

Virtual CityLab : Managing Tourism in Historic City Centers: Balancing Habitability, Heritage and Economy

Co-organised with the City of Amsterdam and the
European Alliance on Balance Urban Tourism
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Report



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INTRODUCTION

Since 2025, *CityLabs* have served as a platform to support the collective development of the *New Urban Process* (NUP) of the Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC). By exploring specific themes deemed essential by member cities, they aim to ensure that the priority issues facing historic centres are fully integrated into the NUP. These meetings, held in the form of workshops, enable participants to formulate shared observations and objectives.

With a view to the adoption of the NUP at the 18th OWHC World Congress, to be held in Marrakesh (26-29 October 2026), the *CityLabs* have moved to a virtual format to facilitate final discussions on topics that have not yet been sufficiently explored but are essential to the coherence and relevance of the NUP.

In collaboration with the City of Amsterdam—through the Office of Monuments and Archaeology and the Department of Economic Affairs and Culture—and with the support of the European Alliance on Balanced Urban Tourism, the OWHC coordinated the virtual *CityLab* entitled “Managing Tourism in Historic City Centers: Balancing Habitability, Heritage and Economy”, held on 2 April 2026. This *CityLab* built upon the outcomes of a first workshop organized in the fall of 2025, entitled “Rethinking Tourism to Restore Balance in Historic City Centers.”

The *CityLab* contributed to advancing a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with sustainable tourism in historic centres and highlighted the need to further refine both the conceptual and operational dimensions of balanced urban tourism.

The contributions gathered during this workshop form the basis of this report, which has been prepared jointly by the General Secretariat of the OVPM and the coordinating city.

THEME OVERVIEW

The theme of the *CityLab* was designed to explore balanced urban tourism as a strategic response to the growing pressures faced by historic city centres due to increasing visitor flows. Discussions examined how tourism models can be reoriented by rethinking the notion of hospitality and redefining the relationships between residents, visitors, and economic actors. From this perspective, the exchange focused on two main thematic axes:

1. The evolution of visitor profiles and practices.
2. Governance mechanisms, with particular attention to the role of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in structuring, coordinating, and regulating tourism dynamics.

A central premise of the workshop was that achieving balance in tourism requires moving beyond short-term, reactive measures toward comprehensive, forward-looking strategies, to tackle challenges such as overtourism and monocultural urban development. Taking this in consideration, three complementary fields of action appear as essential to discuss for the maintenance of the long-term vitality of historic centres:

- The development of diverse, high-quality housing, supported by local services, to ensure the continued presence and well-being of residents in historic centres.
- The design of public spaces as shared living environments, fostering social cohesion and everyday urban life;



- The implementation of sustainable and accessible mobility systems, enhancing intermodality and facilitating the movement of both residents and visitors.

Within this framework, *habitability*—as defined by the OWHC—emerges as an integrated vision of the historic centre, where heritage plays a central and active role. Both tangible and intangible heritage not only contribute to local identity but also act as a resource for innovation, supporting the development of inclusive, resilient, and hospitable urban environments. When mobilized in this way, heritage becomes a driver of transformation, rooted in the long-term intelligence of the territory.

At the same time, the theme of the *CityLab* focuses on understanding the limits of isolated or ad hoc interventions aimed solely at mitigating the negative impacts of tourism. While such measures may be effective in specific contexts, they do not fundamentally reposition tourism as a lever for integrated urban development. Similarly, no single narrative or promotional strategy can adequately address the complexity of tourism in historic centres. Instead, a collective effort is required—mobilizing public authorities, experts, citizens, and economic actors—to co-construct new, context-sensitive narratives and approaches.

IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

The discussions among participants made it possible to identify the following six shared challenges related to tourism management in historic cities:

1. Pressure on historic centers and public spaces

Across all cities, tourism remains highly concentrated in historic centers, where its impacts are most visible. Participants highlighted that visitors are primarily attracted to iconic areas, leading to overcrowding, congestion, and pressure on public spaces. For instance, in Amsterdam and Paris, the historic core absorbs the majority of tourist flows. This concentration is further intensified by the growth of day visitors, who tend to occupy public spaces without significantly contributing to the local economy.

2. Housing and social impacts

Tourism is increasingly linked to housing challenges, particularly through the expansion of short-term rentals. Several cities reported rising rental prices and the gradual displacement of residents and traditional businesses. These dynamics contribute to growing tensions between maintaining and urban life and accommodating tourism growth.

3. Economic imbalance and low-value tourism

A recurring concern is the rise of tourism models that generate limited economic value while increasing pressure on infrastructure. Many cities observed a shift toward day trips and free activities, with visitors spending less on cultural institutions or local businesses. In Regensburg, for example, cruise tourism is perceived as generating high volumes of visitors but limited local economic benefits. Similarly, Luxembourg highlighted the dominance of same-day visitors from neighboring countries and the challenge of extending their stay.

