to long-term development outcomes. Community groups are particularly important in the adaptive reuse of abandoned spaces, contributing to the preservation and continued relevance of heritage sites. Common spaces can take different forms, ranging from community gardens to creative hubs, and function as centres for cultural exchange, fostering social cohesion while encouraging innovation and dialogue. Small-scale cultural facilities enhance access to artistic and cultural services, such as exhibitions and workshops, offer diverse opportunities for participation, and support the protection of cultural values while creating development prospects for local communities. In addition, such initiatives can also generate income and employment, provide vocational training, and help preserve traditional crafts. Accordingly, policies that support production areas, safeguard workspaces and cultural facilities, and promote function-

al diversity are widely recognised. At the same time, sustainable tourism strategies that respond to local community needs have become increasingly important, with cultural routes contributing to greater visibility and appreciation of heritage assets (OECD, 2025).

One illustrative example is the *Venetian Craftmanship and Creativity Routes*, developed as part of a European project focused on smart strategies for sustainable tourism, which proposes ten itineraries that explore different areas of the city and promote local artisans, contributing to the development and preservation of historic workshops and traditional craft practices (Venezia Unica, 2025). Similarly, in Florence, the *OMA Association* supports the development and promotion of artisanal activities through a range of initiatives, including workshops, professional internships, editorial projects, the recovery of archival documents, and the promotion of craft-focused products. Together, these actions help stimulate employment and social development, combat the loss of cultural identity, and contribute to the revitalization of local commercial and artisanal structures, reopening historic shops and fostering new creative businesses (Fondazione CR Firenze, 2025).

Community engagement interventions in the historic centre of Cairo are widely recognized as a global model for heritage conservation. The *Urban Regeneration Project for Historic Cairo* and the *Japan Society for the Promotion of Science* projects demonstrate that community engagement is a fundamental component for achieving effective and sustainable heritage conservation. These programmes focused on one of the city centre's oldest residential and artisanal areas, and their success was largely driven by well-structured engagement strategies, including workshops and training sessions, participatory mapping and planning, cultural and economic revitalization initiatives linked to heritage tourism promotion, crafts, and local entrepreneurship, the organisation of multiple cultural events, and the adaptive reuse of historic buildings. By fostering a strong sense of belonging and responsibility, community engagement contributed significantly to the long-term sustainability of conservation efforts. Beyond improving the physical condition of heritage sites, both initiatives strengthened cultural identity, enhanced economic resilience, and promoted long-term social cohesion (Fahmy & Thamarat, 2025).

The increasing use of digital tools has introduced new and effective ways of engaging the public in cultural heritage preservation (Lian & Xie, 2024). In recent years, digital technologies have significantly enhanced approaches to heritage research and dissemination, allowing broader audiences to develop a deeper understanding of cultural values, enabling more inclusive and interactive forms of participation. These encompass a wide range of applications, from data collection and digital archiving to virtual reconstruction and immersive experiences (Li et al., 2025). Within this context, the concept of digital placemaking uses the possibilities of virtual space to support urban structures, enhancing residents' experiences and strengthening connections with historical places and immovable cultural heritage (Shih et al., 2021).

Immersive technologies, including augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) and mixed reality (MR), play a key role in enhancing cultural experiences through applications such as interactive exhibitions and virtual museums. Digital storytelling significantly influences education, interpretation, communication and conservation by strengthening users' understanding and emotional connection to cultural heritage, thereby supporting its dissemination and long-term preservation. At the same time, the role of social networks is increasingly acknowledged, highlighting the capacity of digital platforms to foster wider social engagement and support conservation activities (Lian & Xie, 2024). Furthermore, the online presentation of cultural heritage has become an essential component of sustainable tourism strategies (Lequeux-Dincă et al., 2025).

Digital archives not only ensure the long-term preservation and efficient transmission of cultural heritage but also function as platforms for learning and expanded access to information. Information systems and digital databases provide structured frameworks for the systematic processing, analysis, and interpretation of heritage-related data (Lian & Xie, 2024). A wide range of digital technologies, including the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, remote sensing, high-precision scanning, 3D modelling, and Heritage Building Information Modelling (HBIM) have significantly advanced the research, development and dissemination of cultural heritage, expanding both methodological and interpretative possibilities (Li et al., 2025). In addition, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have become increasingly important in heritage practices, offering spatial frameworks for organizing, visualizing, and contextualizing cultural assets (Ducatteeuw et al., 2025).

