

Cultural Heritage Management as a catalyst for sustainable urban development: exemplary approaches from European emerging regions

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Abstract— Cultural heritage plays a crucial role in shaping resilient communities and fostering sustainable urban development. This study aims to explore how cultural heritage can be effectively managed and integrated into urban revitalization strategies, contributing to social, economic, and environmental sustainability. It employs desk research and a case study methodology. These cases illustrate innovative approaches to heritage conservation and adaptation, demonstrating their potential to enhance urban spaces and strengthen local communities. Findings suggest that cities that integrate heritage management with contemporary urban needs create a more inclusive, dynamic, and resource-efficient environment. The analysis also highlights the importance of policy frameworks, community engagement, and adaptive reuse strategies in ensuring the long-term sustainability of heritage assets. The practical implications of this research include recommendations for urban planners, policymakers, and heritage managers on how to leverage cultural heritage as a tool for sustainable development. The study provides insights into effective strategies for adaptive reuse, innovative governance models, and participatory planning processes that enhance urban resilience. The originality and value of this study lie in its novel approach to heritage management, which combines sustainability principles with real-world case studies, offering a fresh perspective on integrating cultural heritage into contemporary urban planning.

Keywords— cultural heritage management (CHM), sustainable urban development, community engagement, heritage conservation, urban revitalization, cultural economy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The cultural heritage is increasingly acknowledged as a key driver of sustainable urban development, influencing social cohesion, economic vitality, and environmental stewardship (UNESCO, 2016; Duxbury et al., 2019). In the face of

urbanization, climate change, and socio-economic shifts, heritage is recognized not only for its symbolic value but also as a strategic asset for building resilient cities (Labadi & Logan, 2020; Legutko-Kobus, 2016a; Koziół-Słubska, 2022).

Effective cultural heritage management (CHM) fosters local identity, supports creative economies, and promotes sustainable practices such as adaptive reuse and resource efficiency (Ripp & Rodwell, 2018). It should thus be viewed as an integral component of broader development management (Legutko-Kobus, 2016b), with spatial planning playing a critical role in heritage preservation and integration (Guzman & Roders, 2014; UNESCO, 2019). However, tensions persist between traditional conservation models and contemporary urban needs (Pereira Roders & van Oers, 2011; Angelidoua et al., 2023). This challenge is particularly evident in rapidly transforming urban contexts like Albania and Kosovo. In both Tirana and Pristina, the transition from centralized planning to market-driven urbanism has intensified urban growth, often at the expense of cultural heritage (Aliaj et al., 2008; Allkja, 2021; Dhrami & Allkja, 2021). Although both cities have integrated heritage protection into their strategic planning (Allkja & Dhrami, 2021), implementation is often hindered by speculation, weak governance, and inconsistent land management.

Globally, cities such as Rzeszów, Helsinki, Lisbon, and Stockholm offer examples of how heritage-led regeneration can support sustainability through adaptive reuse, cultural tourism, and community-based planning. These cases illustrate the potential of cultural heritage to enhance urban resilience, particularly when supported by hybrid financing models and inclusive governance (Nijkamp, 2012; Jelincic & Šveb, 2021; Piotrkowska & Lipska, 2015).

In response to these dynamics, this study adopts a



comparative case study approach to examine how cities in Europe and the Western Balkans integrate cultural heritage into urban development. It argues that heritage, when strategically managed, can act as a catalyst for sustainable transformation. The findings aim to inform policymakers and planners on reconciling growth with preservation and strengthening heritage's role in creating livable, inclusive, and adaptive urban environments. Sharing innovative practices and lessons learned is critical to bridging research and policy, particularly in post-socialist contexts where resilience-building remains underdeveloped (Dastgerdi et al., 2019; Veselý, 2011).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW ON CULTURAL HERITAGE

Cultural heritage plays a fundamental role in shaping both local and national identities, contributing to the preservation of historical and cultural legacies while simultaneously influencing contemporary societies. It promotes social cohesion, resilience, and sustainable development by offering economic opportunities, nurturing local identity, and supporting environmental stewardship. Over recent years, cultural heritage has been increasingly recognized as a strategic asset that can mitigate the negative impacts of globalization while fostering local economic and social growth (Batyk, 2010). The concept of cultural heritage is complex and subject to evolving interpretations. As Batyk (2010) observes, it is a dynamic term that relies on how culture is perceived. Cultural heritage encompasses not only material artefacts from the past but also contemporary reinterpretations, making it a socially constructed phenomenon that continually assumes new meanings (Kobyliński, 2011; Góral, 2014).

