

Heritage First! Towards a Common Approach for a Sustainable Europe **Acropolis Museum, Athens, Greece** **6 – 8 March 2014**

Concept note

“When we attempt to preserve our culture and to share it with others, we are not only expressing who we are, but also how we live together. Therefore, by promoting our culture and our heritage, we are maintaining a strategic resource every bit as important as any nuclear arsenal or oil reserve”¹.

In a constantly changing reality marked by multiple challenges in all aspects of the public sphere and severe effects on citizens' trust in the EU integration project itself, Europe is now faced with an urgent need to create a new collective narrative. A fresh approach “to highlight that the EU is not solely about the economy and growth, but also about cultural unity and common values in a globalized world”² is urgently needed. The currently ongoing debate on a sustainable future for Europe thus clearly suggests a more complex approach to development which gives more consideration to the cultural dimension.

Cultural heritage³ as a custodian of shared values that underpin European identity and, at the same time, as both an essential component and a driving factor of sustainability, in social, economic and environmental terms, is well-placed to deliver a wide range of benefits for society. Such benefits are associated not only with economic growth but also with good quality environment, social well-being, intercultural dialogue, promotion of a sense of belonging to a community, and ultimately, with the building of a more cohesive Europe. Essentially, Europe's common and diverse heritage, as a dynamic force in today's society, plays (or has the potential to play) a key role in sustainable development within a broader context. Cultural heritage provides the models for sustainable environmental management through traditional ways and techniques, as well as the resources for innovation; it is a generator of growth and employment and an indispensable element of urban revitalization and social cohesion.

The fact that cultural heritage cuts across several public sectors and policy domains, despite the acknowledged benefits of cross-sectoral cooperation, may occasionally result in the diffusion and weakening of its role. Cultural heritage is not explicitly mentioned in the Europe 2020 Strategy, although its contribution to every individual EU 2020 goal is crucial and distinct. Contemporary concerns shared by various stakeholders (i.e. policy makers, culture professionals, civil society) address

¹ Sharon Jeannotte & Dick Stanley, “How Will We Live Together?”, Canadian Journal of Communication, vol. 27 (2-3), 2002.

² As stated on the Commission website on the debate on the future of Europe (http://ec.europa.eu/debate-future-europe/new-narrative/index_en.htm).

³ Cultural Heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time (Faro Convention).

the need for cultural heritage to acquire a more prominent role, become further re-conceptualized and more strategically placed in development agendas at local, regional, national and EU level. The necessity to rethink cultural heritage from a strategic perspective at EU level, in other words, to develop a common long-term approach to the added value of cultural heritage for Europe is a timely issue, central to the work of expert groups or civil society initiatives (e.g. European Heritage Alliance 3.3 , Herein-Aisbl Network ,“EU and Cultural Heritage” Reflection Group).

This necessity becomes imperative for a number of additional reasons: first, Europe can and must make optimal use of its cultural resources, in order to reshape and reform its cultural values and foster social cohesion at a time of tensions and transformations, which give rise to centrifugal and regressive forces. Second, cultural heritage today is facing many more environmental and social hindrances than in the past (e.g. climate change impacts). Third, it is commonly agreed upon by all experts that the economic crisis currently prevailing in several EU member states, as well as fiscal austerity, may have grave consequences on the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage. The latter may be an expensive affair, the lack and loss thereof, however, is likely to prove even more costly to Europe.

Taking the above into consideration, and at the same time also recognizing the fact that heritage is not merely something to be conserved and preserved, but rather to be enhanced and promoted as a driving force of public participation and involvement, the Hellenic Presidency of the Council of the EU is organizing the conference *“Heritage First! Towards a Common Approach for a Sustainable Europe”*. The aim of the conference is to discuss the link between cultural heritage and sustainability, the decisive and distinct contribution of cultural heritage to sustainable and participatory socio-economic development, the need for the cultural heritage sector to embrace changes at policy level and explore innovative ways of operation, and for the EU to move towards a long term approach to the enhancement of cultural heritage as a resource and a prerequisite for a Europe of "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth."

The conference will seek to link theoretical debate with examples of good practice, which demonstrate the key role of cultural heritage in delivering sustainable development objectives. It will also encourage interaction and exchange of views among policy actors, researchers, representatives of international organizations, working fora, lobby groups and cultural heritage professionals, in order to:

- promote greater recognition and better understanding of the value and role of cultural heritage within the broader context of sustainability, especially as a response to current social challenges.
- raise awareness about the wide range of benefits arising from fully integrating cultural heritage into local, regional and national sustainable development policies, agendas and projects.
- stress the need for coordinated and collaborative action to be taken by multiple stakeholders, including national governments, local authorities, the private sector and civil society, in order to maximize the potential of cultural heritage as an agent of socio-economic development.