The *Amsterdam Time Machine* is a research project coordinated by the University of Amsterdam that creates a navigable infrastructure through space and time, which connects various historical data sets to obtain a picture of city's past. It illustrates how advanced digital technologies can support the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage in historic mixed-use environments. By integrating historical maps, archival records, 3D models, and geospatial data, the project reconstructs the layered evolution of Amsterdam's urban fabric, allowing users to explore past streetscapes, merchant houses, and former workshops in an immersive digital environment. The open access platform makes historical information available to scholars, planners, residents, and visitors, fostering broader awareness of the city's cultural values. By digitally reconstructing the traditional urban environment, the project not only safeguards vulnerable heritage but also strengthens the cultural memory and identity of the historic urban landscape (Amsterdam Time Machine, 2025).

These strategies can also be useful in the case of Bucharest. The research dedicated to post-socialist cities, which includes also Romania, emphasizes the vital role of culture in achieving urban regeneration (Lequeux-Dincă, 2025). The different types of cultural initiatives play an important role in preserving urban identity and revitalizing historic mixed-use areas by reconnecting communities with the multilayered meanings embedded in the traditional urban environments. Interpretative and educational initiatives, such as exhibitions, workshops, and cultural events, strengthen public understanding of their significance and recover the memory of historic values. Community activities increase participation, a sense of belonging, and capacity building, which can lead to a better approach to heritage sites. Creative and artistic programmes can reanimate vacant or underused spaces and can return productive and commercial functions, reconnecting contemporary practices with historical ones. Meanwhile, digital initiatives, including virtual archives, interactive maps, and social media storytelling, extend engagement beyond physical boundaries and reach wider audiences, also enhancing documentation and research of cultural heritage. Finally, tourism-related initiatives can contribute to the local economy and encourage the sustainable development of traditional streetscapes, while cultural routes can attract intervention in lesser-known parts of the city. Together, these initiatives help safeguard the distinctive identity of historic neighbourhoods while fostering social, cultural and economic reactivation.

Conclusion. The study shows that cultural initiatives play a central role in preserving urban identity of historic mixed-use areas characterised by buildings that combine residential and commercial or manufacturing spaces and ultimately contribute to the sustainable development of heritage sites. Being

essentially participative, they enhance public awareness and strengthen community engagement, also ensuring social, economic, environmental and cultural improvements, interconnecting both the material and immaterial layers of urban identity.

The continuity of urban identity depends not solely on the conservation of built form, but on the sustained vitality of the social, cultural and economic practices that have historically animated these spaces. Traditional townhouse typologies, typically combining artisanal workshops or merchant spaces on the ground floor with residential uses above, are inherently hybrid structures that embody strong tangible and intangible dimensions. As such, their conservation cannot be effectively achieved through architectural restoration alone. Instead, it requires a holistic, people-centred approach that mobilizes cultural interventions to sustain the everyday life of local communities, craftsmanship, memory and collective values.

Cultural initiatives can reactivate declining historic areas by reinforcing local economy, strengthening community cohesion, and cultivating public interest in heritage, contributing to resilient and culturally vibrant urban environments. By anchoring contemporary uses in traditional spatial logics, such initiatives enable historic districts to remain relevant, liveable and socially meaningful in the contemporary city. This perspective positions cultural initiatives not as supplementary enhancements but as essential, sustainable tools for ensuring the long-term vitality, authenticity and resilience of urban heritage.