Cultural heritage is composed of both tangible and intangible elements. Tangible heritage includes monuments, historical buildings, and natural landscapes, whereas intangible heritage refers to oral traditions, customs, performing arts, traditional knowledge, and skills. Intangible heritage also involves social practices, cultural spaces, and craft techniques that communities recognize as part of their heritage (UNESCO, 2003). Custodians of heritage, including museums, libraries, and cultural institutions, play an essential role in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage to future generations (Sobczyk, 2014). Engaging stakeholders—both internal (those directly involved with heritage sites) and external (the broader society benefiting from the heritage)—is critical to ensuring effective heritage preservation and use (Góral, 2014). Although cultural heritage is deeply connected to the past, its significance is shaped by the present. It is a continuously reconstructed concept, with new meanings being ascribed to historical elements (Schouten, 1995; Jensen, 2000; Meskell, 2005; Matthews, 2006; Albert, 2007; Ashworth, 2007; Schröder-Esch, 2007).

As cities grapple with urbanization, globalization, and shifting societal demands, cultural heritage has become a pivotal element in sustainable urban development. Heritage-driven revitalization projects in cities such as Rzeszów, Helsinki, Lisbon, and Stockholm show how adaptive reuse can

contribute to urban renewal, community engagement, and economic growth. These initiatives demonstrate how cultural heritage can evolve from a passive historical asset to a dynamic force for innovation (Machowska, 2016). Cultural heritage tourism—including agritourism (Ziarnicka-Wojtaszek & Zawora, 2010; Dorodski, 2020) and industrial heritage tourism (Dąbrowski, 2017; Rakowicz, 2020) - has proven instrumental in regional development (Pytel, 2010). This highlights the necessity of balancing heritage conservation with modern urban and economic demands.

Communities depend on their ability to address both existing and emerging risks (Aitsi-Selmi et al., 2016). Protecting cultural diversity and promoting pluralism strengthens social identity and resilience, particularly in disaster recovery situations (Fatorić et al., 2020a). Heritage offers valuable insights into past environmental and societal shifts, providing knowledge that can help address contemporary challenges (Fatorić et al., 2020b). Once human safety is ensured, prioritizing cultural heritage conservation becomes essential in post-disaster recovery efforts, where heritage experts can play a crucial role (United Nations). Despite growing recognition of heritage's importance in resilience-building, policies aimed at protecting heritage remain fragmented, and the value of heritage-based knowledge in strengthening resilience is often overlooked (Santangelo et al., 2022).

Cultural heritage, deeply rooted in the past, is ultimately a contemporary construct that evolves with societal needs. Its significance goes beyond historical preservation, contributing to economic development, urban sustainability, and disaster resilience. As cities and communities across the globe face modern challenges, integrating heritage into broader development strategies is essential. The balance between conservation and adaptive reuse ensures that heritage remains a dynamic and valuable resource for future generations.

By nurturing cultural identity, supporting local economies, and promoting sustainable practices, cultural heritage emerges not only as a legacy of the past but also as a driving force for the future. It is crucial that cultural heritage creates opportunities for supporting the SDGs. Culture plays a vital role in addressing the social and economic dimensions of poverty (SDG no. 1). Indigenous and local knowledge fosters sustainable agricultural practices and enhances food security (SDG no. 2). Furthermore, culture strengthens communication and the dissemination of information, which are crucial for disease prevention (SDG no. 3). Arts education and linguistic diversity promote intercultural dialogue, equipping young people with the necessary skills to become active global citizens (SDG no. 4). Supporting cultural participation helps advance gender equality and empowers women (SDG no. 5). Engagement of local communities in safeguarding cultural and natural heritage plays a key role in ensuring the sustainable development of aquatic ecosystems (SDG no. 6). Cultural practices significantly shape energy consumption behaviors (SDG no. 7). Both the cultural and creative industries offer employment opportunities that align with local realities and societal demands (SDG no. 8). Cultural infrastructure and creative experts are essential in driving innovation and fostering

economic diversity (SDG no. 9). A commitment to cultural diversity is fundamental to promoting meaningful dialogue and social inclusion (SDG no. 10). Creativity and cultural heritage are integral to social strategies that support more sustainable urban and community growth (SDG no. 11). Culture holds the power to encourage shifts in behavior towards more responsible consumption and production (SDG no. 12). Traditional knowledge and expertise build resilience against the impacts of natural disasters and climate change (SDG no. 13). Protecting maritime heritage is vital for the preservation of healthy and productive oceans (SDG no. 14). Strengthening the connection between cultural diversity and biodiversity encourages more sustainable interactions between humans and the environment (SDG no. 15). Upholding cultural diversity—through the protection of artistic expression and access to cultural life—is intrinsically linked to safeguarding human rights (SDG no. 16). Artists, cultural experts, and policymakers drive the creation of innovative partnerships that push boundaries (SDG no. 17) (UNESCO, 2022).

