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# Italian museums as drivers for social wellbeing: MNEMONIC the Italian digital hub of cultural resilience

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# MUSEUMS, CITIZENS AND URBAN SUSTAINABILITY

## ICOM GENERAL CONFERENCE 2022, PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC

# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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CTĚNICE CASTLE IN VINOŘ, PRAGUE. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

# ITALIAN MUSEUMS AS DRIVERS FOR SOCIAL WELLBEING: *MNEMONIC* THE ITALIAN DIGITAL HUB OF CULTURAL RESILIENCE

ROSA TAMBORRINO AND GIULIA MEZZALAMA

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## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the results of the MNEMONIC project, launched in 2020 by the Polytechnic of Turin to critically collect, analyze and network the cultural production developed by Italian museums and cultural organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. It deals with the emergence of digital projects as a response to the crisis through collective cultural actions. Italy was the first European country to implement a national lockdown, leading to the closure of museums and cultural heritage sites. Although digitalization wasn't well developed yet, various digital, collaborative, and creative cultural initiatives emerged to address the lack of cultural and social life during the pandemic. These initiatives and their impact on citizens highlighted the contribution of culture and heritage to mental health and well-being. The MNEMONIC digital atlas of Cultural Resilience documents and preserves the plurality of this fragile production by providing a platform for networking among cultural and heritage organizations and all interested stakeholders. Based on a Web Geographic Information System (GIS) and interactive modes, it highlights the adaptive properties of Italian museums and cultural institutions and provides a space-time framework for understanding the development of digital cultural offerings. It reveals the extraordinary resilience, responsiveness, and creativity of Italian cultural institutions in their digital efforts, demonstrating the intrinsic relationship between culture and societal wellbeing.

**Key words:** Cultural resilience, digital heritage, societal wellbeing

**The Italian cultural reaction to COVID-19 pandemic and its digital acceleration**

The paper highlights some aspects of a broader research project undertaken by a team based at Polytechnic of Turin[1]. The pandemic has created a new and unexpected scenario, even in terms of culture and cultural heritage. In Italy, where the first major lockdown took place in March 2020, safety measures, with the succession of events, have triggered new types of behavior. Because of the pandemic, museums and cultural heritage sites have been closed, in-person events and activities have been cancelled and have stopped running. However, since the beginnings, an amount of unexpected and unusual collaborative, and creative cultural initiatives appeared, especially as digital projects (Tamborrino 2020).

We have learnt now that such a response to the crisis has been a shared challenge also in other countries to the interruption in the world of museums and cultural institutions of its normal functions for society (Agnetti et al. 2020; NEMO 2021). However, Italy has served as a sort of role model as it was the first country in the world to declare a national lockdown due to the COVID-19 virus. During the initial period, other countries attentively observed Italy's response. Moreover, the digital response is especially surprising considering the low level of digitalized heritage and expertise in museums. For these reasons, the Italian approach necessitates a case study to better understand how these initiatives have been developed to cope with the lack of cultural and social life. This will help identify the relevance of culture and heritage for societal and individual wellbeing.

On one hand, the crisis has clearly demonstrated the vulnerability of some relevant Italian museums and cultural institutions due to the national digital backwardness. This includes a lack of digital services, scarcity of digital collections, delays in digitalization, and a shortage of experts among the staff. On the other hand, the crisis has also sparked a new digital acceleration. The need to adapt has driven the exploration of digital cultural formats, as seen in some international museums, yielding interesting outcomes (Tamborrino 2022; Zuanni 2020). By overcoming obstacles and delays and achieving a meaningful quantity and quality of digital content, Italian cultural institutions and organizations have demonstrated extraordinary resilience, responsiveness, and creativity.

Mapping 'cultural resilience' also means mapping the relationships between culture and societal wellbeing. The Covid-19 pandemic had profound mental health effects on the general population by impacting social lives (WHO 2022), including more traditional community engagement and access to heritage. This understanding confirms the fundamentals that inspire the Faro Convention, promoting a broader understanding of heritage in its relationship with communities and society (Pavan-Woolfe & Pinton 2019). Furthermore, a growing body of evidence has demonstrated how heritage and museums are beneficial for social and individual wellbeing (Chatterjee & Camic 2015). To cope with the risk of cultural immobilism, Italian culture and heritage have demonstrated an exceptional and pervasive response in the production of digital cultural formats. Italy's history of several states, unified only in the mid-nineteenth century, has resulted in non-centralized cultural institutions with long-lasting local cultural organizations. Beyond the vast number of Italian museums and cultural institutions, a multifaceted range of cultural organization types has also contributed to this response. This large-scale phenomenon, inclusive of local organizations distributed throughout all Italian regions, identifies the Italian approach as a role model. Its strong characterization enables it to engage local stakeholders and have a significant impact on a national