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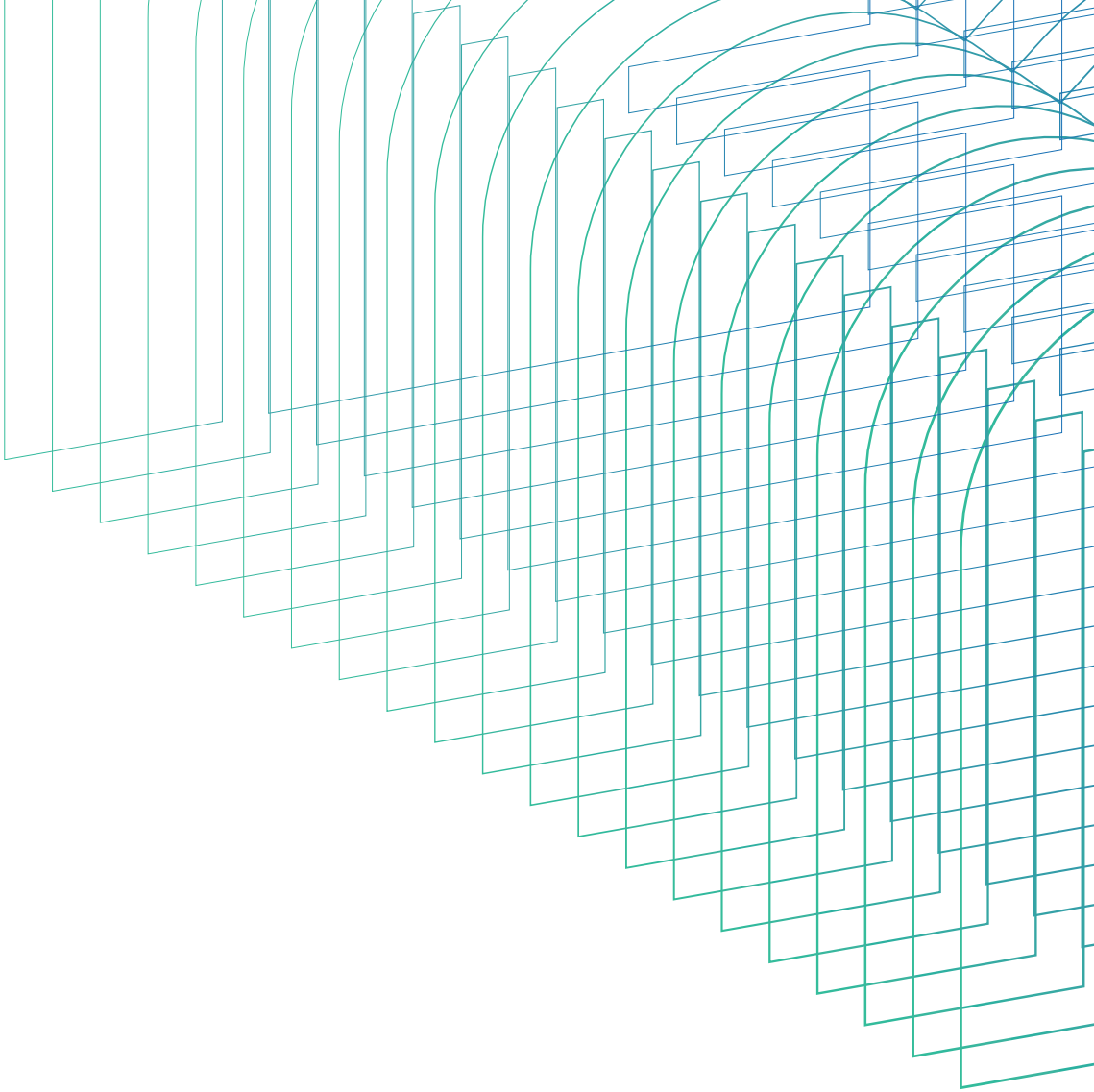
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NEVERLAND IN THE ARCHIPELAGO MILAN

