

Promoting reuse of religious heritage: challenges and critical issues in implementing European strategies

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Didattica ed esperienze di Restauro: affermazione dell'identità territoriale e confronti internazionali

Per Carla Bartolozzi

Teaching and experiences of restoration: affirmation of territorial identity and international comparisons

For Carla Bartolozzi

Curatori del numero / *Issue editors*: Monica Naretto, Francesco Novelli, Emanuele Romeo.

Il volume raccoglie una serie di interventi su ricerca, didattica e public engagement nella sfera del patrimonio architettonico, attraverso lo sguardo della conservazione, del restauro e di discipline che contribuiscono ai processi di conoscenza, intervento e gestione come la storia dell'architettura, la tecnica delle costruzioni, la geomatica, l'estimo e la valutazione economica, la composizione architettonica. Gli scritti, dedicati a Carla Bartolozzi, professoressa ordinaria di Restauro al Politecnico di Torino e già coordinatrice del Collegio di Architettura, spaziano dall'illustrazione di esperienze didattiche, alle questioni metodologiche, alle indagini e problematiche relative a casi studio che muovono dal contesto del territorio piemontese al panorama internazionale.

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In copertina: Ex Ospedale Riberi di Torino, padiglione con vista sulla galleria vetrata, dopo il restauro e la modellazione del terreno (2006).

Indice

Stefano Paolo Corgnati	Saluto di apertura <i>Opening</i>	7
Michele Bonino	Introduzione <i>Introduction</i>	8
Davide Rolfo	Editoriale. Passato, presente, futuro <i>Editorial. Past, present, future</i>	9

PARTE I

Il contributo scientifico nella comunità del restauro *The scientific contribution within the restoration community*

Emanuele Romeo	Tra ricerca e didattica. Il contributo di Carla Bartolozzi al restauro e alla conservazione <i>Between research and teaching. Carla Bartolozzi's contribution to restoration and conservation</i>	12
Monica Naretto	Cultura del restauro in Piemonte tra Otto e Novecento e riflessi attuali. Dai Castelli di Rivara al Borgo Medievale, andata e ritorno <i>Restoration culture in Piedmont between the 19th and 20th centuries and current reflections. A round trip from the Castles of Rivara to the Borgo Medievale</i>	20
Francesco Novelli	"Grandi Fabbriche" e "progetto minimo": conservazione e restauro tra esperienza didattica e pratica professionale nell'attività di Carla Bartolozzi <i>"Grandi Fabbriche" and "minimum project": preservation and conservation between educational experience and professional practice in the activity of Carla Bartolozzi</i>	34

PARTE II

Ricerca e disseminazione *Research and outreach*

Paolo Napoli	Sapere e saper fare <i>Knowledge and expertise</i>	54
Fulvio Rinaudo	La documentazione del patrimonio culturale: un punto di partenza corretto per pianificare azioni di valorizzazione e conservazione <i>The documentation of cultural heritage: the right starting point to plan optimisation and conservation actions</i>	58

Cristina Coscia	Una sostenibilità "etica" nei processi di valorizzazione del patrimonio culturale: il ruolo degli indicatori multidimensionali come strumento decisionale <i>"Ethical" Sustainability in the optimisation of cultural heritage: the role of multidimensional indicators as a decision-making tool</i>	65
Caterina Giannattasio	Superare i limiti. Patrimonio eterotopico e [in]accessibilità <i>Pushing the limits. Heterotopic heritage and [in]accessibility</i>	75
Emanuele Morezzi	Spazi eterotopici tra <i>flânerie</i> contemporanea ed esplorazione urbana. Paesaggi culturali di visioni, percezioni e memorie <i>Heterotopic spaces between contemporary flânerie and urban exploration. Cultural landscapes of visions, perceptions and memories</i>	85
Daniele Dabbene	Risignificare il patrimonio eterotopico degli ex orfanotrofi: il caso studio dell'Istituto Provinciale per l'Infanzia a Torino <i>Repurposing the heterotopic heritage of former orphanages: the case study of the Istituto Provinciale per l'Infanzia in Turin</i>	92
Chiara Occelli	Il ruolo del patrimonio religioso nelle aree rurali e marginali <i>The role of religious heritage in rural and marginal areas</i>	102
Irene Ruiz Bazán	Potenziare il riuso del patrimonio religioso: sfide e questioni critiche nell'implementazione delle strategie europee <i>Promoting the reuse of religious heritage: challenges and critical issues in implementing European strategies</i>	109
Donatella Rita Fiorino	Strategie di co-creazione per la tutela e il riuso di vasti complessi religiosi nel contesto urbano. Esperienze di ricerca e didattica per tre casi studio a Cagliari <i>Co-creation strategies for protecting and reusing vast religious complexes in the urban context. Research and teaching experiences for three case studies in Cagliari</i>	119
Renata Prescia	Un patrimonio monastico da valorizzare. Studi e progetti per architetture medioevali e 'chiamontane' tra Palermo e Agrigento <i>A monastic heritage to be optimized. Studies and projects for medieval and 'chiamontan' architecture between Palermo and Agrigento</i>	138
Michela Benente	L'Area archeologica di Libarna e la sua conservazione integrata: scenari di un possibile futuro tra sostenibilità e resilienza <i>The archaeological site of Libarna and its integrated conservation: scenarios of a possible future between sustainability and resilience</i>	146
Manuela Mattone	Moby Dick in città: problematiche di conservazione dell'ex acquario-rettilario del giardino zoologico di Torino <i>Moby Dick in the city of Turin: conservation issues of the former aquarium-reptilium of the zoological garden</i>	152
Tommaso Vagnarelli	Patrimonio abbandonato e valore sociale: (ri)usi informali per una conservazione radicale <i>Abandoned heritage and social value: informal (re)uses for a radical conservation</i>	162