CHM has emerged as a key component of sustainable urban development, integrating historical preservation with contemporary urban planning strategies. Scholars and policymakers increasingly recognize that cultural heritage is not just about safeguarding the past but also about fostering economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability (Rodwell, 2007; Logan, 2012).

The role of cultural heritage in urban regeneration has been widely documented in academic literature. Studies highlight how cities leverage historical assets to revitalize declining urban areas, attracting investment and enhancing livability (Tweed & Sutherland, 2007). Adaptive reuse of heritage buildings has proven to be a successful approach, balancing conservation with functional urban needs (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019). For instance, European cities like Barcelona, Lisbon, and Berlin have integrated heritage sites into mixed-use urban developments, promoting tourism and cultural industries while preserving historical identity (Gravari-Barbas & Guinand, 2017). Moreover, UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach emphasizes the dynamic relationship between cultural heritage and urban development, advocating for heritage-sensitive policies that consider contemporary urban needs (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012). Case studies from Helsinki and Amsterdam illustrate how this approach can guide urban planning, ensuring that heritage conservation aligns with modern infrastructure demands. Cultural heritage contributes significantly to the economic vitality of cities, particularly through heritage tourism, creative industries, and property value appreciation (Dümcke & Gnedovsky, 2013). Cities that successfully integrate heritage assets into urban development often experience increased economic activity, particularly in sectors like hospitality, retail, and real estate (Ashworth, 2011). Research by Licciardi and Amirtahmasebi (2012) highlights that heritage-led urban regeneration can stimulate local economies by creating jobs and fostering small business development. In addition to economic benefits, cultural heritage fosters social cohesion and community identity. Studies suggest that heritage-led

regeneration strengthens local communities by fostering a sense of belonging and place attachment (Graham, Ashworth, & Tunbridge, 2000). Community-driven heritage initiatives, such as participatory urban planning and co-management models, have gained traction as effective tools for ensuring inclusivity in heritage conservation (Waterton & Smith, 2010).

The integration of sustainability principles into heritage management has gained attention in recent years. Scholars emphasize the need for an environmentally responsible approach to conservation, advocating for energy-efficient retrofitting, material reuse, and low-carbon strategies in heritage restoration (Foster, 2020). The European Union's New European Bauhaus initiative promotes a holistic approach to heritage sustainability, linking culture, green urbanism, and community well-being (European Commission, 2021). Furthermore, the circular economy model is increasingly applied to CHM, emphasizing resource efficiency and sustainable urban planning. Cities like Stockholm and Copenhagen have pioneered heritage-led sustainability projects, demonstrating that historical preservation can coexist with modern environmental goals (Gustafsson, 2020). Effective heritage management requires strong governance structures, interdisciplinary collaboration, and well-defined policy frameworks. International organizations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, and the European Commission play a crucial role in shaping cultural heritage policies and funding conservation initiatives (Rodwell, 2018).

At the national and municipal levels, governments employ various legal and financial mechanisms to support heritage conservation, including heritage zoning laws, tax incentives, and public-private partnerships (Pendlebury, Townshend, & Gilroy, 2004). Successful examples include the *Lojas com História* program in Lisbon, which provides financial support to preserve historic storefronts, and the Heritage Action Zones in the UK, which stimulate economic growth through heritage-based regeneration. Despite progress, challenges persist, including funding limitations, gentrification risks, and conflicts between conservation and urban development. Scholars stress the need for integrated heritage policies that balance economic interests with cultural and social values (Jokilehto, 2006).

The literature underscores that CHM is a multifaceted process that extends beyond mere preservation to encompass urban regeneration, economic development, sustainability, and community engagement. While adaptive reuse and heritage-led urban planning have demonstrated success in revitalizing historic cities, challenges such as financial constraints and policy fragmentation remain. Future research should explore innovative governance models, participatory heritage planning, and digital heritage technologies to ensure that cultural heritage continues to be a key driver of sustainable urban transformation.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach that integrates desk research and case study analysis to examine the

role of CHM in sustainable urban development. The methodology is designed to explore how selected European cities have successfully integrated cultural heritage into their urban revitalization strategies, providing insights into best practices and policy implications.