- advance consideration of a common European strategic framework for cultural heritage with a view to enhancing its potential as a key resource for delivering the objectives of the EU 2020 strategy, as well as to shaping future priorities in EU and national policy making, particularly in connection with the future Work Plan for Culture.

The agenda of the conference will include an official opening ceremony, featuring a tone-setting discussion on the role and place of cultural heritage in the context of the multiple challenges facing Europe today and the urge to develop a new vision for the future. The main part of the agenda will be structured around plenary sessions, which will address the following themes:

1. Thematic Session A:

Cultural heritage at the heart of sustainability: the urban dimension

Cultural heritage can prove extremely valuable to EU's overall growth strategy, which aims at bringing together economic, social and environmental agendas while also aiming at reinforcing the European integration process. This potential deserves to be more fully recognized and further utilized in line with the needs of contemporary societies, in order to invigorate the sector and ensure a sustainable future for Europe and its citizens. Placing heritage at the heart of sustainability essentially means exploring and fostering a better understanding of the environmental, economic, social and cultural benefits that heritage yields in support of the needs of present and future generations, including but not limited to promoting innovation, resource efficiency, economic prosperity, employment, social cohesion, a sense of place and general well-being. Crucially, better understanding of the role of cultural heritage in sustainable development goes hand in hand with greater access to such benefits for everyone. On the other hand, it inevitably poses new challenges to the sector's own ability for policy change. It also entails development of new agendas and priorities with regard to continuity and innovative funding partnerships in heritage interventions.

Heritage conservation is seen today as an exercise on environmental, economic and social/cultural responsibility. The integration of heritage planning into broader urban planning processes is also increasingly considered to generate opportunities for achieving sustainable, attractive and competitive cities. The largest concentration of EU's population is actually found in cities and urban areas. This is also where complex social and environmental problems are most acutely felt. Furthermore, cities and urban areas are major generators of innovation and growth in today's advanced knowledge economy, and at the same time the testing grounds for EU 2020 strategy. Cultural heritage, as a major contributor to the unique character and identity of a city, may prove to be a competitive advantage, a differentiator of a city's overall development strategy. Examples of cities which have capitalized on their cultural heritage for sustainable development show that cultural heritage (including museums, historic sites and other heritage institutions as "anchor institutions"), as a resource that cannot be relocated, may potentially contribute to job creation, business expansion, development of cultural tourism, promotion of localized cultural and creative industries, improved physical conditions and quality of life, positive community distinctiveness and increased civic pride. It is thus vital to constructively incorporate long-term heritage management strategies in local development.

In this context, this session of the conference aims at increasing the understanding of the strong relationship between cultural heritage, sustainability and urban development, at discussing the means by which the preservation, conservation, upgrade, adaptive re-use and enhancement of urban heritage items can contribute to local sustainable development and at stressing the need for bringing sustainable development considerations more actively into cultural heritage policies and management that will turn cities and neighborhoods into vibrant, livable places.

2. Thematic Session B: Cultural heritage: Investing in the future

Today, cultural heritage stands at the core of reflections on sustainable economic development. The rising importance of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, stems from its place in local, regional and national economies, and especially from the turnover of construction, real estate and tourism sectors and their respective contribution to job creation and growth. It is also related to the overall externalities and spill-over effects caused by the expanding Cultural and Creative Sector in Europe, which equally embraces the new digital economy.

Moreover, during the last decade the concept of economic sustainability has developed wider anthropological and anthropocentric parameters, which until recently were overlooked by traditional economic thought. This is also reflected in all recent reports of international organizations such as the UNESCO, the OECD and the Council of Europe that fully recognize the socioeconomic value of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is considered a decisive factor of well being. It is now generally accepted that it has a visible real and distinct economic and financial impact, which may be further quantified, measured and confirmed by a series of adequate indicators. Following this line of reasoning, the social sector is increasingly involved with heritage related initiatives and actions.

In this context, the concept of cultural capital is crucial to our understanding and to the advancement of heritage discussions. Investing in cultural heritage takes a whole new meaning in view of sustainable development strategies, which treat available resources with respect and provide for its continuous enrichment. In the long term, investing in culture becomes a necessity.

