**Matjaž Uršič**

# IMMOVABLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW LOCALISM: THE ROLE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABLE HERITAGE-BASED DEVELOPMENT

*ABSTRACT*

*On the declarative level, immovable (physical) cultural heritage is a convenient subject of a variety of programmes, conservation approaches and legislative processes supposedly tied to sustainability development plans. The declarativeness of immovable cultural heritage integration processes is often exposed in spatial antagonisms based on frictions between local communities on one side and, on the other, conservation approaches, the development aspirations of investors, political structures and other actors who seek to assert their particular interests and needs. The paper analyses the mentioned frictions through the prism of "new localism" trends and connects them to the findings of several Slovenian case studies.*

*KEY WORDS: Localism, new localism, cultural heritage, participation, HEI-TRANSFORM*

Matjaž Uršič

# Nepremična kulturna dediščina v kontekstu novega lokalizma: vloga lokalnih skupnosti pri implementaciji na dediščini temelječega trajnostnega razvoja

*IZVLEČEK*

*Na deklarativni ravni je nepremična (fizična) prostorska dediščina priročen predmet vrste programov, varstvenih pristopov in zakonodajnih procesov, ki jo vključujejo v prostorske razvojne načrte in povezujejo z različnimi skupinami deležnikov. Deklarativnost procesov integracije nepremične kulturne dediščine se pogosto materializira v prostorskih antagonizmih, kjer prihaja do trenj med lokalnimi skupnostmi na eni in konzervatorskimi pristopi, razvojnimi težnjami investitorjev, političnimi strukturami in drugimi akterji, ki skušajo uveljavljati svoje interese in potrebe, na drugi strani. Članek analizira omenjena trenja prek koncepta »novega lokalizma« in ga povezuje z izsledki različnih študij primera v Sloveniji.*

*KLJUČNE BESEDE: lokalizem, novi lokalizem, kulturna dediščina, participacija, HEI-TRANSFORM*

## 1 Introduction[1]

Planning when items of immovable cultural heritage are involved is all too often regarded as merely a standard procedure based on well-established, predetermined legal systems of cultural heritage protection containing defined elements of protection and assigned functions determined according to expert knowledge, measurements and scientific data. The fact that immovable cultural heritage includes all tangible cultural elements like buildings, monuments, landscapes, archive materials, works of art or artefacts means it is automatically presumed that its physicality allows planners to properly arrange for the heritage's embedment within the locale's socio-cultural contextuality. It is blindly assumed by the general public that planning for heritage will follow in detail the procedures and selected objectives of protection policies, limiting negative spatial processes and favouring actions that work to the benefit of the entire community (see Council of Europe 2017; Ministrstvo za kulturo 2019). However, only

---

in very rare situations can planning with cultural heritage actually be realised simply with formal measures that are known in advance; much more often, it is required to connect the perceptions and needs of local population groups with the formal planning objectives and practices to ensure that more considered and inter-community negotiated decisions are made concerning the management of immovable cultural heritage.

Introducing new ideas regarding immovable heritage management in a local area is a very sensitive undertaking and calls for considerable patience, the gathering of suitable data, and time-consuming processes of coordination between different local stakeholder groups. Planning for sustainable heritage-based development is in this context seen as a form of consultation or interactive management whose objective is to harmonise the interests of different (political, financial, class, ethnic, cultural) socio-economic groups present in a given space (Healey 1997; Sanoff 2008). These groups may have conflicting interests and differ not only with regard to their aims and expectations but also to the level of acceptance of new ideas, which may be translated into power, pressure or influence when it comes to decisions about interventions in the cultural heritage of a locality. The article presents the way in which the interactions between stakeholders operating within local communities often reveal discrepancies in attitudes to immovable cultural heritage. In this respect, discrepancies are observable between desirable and practical implementations in space while planning for sustainable heritage-based development. On the declarative level, immovable cultural heritage is a convenient subject of a variety of programmes, conservation approaches and legislative processes that are supposedly tied to sustainability development plans and should include various groups of stakehold-ers. Declarative aspects of these programmes are identified in the non-imperative nature of plans, strategies or documents that describe the desired results yet without explicitly listing the actions, timetables or steps that must be performed to achieve the proposed goals. The mere declarative integration of immovable cultural heritage within the socio-cultural context of communities is often exposed in various NIMBY (not in my backyard) syndromes whereby different types of civil society initiatives, local communities and, on the other side, conservation approaches, development aspirations of investors, political structures and other actors clash to assert their particular interests and needs (see Fischel 2001; Kiefer 2008). Frictions and thus non-optimised or imbalanced relations between actors lead to reinterpretations of the roles played by immovable cultural heritage and partly limit their function in building locally-based "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1986: 248) among the autochthonous population. By so doing, specific parts of cultural heritage or socio-cultural capital integrated with immovable cultural

heritage and belonging to less dominant social groups are pushed out to the periphery and used only in the most rudimentary forms like, for example, as a welcome sidekick element that helps to create a suitable ambience for the offer of consumable goods in the tourism or promotion contexts (Bianchini 1999).