The study relies on desk research, which includes the analysis of academic literature, policy documents, urban planning reports, and case-specific publications. The key sources of data include:

- Municipal and national policy documents related to cultural heritage and urban development.
- Reports from international organizations such as UNESCO, the European Commission, and ICOMOS.
- Academic research and case studies on urban sustainability and heritage management.
- Media articles and grey literature to capture recent developments and stakeholder perspectives.

The study follows a multiple case study design (Yin, 2018), analyzing six European cities - Rzeszów, Helsinki, Lisbon, Stockholm, Tirana, and Pristina - which have implemented innovative approaches to heritage management. These cases were selected based on their diverse strategies in leveraging cultural heritage for urban sustainability, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of different models of heritage-led urban transformation. The case study cities were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Innovative approaches to CHM (adaptive reuse, community engagement, sustainability integration).
- Diversity in geographic and socio-economic contexts to ensure comparative insights.
- Recognition of best practices in cultural heritage policies, as reflected in international rankings or urban planning frameworks.

It is also worth emphasizing that the cities presented in the research part represent different European countries, which due to their level of economic development, social awareness, access to technology and innovation, etc. are at a different stage of the path to achieving sustainable development. Four of them – Rzeszów, Helsinki, Lisbon, and Stockholm were mapped in terms of their situation in relation to the intended results of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) both in the context of the average value for the countries of the OECD, as well as the value represented by their country. Analyzing the data presented in Table 1, it can be noticed, among others, that:

- Rzeszów is ahead of Poland in SDG nos. 6, 13, 15, 16, reaching peaks within nos. 8, 15, 16, 17.
- Helsinki is ahead of Finland in SDG nos. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12, reaching peak values within nos. 3, 5, 6, 11, 12, 17.
- Lisbon is ahead of Portugal in SDG nos. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 11, 16, reaching peaks within nos. 11, 14, 15, 17,
- Stockholm is ahead of Sweden in SDG nos. 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, reaching peaks within nos. 3, 11, 12, 16, 17.

These cities are therefore role models within the countries they represent and beyond.

TABLE 1. LEVEL OF IMPLEMENTATION OF SDGs.

SDG (No.)	Category	City					
		Rzeszów	Helsinki	Lisbon	Stockholm	Tirana	Pristina
1. No Poverty	1. Value / city	-	31	44	46	-	-
	2. Avg. OECD		59	59	59		
	3. Value / country		11	32	25		
2. Zero Hunger	1						
	2		-	-	-		
	3						
3. Good Health and Well-Being	1		97	85	97		
	2		72	72	72		
	3		83	76	97		
4. Quality Education	1		81	50	84		
	2		65	65	65		
	3		62	42	76		
5. Gender Equality	1		100	72	85		
	2		39	39	39		
	3		100	56	82		
6. Clean Water and Sanitation	1	81	96	78	61		
	2	70	70	70	70		
	3	77	75	73	77		
7. Affordable and Clean Energy	1						
	2						
	3	-	-	-	-		
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth	1	98	49	43	72		
	2	64	64	64	64		
	3	98	55	57	64		
9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	1	1	46	2	40		
	2	13	13	13	13		
	3	1	40	2	42		
10. Reduced Inequalities	1		34	1	51		
	2	-	86	86	86		
	3		60	1	86		
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities	1	66	98	98	100		
	2	90	90	90	90		
	3	68	98	96	100		
12. Responsible Consumption and Production	1		100		100		
	2		55		55		
	3	-	82	-	100		
13. Climate Action	1	47	64	48	87		
	2	48	48	48	48		
	3	45	71	54	89		
	1	n.d.	20	100	41		

SDG (No.)	Category	City					
		Rzeszów	Helsinki	Lisbon	Stockholm	Tirana	Pristina
14. Life Below Water	2	57	57	57	57		
	3	n.d.	28	36	48		
15. Life on Land	1	89	19	70	29		
	2	55	55	55	55		
	3	78	27	36	29		
16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	1	100	67	92	95		
	2	72	62	72	72		
	3	66	71	89	95		
17. Partnerships for the Goals	1	100	100	100	100		
	2	93	93	93	93		
	3	100	100	100	100		

* '-' means 'no data'.

