

# Culture and Cultural Heritage:

## A key asset for sustainable development and transition in cities



### Prologue

**Culture and cultural heritage** are central touchpoints for the sustainable development of cities and towns<sup>1</sup>. Culture and heritage includes, among others, architecture and the built environment, food, the arts and creative industries, religion, traditions and lifestyles. As a mediator between social-ecological-economic pillars, and the root of human action, culture is seen as the foundation and structure for sustainable development<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore culture is capable of preserving values, beliefs, and assumptions that constitute the basis for mutual understanding in sustainability related ambitions. Looking forward, “the capacity to aspire is a future-oriented cultural capacity”<sup>3</sup>. Thus, culture has the unique power to drive forward debates and action on our common urban future.

Culture and sustainable development are visibly intertwined at the International and European level. The **Agenda 2030** acknowledges the role of culture and directly addresses heritage in Target 11.4<sup>4</sup> of the Sustainable Development Goals. The European Commission highlights culture as an “ideal means of communicating across language barriers, empowering people and facilitating social cohesion”<sup>5</sup>. The Council Conclusions on the **New European Bauhaus** initiative<sup>6</sup> “reaffirm the role of culture and cultural heritage...as an important contribution to sustainable development, including the circular economy, social and territorial cohesion, the environment, the biodiversity and climate targets, prosperity and the well-being...”. Furthermore, the recently established **EIT Culture & Creativity** wants to “facilitate impact-driven dialogues with best-in-class innovators and policy-makers at all levels to unlock the potential of cultural and creative sectors and industries for a sustainable and thriving society”<sup>7</sup>. Finally, culture and cultural heritage are easily linked to each key area of the **European Green Deal** and consequent Local Green Deals - with key actors arguing that culture, creativity, heritage based on values, imaginations, dreams, but also critical skills and curiosity can trigger the most needed changes to combat the climate emergency in multiple ways<sup>8</sup>.

- 1 Duxbury, N., Kangas, A., De Beukelaer, C. 2017. Cultural policies for sustainable development: four strategic paths, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 23:2, 214-230.
- 2 Dessein, J., Soini, K., Fairclough, G. and Horlings, L. (eds) 2015. Culture in, for and as Sustainable Development. Conclusions from the COST Action IS1007 Investigating Cultural Sustainability. University of Jyväskylä, Finland.
- 3 Appadurai, A. 2004. The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition', in Rao, V. and Walton, M., (eds) *Culture and Public Action*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, California, pp 59-84.
- 4 Target 11.4: Strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.
- 5 SWD [2018] 167 Final: 'A new European Agenda for Culture'
- 6 14534/21 'Council conclusions on culture, high-quality architecture and built environment as key elements of the New European Bauhaus initiative'
- 7 EIT Culture & Creativity, <https://eit.europa.eu/eit-community/eit-culture-creativity> [access: 15.11.22].
- 8 European Cultural Heritage Green Paper, [www.europanostra.org/our-work/policy/european-cultural-heritage-green-paper](http://www.europanostra.org/our-work/policy/european-cultural-heritage-green-paper)

## The big picture

Culture and cultural heritage are both impacted by, and often have the potential to address, rapid changes, such as:

- the profound consequences of climate change and increase of extreme natural events, such as earthquakes, fires, floods;
- the need to strengthen community resilience as an essential part of primary care, as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- the increasing mobility of populations, due to remote work and frequent job changes among other factors;
- the sprawl of new development with under-consideration of renovating existing vacant buildings;
- the financial and social insecurity caused by global tensions.

## ICLEI fields of work regarding cultural and creative cities

ICLEI focuses on several fields of work to better support cities in linking their culture and cultural heritage with sustainable development agendas:

### Cultural and natural heritage.

There is an increasing recognition of strong links between cultural and natural heritage, between urban and rural areas. These interlinkages, as well as the common threats faced by biodiversity and cultural assets, point to the benefits that can arise from a systemic perspective. Historic Urban Landscapes<sup>9</sup> offer a unifying approach as an essential component of people's surroundings, an expression of the diversity of their shared cultural and natural heritage, and a foundation of their identity. This multi-layered 'urban landscape' is also a major economic and social engine to create a liveable, viable, human-centred city.