Paolo Cornaglia	Il "Gruppo storico" all'Esposizione del Millenario di Budapest nel 1896. Dal Medioevo al Barocco, passando per Torino <i>The "Historical group" at the Millennium Exhibition of Budapest in 1896. From the Middle Ages to the Baroque, via Turin</i>	172
Sara Abram	"La Via del restauro": un terreno di incontro per discipline, geografie, cronologie e contesti <i>"La Via del restauro": a meeting ground for disciplines, geographies, chronologies and contexts</i>	183
Matteo Barisone	"La trilogia del restauro" <i>"The restoration trilogy"</i>	187
PARTE III		
Ricerca e didattica <i>Research and teaching</i>		
Chiara Devoti	Il programma didattico della Scuola di specializzazione, tra formazione teorica ed esperienze sul campo <i>The teaching program of the School of Specialization, between theoretical training and practical experiences</i>	194
Marco Roggero	Il contributo della Geomatica al progetto di Restauro: evoluzione di tecnologie e pratiche di rilievo in quindici anni di esperienze didattiche condivise <i>The contribution of Geomatics to the Restoration project: evolution of survey technologies and practices in fifteen years of shared teaching experiences</i>	203
Riccardo Rudiero	Lo spazio architettonico come ambiente didattico: il Borgo Medievale del Valentino, modello per il – e di – restauro <i>Architectural space as an educational environment: the Borgo Medievale in Turin as a model for – and of – restoration</i>	211
Valentina Serra	Strategie di retrofit per la riqualificazione energetica negli edifici storici: un compito impegnativo. Il caso di studio del Monastero di Santa Maria de Monfero in Galizia <i>Envelope retrofit strategies for energy refurbishment in historic buildings: a challenging task. The case study of the Santa Maria de Monfero Monastery in Galicia</i>	217
Maurizio Reggi	La conservazione dei giardini storici: esperienze di studio e collaborazione nel recupero dei giardini del Castello di Racconigi e della Venaria Reale <i>The conservation of historic gardens: experiences of study and collaboration in the recovery of the gardens of Racconigi Castle and Venaria Reale</i>	224
Gerardo Bonito	Il castello di Verzuolo. Dall'abbandono ai primi interventi di valorizzazione <i>Verzuolo castle. From the abandonment to the first enhancement interventions</i>	235

Mianlin Yang, Qian Du	I dilemmi della conservazione dei villaggi tradizionali: sfide e possibili soluzioni basate sullo studio comparativo di Cina e Italia <i>The dilemmas of traditional village conservation: challenges and possible solutions based on the comparative study of China and Italy</i>	245
Carlo Allemano, Fabio Ambrogio	Save the traditional Cabras: un'opportunità didattica internazionale tra approcci teorici e sperimentazioni <i>Save the traditional Cabras: an international learning opportunity between theoretical approaches and experiments</i>	259
Edoardo Piccoli, Cesare Tocci	La torre dell'orologio a Borgo Castello. Un <i>divertissement</i> ottocentesco e la didattica della costruzione <i>The clock tower in Borgo Castello. A nineteenth-century divertissement and the teaching of construction</i>	263
Francesca De Cola	Salirò, salirò... Analisi tipologica e costruttiva delle strutture di collegamento: un'occasione di confronto con gli studenti sugli edifici storici <i>Salirò, salirò... Typological and constructive analysis of connecting structures: an opportunity for students to discuss historic buildings</i>	272
Paolo Mellano	Restauro vs progetto o progetto di restauro? <i>Sont deux mots qui vont très bien ensemble</i> <i>Restoration vs project or restoration project? These are words that go together well</i>	275