The paper analyses the mentioned frictions within the local environment based on the findings of various research projects. Special focus is paid to examining possibilities for developing new mechanisms for connecting what thus far have been less involved or insufficiently empowered groups of users of immovable cultural heritage. From this point of view, the article analyses how elements of "new localism" (Strassoldo and Tessarin 1992: 287) reflect the actions of stakeholders involved in the management of immovable cultural heritage today by considering empirical cases from Slovenia. In the case of cultural heritage, local actions are often connected to hierarchised and rigid local networks whilst the new localism conceptualisation envisages the use of local elements in ways that benefit both the local and general (global) society. Analysis of this dialectic relationship between (traditional, autarkic) localism and new localism within cultural heritage management is based on data drawn from the research projects HEI-TRANSFORM (2022–2025), Fakin Bajec (2005–2020) and Kuševič (2016) that allow insights from various case studies in Slovenia.

## 2  "New localism" and its potential for sustainable heritage-based development

The sustainability of cultural heritage management can be defined in two ways. The first dimension is "green sustainability" and consists of assuring adequate procedures that enable the physical preservation of cultural heritage through the use of green materials and green approaches that do not disrupt natural ecosystems cycles (see, e.g., ICOMOS 2013, 2019; Scardigno et al. 2019; Foster 2020). The second dimension of sustainable cultural heritage management is focused on the social sustainability of cultural heritage. This approach tends to strike a balance between the quality of life in the local community and cultural heritage management. The approach is complex and contains unpredictable elements because it includes close cooperation with local communities, experts, owners and various institutions (local, municipal, state) that are involved in the process of cultural heritage management. Still, in the last few decades the mentioned approach has been significantly undermined and neglected compared to other approaches (see Vecco and Srakar 2018). In terms of social sustainability, a sustainable cultural heritage management model has to provide capacities that based on the appropriate balanced participation of all stakeholders enable the

long-term development of local communities while simultaneously serving the general public by ensuring the preservation and accessibility of the cultural heritage. This act of balancing between local and general benefits on a longer-term scale represents the most conflictive and difficult part of the process of developing a sustainable heritage model and is unique for each case (see Garcia and Cox 2013). Namely, each case involves a different set of actions, actors and needs that must be balanced in order to assure sustainable development that considers the heritage.

The concept of social sustainability in the management of immovable cultural heritage is inherently connected to the notion of participation (see Stöger 2010; Müller and Stotten 2011; Council of Europe 2017). Although stakeholders' participation is an inseparable part of the process of ensuring social sustainability in heritage studies, it is also one of the most frequently mentioned concepts that is becoming ever more controversial in terms of its capability for implementation in the field due to a lack of expertise, finance, political will and local specifics. It is worth mentioning that socially sustainable heritage management is in this sense often exploited in the name of developing a holistic approach to heritage management that presupposes the active cooperation of the state, investors, local and other interested stakeholders. Formal policy actors (state, municipalities) under the guise of the concepts of participation, inclusive society, and active citizenship often attempt to transfer the cost of maintaining public goods on to the shoulders of civil society. Authors like Coombe and Weiss (2015), Cantillon and Baker (2020) describe such actions as reflecting of the growing importance of the economic sector and aspirations to achieve short individual financial gains in contrast to generating long-term welfare effects for society at large.

In the article, special attention is paid to the analysis of social sustainability in cultural heritage management in selected cases, while the dimension of physical green sustainability is left aside as a secondary dimension that, while inherently important, does not add to the arguments presented. In this respect, focus is given to the analysis of crucial elements that either provide, support or obstruct the implementation of social sustainability in heritage management in Slovenia. One of the important debated characteristics that contribute to or obstruct the social sustainability of cultural heritage in Slovenia is the effect of active local interest articulation or "localism". In popular debates, localism is often described as an element that prevents the introduction of novelties into the local space and hinders any faster development of it. The real effects of present localism trends are much more complex and cannot be reduced to a simple differentiation between levels of global permeability in the local space. All of the local communities in today's Europe are connected with the globalisation process and form their spatial

(local) identity in relation to the (global) "space of flows" (Castells 1989: 146), i.e., circulation of cultural elements, information, goods, people and capital. Every single local community responds to the challenges of globalisation in its own ways. The sphere of new global influences on local communities possibly ranges from the distinctive protection of traditional local spatial features to the distinctive transformation of local communities. Some communities are more open/permeable as concerns the new (global) elements being introduced into their space, whilst others tend to be reserved and try to minimise their influences. In relation to this, many authors have described a shift from "old localism to new localism" (Strassoldo and Tessarin 1992: 287).