### Cultural heritage and the circular city.

Cultural heritage is at the heart of the circular city paradigm. Many cities are transitioning to a circular economy model to replace current linear 'take-make-dispose' models. The adaptive reuse of existing historical buildings and spaces plays a central role here by reducing raw material and energy consumption, as well as waste production. This approach supports synergistic models of business, finance and governance including multi-actor partnerships.

### Cultural participation and social cohesion.

Culture and cultural heritage, whether tangible or intangible, are central to what makes cities attractive, creative and sustainable. According to the Faro Convention<sup>10</sup>, "it includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time" and plays a fundamental role fostering social and economic development. Participatory processes, bottom-up solutions and local community engagement can all serve as tools to valorise places and practices, acting as catalysts for the regeneration of urban areas and transforming the city into a creative and sustainable laboratory through a new sense of belonging and heightened social cohesion.

### Culture, education and creative ecosystems in cities.

It is beneficial to integrate culture, cultural heritage and creative industries into various educational curricula, including cooperation with kindergartens, schools, universities, and beyond. They are a means of reconnecting, building a cohesive identity, and intergenerational dialogue. As a result, they can become an important foundation for strengthening awareness, maintaining a sense of belonging and awakening social sensitivity, as well as building an ecosystem of institutions involved in creative sustainable development. In addition, according to OECD "Cultural and creative employment account for up to 1 in 20 jobs in some OECD countries, and up to 1 in 10 jobs in major cities. These jobs are "future proof" (10% at high risk of automation vs. 14% in general workforce)"<sup>11</sup>. This opens up a new potential for integrating culture and creative industry in sustainability ambitions of cities beyond consumption of resources, but as a real and inspiring contribution to conscious development.

<sup>9</sup> UNESCO (2011) Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape

<sup>10</sup> Council of Europe (2005) Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society

<sup>11</sup> The Culture Fix. Creative People, Places and Industries. [www.oecd.org/employment/the-culture-fix-991bb520-en.htm](http://www.oecd.org/employment/the-culture-fix-991bb520-en.htm) [access: 15.11.22].

### Cultural heritage, climate and resilience.

In the face of increasing risks of disasters, planning for sustainable development has become more urgent. Historic areas and sites are increasingly affected by climate-change and various natural hazard events. Increasing their resilience through 'preparedness' intervention is essential to preserve their identity and economic, social and environmental functionality and to ensure their values for present and future generations. At the same time, cultural heritage can act as a vector for collaborative processes to enhance the resilience of communities and empower them to imagine alternative futures.

### Cultural tourism and local sustainability.

Cultural tourism can be a great opportunity to stimulate local communities to become more innovative, entrepreneurial and collaborative, generating new sustainable jobs and enhancing human wellbeing and ecological health. This new approach targets cultural heritage sites in remote, peripheral or deindustrialized areas, as well as over-exploited areas, focusing on sustainability, wellbeing, relationships, cooperation, and regeneration, rather than just tourism. It aims to co-develop innovative solutions for circular cultural tourism with local communities.

### Beauty and high quality of the accessible built environment.

Culture, high-quality architecture and built environment contribute to the achievement of the SDGs in many ways. Drawing inspiration from the Baukultur<sup>12</sup> and the New European Bauhaus, beauty is a fundamental dimension together with sustainability and inclusion. The optimisation of energy efficiency of the existing building and cultural stock needs to include dialogue between the existing cultural heritage, landscape setting and contemporary needs through a holistic approach. Beautiful and sustainable solutions reduce fragmentation, foster cross-sector collaboration, enhance local skills and must be accessible and affordable for all.