[1] The team under the coordination of Rosa Tamborrino includes the second author and more researchers of the Polytechnic of Turin and University of Turin. The biannual research project "Digital Atlas of the Memory of the Present. Cultural and Natural Heritage in Italy during lockdown," with the acronym "MNEMONIC" has been funded by the Department of Urban and Regional Studies, and Planning in response to a competitive call from the Polytechnic of Turin. (http://www.mnemonic.polito.it/)

scale. It surpasses being just a response to a need; it can be defined as a kind of 'Cultural Resilience', a resilience of cultural institutions, culture, and heritage at large, which fosters societal resilience (Tamborrino et al. 2022). As a result, this cultural adaptive approach to the crisis has led to the creation of a new digital heritage, which is extremely fragile and susceptible to dispersal or loss. While available on the web, it does not receive the same exposure as the collections of huge famous museums. Nevertheless, this digital heritage represents the memory of a recent past that, despite being disruptive, needs to be preserved and made accessible. These reflections have laid the foundation for the MNEMONIC research project.

**MNEMONIC: Digital Hub of Cultural Resilience**

The MNEMONIC project's primary goal was to document the expressions of this heritage as a creation of cultural and collective memory. It sought to design and develop a platform for visualizing and managing the mapped information, making the results publicly accessible on the web. It meticulously mapped the digital cultural production, with the aim of creating a prototype of a synthesis format that is open to accommodating such diversity, including subsequent integrations, and flexible in its potential uses. MNEMONIC mainly consists of a multimedia and interactive atlas, based on Web GIS, connected to a data pool, and a digital platform. Its primary aim is to safeguard an ephemeral yet significant cultural production, making memory accessible while sharing the research results. While temporary exhibitions in museums may be ephemeral, they typically produce a catalogue of information stored in archives. In contrast, digital web formats are entirely ephemeral, often disappearing or changing without leaving any trace. The project has identified a wide range of organizations that play important roles as stakeholders. These initiatives have been organized by diverse entities, including national museums, local museums, associations, libraries, archives, university museums and collections, municipalities, and others. Since March 2020, MNEMONIC has collected over 700 cultural initiatives, with 250 of them

