THE REACH PROJECT
RE-DESIGNING ACCESS TO CULTURAL HERITAGE FOR A WIDER PARTICIPATION IN PRESERVATION, (RE-)USE AND MANAGEMENT OF EUROPEAN CULTURE

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Abstract

The REACH social Platform brings together relevant heritage stakeholders' representatives including research communities, heritage practitioners from public or private cultural institutions and organisations as well as policy-makers at European, national, regional or local levels. Based on a focused, critical mapping of existing research and practice, the objective of the social platform is to develop an understanding of the challenges and opportunities for research and innovation in the participatory preservation, (re)use and management of cultural heritage.
The project identifies theoretical participatory models and tests them in the practice through four thematic pilots in order to propose the adoption of an integrated model of resilient European cultural heritage milieux

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Participation is demonstrating to be a very effective approach to widen the research perspective from the academic and institutional fields to the society, including citizens.

The ability to link participatory approaches with capacity of resilience is the focus of the REACH Social Platform about participatory approaches and social innovation in culture.

REACH - RE-designing Access to Cultural Heritage for a wider participation in preservation, (re-)use and management of European culture is a three years project coordinated by Coventry University with a consortium made of seven partners from six European countries, namely UK, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Hungary and Spain.

The project started the 1st November 2017 and will last until end of 2020. It received funding from the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme of the European Union, under grant agreement no 769827. The concept is based on the proposition that cultural heritage, in all its various representations and forms, plays an important role in contributing to reciprocal understanding, social integration, inspiring peace and mutual respect in Europe.

The REACH Social Platform addresses the potential of people to engage in culture and cultural heritage, to unlock opportunities not yet exploited, to foster creativity and innovation, and to empower citizens to face immense and rapid changes generated by the digital transformation.

In this respect, the main **output** of the REACH project is the establishment of the **Social Platform** as a sustainable space for meeting, discussing and collaborating in the field of culture and cultural heritage.

Using tools and instruments accessible through the REACH portal, the project triggered a debate about how participatory approaches can contribute to developing common understanding and fostering social innovation.

The project carried out two complementary **objectives:**

- Support: to map and provide analysis of research results achieved in previous programmes, to identify current and emerging research trends, and to offer authoritative new knowledge of the cultural heritage field to the European, national and regional and policy makers.

- Coordination: to offer benefits to its participants, expanding knowledge of complementary research domains and of new research methodologies, generating opportunities for cooperation, offering pathways to wider user engagement with research outputs.

All inputs received by the REACH Social Platform from its various contributors – institutions, academies, civic interest groups, business and public administrations, etc. - have been addressed to give culture and

cultural heritage a greater, more relevant and even transformative role in the economy, communities and territories. In this respect, REACH proposes an **integrated model of resilient European cultural heritage milieux** based on a two-step process: while the first step is the construction of participatory models based on the theoretical understanding of resilient European cultural heritage, the second step consists in testing and applying this model in a series of participatory pilots.

Taken into consideration the need of the Platform to address many disciplines and fields, the REACH partners have been selected in order to offer a rich mix of skills, expertise and complementary competences. The Consortium includes four universities (Coventry University – the Coordinator, Eötvös Loránd Tudomanyegyetem ELTE University in Budapest, Granada University and Charles University in Prague), one Italian SMe successfully active for many years in the sector (Promoter S.r.l.), one well-acknowledged German cultural foundation (the Institute for Museum Research of Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz - SPK) and the Italian Ministry of Economic Development. All the partners play active roles in cultural heritage research, innovation and economic development strategies, in the frame of numerous successful projects and networks, at national as well as international levels.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

REACH focuses on four practical areas of action.
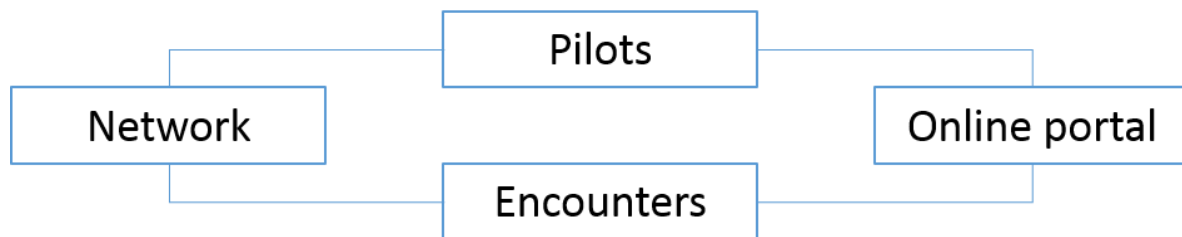
The first area of action consists in the operations of a sustainable network, aggregating the widest range of stakeholders and audiences. This network has been protagonist of the Symposium named Horizons for Heritage Research, organised by the REACH project under the auspices of the European Commission, in Brussels in March 2019. At the first-year anniversary of the high-level conference of the European Year of Cultural Heritage, the Symposium took stock of European research policy development, discussing needs and benefits that can be generated from a joint coordination effort.