Potenziare il riuso del patrimonio religioso: sfide e questioni critiche nell'implementazione delle strategie europee

Promoting reuse of religious heritage: challenges and critical issues in implementing European strategies

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Questo articolo esamina gli sforzi in atto per promuovere il riuso del patrimonio religioso, offrendo una panoramica dei quadri normativi e delle linee guida dell'UE. Si evidenziano le principali sfide, tra cui il calo della pratica religiosa, e le difficoltà di gestione, che complicano la conservazione di questi importanti beni culturali. L'analisi mette in guardia contro la riduzione del patrimonio a una mera risorsa sostenibile, poiché tale approccio rischia di sminuirne i valori culturali e spirituali. Viene brevemente esaminato il progetto europeo RELiHE come caso di studio, suggerendo che le strategie su misura, guidate dalle comunità, e i cambiamenti politici gradualmente radicati nella disciplina del restauro, possono meglio allineare i nuovi usi con il significato culturale intrinseco del patrimonio religioso.

This article explores the current efforts to promote the reuse of religious heritage, providing an overview of relevant EU frameworks and guidelines. It highlights key challenges such as ecclesiastical constraints, declining religious observance, and operational difficulties, all of which complicate the conservation of these important cultural assets. The analysis cautions against reducing heritage to a merely sustainable resource, as this approach risks diminishing its cultural and spiritual values. The European project RELiHE is briefly examined as a case study, suggesting that tailored, community-driven strategies and incremental policy changes rooted in the discipline of restoration may more effectively align new uses with the inherent cultural significance of religious heritage.

¹ We highlight in this context, among other works, the publication by Carla Bartolozzi (ed.), *Patrimonio Architettonico Religioso. Nuove funzioni e processi di trasformazione*, Gangemi, Roma, 2017. This work compiles the findings from the Convegno Internazionale Patrimonio Architettonico Religioso. Nuove funzioni e processi di trasformazione, held on December 11-12, 2014, at the Castello del Valentino in Turin. The conference was organized by the Department of Architecture and Design (DAD) at the Politecnico di Torino, in collaboration with the National Office for Ecclesiastical Heritage of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI). The Scientific Committee was led by prof. Carla Bartolozzi.

² Future for Religious Heritage (FRH), established in 2011, is a prominent organization dedicated to the preservation of Europe's diverse and unique religious heritage. As the only independent, non-faith-based, and non-profit network, FRH unites over 170 members from charities, conservation departments, governmental and religious institutions, universities, and other professionals across more than 35 countries. Its mission is to promote and safeguard religious heritage by connecting organizations and individuals through a Europe-wide network. FRH actively engages in forums and advocacy to amplify the voice of religious heritage and influence relevant stakeholders and policymakers. The data are available at <https://www.frh-europe.org/european-citizens-support-religious-heritage-81-of-europeans-believe-that-religious-heritage-is-key-for-the-present-and-future-of-their-community/> Accessed on 17th August 2024.

³ European Parliament, *REPORT towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe* https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2015-0207_EN.html Accessed on 17th August 2024.

⁴ *Ibid.*

1. Introduction

This article explores the future directions and the challenges that remain in the European context regarding the complex process of developing policy strategies for repurposing religious heritage that is underused, abandoned or even in ruins. Notably, Professor Carla Bartolozzi has played a key role in driving these efforts forward, significantly contributing to the research and implementation of effective strategies for repurposing religious heritage¹.

1.1 The importance of religious heritage in Europe

As is well-known, religious heritage in Europe holds profound significance, serving not only as a vital link to the continent's spiritual and cultural history but also as a cornerstone of local identity and community cohesion. A 2023 opinion poll commissioned by the network Future for Religious Heritage (FRH)² revealed that 86% of Europeans consider religious heritage to be a highly valued asset for their local communities. Additionally, 81% agree that preserving historic places of worship is essential for their community's present and future. This widespread sentiment highlights the integral role that religious sites – such as Notre-Dame in Paris and the Mosque-Cathedral in Córdoba – play in shaping cultural landscapes and local identities across Europe. Furthermore, 77% of Europeans recognize religious heritage, which includes over 500,000 churches, synagogues, mosques and associated art and ceremonies, as a key part of their country's cultural heritage. This broad appreciation reflects not only the historical and artistic significance of these sites but also their evolving role in contemporary society, with 79% of citizens supporting the extension of their use beyond religious functions to include tourism and cultural activities that honor the sacred nature of these buildings.

