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# Guest editorial: Participation and co-creation in heritage processes – education, research and practice

Nowadays, urban societies require the participation of citizens in most issues pertaining to people's social lives, including heritage processes. Promoting co-creation and participatory approaches for a more sustainable, inclusive, engaging and high-quality living environment is at the root of many heritage regulatory documents from international organizations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS and the Council of Europe, as well as contemporary urban agendas, namely the New Urban Agenda and the New European Bauhaus, among others. Furthermore, cultural heritage processes are no longer exclusively accomplished by heritage professionals since heritage protection and safeguarding must nowadays benefit from the expertise of multiple academic and professional fields. The importance and benefits of collaborating with various stakeholders is increasingly acknowledged, and their valuable perceptions and know-how are gradually being accepted and increasingly integrated in urban processes.

Bearing in mind that different forms of multi-stakeholders' participation in heritage practices have been widely researched worldwide, this Special Issue highlights the benefits and challenges of communities, groups and individuals' participation in different contexts. Research argues that empowering participatory heritage practices has transformative power, thus contributing to more inclusive and equitable societies, improving the management of cultural and natural resources and increasing the sustainable development of living environments. Hence, participatory heritage practices can be key to tackling contemporary urban challenges and building resilient cities in this time of uncertainty – even though some forms of participation may not lead to the intended results.

Even though participation, engagement and co-creation are concepts pertaining to the involvement of people and are frequently used indistinctively when tackling heritage issues, slight differences may be found that contribute to improving their accuracy whenever they are used. A first approach to distinguish participation from engagement emerges from the subject initiating the participatory process. A top-down process initiated by the government or other authorities would be considered citizen or civic engagement, while the bottom-up voluntary involvement of individuals or groups in activities or initiatives would be labelled as citizen or civic participation (Martell, 2024, May 7).

The education sector offers a distinction between participation and engagement, considering that the first entails taking part in projects and activities in a visible way, while the second has to do with the attitude and the level of commitment to a cause, by paying attention to, or having knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes or feelings towards matters considered relevant (Hoffman *et al.*, 2005; Pittaway and Moss, 2019; Barrett and Brunton-Smith, 2017). In political science, authors distinguish political participation, understood as manifest actions in the political field aimed at influencing regional, national or supranational governance, from civic engagement, which encompass activities intended to have an impact on events and situations in society (Ekman and Amnå, 2012; Barrett and Brunton-Smith, 2017). However, even though engagement implies a deeper, more active, and often more emotionally invested connection than mere participation, the two terms are often used arbitrarily to describe people's involvement in something.

An essential feature of participation/engagement is the greater or lesser distribution of power it entrusts (White, 1996), a widely recognized trait that entails several forms of participation, from the plain transmission of information to the collaboration and empowerment of individuals and groups. One of the most well-known and cited participatory scales is Sherry Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation" (Arnstein, 1969) in the field of urbanism, which includes eight levels ranging from non-participation (the first two steps), considering



information the lower form of participation and placing citizen control at the top of the ladder. More recently, the Spectrum of Public Participation developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) similarly establishes five continuous levels of increasing impact, expectations and results of broad participation in decision-making, also starting from the mere transmission of information and gradually increasing people's intervention until reaching empowerment, when it is possible to take part in decision-making (IAP2, 2018). Even though it can be argued that all forms and degrees of participation are useful and at least some may be used simultaneously, real participation only takes place when people are actively engaged in matters at stake and their opinions are taken into consideration, something that public participation models do not guarantee.

To overcome these obstacles, the term co-creation was imported from the business and marketing research as a method for encouraging democratic processes in other areas, including urban governance and heritage practices. More explanatory than the term participation, co-creation evokes the joint construction of something, the sharing of knowledge and experience and the use of several people's skills to achieve a selected objective. Although active forms of participation have some similarities with co-creation, since both involve active doing, mutual learning and, in a sense, are part of a process and not an end in themselves, co-creation's aim is to achieve practical outcomes which can, furthermore, be emotional, behavioural, physical or any others (Prager, 2016; Hedensted Lund, 2018; Grcheva and Vehbi, 2021). In this sense, it can be argued that co-creation encompasses active forms of participation corresponding to the degrees partnership and delegated power in Arnstein's ladder (1969) or the levels of involvement and collaboration in the IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum (IAP2). In brief, the three non-exclusive and intertwined forms of participation termed intervention, partnership and involvement, when enlightened by information and validated through consultation, may usefully contribute to decision-making (Rosetti *et al.*, 2022). As a matter of fact, in co-creation processes, people always get empowered by acquiring knowledge and experience, and by establishing new contacts, thus enhancing their cultural and social capital.

