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Summary Report of Conference on "Attracting Visitors to Cultural Heritage Sites, both physical and digital"

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Testimonianze

Summary Report of Conference on “Attracting Visitors to Cultural Heritage Sites, both physical and digital”

di [Maximilian Brüning](#) [*]

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The relationship between cultural heritage institutions and visitors is changing. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a process in the heritage sector where museums and visitors move away from a relationship mostly build upon physical visits, to one of partnership which also include digital domains. This report illustrates the outcomes of the discussions held during the 'Attracting Visitors to Cultural Heritage Sites, both physical and digital' conference held at Luiss Guido Carli University. It is detailed how new forms of heritage partnerships are envisaged and implemented, how private heritage institutions can attract visitors and engage with their local communities, and how the digital sphere helps to attract visitors to visit both online and in person.

Keywords: Visitor Attraction; Heritage Partnership; Digital Heritage; Private Heritage Institutions.

1. Introduction

Cultural Heritage is a set of sectors that have traditionally been treated as excluded from purely commercial and economic logics in their regulation and management. Nonetheless, as is increasingly recognized at both the state and supranational levels, cultural heritage sectors are industries that are part of markets that generate economic benefits, from revenues to employment.

The emergency generated by COVID-19 and the concomitant forced closure of cultural institutions severely affected the cultural sector, which had to come up with new survival strategies. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) estimated that 43% of museums worldwide faced closure in the first quarter of 2021. In the United States «nearly half (46%) of museums surveyed report that their total staff size has decreased by an average of 29% compared with pre-pandemic levels». In Italy, the National Statistic Agency of the Ministry of Culture estimated that in 2020 public museums lost almost 80% of their net incomes as compared to 2019, a loss of 41.991.929,03 €.

To face this situation, governments at the domestic level have decided to support the cultural sector through targeted interventions to address old and new emergencies. Among these, one of the biggest challenges facing cultural institutions-and museums in particular-is how to attract and engage visitors. Visitors bring revenue, both directly through tickets and indirectly through other sales. But equally important, they legitimate public funding at local, regional, and national level, as well as support by non-profit groups and philanthropy, since cultural heritage venues today find it very difficult to flourish just on visitor income. The pandemic exposed the vulnerability of income from visitors, but it also revealed new opportunities for attracting different categories of audiences. In particular, digital visits rapidly became popular, with millions of Italian and overseas visits. It also underlined the scope for attracting local visitors and hence strengthening links with local communities, as well as seeking to attract groups that are under-represented in visits to cultural heritage locations, such as the young, ethnic minorities and lower-income groups.

However, such opportunities raise complex issues, notably about support from policy makers, the relationship between physical and virtual visits, coordination between different interested parties, and finance.

This report is the outcome of the discussions conducted in the occasion of the conference «Attracting visitors to Cultural Heritage sites, both physical and digital», held at Luiss Guido Carli University on the 8th of April 2022 [1]. This was the second event of the Luiss Cultural Heritage Initiative, a new format for in-depth analysis and reflection on the role that culture, and cultural heritage can play in this phase of political, economic and social change. By facilitating dialogue between administrators at different territorial levels (local, national, and international), directors of cultural institutes, experts, academics, and representatives of the associative and entrepreneurial world, the aim is to create a network of protagonists of the cultural heritage and creative industries in order to reflect on common strategies that place culture at the centre of social and economic recovery.

2. Key Challenges

Throughout the conference several key challenges were identified, among which:

- What is currently the role of visitors in museums, archaeological parks, or other cultural institutions? Is it possible, especially after the experience of the pandemic, to identify a category of audience (both physical and virtual) that interest the more the directors of such cultural institutions?
- How can cultural heritage sites be presented digitally, in terms of visitor experience, revenues and costs, and not damaging the attraction of physical visits?
- What means are best suited to attract under-represented groups and which other actors (e.g., public, private and third sector, at different levels) need to be involved?