4. Governance complexity and coordination challenges

Tourism management involves a wide range of stakeholders, making governance particularly complex. Cities emphasized the need to coordinate between municipal departments (economic development, heritage, mobility), DMOs, and private actors. In this context, tensions can arise due to differing objectives, especially between marketing strategies and regulatory measures. For instance, several cities noted that DMOs are often external to municipal structures, as in Porto or Brussels, which can complicate alignment despite close collaboration.



5. Lack of data and monitoring tools

Participants widely acknowledged the importance of data in managing tourism but also identified significant gaps in access and capacity. Cities expressed the need for better tools to measure visitor flows, behaviors, and impacts, including indicators such as tourism density or carrying capacity.

6. Seasonality and uneven spatial distribution

Tourism flows are often highly uneven, both in time and space. Several cities reported strong seasonal peaks, leading to temporary overcrowding followed by periods of low activity. In smaller cities such as Évora or Rhodes, this imbalance is particularly challenging, as large numbers of visitors arrive during specific periods without staying long enough to generate sustained benefits all over the year.

COMMON SOLUTIONS

The discussions among participants revealed a strong convergence around a set of shared initiatives and approaches to managing historic city centers. The following six elements synthesize the main common trends identified through the exchange of experiences:

1. Shift in Priorities

Cities demonstrated a strong convergence toward a shared vision of tourism management that prioritizes balance over growth. There is a clear shift from a quantitative approach—focused on increasing visitor numbers—toward a qualitative model that emphasizes longer stays, higher-value experiences, and a better distribution of benefits.

2. Cross-sectoral approaches

A common trend among participating cities is the recognition that tourism can no longer be managed as a standalone sector. Instead, it must be integrated into a wider urban strategy that includes housing, mobility, environmental transition, and economic development. Discussions highlighted that issues such as short-term rentals, public spaces management, and accessibility are deeply interconnected, requiring holistic and cross-sectoral approaches.

3. Cooperation between stakeholders

Cities also agreed on the importance of strengthening governance frameworks and collaboration mechanisms. Effective tourism management depends on close coordination between municipalities, DMOs, and a wide range of public and private stakeholders. While governance models vary, there is a shared understanding that clear objectives, political leadership, and sustained dialogue are essential to align interests and ensure coherent action.

4. Diversification strategies

Another key point of convergence lies in the growing importance of spatial and temporal diversification strategies. Many cities are actively seeking to reduce pressure on historic centers by encouraging visitors to explore other neighborhoods or regions, as well as by promoting off-peak travel. These strategies are often combined with efforts to reposition heritage, local identity, and creative initiatives as central elements of the tourism offer.

5. Residents' contribution

Participants emphasized the central role of residents in shaping sustainable tourism models. There is a shared consensus that tourism must be socially acceptable and generate tangible benefits for local communities. This includes fostering community engagement, maintaining neighborhood life, and ensuring that economic gains do not come at the expense of residents' quality of life.



6. Data collection and monitoring

There is recognition of the need for improved data and monitoring tools to support decision-making. Cities highlighted the importance of developing indicators, better understanding visitor behaviors, and leveraging data to guide policies. While capacities vary, the trend is toward more evidence-based approaches.

POINTS OF DIVERGENCE OR SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS

The discussions highlighted the specific characteristics of each city, which are closely linked to their respective institutional, social and economic contexts. The following five points summarise the main areas of divergence and distinctive features relating to the management of tourism in historic centers:

1. Tourism pressure at different degrees

One of the most significant differences between cities lies in the level of tourism pressure they experience. While some cities are facing clear situations of overtourism, others are still in a phase of growth or even seeking to attract more visitors. For example, Amsterdam and Paris are dealing with high concentrations of visitors in their historic centers and are actively implementing strategies to regulate flows and reduce pressure. In contrast, cities such as Vilnius indicated that overtourism is not yet a major issue.

2. Economic importance of tourism activities

Another divergence concerns the economic role of tourism within cities. In some cases, tourism is a central pillar of the local economy, while in others it remains a secondary activity. For instance, in Willemstad, tourism growth is a key economic driver. By contrast, Luxembourg described tourism as a relatively minor component of its economy.

3. Governance modes

Governance models and institutional arrangements also vary across cities. In several cases, DMOs operate outside municipal structures but maintain close collaboration with local authorities. This is the case in Porto and Brussels, where cooperation exists but may involve tensions due to differing mandates or financial constraints. In other contexts, such as Regensburg, the tourism agency is owned by the city, allowing for stronger alignment between marketing and public policy objectives.

4. Regulatory frameworks

Differences are also evident in legal and regulatory frameworks, particularly in relation to housing and tourism regulation. Some cities are developing or strengthening legislative tools to address the impacts of tourism. For example, Mexico City is currently discussing regulations to control short-term rentals and rising housing costs in its historic center. Meanwhile, other cities are still exploring how to implement such measures or operate within more limited regulatory frameworks.

