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ENGAGING COMMUNITY IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION: INSIGHTS FROM FLORENCE

Carlo Francini*, Tatiana Rozochkina°

*Municipality of Florence, carlo.francini@comune.fi,it
°University of Florence, tatiana.rozochkina@unifi.it

Abstract
The article examines the *Boundary Spaces: Reading the Historic Urban Landscape through Intermediate Spaces* project as a model for integrating participatory methodologies into World Heritage management. Focusing on Santo Spirito, a key attribute of the Historic Centre of Florence World Heritage site, the study explores the community engagement techniques aimed at raising heritage awareness and exploring the competing value systems associated to heritage by different groups. The findings highlight the necessity of participatory decision-making in reconciling sacred and secular uses, offering insights into sustainable governance strategies for complex urban heritage contexts.

Keywords: World Heritage Management, Participatory Decision-Making, Community Engagement

Coinvolgere la comunità nella conservazione storica: approfondimenti su Firenze

Questo articolo presenta il progetto *Spazi di Confine: leggere il paesaggio urbano storico attraverso i luoghi intermedi* come un modello per integrare metodologie partecipative nella gestione del Patrimonio Mondiale. Attraverso il caso di Santo Spirito, uno degli attributi del Centro Storico di Firenze, lo studio esplora le tecniche di coinvolgimento della comunità volte ad accrescere la consapevolezza del patrimonio e comprendere i diversi valori che gli vengono attribuiti da gruppi eterogenei. I risultati evidenziano la necessità di adottare

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processi decisionali partecipativi per conciliare i molteplici usi degli spazi urbani e sviluppare strategie di governance sostenibile nei centri storici Patrimonio Mondiale.

Keywords: gestione dei World Heritage, participatory decision-making, coinvolgimento delle comunità

Community Involvement in the UNESCO Guidelines for World Heritage Site Management and Preservation

The role of community involvement in the preservation and management of World Heritage (WH) properties has been increasingly emphasized in recent decades by UNESCO and its advisory bodies. Recognizing that heritage sites are not isolated from their social, cultural, and economic contexts, UNESCO has developed frameworks that highlight the importance of community participation as a key component of effective and sustainable heritage management. This approach aligns with the overarching principle that heritage is not merely a collection of monuments or landscapes, but a living entity deeply intertwined with the identities, values, and practices of local populations.

Adopted in 1972, the UNESCO World Heritage Convention sets the foundational principles for the protection of cultural and natural heritage of *Outstanding Universal Value* (OUV). While the Convention itself does not explicitly reference community involvement, its subsequent *Operational Guidelines*, updated periodically, progressively integrate community participation into the processes of site nomination, monitoring, and management.

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The latest *Operational Guidelines*[1] (2023) stress that communities are fundamental stakeholders in the safeguarding of WH sites. Specifically, Paragraph 26 recognises Community involvement among one of the five current Strategic Objectives of the Convention (also referred to as "the 5 Cs"), while Paragraph 12 invites States Parties to "ensure gender-balanced participation of a wide variety of stakeholders and rights-holders, including site managers, local and regional governments, local communities, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other interested parties and partners in the identification, nomination, management and protection processes of World Heritage properties." This participatory approach requires that local communities be engaged not only in day-to-day management activities but also in the broader decision-making processes that shape the conservation and sustainable use of the site.

Among the key programatic documents framing heritage as a right and responsibility of communities also stands the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, known as the Faro Convention. It explicitly recognizes the social value of heritage, emphasizing the active participation of individuals and groups in defining and managing cultural heritage. The Faro Convention's emphasis on "heritage communities" resonates with UNESCO's directives, providing a model for fostering participatory governance at heritage sites.

[1] https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/

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Applying Global Frameworks in the Historic Centre of Florence, World Heritage Site

The UNESCO guidelines and advisory frameworks for integrating community involvement into the management of World Heritage sites have been effectively embraced by the Florence World Heritage and Relations with UNESCO Office. These global principles are embedded within the *Management Plan of the Historic Centre of Florence*, updated in 2022, which serves as a strategic tool for balancing the preservation of heritage with the evolving needs of a dynamic urban environment.

Through this plan, Florence World Heritage and Relations with UNESCO Office, with the scientific support of the joint research laboratory HeRe_Lab[2], has set itself the goal of operationalizing the concepts outlined in the aforementioned global frameworks, translating them into localized strategies. To do so, the Office has scaled down the global strategic goal of enhancing the role of communities in the implementation of the World Heritage Convention into two overarching objectives: the development of participatory decision-making mechanisms and enhancement of communication and awareness.