The second area focuses on the organisation of pilots. Four experimental initiatives addressed different kinds of heritage and target audiences, offering genuine participatory experiences to the contributors, under the coordination of the REACH partners. Focusing on local communities, the pilots engaged representatives of these communities into hands-on activities, discovering and promoting best practices, and establishing conditions to encourage the players' commitment beyond the project's end.

The third area regards the implementation of a rich programme of public encounters (workshops, conferences and meetings with local stakeholders). These are the occasion to discuss inclusive methods of multi-disciplinary research on cultural heritage, and how wider societal participation can contribute to better and more sustainable results. Improved understandings of the new roles for the civil society to collaborate with heritage professionals are explored in these encounters, together with novel approaches to use and (re-)use cultural heritage, also in the context of partnerships between cultural and private sectors, identifying future research directions.

The fourth area concerns the REACH online portal, made of the project's website at reach-culture.eu and the online platform at open-heritage.eu. The former aims at promoting the project's initiatives and results, the latter offers a wide repository of resources and data about cultural heritage research and best practice to the communities that are active in the research and management of cultural heritage.

The REACH Network

With the aim to promote participatory approaches, the REACH Network contributes to broaden the participation in the research on culture and cultural heritage in Europe. This is carried out by a wide range of initiatives that aim to: encourage civic participation, inform policy makers and advocate their attention to the needs of the field, raise awareness among cultural heritage institutions about the innovations necessary to cope with social transformations, involve cultural studies in experiencing participatory approaches in higher education, and attract creative enterprises to explore new opportunities of jobs and economic development.

The REACH Social Platform aims to facilitate collaboration and promotes concrete involvement of culture stakeholders. For this purpose, it created an open and sustainable network made of a wide range of individual experts, institutions, organisations, projects, all interested in sharing best practices, successful results, knowledge and experiences of participatory initiatives.

The network involves representatives of development bodies, cultural tourism operators, training and education organisations, creative industries, cultural heritage institutions, policy-makers, associations and interest groups, plus a constantly growing number of professionals, academic experts, arts practitioners, archivists, all those with a stake in the field of culture and cultural heritage.

Participatory Pilots

The four participatory pilots are diverse in nature, working with various types of communities and stakeholders, in different situations and political climates. Each pilot assessed and validated different models of participation, focusing on strengths and challenges, discussing opportunities and threads and how these occur throughout different regions in Europe.

With the aim to advocate the socio-economic value of civic participation in preservation, (re-)use and management of cultural heritage, the pilots gathered and discussed best practices in the development of resilient policies in community building, education, data management and protection of intellectual rights. Furthermore, the pilots demonstrated successful cases in cultural tourism and provided examples of improved public services for cultural heritage management.

The REACH pilots covered four thematic areas of the European heritage: minority heritage, institutional heritage, rural heritage, small towns heritage.
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The Minority Heritage pilot, coordinated by ELTE University in Budapest, focused on marginalized minorities and, in particular, on Roma communities mostly based in Hungary but also in other European Countries. It studied heritage practices aiming at establishing a Roma minority heritage. The experience demonstrated how the institutionalisation of Roma (re-)appropriated cultural heritage has resulted in economic and social revival and has reinforced social inclusion, contributing to create more tolerant societies in Central Europe.

The Institutional Heritage pilot, coordinated by SPK in Berlin, compared the effects of participatory approaches in the case of large cultural heritage institutions with international audiences as opposed to the case of smaller institutions targeting local users. The activities of the pilot aimed at evaluating the complexity of involvement, inclusion and engagement of citizens in institutional cultural heritage, exploring possibilities and limitations of participation.

The Rural Heritage pilot, coordinated by the University of Granada, promoted participation in cultural and environmental protected natural areas as a way to solve conflicts between preservation of historical sites and exploitation of touristic and economic activities. It included a comparison between Sierra Nevada region in Spain, agricultural areas in the North of Italy, and other cases across the EU.

The Small Towns Heritage pilot, coordinated by Charles University Prague, analysed the representations and (re-) valorisation of the heritage owned by villages and small towns in the Czech Republic, in Poland and in central Italy. Focusing on a variety of European regions, considerations were made about the liaisons among heritage objects, local history, natural and social landscapes, including how they are displayed by museums, through pageants and festivals, in heritage trails and urban spaces. The pilot identified major frameworks of identities and values to which this heritage is associated, highlighting how this understanding can help the development of more effective and innovative cultural policies.

