

Nika Murovec
Damjan Kavaš

Revitalizing cultural heritage buildings through cultural and creative industries: The Forget Heritage project

How is it possible to unleash the hidden potential of cultural heritage for improving people's quality of life and at the same time to create new opportunities and offer additional information about management to the cultural and creative sector? This question is addressed by Forget Heritage, a three-year Interreg Central Europe programme project. The main objective of the partner cities' cooperation is to identify innovative, replicable, and sustainable public-private cooperation management models for abandoned cultural heritage buildings and to give these historical sites added value by setting up cultural and creative companies.

The project tackles an issue present in most cities characterized by unused historical buildings that have marked the history of the local community in various ways. This is not about widely recognized "A list" cultural heritage buildings, but buildings such as former factories, hospitals, schools, or barracks, which are a backdrop and often invisible to the public eye. Now in a state of neglect, their historical memory is being forgotten. The functionality of such buildings is often limited. They are turning into urban voids and have a negative impact on surrounding areas. In each city, there are pressures to tear down such buildings and build new residential or business complexes in



their place in the name of development. However, there is plenty of evidence that precisely such urban voids have the potential to become the major driver of development in a neighbourhood. Not only do blocks of smaller, mixed-age buildings add character and charm to cities, but these areas also provide a foundation for diverse local businesses and innovative startups. Whereas large new buildings provide suitable space for recognized companies that can afford it, older, modest, and unassuming buildings contain economic development engines of their own. The basic idea of the Forget Heritage project was built around Jane Jacobs's dictum "Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings." Innovative ideas of any kind always bear quite a risk in their development stage, no matter how successful they ultimately are. Such ideas always need room for experimentation: room for trial and also room for error.

One of the characteristics of larger cities is also a higher concentration of the cultural and creative sector. The creatives are definitely a group that cities aim to attract; however, they need an affordable and flexible place to work in. The authenticity and character of historic (even if not very old) buildings presents an added value for them that is lacking in new ones. The project partners recognized the need of the creatives for a suitable and inspiring working environment, as well as various positive externalities (from social to economic) that derive from making such places available to the creatives. The Forget Heritage project therefore tries to identify such places and provide information and tools to help tap their hidden potential with the use of cultural and creative industries. At the same time, it tries to improve awareness and understanding among both major actors in this process, public administration and the creatives, and together

find economically sustainable models, test them, and establish examples that can also serve as an inspiration to other cities.

The information that will be gathered within the project through inclusion of various groups, exchange of experience, training, and research will be tested in eight pilot projects, and recommendations will be transferred to other cities. The pilot projects are very diverse in terms of content and space. They range from a multidisciplinary creative centre in the network of historical buildings in the centre of Genoa to an intercultural gardening project that integrates refugees and creatives in Nuremberg, for example. In Slovenia, the pilot project is running at the Vodnik Home, a local cultural heritage monument. In the now renovated and previously unused rooms on the first floor of the building, which was revitalized as premises for reading, writing, and storytelling, a new educational programme and the Writers' Hub was developed. Various writing workshops and mentorship programmes and other accompanying events are being held there, and authors have the opportunity to rent one of the four rooms in the shared working premises. The Writers' Hub programme is therefore perfectly in line with the programme of the entire building, where many links are ingeniously created through books with several other aspects of the cultural and creative sector – from the performing arts and artistic creation to music and cultural education.

In line with the goal of sharing information, one of the key tools created within the project is the Management Manual, which addresses both managers of cultural heritage buildings and decision-makers. The Management Manual was built based on international experience and fills the gap in the literature on entrepreneurial revitalization of cultural heritage. It represents a resource of practical necessities, structured approaches,



Figure 1: Project workshop (photo: Motovila).

and best-practice examples. The first part of the manual is oriented toward public administration. It contains recommendations for several challenges that public administration faces in managing cultural heritage buildings. The manual also offers information about how to set up new kinds of participative development (including bottom-up approaches) and what kind of tools have already proven to be effective in modern revitalization strategies.

The second part of the manual is intended for use by various revalorization initiatives and future cultural heritage building managers. A management model for cultural heritage revalorization projects is presented. Step by step, the model will guide managers through all important tasks and challenges – from shaping the idea and goals, to the financial plan and project timeline. The manual is a hands-on guide: it offers several practical examples and its appendices also contain worksheets that can be printed out and directly used as assistance for faster and better response to various management challenges. The manual is available in both Slovenian and English on the project's homepage as well as on the homepages of both Slovenian partners, the Institute for Economic Research and the Regional Development Agency of the Ljubljana Urban Region.

All other important documents created within the project are also available at these homepages. Based on previous local analyses of legislation and policies, the project partners prepared a policy handbook on revitalizing unused cultural heritage buildings in central European cities. In addition to an overview of national practices regarding the protection and reuse of cultural heritage buildings and relevant legislation at the local, regional, and national levels, this handbook also contains recommendations for improvements, and indicates certain opportunities and justifications for financially supporting revitalization projects. Another product of previous analyses in partner countries is also an analysis of transferrable elements of good practice in cultural heritage building management, which highlights some common key factors in various examples of successful management. Furthermore, in cooperation with the Department of Architecture and Design of the University of Genoa and the Culture Department of the City of Genoa, the project produced the document Guidelines for the Involvement of Citizens in Historical Sites Valorization. These guidelines were developed based on research and the findings of studies by the project partners. In addition to analysing current operating models, the guidelines also include a proposal for an operational scheme as

a working model to establish a plan for stakeholder involvement in cultural heritage revitalization. Within the work package, which focuses on training cultural heritage managers, free training sessions were held in all partner cities. In addition, a transnational training model for historical site management was prepared. This tool is intended for everyone responsible in order to provide an incentive for development programmes on training and skills development in managing underused or abandoned historical sites. Another important project tool that will be put into practice very soon is a web application. The application will have two major functions: on the one hand, it will make it possible to identify and record appropriate abandoned spaces in partner cities, and on the other hand it will allow feedback from residents and other stakeholders regarding the pilot projects and the use of other spaces.

After testing the tools developed in the pilot projects and evaluating the pilot projects through an interim and final assessment, a strategy for cultural heritage management through the use of cultural and creative industries will also be prepared.

The strategy will be endorsed by policymakers in the partner regions. After the Forget Heritage project concludes, the manager of the Vodnik Home will continue the activities developed within the project (the educational programme and the Writers' Hub). All the other pilot projects in the partner cities will also continue, and the knowhow created within the project will serve as an inspiration and platform for managing cultural heritage buildings in other cities. The project therefore offers several results that are also sustainable after the project's lifetime. Through revitalization of cultural heritage buildings, the project will directly increase the visual attractiveness of the cities and indirectly

also the quality of life in them. Through preservation of history, the project will increase the sense of belonging to the community. Furthermore, it will also increase tourist flows and offer several opportunities to the cultural and creative sector, and, last but not least, it will stimulate the creation of new jobs, entrepreneurship, and economic growth.

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Nika Murovec
Institute for Economic Research, Ljubljana,
Slovenia
E-mail: murovecn@ier.si

Damjan Kavaš
Institute for Economic Research, Ljubljana,
Slovenia
E-mail: kavasd@ier.si

Information about the project and publications

Project homepage: <https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/Forget-heritage.html>

Institute for Economic Research:
<http://www.ier.si/menu-298.php>

Regional Development Agency of the Ljubljana Urban Region: <http://www.ruralur.si/sl/projekti/forget-heritage>