Moreover, about 20% of UNESCO's World Heritage sites have a religious or spiritual nature, representing an asset of unequalled relevance. According to the Communication from the Commission Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe (2014)³, cultural heritage is a shared resource and a common good, and, "like other such goods, it can be vulnerable to over-exploitation and under-funding, which can result in neglect, decay and, in some cases, oblivion"⁴. This statement highlights two central themes: the perception of heritage as a resource and its heightened susceptibility to threats, particularly regarding the context religious heritage. Key challenges include declining religious faith and management issues, which further complicate the conservation of these important cultural assets.

1.2 A complex situation

Beyond its cultural significance, the European approach to cultural heritage increasingly emphasizes its potential as a sustainable resource. As we are going to see, numerous documents from EU affiliated institutions and advisors, as well as various conventions and recommendations, consistently advocate for viewing cultural heritage as a sustainable asset. However, there is still some ambiguity regarding how these concepts can be effectively implemented in conservation projects, particularly concerning religious heritage, which requires special attention due to its unique characteristics.

While a 'one-size-fits-all' approach might be appealing from some perspectives, to outline how to deal with the challenge of reusing religious

heritage, it is unlikely to be effective given the complex and varied nature of these sites. The diversity of religious heritage across Europe demands tailored solutions. Although some projects have succeeded – either fully or partially – these successes are context-specific, offering valuable lessons that highlight the importance of understanding the unique conditions that enabled them. These lessons could be applied or transferred as best practices within the framework of European policies. However, the implementation of such projects often involves significant bureaucratic complexity due to the varied relationships between religious entities and the institutions responsible for heritage management.

While the European Union (EU) coordinates, supports and supplements policies and measures related to culture, it does not have legislative powers in this domain, as culture and heritage are considered national matters, which remain under the jurisdiction of individual member states. Adding to this complexity is the imminent accession of seven new candidate states – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine. These countries, which are already beginning to receive support from various EU funding programs, present new challenges in managing their religious heritage, particularly in relation to their Soviet past and the numerous identitarian conflicts in their recent history.

The *European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage*⁵ outlines key guidelines from the EU for preserving and promoting cultural heritage. Launched as part of the European Year of Cultural Heritage (EYCH)⁶ in 2018, this initiative aimed to celebrate cultural heritage as a shared resource, enhance awareness of Europe's common history and values, and strengthen a unified European cultural and political identity. The EYCH 2018 helped prioritize cultural heritage on the EU's agenda through a comprehensive approach. The *European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage* introduced in the new *European Agenda for Culture*⁷, builds on the successes of EYCH and ensures its legacy by implementing concrete actions. It promotes an integrated and participatory approach to cultural heritage, contributing to its incorporation into various EU policies. This approach has received support from key EU institutions, including the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee.

The recent *2023-26 Work Plan for Culture*⁸ of the Council of the European Union identifies four concrete actions: safeguarding cultural heritage against natural and human-made disasters:

- developing strategies and tools to protect heritage sites and collections from risks such as climate change, pollution and conflicts;
- fighting illicit trafficking of cultural goods: strengthening measures to combat the illegal trade of cultural artifacts, thereby preserving heritage and preventing cultural loss;
- preserving cultural heritage in Ukraine: providing support for the protection and restoration of cultural heritage sites affected by conflict and instability;
- climate action through arts and cultural heritage: leveraging cultural heritage and the arts to raise awareness and drive action on climate change, highlighting the role of heritage in sustainable development.

The last action emphasizes the role of cultural heritage as a catalyst for sustainable development.

All these guidelines, strategies and frameworks, combined with the rise of certain theoretical approaches in the field of architecture that

⁵ European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *European framework for action on cultural heritage*, Publications Office, 2019, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/949707> Accessed on 18th August 2024.

⁶ European Commission, *European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018*, <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-heritage/eu-policy-for-cultural-heritage/european-year-of-cultural-heritage-2018>. Accessed on 18th August 2024.

⁷ <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/document/a-new-european-agenda-for-culture-swd2018-267-final>. Accessed on 18th August 2024.

⁸ Council of the European Union, Council 2023-26 Work Plan for Culture, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022G1207\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022G1207(01)), Accessed on 18th August 2024.

9 We can find an interesting research into compatibility in the process of selecting new functions in: Alessandro Lo Faro, Alessia Miceli, *Sustainable Strategies for the Adaptive Reuse of Religious Heritage: A Social Opportunity*, in «Buildings», 9, 211, 2019, p. 16.