3. Conference Sessions

Session I: The National Recovery and Resilience Plan and Attracting Visitors

Visitors contribute greatly to the longevity and preservation of cultural heritage through entrance fees and donations. But the way modern cultural heritage sites see their visitors is changing. This first session of the Luiss CHI focused on the potentials of perceiving visitors not only in economic terms of ticket sales and funding, but as partners who engage with heritage. The opening remarks of the first session highlighted the need for a new relationship between cultural institutions and visitors. In the envisaged partnership model, heritage as a narrative and an object of study is emphasised, and visitors are provided with opportunity to see behind the scenes of sites through physical, but also digital access. Moving away from a client/provider relationship to one of partnership means further transforming the idea of museums and sites as static to an idea of living, breathing heritage. Through partnership models, sites can exhibit not only objects and stories but also the research processes or artistic craftsmanship which created them. Different cultural institutions will engage with their partners differently - based on its content or intent.

With this envisioned transformation, the purpose and roles of sites and museum was discussed in the panel - including the challenges of financing and engagement of visitors independent of large social media companies. Here, the role of cultural heritage as a backdrop for influencers was discussed, including the visit of Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The questions discussed revolved around the role of museums and sites in society, and whether the increasing role of platforms such as 'Instagram' elevates or decreases the societal role of cultural heritage. Two ideas were highlighted using the example of the archaeological park of Pompeii. Firstly, the role of cultural sites must be deliberated by themselves, both societally and in terms of social media. In Pompeii, this meant a proposed moving away from interactions with visitors mainly on large social media sites towards developing an in-house app which features digital content about the park, as well as the formerly physical audio guide. Secondly, to locate the park more within the local community, the idea is to rely on local traditions of agriculture to create trademarked agricultural products grown on site by local farmers - thus combining cultural heritage and local agricultural traditions in a number of products.

Despite these ideas, concerns were raised about the financing and managerial expertise needed for this implementation. The human resources needed to attract private funds or brand cooperation, in turn for attracting more visitors and partners, were seen as a great hinderance. While institutions have highly skilled cultural professionals at their disposal, financial managers remain a scarce resource in the sector.

Session II: Managing visitors and attracting local communities, minorities and young people

The opening remarks of the second session of the Luiss CHI conference brought the testimony of a private foundation, which manages the garden of Ninfa and the nearby castle. The role of private foundations with a clear public interest was highlighted; both the garden and the castle, in fact, belong to a protected area of the region of Lazio, Italy. The role of private foundations with public interests leaves them to engage in a balancing act of financial independence and self-sufficiency, coupled with an interest in preservation and visitor engagement.

The subsequent discussion was linked with the previous one of Session I, focusing on new partnership models and digitalization. The garden of Ninfa provided an example where a digital content cannot provide an adequate experience of the beauty presented. Experiencing the garden means to see its stream, to hear its bees and to smell its flowers. While digital projects are being put in place, the physical experience remains at the forefront. In terms of the partnership discussion, the Caetani foundation further illustrated what such a model could look like. With the 'Friends of Ninfa' associations around the world or the partnership with Kew gardens in London visitors can engage on a deeper level than just a visit. But partnership can also start with a deeper personal connection during a visit. Here, several models were shown. As pointed out, the Tate Modern Gallery in London asked staff to indicate works to visitors to which they have a personal connection. This was further emphasised by Erik van der Schaft suggesting that museums should increasingly focus on narratives than purely on objects, but to also leave space for contemplation and wandering. During the pandemic, the garden of Ninfa trialled a new model of touring: instead of one guide leading a group through the area, guides were positioned throughout the park and visitors could walk around and listen to stories told by different voices. Thus, personal connections and wandering were combined.

Because of the connection between private and public interests, the discussion further focused on the financial sustainability of specific institutions. As has been pointed out, securing tax credits for private foundations in Italy has been difficult, even when there are public interests of conservation involved. Public funding is only available through specific projects, but day-to-day operations need to be self-financed to a significant degree. While funding is being made available through the PNRR, the overall sustainable funding of private foundations remains a challenge to be addressed.