[2] *HeRe_Lab – Heritage and Research* is a joint research laboratory between the Florence World Heritage and Relations with UNESCO Office of the Municipality of Florence and the University of Florence. Coordinated by Giuseppe De Luca and Carlo Francini, the laboratory conducts research activities aimed at developing technical plans and projects dedicated to the protection and enhancement of the Outstanding Universal Value of World Heritage sites, identifying shared solutions for the sustainable management of World Heritage.

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These goals have then been translated into practice through a strategic initiative launched by the Florence World Heritage and Relations with UNESCO Office: *Boundary Spaces: Reading the Historic Urban Landscape through Intermediate Spaces* project, designed as an experimental field for testing and refining community engagement techniques within the specific context of Florence.

Boundary Spaces: Reading the Historic Urban Landscape through Intermediate Spaces

The *Boundary Spaces: Reading the Historic Urban Landscape through Intermediate Spaces* project represents a collaborative effort by the Florence World Heritage and Relations with UNESCO Office and HeRe_Lab. Conceived in 2022 as part of the broader initiative *Florence and the cultural inheritance of its religious heritage*, the project focuses on "boundary spaces" such as church forecourts and cloisters—zones where the sacred and the secular meet. Through research, design, and community participation, the project addresses a fundamental question in heritage management: how can heritage spaces retain their sacred, historical, and cultural significance while also accommodating the needs of a contemporary, diverse public?

Central to the project is the ambition to reconcile three essential dimensions that define the spiritual heritage sites of the Historic Centre. These dimensions include the intangible values associated with religious heritage, reflecting its spiritual and symbolic importance; its cultural and touristic appeal, highlighting its role as a

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global heritage destination; and its accessibility for local communities, ensuring that these spaces remain inclusive and meaningful to those who live and interact with them daily.

Within the scope of the project, community engagement strategies have been developed particularly in relation to the use of the church forecourts (*sagrati*[3]). In Florence, the *church forecourts* adjacent to *public squares* have long been focal points for social interaction, yet their informal uses frequently clash with the values attributed to the properties by different groups. Some of the forecourts of main Florentine churches act as informal extensions of *piazzas*, serving as public seating areas and gathering spots for nightlife. Others, particularly those linked to churches that have lost their pastoral function, have been appropriated for more formalized profane uses, such as outdoor restaurant seating.

While such uses integrate these spaces into the social fabric of daily urban life, they can also conflict both with the *universal values* associated with the heritage site and the values attributed to it locally, particularly for groups that identify with its religious or cultural significance.

[3] The *sagrato* (church forecourt), as used in Italian heritage contexts, refers to the transitional space in front of the church, including the open forecourt and the staircase leading to the main entrance. It plays both a functional and symbolic role, marking the boundary between the public urban space and the sacred interior of the church.

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In some cases, this conflict extends beyond the secular-religious divide, reflecting deeper social tensions between different groups, each with distinct perceptions of the site's purpose.

In Florence, the Basilica of Santo Spirito and its surrounding spaces offer a particularly symbolic example of these dynamics. Recognized as one of the *Attributes*[4] of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Historic Centre of Florence, Santo Spirito holds a complex dual identity as both a site of spiritual significance and an iconic meeting point for locals, tourists, and temporary users of the city. Here, informal social activities, public gatherings, and commercial uses often coexist uneasily with the space's spiritual and historical dimensions, giving rise to competing expectations.

The management implications of this scenario are profound. While the intangible meanings ascribed to Santo Spirito can coexist conceptually, practical management strategies inevitably favor some uses over others. Measures aimed at preserving the basilica's spiritual significance might restrict public access or limit activities deemed inconsistent with its heritage value, thereby alienating groups who "practice" the space differently. Conversely, a more liberal approach to usage risks undermining the site's sacred and historical character, compromising its status as a key *Attribute* of the World Heritage property.

[4] According to the Resource Manual *Preparing World Heritage Nominations*, "Attributes are aspects of a property which are associated with or express the Outstanding Universal Value."

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These challenges highlighted the need for collaborative strategies aimed at exploring the competing value systems and prompted the Office to select Santo Spirito as a case study for testing community involvement techniques. These efforts were implemented through the organization of a participatory design workshop and the development of a participatory decision-making process - still ongoing - both designed to foster active engagement with stakeholders.