10 Interreg Europe is a European Union program that aims to support regional development and cooperation among European regions. It provides funding for interregional projects and initiatives that allow regions to share experiences, transfer knowledge and develop innovative policies. The program is part of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and seeks to improve the effectiveness of regional development policies across Europe by fostering collaboration and learning among public authorities and organizations.

11 All the information related to the project can be found in <https://www.interregeurope.eu/relihe> Accessed on 18th August 2024.

12 On the role of cultural heritage as a vector an interesting reflection can be found in: Joks Janssen, Eric Luiten, Hans Renes, Eva Stegmeijer, *Heritage as sector, factor and vector: conceptualizing the shifting relationship between heritage management and spatial planning*, in «European Planning Studies», 25 (9), 2017, pages 1654-1672.

emphasize the economic potential of heritage buildings, are leading to a shift that increasingly distances reuse projects or religious buildings from a proper understanding of their cultural significance and the values that originally led to their designation as a common and identitarian heritage.

This trend emphasizes the need to develop more comprehensive approaches and tools that not only consider sustainability and economic viability but also prioritize the cultural and historical values inherent in religious heritage sites⁹. These tools should go beyond traditional disciplines, ensuring that the conservation efforts remain true to the original significance of these sites. Moreover, each approach must be carefully adapted to the specific context of the building, paying particular attention to the legal frameworks and policies that apply.

There is a clear need for policies and programs related to religious heritage that go beyond a sole focus on sustainability. It may be more effective to shift the emphasis toward approaches that also prioritize the cultural values of religious heritage, making them central to reuse projects. This perspective guides conservation efforts and requires policy changes that address various interconnected aspects.

The Interreg Europe¹⁰ project RELiHE (Religious Heritage in Rural Areas)¹¹, recently initiated by the Politecnico di Torino as the Advisory Lead Partner, embodies this approach. The project specifically explores the potential for reusing religious heritage within Europe's diverse rural landscapes. By collaborating with seven European countries – Spain, Latvia, Poland, the Netherlands, Germany, and the Czech Republic – RELiHE seeks to identify and implement policy changes that respect the cultural significance of religious heritage in these regions.

The project addresses several key challenges:

- complex management issues;
- ownership problems;
- the need for sustainable reuse ideas that extend beyond mere conservation.

Through the exchange of experiences and best practices, the project aims to implement and improve six policy instruments, ranging from regional development strategies and special heritage conservation plans to specific policies for the restoration of religious heritage. This collaborative approach is expected to enhance the effectiveness of these instruments, ensuring they are better suited to addressing the unique challenges of preserving and repurposing religious heritage in diverse rural contexts.

2. European strategies and frameworks for the reuse of religious heritage

In recent years, the role of heritage within the broader context of sustainable development has gained significant attention, shaping European strategies aimed at balancing economic progress with cultural preservation and environmental responsibility. Religious heritage, encompassing both tangible and intangible elements, serves as a key vector¹² in sustainable development, contributing to the creation of more equitable, resilient and harmonious societies. This importance is emphasized by the sheer number of religious sites across Europe – over 500,000 churches, chapels, synagogues, mosques, cathedrals, monasteries and convents – which not only hold immense cultural and historical value but also represent key aspects of European identity. We must mention also that although the United Nations' 2030 Agenda

for Sustainable Development does not explicitly mention religious heritage, it remains an underlying theme that intersects with all seventeen goals, reinforcing its integral role in achieving the sustainable development goals¹³.

Key European frameworks from the European Council¹⁴, such as the *Faro Convention* (2005)¹⁵ and the *Leeuwarden Declaration* (2018)¹⁶ from the Architect's Council of Europe, have been instrumental in shaping the discourse on religious heritage. The Faro Convention redefines cultural heritage as a living, inclusive and evolving resource, emphasizing its potential to enhance the quality of life and contribute to sustainable development. It promotes a people-centered approach, placing communities at the forefront of heritage management and recognizing their role in preserving and transmitting cultural values. Meanwhile, the Leeuwarden Declaration focuses on the adaptive reuse of built heritage, including religious sites, advocating for the preservation of heritage values while adapting to contemporary needs.

As pointed out in the research project H2020 *OpenHeritage*¹⁷, traditionally, the concept of adaptive reuse has been discussed primarily within the fields of interior design and architecture. In recent years, there has been a shift in how heritage is valued, especially in the context of austerity where governments are less inclined to invest heavily in cultural heritage. As a result, adaptive reuse has become a major policy focus in the heritage field. This approach is now widely used in various countries and within EU policies as a cost-effective and environmentally friendly method for both regenerating and preserving heritage sites.