Source: own elaboration based on OECD (2020).

Each case is analyzed based on a common framework, focusing on: i) policy and governance models for heritage protection and integration, ii) social, economic, and environmental impacts of heritage-led urban regeneration, and iii) stakeholder engagement and participatory approaches in heritage management.

The research is structured around the following key questions:

- How have these cities integrated cultural heritage into their urban development policies?
- What are the main challenges and opportunities associated with heritage-driven urban regeneration?
- What lessons can be drawn from these cases to inform future urban planning and heritage management practices?

A schematic depiction of research highlights is shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. A SCHEMATIC DEPICTION OF RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS.



Source: own study.

The collected data is examined using a comparative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying common trends,

challenges, and best practices across the case studies. The analysis follows an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being predetermined.

IV. RESULTS

International cooperation and the exchange of knowledge are key to promoting cultural heritage as an essential component of sustainable development. Initiatives that involve both local and regional communities facilitate the implementation of innovative solutions while providing valuable examples of good practices. The Cultural Heritage in Action project (Eurocities, 2021), which ran from 2020 to 2023, enabled more than 100 decision-makers from cities and regions across Europe to share their knowledge and experiences related to cultural heritage. The project focused on three main themes, especially in the context of new challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Promoting Recovery and Resilience through Cultural Heritage in the Post-Pandemic World
- Cultural Heritage Sustainability in the Context of the Climate Crisis.

The project highlighted the necessity of adapting cultural heritage protection actions to environmental challenges and climate change mitigation. New Roles in the Management and Financing of Cultural Heritage for Local and Regional Authorities Discussions centered on managing cultural heritage in changing conditions, identifying new sources of funding, and promoting participatory heritage management. One of the key successes of the Cultural Heritage in Action project was the identification of 32 good practices, which were published in the European Good Practices Catalogue. These initiatives, carried out by local and regional authorities, serve as inspirations for other regions. The actions cover a range of areas, including participatory heritage management, the adaptation and reuse of cultural resources, and high-quality interventions in cultural heritage (Table 2).

TABLE 2. GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES FROM THE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ACTION PROJECT

City/country	Best practice	Main benefits
Rzeszów, Poland	Rzeszów transformed its historical underground route into an interactive cultural institution, blending history with modern techniques for exhibitions and local engagement.	Preservation of historical infrastructure, enhanced public engagement through interactive exhibits, revitalization of local heritage.
Stockholm, Sweden	Stockholm opened a Materials Warehouse for reusing exhibition props, promoting sustainability and recycling in cultural institutions.	Reduced waste, increased sustainability in cultural sector, cost-efficient resource management.

City/country	Best practice	Main benefits
Lisbon, Portugal	The "Lojas com História" program in Lisbon protects historic shops by awarding them and preventing property speculation, preserving the city's retail heritage.	Preservation of cultural and retail heritage, prevention of gentrification, support for local businesses.
Helsinki, Finland	Helsinki converted the Cable Factory into a cultural center, housing studios, galleries, and performance spaces, creating a vibrant community of 1,000 workers and 500,000 visitors.	Cultural revitalization, economic growth through creative industries, increased local engagement in cultural activities.

Source: Own elaboration based on Eurocities (2021).

The cities of Tirana (Albania) and Pristina (Kosovo) face rapid urbanization, urban sprawl, and pressure on cultural heritage amid growing populations and economic shifts. After the fall of Albania's dictatorship in the early 1990s, Tirana entered a period of chaotic urban growth, driven by weak governance, unclear property rights, and inconsistent legislation (Aliaj et al., 2008; Aliaj et al., 2009; Allkja, 2021). Informal development expanded on the outskirts, while densification occurred within the core. Urban reforms began after the 2007 EU Stabilization and Association Pact. A new territorial planning law in 2009 aimed to support sustainable development (Berisha et al., 2018), but implementation remained uneven. In 2014, revisions attempted to streamline the system. By 2016, nearly all municipalities had General Local Territorial Plans (GLTPs), up from just 5% coverage before (Allkja, 2021). Despite progress, Tirana saw a real estate boom post-2017, with over 2.2 million m² of new construction approved between 2019–2022 (Liperi, 2022). Much of this took place in the historic core, raising concerns about affordability, speculation, and the destruction of cultural heritage—such as the Italian-era city center and the former National Theater (Dhrami & Allkja, 2021). Albania has a long tradition of heritage protection, tracing back to its participation in the 1964 Venice Charter (ICOMOS, 1964). Recent planning documents in both Tirana and Pristina now include strategies that integrate cultural heritage into urban development (Allkja & Dhrami, 2021), signaling a shift toward valuing heritage in shaping future city growth. The strategic visions and planning approaches of Tirana and Pristina, as summarized in Table 3, reveal a shared emphasis on sustainable urban development, cultural heritage protection, and the integration of tourism into broader urban policies. While Tirana prioritizes polycentric growth, environmental balance, and post-socialist heritage preservation, Pristina focuses on positioning itself as a modern capital through cultural valorization, enhanced mobility, and rural-urban connectivity. Both cities demonstrate a growing recognition of cultural heritage as a driver of identity formation, urban regeneration, and international visibility.