Boundary Spaces: In the Hollow of the Dense City. A Model for Enhancing Values Communication and Public Awareness

The thematic urban design seminar *Boundary Spaces: In the Hollow of the Dense City* was conceived as a multidisciplinary exercise in collaborative urban design informed by heritage values. Conducted in February 2024 in collaboration with the Department of Architecture (DIDA) and the Department of History, Archaeology, Geography, Fine and Performing Arts (SAGAS) at the University of Florence, the seminar aimed to explore how the diverse sets of heritage values ascribed to Santo Spirito and its adjacent spaces could be reconciled with the contemporary uses of these areas. The master students of the two faculties were invited to develop design solutions for the cloister and forecourt of Santo Spirito that could effectively communicate and disseminate the values of the place through visual and spatial language.

The seminar began with an in-depth introduction to the value of Santo Spirito as an *Attribute* of the Historic Centre of Florence; participants

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were provided with a comprehensive overview of the area's historical, architectural, and cultural significance through a series of lectures delivered by experts from diverse disciplines. These included professors specializing in architectural history, urban composition, canon law, and architectural design, as well as officials from heritage management offices.

Building on this foundation, the seminar transitioned into collaborative design sessions where students and professionals worked together to develop proposals for reinterpreting the spaces surrounding the basilica. The design concepts aimed to enhance the communicative capacity of these spaces, which involved devising design strategies that could visually articulate the sacred character of Santo Spirito while also addressing its contemporary function as a vibrant urban node.

The resulting projects were evaluated by a commission composed of key management stakeholders, including the Head of the Municipal Fine Arts Service and the Superintendent for Archaeology, Fine Arts, and Landscape for the Metropolitan City of Florence and the Provinces of Pistoia and Prato. This evaluative process ensured that the proposals not only respected the heritage values of the site but also addressed the practical considerations necessary for its effective management. The involvement of officials from municipal and regional heritage bodies also facilitated the development of shared decision-making processes, as representatives from religious, cultural,

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and local stakeholder groups were included in the evaluation committee.

Fig. 1. Presentation of the design seminar results. February 15, 2024, Santo Spirito (Credits: Gaia Vannucci, HeRe_Lab)

Beyond its academic scope, the seminar also served as a platform for broader public engagement. To extend the discussion initiated during the seminar, guided tours of Florence's cloisters were organized in collaboration with MUS.E[5], culminating in a visit to the *Chiostro dei morti* of Santo Spirito.

[5] The MUS.E Association is an in-house organization of the Municipality of Florence in charge of cultural mediation activities

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The tours provided an opportunity to present the design proposals to a broader public, encouraging dialogue about the future of the spaces around Santo Spirito. Participants, including local residents, tourists, and city users, were given the chance to reflect on the site's significance and to provide feedback on the ideas presented during the seminar.

As part of this engagement strategy, the Office dedicated special attention to briefing tourist guides. Recognizing that tourist guides act as key intermediaries between heritage sites and the public, the Office organized a briefing session to provide guides with an overview of the project, its outcomes, and key notions on World Heritage values, so as to equip guides with the knowledge needed to effectively communicate the significance of Santo Spirito within the Historic Centre of Florence.

By involving students, researchers, local stakeholders, and the general public, this initiative aimed to cultivate a deeper understanding of heritage values, fostering a sense of belonging and active stewardship for public spaces. Such an educational approach seeks to embed World Heritage values into the everyday experiences of local communities, ultimately encouraging a shift from passive enjoyment to active participation in heritage management. The outcomes of the seminar will serve as a model for future participatory initiatives, demonstrating how heritage education can be used as a tool for promoting awareness, care, and a shared sense of responsibility.

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Understanding Evolving Values in the Management of Heritage Spaces: The Case of Santo Spirito

The informal and spontaneous use of the space surrounding Santo Spirito illustrate the enduring success of the inclusive cultural policies implemented in Florence in the 1980s; on the other hand, it raises significant questions about safeguarding the *OUV* of the site. To what extent should site management policies be restrictive? How can the diverse local values attributed to the place be meaningfully integrated into management directives? Can these sometimes conflicting interests be reconciled in a unified management approach?

Building on the understanding of the essential role of local communities in identifying, shaping, and redefining the values of heritage properties, the Florence World Heritage and Relations with UNESCO Office, in collaboration with HeRe_Lab, launched a research titled *Understanding Evolving Values in the Management of Heritage Spaces: The Case of Santo Spirito"*, consisting in a preliminary research phase and the development of a participatory decision-making process. The former was conducted from September to December 2024, with the aim to provide qualitative data on the current perceptions of the site by its various users, ultimately informing participatory management strategies and guiding future policy development. This approach is based on the premise that heritage values are not static; instead, they evolve over time as social,

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cultural, and economic contexts shift[6]. One of the key principle in modern heritage management, recognising this fluidity allows for more contextually responsive and adaptable management strategies.