This method aligns with the European Green Deal's goals¹⁸, particularly through initiatives like the *European Cultural Heritage Green Paper* (EHGP)¹⁹. This document, developed in 2021 by Europa Nostra, ICOMOS, and the Climate Heritage Network, with support from the European Investment Bank Institute and the Creative Europe program, emphasizes the transformative role of cultural heritage in addressing climate change and promoting sustainable development. The EHGP advocates for integrating cultural heritage considerations into climate action strategies, highlighting the vital contribution of heritage to achieving the European Green Deal's goals. It highlights the importance of cultural heritage in shaping a sustainable future for Europe and beyond and emphasizes the critical need to integrate cultural heritage into European sustainability policies. EHGP stresses the importance of funding initiatives that address the cultural dimensions of the ecological transition, particularly through pilot projects. According to the paper, policymakers should prioritize cultural heritage in green strategies, such as mobilizing public funds to leverage the unique capacities of local communities. The European Commission is encouraged to incorporate cultural heritage into the new EU Taxonomy Regulation, highlighting its role in environmentally sustainable activities and the protection of cultural human rights.

In terms of the reuse and adaptive renovation of existing buildings, the paper highlights their crucial role in reducing our ecological footprint and minimizing the environmental costs associated with demolition and new construction. According to the EHGP, adaptive reuse, particularly of historic buildings, not only preserves cultural heritage but also avoids the energy-intensive processes involved in new construction, making it a key strategy for resource efficiency and sustainability. It further highlights the importance of land-use policies that prioritize the reuse of existing buildings and cultural landscapes, promoting the inclusive regeneration of historic districts while safeguarding heritage

13 The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), comprise 17 Goals, 169 Targets, and 232 Indicators. Notably, Target 11.4 of SDG 11 emphasizes the need to strengthen efforts in protecting and preserving the world's cultural and natural heritage, highlighting its significance for sustainable development. This represents notable progress compared to the absence of explicit cultural references in previous iterations of global agendas.

14 The Council of Europe should not be mistaken for the Council of the European Union, as they are distinct entities within the EU framework. The Council of Europe operates independently from the EU's institutional structure. It is an international organization headquartered in Strasbourg, France, with a primary focus on safeguarding human rights, promoting democracy and upholding the rule of law. Unlike the European Council and the Council, which are integral parts of the EU, the Council of Europe serves a broader purpose, encompassing a wider group of European countries, both within and outside the EU, in its pursuit of common values and principles. Understanding this difference became crucial when examining the different strategies and recommendations for heritage conservation that are promoted today in Europe, since most of them depart from this institution.

15 Council of Europe, *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (Faro Convention, 2005), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/faro-convention>. Accessed on 19th August 2024.

16 Architects' Council of Europe, *Leeuwarden Declaration on Adaptive Re-Use of Built Heritage*. https://www.ace-cae.eu/uploads/tx_jdidocuments-view/LEEWARDEN_STATEMENT_FINAL_EN-NEW.pdf. Accessed on 19th August 2024.

17 *OpenHeritage* was EU Funded Research project H2020 running from 2018 to 2021. It aimed to identify and test the best practices of adaptive heritage re-use in Europe for this study is noteworthy the deliverable: Loes Veldpaus, Federica Fava, Dominika Brodowiz *Mapping of current heritage re-use policies and regulations in Europe. Report complex policy overview of adaptive heritage re-use*, December 2019.

18 European Commission, *The European Green Deal, Striving to be the first climate-neutral continent*, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en. Accessed on 19th August 2024.

19 Andrew Poots, *European Cultural Heritage Green Paper "Putting Europe's shared heritage at the heart of the European Green Deal"*. Discussion Paper. Europa Nostra, 2021.

20 Council of Europe, *Namur Declaration* <https://rm.coe.int/16806a89ae>. Accessed on 19th August 2024.

21 Council of Europe, 'European Heritage Strategy for the 21st century' <https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/strategy-21>. Accessed on 19th August 2024.

22 Council of Europe, *ST21 Factsheets* <https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/strategy-21-factsheets>. Accessed on 20th August 2024.

values. It describes cultural heritage as a long-term resource and a driver of environmental regeneration, capable of generating employment and fostering social cohesion. In the post-COVID-19 recovery context, the paper identifies heritage conservation as a potential lighthouse project within the Next Generation EU initiative, suggesting that sensitively retrofitting historic buildings can simultaneously advance climate action, social cohesion and economic recovery. The EHGP calls for closer collaboration with the financial sector to integrate the benefits of heritage conservation into sustainable financial products, ensuring that the full value of building reuse is recognized within Europe's broader sustainability agenda.