<sup>12</sup> Davos Declaration, 2018

### Integrating culture into urban sustainable development

Genuine sustainable development depends on the interplay of the above topics. Cities need to make the most of potential synergies, and to engage in transdisciplinary education, research and action. Yet, boundaries between disciplinary sectors and fields present challenges such as fragmentation of instances, competences, and financial resources.

ICLEI Europe supports cities and regions by making these interconnections, so that needs will overlap, aspirations will evolve and possible solutions will emerge. For example:

- **Abandoned and vacant buildings/sites and flexible working conditions** can coexist with "targeted" investments in teleworking and relocation of some jobs across space. International workers can bring new life to peripheral areas that rely on seasonal tourism and investment in high speed internet facilities is a solution to become more attractive for "staycations".
- **A new relationship between residents, cultural assets and places** provides an opportunity to create renewed partnerships, share knowledge, set shared goals and objectives, and align resources to help sustainably govern and (re)use cultural heritage. Residents can directly take care of "their" assets, "adopt" them and be involved in their use, through constant maintenance of their local territory and environment before, or in parallel to, complex renovation projects: this will unite communities and people and confer a positive label to the territory while enabling new forms of cultural tourism.
- **Architects and planners have the chance to overcome traditional urban planning**, hypothesising new solutions -housing, work and mobility- congruent with a new reality, using materials in ecological balance, designing and deepening human behaviours. The digital transformation can be seen as an opportunity to design a balanced cultural offer of cities and formulate the role of heritage in the digital society.
- **Heritage activities may be used as a factor of integration** by making young generations and migrants discover their local culture, while reproducing and disseminating traditional and new manual skills and competences and rehabilitating heritage.
- **New creative visioning methods can allow residents to reimagine their city**, communicate priorities to municipal policy-makers and establish multigenerational and interdisciplinary dialogues between local stakeholders, visitors, artists and cultural managers.

## Recommendations: Cities cannot achieve sustainable development without culture

Culture and creativity are a strategic factor for sustainable urban development. They can lay the foundations for innovative, diverse, inclusive and resilient communities. We recommend that ICLEI member cities strive to:

- Address environmental, socio-cultural issues in concert rather than in isolation.
- Develop pilot projects and initiatives that address the cultural dimensions of ecological transition and use the creative potential to design and test various scenarios.
- Include culture and heritage in just transition plans as key to peace, mutual understanding and trust of all inhabitants within the planet's boundaries.
- Support campaigning on climate change matters by cultural institutions and organisations, and include related messages into cultural programs, tours, and exhibitions.
- Enhance training of climate experts on the cultural dimensions of climate action.
- Reduce congestion and pollution by designing measures to safeguard the dense, walkable, mixed-use features of historic districts.
- Work with culture and tourism stakeholders to emphasise sustainable tourism approaches that allow cultural sites to generate positive economic and social benefits for local communities while reducing tourism's carbon footprint.
- Promote energy and resource efficiency in all historic buildings while working collaboratively to prepare guidance adapting to the needs and values of historic buildings and traditional building systems.
- Involve creative and craft actors, and use traditional building construction techniques, craft and local knowledge in combination with sustainable innovations.
- Rethink the role of culture in cooperation with other municipalities and regions through sustainable mobility of artists, efficient management of venues, and circularity of cultural goods and resources.

## Connect with us:

- ✉ Cristina Garzillo: [cristina.garzillo@iclei.org](mailto:cristina.garzillo@iclei.org)
- 🌐 [www.iclei-europe.org](http://www.iclei-europe.org)
- 🐦 [twitter.com/ICLEI\\_Europe](https://twitter.com/ICLEI_Europe)



## ICLEI Europe

ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability is a global network working with more than 2500 local and regional governments committed to sustainable urban development. Active in 125+ countries, we influence sustainability policy and drive local action for low emission, nature-based, equitable, resilient and circular development.

*This paper reflects the position of the ICLEI Europe network of Local and Regional governments as a whole, and may not reflect the position of every Member individually.*