The research employed a qualitative methodology centred on semi-structured interviews with individuals representing four distinct groups of users of Santo Spirito: residents, tourists, visitors (non-resident users/ users from neighbouring areas), and local merchants. This selection of respondents was designed to ensure a diverse and representative understanding of the various ways the space is "practiced"[7] and perceived.

The semi-structured interviews were focused on exploring the users' degree of awareness on historical, religious and artistic significance of Santo Spirito and the habitual use of the forecourt and piazza. Additionally, participants were asked to articulate their thoughts on the current informal uses of the forecourt of the Basilica of Santo Spirito, as well as their views on the potential use of the adjacent cloister as a public space.

The findings revealed several key insights into the public's perception and use of the Santo Spirito forecourt, which may have important

[6] UNESCO (2023) Enhancing Our Heritage Toolkit 2.0. UNESCO, Paris, p. 21.

[7] The term "practice of a place" originates from the field of human geography, where it is used to describe the ways in which everyday practices within a space contribute to the production of its meaning and the establishment of its social identity. In the context of heritage sites, the "practice of a place" can inform management decisions, as it reveals how users' interactions with the site shape its perceived value, significance, and appropriate use.

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implications for heritage management and further definition of participatory decision-making processes.

One of the most striking findings was the widespread perception of the sagrato as an extension of the public piazza, rather than as an integral part of the basilica. Residents and Italian visitors viewed the steps as part of the public realm, which legitimized their use as a space for sitting, socializing, eating, and drinking. This perception was shared across different demographic groups, with many respondents describing sitting on the steps as "a way to experience the piazza" rather than an act of disrespect toward the sacred nature of the space. This conception has clear implications for management, as it suggests that users do not automatically recognize the sacred dimension of the forecourt unless it is explicitly conveyed to them.

The findings further revealed that the spiritual character of the site does not feature prominently as a rationale for regulating the use of the space. Analysis of the interview data demonstrated that concerns about inappropriate use of the forecourt and steps of the Basilica were framed within a broader discourse on the public order and cleanliness of shared public space, rather than linked to its religious or historical vocation. This indicates that concerns about the site’s use are more related to practical matters of urban management than to the site's symbolic or religious function with direct implications for policy design, suggesting that measures aimed at reducing noise and litter might receive broader public support than measures focused solely on the site's religious significance.

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These findings also lead to a conclusion that awareness of the site's religious and historical significance is not uniformly distributed among user groups. While local residents had a stronger understanding of the site's cultural and religious importance, most tourists and short-term visitors lacked this awareness. When explicitly informed about the sacred nature of the space, interestingly, several tourists expressed discomfort, noting that if signage had been present, they would have refrained from sitting on the steps. This sensitivity to signage and visual communication may also underscore the potential role of awareness-raising initiatives in shaping behavior.

This perception is also reflected in user behavior. The act of sitting on the steps of the Basilica has become a normalized, habitual practice, widely seen as a socially accepted way of experiencing the piazza. Respondents described it as an integral part of everyday life in the square, reinforcing the idea that these spaces have, over time, become deeply embedded in the local social fabric.

Based on the findings, it becomes evident that the formulation of a management strategy cannot ignore the evolution of the social value of the area and ways of experiencing the place that have become an integral part of everyday life of the local community. The research identified a need for more inclusive management strategies, based on participatory governance mechanisms that bring together representatives of each user group. The Florence World Heritage and Relations with UNESCO Office thus aims to introduce, over 2025, participatory decision-making mechanisms that would promote active

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dialogue among the identified groups. These efforts would seek to foster shared responsibility among the city users and avoid "zero-sum" scenarios in which one group's needs are met at the expense of another. Instead, the goal is to promote integrated management objectives that would balance the site's sacred, social, and recreational uses.

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List of Abbreviations

DIDA Department of Architecture, University of Florence

EoH Enhancing Our Heritage (UNESCO manual for WH site management)

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HeRe_Lab Heritage and Research Lab, Joint Research Laboratory between the Municipality of Florence and the University of Florence

MUS.E Florence-based cultural association managing educational and heritage-related activities

NGO Non-Governmental Organization

OUV Outstanding Universal Value

SAGAS Department of History, Archaeology, Geography, Fine and Performing Arts, University of Florence

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

WH World Heritage

WHC World Heritage Centre (UNESCO)