5. Different type of tourism activities

While heritage is an essential part of the tourism activities in the majority of cities, the nature and structure of tourism itself vary across contexts, leading to distinct challenges. Some cities are heavily impacted by mass tourism or specific segments such as cruise tourism, as noted in Regensburg. Others are more focused on cultural tourism or event-driven tourism, such as Amsterdam.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the shared findings of the *CityLab*, several strategic orientations emerge to guide future actions and support the ongoing development of the *New Urban Process*.

1. Strengthening cross-sectoral governance

There is a need to strengthen integrated and cross-sectoral governance frameworks for tourism management. Cities should move toward more structured coordination between departments (heritage, housing, mobility, economy) and with external stakeholders such as DMOs and private actors. This includes clarifying roles and responsibilities, aligning strategic objectives, and fostering continuous dialogue mechanisms. Developing governance models that better articulate promotion and regulation will be essential to ensure coherent and balanced strategies.

2. Prioritizing quality over quantity

A qualitative approach to tourism focuses on longer stays, higher-value experiences, and a better distribution of economic benefits. This implies rethinking tourism strategies beyond visitor numbers and promoting cultural, local, and sustainable offers that reinforce the identity and attractiveness of historic centers while supporting local economies.

3. Monitoring impacts

Cities must develop and implement tools for monitoring and managing tourism impacts. This includes the creation of shared indicators among all stakeholders—such as tourism density, carrying capacity, or length of stay—as well as improved access to and use of data. Strengthening data-driven approaches will allow cities to anticipate pressures, evaluate policies, and adapt strategies over time.

4. Diversify the offer

To reduce tourism pressure on historic centers, cities can advance spatial and temporal diversification strategies. These strategies include encouraging visitors to explore less frequented areas, promoting off-peak travel, and leveraging regional and mobility frameworks—such as transport corridors—to redistribute visitor flows more effectively. Diversification also involves encouraging longer visitor stays, which are seen not only as a means of improving the quality of the tourism experience but also as a way to increase local economic benefits, including tourism-related spending and hotel tax revenues.

5. Prioritizing the local population needs

Another key recommendation is to place residents at the core of tourism policies. Ensuring social acceptance requires maintaining a balance between tourism development and quality of life, supporting local uses of public spaces, and fostering community engagement. Cities should also explore initiatives that reconnect residents and visitors and ensure that tourism generates tangible benefits for local populations. Furthermore, it is essential to address the relationship between tourism and housing through holistic approaches. Policies regulating short-term rentals, controlling real estate pressure, and preserving residential functions in historic centers should be integrated into broader urban strategies, recognizing that tourism-related challenges are closely linked to wider structural dynamics.

It was seen as essential to develop strategies to sensitize residents about tourism. Beyond mitigating negative impacts, there is a need to develop communication and awareness-raising initiatives aimed at fostering a more nuanced understanding of tourism among local populations. Improving social acceptance requires acknowledging existing tensions while promoting local development under clear and collectively defined conditions.



CONCLUSION

The *CityLab* confirms the strategic importance of sustained knowledge exchange and collective learning among cities in support of the *New Urban Process*. The diversity of urban contexts, governance models, and tourism dynamics fosters the co-production of solutions grounded in real urban conditions. Future actions should therefore prioritize the identification and capitalization of good practices, the reinforcement of peer-to-peer cooperation.

Despite differences in scale, institutional arrangements, and levels of tourism pressure, participating cities expressed a strong convergence around common priorities. A balanced urban tourism model should be shifting away from growth-driven approaches toward a model capable of addressing tourism pressures while reinforcing *habitability* in historic centres. A central lever in this transition is the placement of residents at the heart of tourism strategies.

The *CityLab* also underscored the critical role of governance and institutional cooperation in achieving these objectives. Effective collaboration between municipalities and DMO's is essential to better articulate promotional strategies with regulatory tools and broader urban policies.

While cities experience tourism at different intensities—ranging from situations of mass tourism to contexts seeking increased visibility—there is a common ambition to improve the quality of tourism and to ensure that visitor presence contributes positively to urban life. Whether through diversification, regulation, or targeted development, the objective remains to avoid monocultural dynamics and the excessive commercialization of public spaces, while reinforcing the multifunctional character of historic centres.



ANNEXES

Participant List

CITY	NAME	ROLE
Amsterdam	Chantal van Binsbergen	Speaker
Amsterdam	Ella Ripken	Coordinator
Amsterdam	Inez Weyermans	Coordinator
Amsterdam	Jelmer Peter	Speaker
Brussels	Patrick Struelens	Participant
Evora	Miguel Pedro	Participant
Jongno-Seoul	Hye Ran Seo	Participant
Luxembourg	Jhonny Fernandes	Participant
Mexico City	Anabelí Contreras Julián	Participant
Paris	Perrine Gros	Participant (City invited by the European Alliance on Balanced Urban Tourism)
Porto	Alda Bessa	Participant
Porto	Ana Paula Marques	Participant
Regensburg	Monika Goettler	Participant
Rhodes	Polly Chatzimarkou	Participant
Vilnius	Guoda Šlajūtė	Participant
Willemstad	Juleyma van Heydoorn	Participant