Localism is best described as a relationship between place (understood as a space, which is relatively small and limited) and the social phenomena that occur in it. This relationship is valorised (ideologised) from the point of an observer or actor and becomes a part of their state of conscience (ibid.). In this way, the locality (and space in general) becomes an important ingredient in the construction of an individual's identity and, contrary to the theories pointing to the loss of territorial determinism, stresses the importance of locality in everyday life. Traditionally, localism and rootedness have been considered backward and part of the conservative pole of values. Modernisation processes seemed to be directed at cosmopolitanism, universalism and mobility. Territorial attachment, described by Tönnies (1999: 31) as part of "Gemeinschaft", seemed to be vanishing, as it was supposed to be gradually destroyed by a functional "Gesellschaft". Strassoldo (2004: 7) explains that while Gemeinschaft was in fact somewhat influenced or restrained by those processes, the trend did not alter its contents: "It has found inner limits in some basic human needs, and has generated dialectically its own limiting contradictions and countervailing forces" (ibid.). A consequence of these processes was new localism where elements of the old localism were fused with the processes of globalisation that brought new elements into the locality. Mlinar (2001: 770) examines old localism relative to new localism based on the analytical dimensions of "connectedness" and internal "characteristics". Connectedness is analysed through the prism of autonomy, while internal characteristics are defined according to the exclusion or integration of specialties. In Table 1, one can see that old localism is much more closed, and less connected than the choice-oriented new localism. Similar differences are recognised in the way that old and new localism exclude or integrate the special features of localities.

**Table 1: Old and new localism.**

| Analytical dimension | OLD LOCALISM | NEW LOCALISM |
|---|---|---|
| *Connectedness* | Autonomy/ Independence | Autonomy/ Choice |
| *Characteristics* | Specialties/ Exclusion | Specialties/ Integration |

*Source: Mlinar 2001.*

According to Strassoldo (2004), two additional differences between new and old localism are critical. The first is that while old localism was primordial and less reflective, the new one is the outcome of a more conscious choice. While the old localism seemed "necessary and natural", the second appears more "voluntary and intentional (rational)" (Strassoldo 2004: 7). The second difference is: "that the old localism tended to minimize contacts with the exterior to maintain a strong closed boundary; while the new localism is quite aware of the rest of the world, and is quite open to interactions with it" (Strassoldo 1992: 46–47). By way of a general assumption, we may say that new localism is more open than (old) localism, yet still emphasises the need for certain values that should be present in the locality.

The concept of new localism brings new elements into the debate concerning the management of immovable cultural heritage in Slovenia. It first raises the question of the extent to which new localism is present when dealing with various forms of immovable cultural heritage in Slovenian local communities. Given that local communities need to integrate novelties into their environments, this process immediately triggers dialogue between the forces of old (preservation) and new localism (adaptation). Second, this process of the inevitable confrontation of the two localisms is nested within a much larger question of whether the management of immovable heritage in Slovenia is directed more to heritage development that considers sustainability or the existing rigid, hierarchical form of mere protecting the status quo. "Business as usual" in this scenario would mean a distinct embeddedness in old localism whilst neglecting the values and benefits of new localism, where sustainability orientations are mixed with globalisation and local values. Although this "glocalisation" (Robertson 1995: 173) process is undoubtedly in place in Slovenia, the question regarding its extent and features in the case of immovable heritage management has hardly been examined. We address the presented questions through an examination of specific data and case studies in Slovenia.

## 3  Analysing the management of immovable cultural heritage in local communities

### 3.1 Methodology

The analysis of how immovable cultural heritage in local communities is managed was performed based on data gathered from multiple research studies that include the project HEI-TRANSFORM (2022–2025) as well as field studies by Fakin Bajec (2005–2020) and Kuševič (2016). The selected research studies are relevant for our analysis as they include data regarding multiple types of actors on the local level (e.g., local inhabitants, municipality, experts). Due to the use of a mix of accumulated primary (HEI-TRANSFORM) and secondary (Fakin Bajec and Kuševič) data, the methodology applied in the article may best be described as the "mixed research methodology" approach (see Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010) or the "grounded theoretical approach" (see Holt-Jensen 1988; Glaser 1998) where various types of data are synthesised in order to produce a more general theory, i.e., a hypothesis. The data analysis thus combines data of various types spanning from semi-structured questionnaires to field analysis in various locations. The intention of the analysis is to identify key changes related to the presence of new localism and social sustainability that have occurred in the area of immovable heritage management in local communities over the last two decades. The analysis first interprets data that succinctly summarise specific noteworthy ideas or elements that guide the handling of immovable cultural heritage in local communities. Second, in the conclusion, the collected interpretations and ideas are re-grouped into higher-level concepts to explain how and why local communities and other stakeholders handle the management of immovable cultural heritage in particular ways. The model can assist with the drawing of conclusions regarding whether elements of "new localism" can be detected in a given location.

### 3.2 The ideal model of participation in the management of immovable cultural heritage

The main premise of the analysis was to identify how elements that constitute the socially sustainable handling of immovable cultural heritage are dealt with in the case of Slovenia. This led us to look at the model of participation in the case of heritage management in Slovenia. In this regard, the ideal sustainable model of immovable heritage management should also include a well-integrated model of stakeholder participation that enables good communication between (local) actors and the balanced use of resources stemming from the heritage. The first layer of data analysed is the results of the HEI-TRANSFORM survey in 2023