As a result, the issues of conservation, management, enhancement and valorization of cultural heritage are central to most, if not all, European cultural heritage organizations seeking to find new answers to old and complex problems. This particular session of the conference addresses issues related to public investment and regional development, the establishment of new business models and partnerships, the creation of cultural heritage products and cultural entrepreneurship. Accepting the fact that cultural heritage should remain in the realm of public investment for reasons that transcend pure economic arguments, where should the limits of public expenditure be set? How can cultural heritage services mobilize diverse sources of funding in order to generate added value? What should be the contribution of private investment? What solutions are available in the current circumstances of socioeconomic change, fiscal austerity and consolidation programs? How may the member states of the EU fully exploit the European Structural Funds for the sustainable use and re-use of cultural heritage, while the cost of protection is constantly increasing? What steps and actions do experts propose towards a more targeted EU policy and an integrated approach in the area of cultural heritage economy in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy? In conclusion, what is

the best approach in order to render our cultural heritage economically sustainable, and how may the latter contribute to the sustainability goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy?

Throughout the session, the role of partnerships emerges as a valuable option for future policies in cultural heritage management and protection, taking into consideration the prerequisites of sustainable economic development.

3. Thematic Session C: Cultural heritage, social responsibility, social participation

The role of culture and cultural heritage as factors of social cohesion emerges as one of the major challenges for 21st century societies in general, and is of great significance to the very sustainability of the European unification endeavor. Today, the cohesive power of culture acquires a new dynamic with regard to the transformations brought about by globalization and the current crisis. Rising unemployment, deepening inequalities, poverty and social exclusion, escalating phenomena of marginalization, xenophobia and racism, weaken social cohesion, cause cracks in the social fabric, and ultimately undermine the conditions for sustainable development.

The European vision for “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” also promotes a recovery model that seeks to combine competitiveness and efficiency with social awareness, solidarity and justice, incorporating the fundamental demand for more effective social protection, equality and fight against discrimination. The concept of sustainability in the cultural field entails equal access to cultural goods and protection of cultural rights as an integral part of the human rights acknowledged for all members of society without discrimination (intra-generational equity). It also ensures the enjoyment of the benefits of culture by future generations on an equal basis (intergenerational equity). Sustainable development also requires the preservation of cultural diversity as “common heritage of mankind”, which in turn implies “the recognition of equal dignity and respect for all cultures”.

In this context, cultural heritage as a public good rightfully accessible to all, as a dynamic bearer of messages, values and symbols that permeate human experience and nurture our daily life, as a field of fruitful dialogue and interaction with the “other”, and as a source of social capital can become a key factor of social inclusion, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence. Cultural participation actuates skills, helps boost self-esteem and enhance self-confidence, leads to richer mental, spiritual and emotional life, while fostering the development of opportunities for active citizenship, which in turn motivates change in various aspects of public life.

While the role of cultural heritage in the achievement of goals such as quality of life, sustainable community growth and consolidation of social cohesion is increasingly acknowledged in official discourse, several more steps in this direction are required at the level of local, national and supranational policy planning. Furthermore, although cultural institutions are increasingly interested in the general public and in liaisons with local communities, in reality only part of the population can usually benefit from cultural activities. That is because barriers (physical, economic, social, intellectual, cultural) still hinder access even to public institutions, while conscious adoption of an open, participatory policy with an emphasis on the promotion of intercultural dialogue and active engagement of the public – especially of the socially excluded groups – as a stakeholder and



co-creator of cultural products (e.g. museum exhibitions) has not yet been universally established in Europe.⁴

Encouraging cultural participation of all citizens without discrimination, and developing strategies for real and effective cultural integration of vulnerable social groups⁵ will require social responsibility on the part of traditional cultural institutions such as museums, change of established attitudes, the acceptance of pluralism, of the legitimacy of multiple "readings", and of different interpretations of cultural heritage, the transfer of power to communities of "non-experts" as well as investment in a long term partnership with civil society. How can heritage be utilized as a vehicle for public participation and social sustainable development? What is the individual and social value of engagement with cultural heritage, what forms does it take, what are the benefits for participants, the sector and society in general? How can heritage sites and institutions work towards developing new and more socially representative audiences? How can effective partnerships with other organizations be established in order to achieve social sustainability goals?

This session of the conference aims to address the current European debate on the contribution of cultural heritage policies to the sense of "belonging" among all members of local communities, on the advancement of social cohesion, and on the encouragement of active citizenship in an ever-changing environment characterized by intense mobility and interaction of people, goods, ideas and knowledge. And all that as the needs of vulnerable population groups are growing exponentially, while the welfare state is shrinking.

4 OMC Report on "Policies and Good Practices in the Public Arts and in Cultural Institutions to Promote Better Access to and Wider Participation in Culture", October 2012.

5 Disabled, immigrants, refugees, unemployed, prisoners, ex-prisoners, mentally ill, addicted, detoxified, homeless, impoverished, national, ethnic, religious minority groups etc.