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Abstract. The contribution proposes a reflection on the value of the void in the modern city, not only as a problem to be faced but, on the contrary, as an opportunity to rethink the its form: as "open moment" that the city still needs in order to define its new significant places and re-compose – through discontinuity – its own form. The subject is a project for Milan which insists on two disused areas of the city's vast military heritage, contiguous but very different from each other, located on the western outskirts of the city: the Ospedale Militare of Baggio and the nearby former Piazza d'Armi. The first, a small city within the city with a precise settlement principle with an historical-monumental value. The second, a large empty space for military exercises, originally external to the built city over time became topologically internal and a large available open space. The idea is to define two new "central places" not only for the district they are located in, but available and significant for the whole city, considered as islands in an urban "archipelago" system. The project tries to re-establish a dialectic between architecture, nature and culture, with a tension in the search for a quality that is first and foremost adequate in form, but according to a broad and multidisciplinary perspective that, in its complexity, sees the various issues converge synthetically in the project: the sustainable regeneration of disused areas with particular attention to the cultural identity of places; nature as an element and context for the construction of the city, in a qualitative key not only on a morphological-spatial level but also on an environmental and ecological one, in an attempt to shape "inclusive, beautiful and sustainable" cities in which recognise our's own civic culture.

Keywords: Milan, architectural voids, collective places, nature, territory;

Introduction / On the value of voids in city construction. The spread of so-called urban voids in modern cities is now a well-established phenomenon, certainly not isolated and affecting most cities around the world. These are spaces that become vacant, varying in size, for a variety of reasons, from destruction due to war or natural disasters to the decommissioning of large infrastructure or industrial complexes, to name a few, which in any case show a lack of definition not only in terms of morphology but also in terms of quality in relation to the urban structure. In this case, following their varied use, these areas become available to the city again, allowing for major transformations in its form, which can be carried out by replacement rather than by land consumption or further growth, especially in relation to established cities and European cities in particular.

A perspective that offers the possibility of rethinking the forma urbis according to a dual approach: on the one hand in terms of environmental sustainability, and on the other in terms of value, with these voids that can gain, if transformed into "architectural voids"1, a renewed or unexpected urban quality that is precise and expressive of a community, in a similar way to that which in cities throughout history was recognised in the voids of streets and squares that represented their most significant places. Although lacking in definition, their exceptional dimensions and their location in the urban form, more or less central or on the margin between the centre and the periphery, are often of great interest. Size and position become the prerequisites for attempting to restore architecture to these voids: specifying the settlement principles and elements that will define them; trying to give shape to an idea of a city-nature, polycentric and territorial, theorised and experimented with by Modernism and which still appears to be a possible response to making our cities "beautiful, sustainable and inclusive"2, recomposing the form of our cities by specifying the quality of their places. According to this approach, the contribution attempts to address these issues through a project for two military areas: the former Piazza d'Armi – a large open field for military exercises that has been completely decommissioned – and the Military Hospital – a complex of considerable historical and monumental value that is in the process of being decommissioned – located on the western outskirts of the city of Milan. Large enclaves within the established city, inaccessible yet preserved in their integrity, their opening appears to be an important resource for rewriting the future of the neighbouring parts of the city through the construction of two new "central places" not only for the neighbourhood in which they are located, but available and significant for the entire city, considered as islands in an urban archipelago system, extending their influence to the whole city and the surrounding areas with which they can establish relationships. A term born from the union of archè and pelagos, "archipelago" refers to an idea of a polycentric city built from finite parts, where the emptiness of nature clarifies their distinction while holding them together at the same time. In the case of Milan, this is not only a legacy of modernity but, as the root of the term suggests, an idea that belongs to the original vocation of the Lombardy region, its history and its identity.

The project persists in this direction and attempts to re-establish a dialectic between architecture, nature and local culture, through the definition of a new urban space in which we can recognise our civic culture.

The form of the territory and the design of the city/ Brief introduction to the nature of the city. In the collective imagination, Milan is the monocentric city par excellence. A city that was born and grew progressively around that single centre, which, starting from the ancient Roman castrum, saw its borders expand, gradually increasing the radius of the circumferences that defined the limits of urban expansion from time to time: the circle of canals on the site of the Maximian fortifications; that of the ramparts coinciding with the route of the subsequent Spanish walls; the ring road that marks the limits of the Beruto plan's expansion zone; the railway belt that, in the words of De Finetti, suffocated the city3. On the basis of this model, but indifferent to its reference territory, the city grew, increasing in size while retaining a very strong dependence on that ancient central core, with the result that, over the long period of its transformation, an increasingly irreconcilable centre-periphery dialectic was consolidated, to the detriment of the clarity of its morphology.