Regarding the European Council policy recommendations, we must consider that in preparation for the EYCH, it initiated a series of policy recommendations especially in the field of management, beginning with the adoption of the Namur Declaration²⁰ by the ministers of the States Parties to the European Cultural Convention in April 2015. This declaration emphasized the need for a unified approach to cultural heritage management, recognizing its critical role in European identity and sustainable development. Building on this foundation, the European Cultural Heritage Strategy for the 21st Century (ST21)²¹ was officially launched in 2017. This strategy focuses on improving citizens' quality of life, enhancing Europe's appeal, fostering education and promoting participatory governance. The Council of Europe was tasked with drafting and overseeing the strategy, with particular emphasis on involving the European Union in its development and implementation. The subsequent ST21 addresses the approach to Cultural Heritage Management by defining three main components: Social, Territorial and Economic Development, and Knowledge and Education. For each of these components, the strategy identifies a series of challenges and offers recommendations for various courses of action, pursuing an interdisciplinary and participatory approach. These recommendations are based on different *good practices* and examples. The ST21 also defines interfaces, or areas of convergence, where different components of the strategy interact and intersect.

Regarding religious heritage, the ST21 has produced a specific fact-sheet²² in collaboration with FRH. The approach is built around the four pillars of the EYCH:

1. engagement: religious heritage belongs to everybody and not just to worshippers;
2. sustainability: interest is difficult to maintain in underused buildings. If use for worship is insufficient, other functions should be sought through tourism, community use, social outreach, alternative or extended use;
3. protection: closure is to be avoided wherever possible. Buildings, which were often built by communities, should be preserved and kept open for public benefit;
4. innovation: particularly in adapting management to the needs of the 21st century, is key to the future.

It also provides specific recommendations and guidelines to refine and improve existing policies based on the three components of heritage outlined in the ST21 to provide a framework for addressing the challenges of religious heritage management which are:

Social Component

- Complementary uses for underused buildings: identifying and implementing compatible uses for underused buildings can increase their social value and relevance.

- Local volunteer support groups: coordinating volunteer efforts across all strategy pillars enhances community engagement and stewardship.
- Promoting public use of sites: encouraging a culture of public use for these sites solidifies their role in the community. (Figure 1)
- Inclusive stakeholder consultations: engaging stakeholders before site closure or abandonment ensures transparency and inclusivity.

Territorial and Economic Development

- Reusing abandoned buildings: promoting the reuse of abandoned buildings (helps maintain public spaces and supports community development). (Figures 2-3)
- Promoting religious heritage through tourism: collaborating with local tourism offices to promote religious heritage, including lesser-known sites can enhance local economies.
- Best practices in heritage tourism: implementing best practices in religious heritage tourism ensures sustainability and responsible management.
- Financial sustainability: exploring online donations and commercial uses for buildings where appropriate supports the financial viability of heritage sites.
- Inventories and security measures: developing inventories and security methods to prevent loss or theft is critical for the protection of cultural assets.



Fig. 1 – An example of activities conducted by the Association Territorio Mudéjar to co-functionalize religious spaces. A geometric drawing workshop on Mudéjar patterns held at the Church of the Virgin of Tobed (Zaragoza, Spain), a UNESCO World Heritage site, is pictured here. Photo by the author.



Fig. 2 – Church of the Assumption of Our Lady in Quinto de Ebro (Zaragoza, Spain). The building was severely damaged during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), subsequently closed and deconsecrated. Today, after nearly 40 years of various restoration projects, it has been transformed into a museum. The management process and its implications for the town's tourism development are studied as a best practice presented by the Provincial Government of Zaragoza within the RELiHE project. Photo by the author.

Fig. 3 – Study visit to the Piccolo Chiostro San Mauro in Pavia, Italy, exemplifying the reuse of religious heritage to house a conservation and restoration center, showcased during the kick-off event of the RELiHE project in April 2024. Photo by the author.



Knowledge and Education

- Cataloging and promoting heritage: promoting tangible and intangible heritage, including history, art and architecture, enhances public awareness and appreciation.
- Religious heritage education: integrating religious heritage into public education for young people fosters a deeper understanding of cultural heritage.
- Knowledge sharing and best practices: supporting studies and knowledge-sharing across sectors encourages the replication of successful management strategies.

Given these considerations, the ST21 framework highlights the need to integrate social, territorial and economic dimensions into the management of religious heritage, ensuring that adaptive reuse not only preserves cultural values but also meets contemporary needs and sustainability goals.