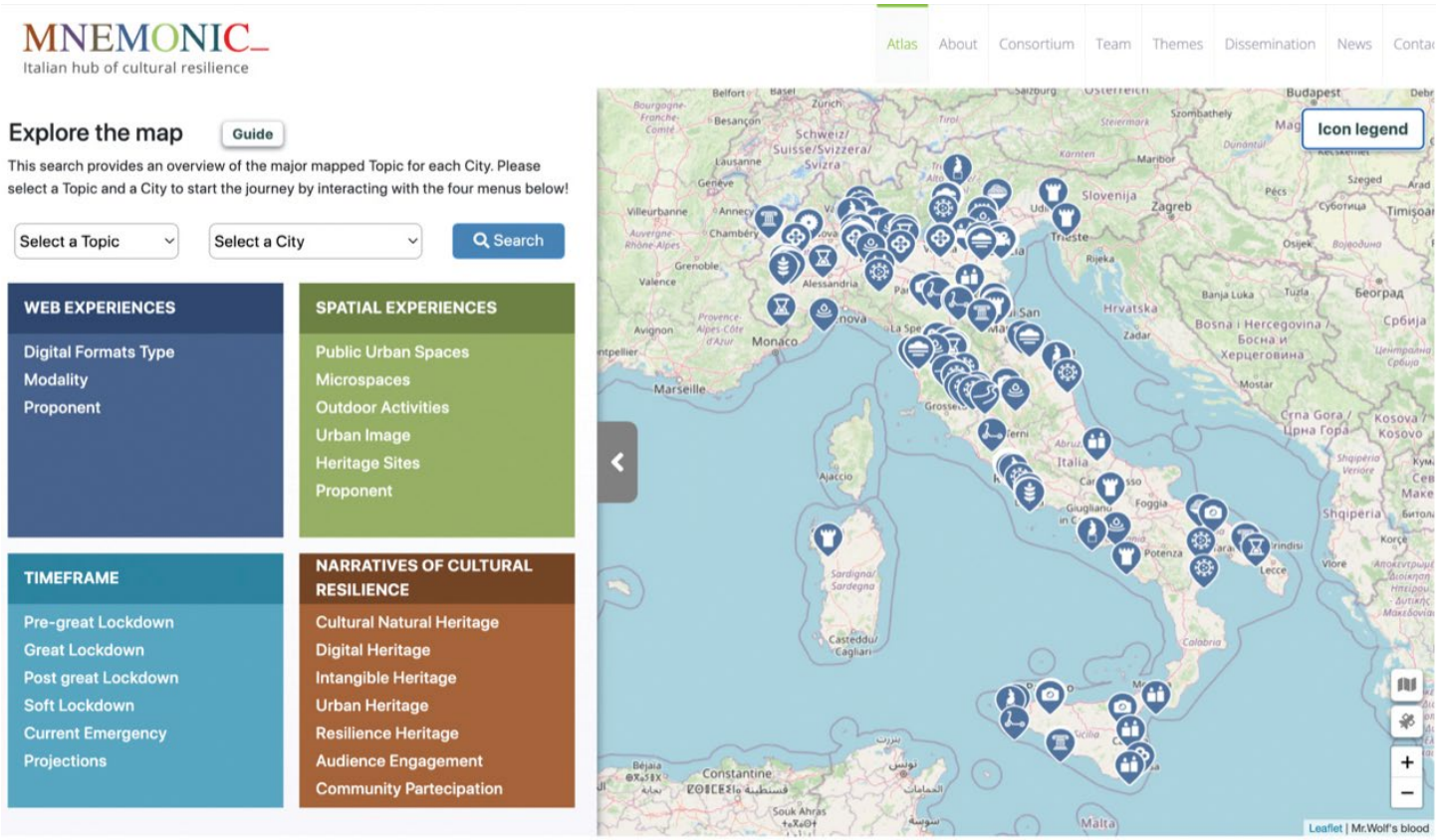


*Fig. 1. The Mnemonic Atlas.*♥mnemonic.polito.it

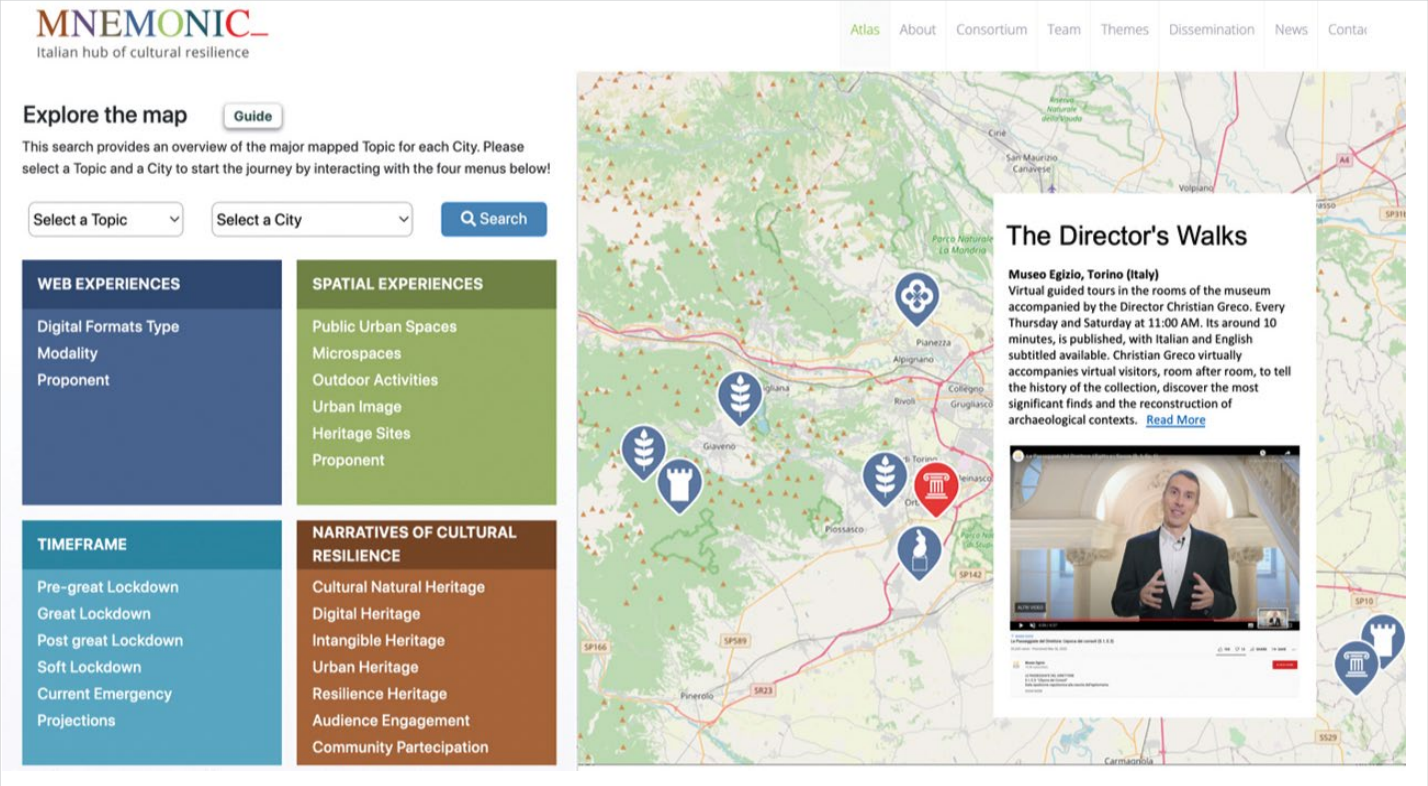


*Fig. 2. "The Director's Walks" virtual guided tours by Egyptian Museum in Turin.* ♥ mnemonic.polito.it