Session III: Cultural heritage sites between virtual and physical presence

The final session of the day was dedicated to the theme of digitization, and the example of the 'Artissima' art fair in Turin served as an example. During the pandemic, the Artissima art fair was supposed to be run in presence, but the rise and cases and the impending lockdown led the fair to be put on hold. With pieces of art already present in exhibition spaces, the decision was taken to transform Artissima into a digital art fair. In the matter of a week, captions were written for hundreds of artworks and a virtual fair was setup. The virtual, however, is not the digital. While the virtual fair allowed visitors or users to view artworks, move around the fair and read the captions, videos of a guided tour and trailers for the fair were also created. Especially the video format opened up the fair to young people, usually not the target audience of art fairs.

The opening remarks gave way to a discussion on the role of digital and virtual content within museums and sites. Here, the Artissima fair provided a good example case of where the difference between formats for content could be observed. Virtual experiences, at this point in time, do not provide the user with sufficient connection as there remains a degree of alienation. With both digital and virtual content, however, there remains a question of Intellectual Property and newly emerging digital museums face new challenges as the temporal dimensions of digital art become longer.

Further, issues remain on what the role of digital content of physical museums and art is, and what it contributes to the cultural sector. There was overall agreement that the digital has not and will not replace physical experiences of culture, but that it can work as a catalyst to bring more people into museums. In Italy, every Euro spent in a museum is estimated to generate around three Euros for the local economy. Digital content could thus be a great accelerator of local development. Digitalisation, especially for public institutions, however, remains highly costly. The survey of user data remains one of the biggest challenges as data collection and evaluation is expensive. To solve the issue of financing, a number of solutions were discussed in the panel. After pondering several alternatives, overall, it was agreed that cultural heritage sites should try to translate new experiences with economic resources, engage with their visitors and compliment physical experiences with digital ones and vice versa.

4. Conclusion

Thus, during the conference, a number of important issues were discussed and addressed:

- Partnerships can be a future way of engaging with visitors through narratives, behind the scenes looks of research and production, but also to connect further with the local community where heritage is located in.
- Partnerships can take many shapes: through new insights into a museum's inner workings, through digital contents of apps or subscriptions, through personal experiences of guides and staff or through videos and virtual visits
- Digitalisation remains a challenge for museums. Thus, a public production company dedicated to the creation of cultural content could assist in the digital transformation and attract more visitors.
- The sustainable financing of private institutions with public interest remains a challenge which needs to be addressed.

This second event of the LCHI highlighted the necessity, for cultural institutions, to create a partnership model for visitors and with the visitors who may be able to transform the classical client/provider relationship between the museum and its public into something more substantial. New forms of digital engagements, outside large social media networks, can aid with this aim, even if digitalisation faces different obstacles and limits. In-person visits are not likely to disappear as they are still the primary source of contact between visitors and cultural institution, and they represent a major source of income which should be maintained.

Note

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[1] The participants included: *Anna Pirri Valentini* (Post-doctoral Researcher, Luiss Guido Carli University); *Cristina Alaimo* (Assistant Professor, Luiss Guido Carli University); *Erik van der Schaft* (Director at Expo Dubai); *Felicia Caponigri* (Director, International & Graduate Programs, Notre Dame Law School); *Gabriel Zuchtriegel* (Director of the Archaeological Park of Pompeii); *Giovanni Ciarrocca* (Secretary General Associazione Dimore Storiche Italiane A.D.S.I.); *Ilaria Bonacossa* (Director of the Digital Art National Museum); *Luciano Monti* (Professor, Luiss Guido Carli University); *Maria Giusti* (Post-doctoral Researcher, Università degli Studi di Verona); *Mark Thatcher* (Professor, Luiss Guido Carli University); *Massimo Amodio* (Vice-President, Roffredo Caetani Foundation); *Maximilian Brüning* (Ph.D Student, Luiss Guido Carli University); *Pierluigi Petrillo* (Professor, Unitelma Sapienza); *Pietro Valentino* (Director Journal 'Economia della Cultura'); *Sofia Ranchordas* (Professor University of Groningen, Luiss Guido Carli University).