TABLE 3. COMPARISON OF STRATEGIC URBAN PLANNING APPROACHES IN TIRANA AND PRISTINA

Category	Tirana	Pristina
Vision	A polycentric, ecologically balanced metropolis integrating urban dynamics and natural systems.	A modern capital for a new state—youth-oriented, high-quality urban and territorial development.
Strategic Objectives	- Polycentric urban intensification - Enhanced accessibility - Urban biodiversity - Mediterranean identity - Creative and smart city development - Social inclusion	- "Balkan Garden" concept - 24-hour city - Sustainable economic and employment growth - Integration into global networks - Improved public services and mobility - Strengthened cultural identity and rural preservation
Cultural Heritage Policies	- Strategic focus on 20th-century architectural heritage - Protection of urban/rural landscapes - Chronological mapping of built heritage (Ottoman, Italian, socialist periods) - Institutional collaboration for urban landscape reinterpretation	- Rehabilitation of historic sites and city center - Integration of cultural, eco-, and rural tourism - Development of cultural infrastructure (e.g., museums) - Enhancement of tourist services and facilities

Source: own study.

In summary, both Tirana and Pristina have made significant strides in incorporating cultural heritage into their urban planning processes. The growing awareness of the importance of preserving cultural assets, alongside rapid urban growth, reflects a shift toward sustainable development that balances modernity with respect for history. As these cities continue to evolve, their planning frameworks will play a crucial role in shaping the urban landscape while safeguarding cultural heritage for future generations (Allkja & Musaj, 2024).

V. CONCLUSION

Cultural heritage plays an essential role in fostering community resilience and advancing sustainable development. By reinforcing identity, social capital, local economies, and environmental stewardship, it supports sustainability across territorial scales (Mackiewicz & Staszewska, 2023). Increasing attention is being paid to how heritage, when properly managed, can become a catalyst for urban revitalization and long-term development. This article explores best practices drawn from the Cultural Heritage in Action project and examples across the Balkans, illustrating how modern conservation methods, local community engagement, and international cooperation can effectively integrate cultural heritage into sustainability strategies. These initiatives strengthen local identity, enhance livability, and support economic growth through heritage-led development.

Particularly valuable are strategies that combine education, awareness-building, sustainable tourism, digitization, and cross-border collaboration (Mackiewicz & Staszewska, 2023). Innovative solutions in heritage management not only preserve cultural assets but adapt them to contemporary urban needs, creating inclusive and dynamic public spaces. While focused

on successful cases, the study acknowledges limitations, including the qualitative nature of the research and uneven data availability. Nonetheless, it offers practical insights for policymakers, urban planners, and cultural heritage professionals, contributing to global discussions on sustainable urban development. The practices examined illustrate a wide spectrum of strategies for integrating cultural heritage into urban development. Cities such as Rzeszów, Stockholm, Lisbon, and Helsinki focus on innovation, environmental sustainability, and creative economies. In contrast, Tirana and Pristina emphasize heritage as a means of identity formation, international recognition, and tourism development amid transitional urban contexts.

Despite differing conditions, a common thread emerges: the effective management of cultural heritage requires holistic, participatory, and context-sensitive approaches. These include:

- Adaptive reuse of historic spaces,
- Technological integration for accessibility and engagement,
- Regulatory tools to protect cultural assets from market pressures,
- Heritage-led tourism strategies rooted in authenticity,
- International and local collaboration for knowledge exchange.

Moreover, these examples confirm that cultural heritage is not merely a legacy of the past, but a strategic asset for future-oriented, sustainable cities. As challenges such as climate change, demographic shifts, and economic uncertainty grow, the ability of cities to draw upon cultural heritage for resilience, cohesion, and innovation will only increase in significance.

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