being promoted by more than 190 Italian museums. These initiatives represent the richness of the widespread heritage found in different Italian regions and highlight the non-centralized tradition of Italian cultural institutions.

The choice of digital tools for the research project has been a relevant aspect. The Atlas has been designed to provide a space-time framework that defines the theoretical and methodological context for creating the Italian Atlas of Cultural Resilience. It has been designed to support the management, integration, storage, visualization, and sharing of a vast collection of heterogeneous data related to cultural and natural heritage. This is achieved through an interactive environment that allows for guided and structured engagement. The user experience is dual: users can either simply and freely navigate the map and click on one of the topic icons or opt for an advanced search on the left side. In the advanced search, users can choose a specific topic and one of the approximately one hundred cities. They can also select different digital format types or specify a particular time span. The results of the advanced search are displayed on the map in the form of topic icons, making it easier to recognize the initiatives. By clicking on a selected icon, a pop-up displays further information, including links to digital web sources (Fig. 1).

**Fostering Italian social resilience through digital cultural initiatives**

By exploring and analyzing the results of the Italian cultural initiatives, it becomes evident that they were purposefully designed to foster societal resilience and a strong sense of belonging.

During the first Great Lockdown the Egyptian Museum of Turin launched "The Director's Walks", virtual guided tours in the rooms of the museum accompanied by its Director Christian Greco (Fig. 2). Twice a week, every Thursday and Saturday at 11:00 for around 10 minutes, with Italian and English subtitles available, Christian Greco virtually accompanied visitors, room after room, to tell the history of the collection, to discover the most significant finds and the reconstruction of archaeological contexts. The initiative was available on YouTube

and on the museum website. The digital format chosen was characterized by a colloquial language and characterized by the unusual active participation of the main cultural institution representative, with the aim of reconnecting the institution with its audience and cope with the sense of isolation generated by the lockdown.

A relevant number of initiatives were supposed to be like series or initiatives scheduled in specific days and hours in order to contribute in recreating habits and a sort of weekly or monthly routine. They tried to reach their audience at home by converting their formal traditional cultural offerings into new informal and "domestic" initiatives. The Pinacoteca di Brera produced a video, with an introduction by Director J. Bradburne, collecting the voices and photos of the objects of those who participated in the "A museum in your home" initiative launched by the Milanese Brera Art Gallery in March 2020, during the lockdown. The project invited the audience to choose the most important object that everyone keeps in their home to reflect on the meaning of collecting as an experience that each of us experiences in their own lives and on the meaning of a museum as a large house that collects the treasures of the whole community.

Alongside the significant presence of museums, the research has shed light on initiatives promoted by third-sector organizations, associations, foundations, as well as small municipalities or informal groups of citizens. Often adopting bottom-up approaches, these entities have contributed to the resilience of the nation through cultural means. While the bigger past of Italian museums faced inadequacies due to technological backwardness or government measures, the creativity, entrepreneurial spirit, and agility of small organizations, new cultural centers, or informal groups of individuals have emerged. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in small cities and villages of southern regions, where a wealth of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, including ceremonies, traditions, celebrations, and events, blends harmoniously with urban spaces, fostering a strong sense of urban identity and social cohesion. The profound sense of community, tradition, and belonging in these areas is notable. Despite the challenges posed by the circumstances, these initiatives have been adeptly preserved in digital formats, ensuring the retention of the sense of place and belonging, and keeping them alive in the collective consciousness. Festivals and civic and religious rituals were transformed into digital formats, exemplified by the "Palermo Sospesa" event, dedicated to Santa Rosalia, the patron saint of Palermo, and her significant miracle in the 17th century, which was reimagined as "the party that isn't there". In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Municipality made the decision to convert the annual religious and cultural celebration, known as the "Festino di Santa Rosalia", into a film produced through collaboration between the Municipality and numerous cultural institutions in Palermo, including the CSC (Center for Contemporary Culture) and the Academy of Fine Arts, among others. These innovative endeavors demonstrate the resilience of Italian cultural heritage, embracing digital means to connect with communities and foster social cohesion in times of profound crisis.

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