Due to the novelty of the concept of co-creation in urban and cultural heritage areas, regulatory documents only mention participation, without stipulating its scope, leaving to the promoters of participatory processes the responsibility to determine how to implement them. Who should participate, through what means, in which phases are some of the issues that participatory heritage and urban processes require, which are usually absent from recommendations and regulations, even though the outcome and validity of those processes are highly dependent on the extent of people's involvement. Similarly, references to participation in scientific literature are sometimes too unspecific to reveal co-creation.

The idea that the identification, safeguarding and perception of historic urban landscapes values, as well as their intangible attributes, including the spirit of the place, can only be attained through participatory processes highlights the relationship between tangible and intangible heritage attributes, without which no heritage conservation will be successful (Engelhardt, 2010; Onesti and Bosone, 2017), since built heritage must remain full of meaning for the associated communities (Ronchi, 2020; Taylor, 2016). The need to involve communities, including virtual ones (Liang *et al.*, 2021), and to implement "bottom-up" participatory approaches when dealing with heritage issues in historic urban landscapes is advocated by authors linked to a vision of heritage practice in line with the 2012 manifesto of the Association for Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS) (Buckley *et al.*, 2016), which defends the multiplicity of narratives, especially those coming from groups alienated from power and deprived of authority.

The city is made up of people from very different ages, educations, backgrounds, beliefs and cultures, a diversity reflected in case studies in which communities' participation is paramount, such as the interconnections among planning, conservation and rehabilitation areas (Filippucci, 1997; Ramasubramanian *et al.*, 2018), the design and implementation of guidelines for participatory urban planning (Polat and Tümer Yildiz, 2019) or the examination of the relation between inhabitants and spaces, recovering or recreating the memories of

places, in order to encourage and regulate the implementation of development projects that incorporate cultural heritage (Özçakır, 2018). Furthermore, the narrower scope of co-creation, understood as participation through collective work to reach an end, has a special place in the performance of cultural expressions and in supporting creativity as dynamic elements of urban centres, thus contributing to address social problems and improve conviviality (Chaubal and Taylor, 2015; Onesti and Bosone, 2017; Eisenbach, 2008).

The adoption in 2005 of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, broadly known as the Faro Convention, not only stresses the importance of democratic participation by confirming that people can exercise their rights and reach their aspirations through culture and heritage while benefiting society as a whole in the process but also encourages activities and initiatives in which civil society and heritage communities are actively involved, suggesting participation through co-creation.

The more recent 2011 UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, a regulatory document encompassing both cultural heritage and urban issues, foresees partnerships between public and private stakeholders to implement the historic urban landscape (HUL) approach and goes a little bit further than the Faro Convention and its counterparts by advocating the application of civic engagement tools involving different stakeholders, to “empower them to identify key values in their urban areas, develop visions that reflect their diversity, set goals, and agree on actions to safeguard their heritage and promote sustainable development” (UNESCO, 2011, para. 24). The Recommendation does not specify which tools should be used, but contemporary authors proposed instruments such as Stakeholder Analysis and Mapping (SAM), City Development Strategies (CDS), SWOT Analysis, Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) or Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) (Bandarin and Van Oers, 2012; Feyzulayev, 2019; Rodwell and Turner, 2018) that foresee participatory processes but do not appear to incorporate co-creation ones.

Nowadays, even though co-creation is a trendy and increasingly used term, it seems to remain an under-developed practice concerning urban issues, requiring further investigation regarding inclusiveness, equality, power relations and social justice (Leino and Puumala, 2021), its influence in the sense of place (Meetiyyagoda *et al.*, 2024) and its benefits to cultural heritage management (Grcheva and Vehbi, 2021), and all contributions to clarify these and other issues are most welcomed. The Faro Convention International Conference (FCIC’24) was aligned with these concerns by aiming at fostering the debate and examining the pros and cons of community participation and co-creation strategies in urban heritage processes within education, research and practice, bearing in mind the shared responsibility for cultural heritage and public participation established in the *Faro Convention*.

This Special Issue comprises seven selected articles built upon the communications presented at the FCIC’24 “Transforming through co-creation: participatory heritage practices tackling urban challenges” that took place from January, 29 to February, 2, 2024, at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto (FAUP), aimed at exploring and addressing existing needs, opportunities and challenges posed by urbanization while attending to the ideation, implementation and monitoring of solutions fostered by cultural heritage. Inspired by the Council of Europe 2005 Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention), FCIC’24 also disclosed other issues concerning urban landscapes, from engagement and decision-making to the delineation of adequate tailor-made approaches to involve communities, groups and individuals in plans and projects and the adoption and integration of co-created solutions into urban management practices.

This international conference aimed to propose an international, interdisciplinary and intersectoral knowledge exchange on participatory heritage practices in urban heritage management and governance. Discussions were developed around three sub-themes: (1) Co-creation in Education/Training – Innovative participation tools/actions in educational projects and programs in heritage studies; (2) Research on co-creation in urban heritage practices – Recent research trends, challenges and opportunities of co-creation approaches in the management of historic urban landscapes; (3) Co-creation in heritage

Practices – Cases of co-creation, private and public, from a small to a large scale, around heritage management, architecture, urban planning and governance.