Public Encounters

Public encounters, both in physical and online formats, are important for supporting the dialogue among stakeholders and researchers. During its three years lifetime, REACH provided a wide programme of events. The project started its outreach activity with the opening conference held in Budapest in May 2018 entitled Resilient Cultural Heritage and Communities in Europe. The conference, hosted by the Hungarian National Museum, was accompanied by a vast posters and video collections. It included several very interactive sessions where the delegates had the opportunity to meet in small groups, and dynamically discuss the major themes of the conference.

Four thematic workshops, organised all around Europe (in Berlin, Coventry, Granada and Prague), addressed different declinations of participatory approaches, namely cultural heritage management, creativity and entrepreneurship, territorial cohesion and cultural heritage resilience.

Furthermore, policy and networking events, plus several local encounters were the occasion to meet and discuss among key note speakers, international experts, local communities and stakeholders. These events were occasions to assess if and how the proposed approaches and participatory models can facilitate the development of new shared horizons of understanding between various sectors, communities, policy makers, administrations, commercial enterprise.

Online Presence

In parallel with the physical events, the online presence has represented always a primary instrument to channel the information about REACH initiatives towards its audiences, to recruit new members of the network, to support their interaction, and, eventually, to cope with the COVID-19 crisis that impeded the organisation of the final conference planned in Pisa in June 2020.

REACH offers a set of tools, data and other information resources to support online participatory activities, comprising:

- The REACH project's website
- The open-heritage.eu platform

The **project's website** gives access to all initiatives and activities carried out by the REACH projects, the outcomes of the works of the pilots and all documents produced in the framework of the REACH implementation. It includes also the online poster gallery, created to provide a space of visibility and debate among the delegates who were not able to join the final conference in Pisa. The posters intended to be exhibited in the conference are published online in the gallery, whose call for contributions is extended in time until the conclusion of the project at the end of 2020.

open-heritage.eu is an online digital platform, independent and aiming to be a long term product. It is naturally connected to the project's website that provides in turn links to the various services of the digital platform. It provides a rich repository of data and resources, comprising policy documents, publications, updated information on events and activities promoted by a multitude of projects and institutions, which can be of use to stakeholders active in the fields of heritage, culture, education, tourism, administration and academia. It includes also a thematic organisation of participatory experiences and good practices and extend to initiatives beyond the project itself.

The platform is conceived as a 'multi-actor platform', opened to contributions from its users (partners, associate partners and general visitors) and able to attract the interest of different stakeholders who play a relevant part in sustaining the social platform.

One important component of open-heritage.eu is the repository of good practices related to social participation in cultural heritage. Carried out with the contribution of the project's partners, this collection comprises over 100 records from 26 European and extra European countries. The participatory activities described in the repository include both small-scale, local interventions, and examples of larger collaborative projects and global distributed online initiatives. The dataset is constantly growing and the addition of new entries continues over the coming months.

open-heritage.eu is managed by the Social Platform created by REACH and is intended to continue functioning after the end of the project.

In addition to the project's website and the open-heritage.eu platform, the REACH Social Platform is active on the social media with its dedicated channels on Facebook and Twitter, and is promoted with a showcase session on digitalmeetsculture.net magazine that is the official media partner of the project.

CONCLUSION

During its timelife, the REACH project produced, gathered and documented a wide and varied collection of participatory practices in culture and cultural heritage using both the experiences produced in the framework of its pilots and the knowledge and investigations developed by other projects and professionals who have established cooperation with REACH and have joined its network.

The results of the pilot experiences together with the development of participatory models helped to define the feature of a resilient European cultural heritage, able to survive to social changes and cultural transformations.

By analysing several institutional proposals and initiatives, the REACH project produced a selection of participatory models demonstrating a stronger capacity to foster positive reactions by societies and an active participation of citizen into the promotion and preservation of the European cultural heritage.

The collection of good practices produced a wide and multidisciplinary database that is accessible to the whole community of cultural heritage and open to further and future contributions.

The REACH project produced open-heritage.eu, the permanent digital participatory platform that provides access to a wide and varied range of papers, data and links to document experiences and practices produced by the work of a multi-disciplinary community of cultural heritage researchers.

Last, but not least, REACH project addressed the challenge to establish a permanent and lasting cluster of actors involved in the field of cultural heritage management and innovation, as a permanent structure for the coordination of the research in such a challenging field.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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