3. Discussion

Despite existing guidelines and support programs, repurposing religious heritage remains challenging due to its unique characteristics and the lack of tailored recommendations within policy frameworks. The absence of a standardized approach requires a case-by-case evaluation, reflecting the need for adaptable and context-specific strategies. In Italy, for instance, repurposing religious buildings is often complicated by Canon Law, which restricts their conversion to non-religious uses only when the buildings are deemed unsuitable for worship and beyond repair. By contrast, deconsecrated buildings face fewer restrictions on their future uses. This scenario highlights the need for policy frameworks that are flexible and tailored to the specific historical, cultural and legal contexts of each individual site. Practically, public interest in revitalizing these properties often conflicts with reluctance by private investors due to high costs and preservation requirements²³. Additionally, ecclesiastical constraints can delay planning approvals by requiring social functions for repurposed buildings, potentially affecting the timely use of public funds. The lack of standardized practices has led to various guidelines, such as the 2018 *Guidelines: Decommissioning and Ecclesial Reuse of Churches*²⁴, which aim to balance the respect for their sacred nature with the need for new functions. They emphasize that any new use must honor the building's original religious significance and stress the need for local community involvement and a thorough understanding of the building's history before accommodating modern uses.

The broader implications for European heritage policy revolve around the need to balance the preservation of religious heritage with its sustainable reuse. This balance is particularly delicate due to the spiritual, cultural and social significance of religious sites. European heritage policies must consider the interplay between conserving tangible and intangible values and the need for functional compatibility with contemporary uses. As the political context increasingly views heritage as a sustainable (and economic) resource, there is still a pressing need for research and practices that address the unique challenges of conserving religious heritage.

Finding a balance between the conservation of religious heritage values, the frameworks for its reuse and the maintenance of its identity and cultural significance remains a complex and ongoing challenge.

²³ This process is analyzed in Felicia Di Liddo, Pierluigi Morano, Francesco Tajani, *Cultural and religious heritage enhancement initiatives: a logic-operative method for the verification of financial feasibility*, in «Journal of Cultural Heritage», 62, 2023, pages 387-395.

²⁴ Pontifical Consilium de Cultura, *Decommissioning and ecclesial reuse of churches - guidelines*, in: «Proceedings of the Conference: Doesn't God Dwell Here Anymore», Rome, 29-30 November 2018. <http://www.cultura.va/content/dam/cultura/docs/pdf/beniculturali/guidelines.pdf>. Accessed on 20th August 2024.

The nature of religious heritage, deeply intertwined with spiritual, cultural and social dimensions, complicates the development of 'universally' applicable policies and practices. The need to respect ecclesiastical constraints, address the high costs and bureaucratic hurdles associated with redevelopment, and engage local communities in decision-making further intensifies the difficulty of this task. European heritage policies must face these complexities, striving to create strategies that not only preserve the tangible and intangible values of religious sites but also adapt them to contemporary needs in a way that honors their historical significance. Achieving this delicate balance is key to ensuring that religious heritage remains an integral part of Europe's cultural landscape, capable of serving both current and future generations.

4. Future Directions

Addressing the reuse of religious heritage presents significant challenges that require a careful balancing act between sustainability and the preservation of cultural and identity values. While the drive for sustainability is key, it must be tempered by an equal emphasis on maintaining the intrinsic cultural significance of these sites. The complexity of integrating these aspects into existing guidelines and policies highlights the need for nuanced, case-specific approaches. To advance effective strategies, it is essential to incorporate incremental policy changes that address both the practical and cultural dimensions of heritage reuse. For instance, making the study of compatible uses a mandatory component of restoration plans could help align new functions with the heritage's cultural and identity values. This requirement must be coupled with a thorough understanding of local community needs and a holistic, territorial-scale perspective that encompasses the diverse factors influencing heritage conservation. The ongoing challenge lies in developing a framework that is both participatory and integrative, avoiding sectoral biases while fostering a shared vision for heritage projects. This requires crafting policies that balance economic sustainability with the preservation of cultural values, ensuring that both are appropriately prioritized in decision-making processes, with an emphasis on an approach that understands the value of these buildings through the discipline of Architectural Restoration.

Projects like RELiHE, led by the Restoration Area of the Politecnico di Torino, aim to provide valuable insights into addressing these challenges by leveraging best practices from across Europe and applying the discipline's critical-methodological criteria to their study of transferability among different regions. These efforts highlight the need for continuous reflection and the adaptation of diverse policies to meet the evolving demands of heritage conservation, from local specificities to broader regional plans that must be carefully considered. Ultimately, in striving for the sustainable reuse of religious heritage, it is essential to remain mindful of the inherent complexities and to adopt thoughtful, culturally sensitive approaches. This will ensure that these valuable sites continue to be meaningful and relevant for future generations.