1. Although heritage education is of paramount importance at all ages, education programs fully dedicated to heritage for adults are still limited and frequently do not foresee any kind of engagement or apply co-creative methodologies, even though educational activities may enhance self-esteem and the sense of belonging, fostering the understanding of other people from different backgrounds and cultures, and even improve mental health. Nowadays, digital tools and game-based approaches are powerful instruments that can be used to analyze urban problems and tentatively find heritage-based solutions, as the first case presented in this special issue reveals.

The project presented by [Andrade and Pereira Roders \(2026\)](#) in the article *Heritage fieldwork for values-based design in higher education: a serious gaming approach for citizen engagement in Faro, Portugal* developed with master students at Delft University of Technology explores serious gaming in architectural higher education and the role of values-based heritage education fostering diverse stakeholders' participation in redesign processes. By using the Minecraft redesign game and organizing heritage walks, it was possible to raise awareness of the importance of designing cities and buildings collaboratively and involving the communities in architectural procedures among students.

Similarly, the workshop guided by [Rey-Pérez et al. \(2026\)](#) on *Historic urban landscape approach bridging education and practice: methods, models and tools for culture significance mapping* focuses on strategies for engaging communities in the process of assessment of attributes and values. Namely, it presents educational experiences at the UNESCO Chairs of the University of Seville and of the University of Porto framed within a Historic Urban Landscape approach. Also, the paper outlines that these methods and tools can be implemented in real contexts by professionals engaged in urban planning, management and conservation.

2. *Research* is fundamental in any field, and participatory heritage processes in contemporary urban places require the contributions of several knowledge areas and disciplines to address the endless challenges, from the demands of conservation, planning and management to the regard for sustainable development and the difficulties posed by the integration of disadvantaged communities.

[García-Casasola et al. \(2026\)](#) offers an original insight into *The contribution of contemporary architecture to heritage co-creation* by proposing a methodology merging past and present to enhance the updated significance of heritage, highlighting its meaning for nowadays society that values a culture of spectacle. Through five case studies, a new model of creation is proposed, to foster active heritage protection, while redefining the role of architecture in bringing the past into the present while acknowledging and emphasizing heritage's multiple dimensions.

A current concern of cities and human settlements is how to deal with the newcomers that arrive in search of opportunities and better livelihoods. This imperative demand is addressed by [Pourbahador and Arjomand Kermani \(2026\)](#) who discuss the problem of *Fostering migrant integration: using the power of co-creation and cultural heritage for migrant empowerment, insights from the Netherlands*, by exploring the potential of participation in the context of intangible cultural heritage to achieve the integration of these new communities. Recent heritage regulatory documents such as the Recommendation on the historic urban landscape foresee the use of civic engagement tools to understand communities' traditions and values, aiming at facilitating intercultural dialogue and, subsequently, integration, but much has still to be done.

When speaking of co-creation, one usually thinks about the present, but participatory processes are also relevant to study the past and make it comprehensible, as [Teba et al. \(2026\)](#) teach us when discussing *Cross-border co-creation of conservation perspectives for the archaeological sites Domus de Janas, Sardinia–Italy* Interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary were the basis of a workshop aimed at discussing the conservation, accessibility, interpretations, protection and musealization of an archaeological site, and the discussions

and co-creation process it entailed resulted in the delineation of revitalization strategies aimed at improving visitors' experiences and understanding of the site.

3. Even though Education and Research are paramount, they should be reflected in tangible *practice*. To fulfil its empowerment aims entirely, participation, engagement and co-creation must result in the involvement of people in concrete programs and projects, thus nurturing inclusiveness, equity and democracy.

Cocco *et al.* (2026) present the project *Co-creating strategies for heritage reactivation: HeritACT pilot cases in Eleusis, Milan and Ballina*, an EU Horizon Europe project aligned with the New European Bauhaus aimed at exploring heritage reactivation as climate action through three pilot cases. A co-creation strategy was implemented along with other methodologies to identify stakeholders' requirements within each pilot context, allowing the reactivation of heritage according to the communities' needs and aspirations.

Focused on very concrete needs and problems, Dang *et al.* (2026) discusses *Integrated energy planning for historic city centres in the Netherlands*, proposing a design workflow for planning the heat transition of historical districts based on Geographic Information System, bottom-up energy modelling and parametric tools, and describing how can essential information be provided to local stakeholders and citizen groups so that the transition to sustainable heating and cooling in historic urban areas may be achieved.

Finally, this issue aims to impact the profile of studies and discussions on urban heritage management and governance, through education, research and practice contributions proposed for the distinct actors involved in the field, such as students, site managers, municipal officers, policymakers, technicians, among others.

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