

Cordoba Path

CityLab "Heritage Narratives and Urban Regeneration"

Cordoba, June 9-10, 2025



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INTRODUCTION

The Cordoba CityLab, organized on June 9 and 10, 2025, is part of the *Cordoba Path* program, which will contribute to the development of *the New Urban Project* for OWHC member cities.

Citizen participation is essential for the adoption of strategies and the implementation of projects to regenerate habitability in historic centers, which will be targeted by the *New Urban Project*. With this in mind, the CityLab aimed to determine the role of "heritage communities" and the narratives they tell, as well as the heritage they bring to life. The CityLab drew on the principles of the Faro Convention¹ on the value of heritage for society, which propose a paradigm shift by placing people at the heart of heritage processes, from the designation of what constitutes heritage, how it is interpreted and promoted, to participation in the ethical debates raised by urban revitalization, as well as the associated implementation network (², notably supporting experiences in the cities of Venice and Marseille).

Three working hypotheses were submitted to participants representing the cities of Cordoba, Marrakech, Riga and San Antonio³:

1. The diversity of narratives, heritage and communities can renew the political imagination and fuel bold urban strategies.
2. The promotion of heritage as a resource that can be activated by society makes it possible to develop operational capacity in the face of crises.
3. Recognizing heritage as a shared responsibility promotes cooperation between public institutions and communities, generating legitimacy.

The results of the CityLab will be used by the Community of Practice for transversal analysis, with a view to identifying convergences with other themes currently being developed and bringing out new *operational objectives*. Certain issues raised during this CityLab, considered particularly structuring, may also be explored in greater depth in specific activities.

PROBLEMATICS DISCUSSED

1. **Defining and identifying heritage communities:** Participants noted the difficulty of clearly identifying these communities in urban contexts marked by migration, conflicting memories, or fragmented uses of space. The heritage to which these communities are attached is not necessarily recognized by institutions, which tend to favor the "remarkable" nature of urban heritage through its historical, artistic, scientific, or technical values, not to mention its tourist and economic appeal. The social, human, and ecological values of heritage are rarely, if ever, taken into account in identification and classification processes, and consequently the narratives and communities attached to them.

Furthermore, heritage communities are not always established, visible or organized: they can be diffuse, emerging, temporary or even formally non-existent, while maintaining a strong link—sometimes

¹ *Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* ("Faro Convention," Council of Europe, 2005), <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/culture-and-heritage/faro-convention>.

² Faro Network, Council of Europe, <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/culture-and-heritage/faro-community>.

³ List of participants in the Annex.



emotional, symbolic or customary—with certain places or practices. This raises the question of their identification and, therefore, their recognition with a view to their mobilization in heritage enhancement processes. However, administrative recognition should not be confused with social recognition: a community can value heritage without it being listed, classified or designated by the authorities.

- **Example:** The concept of "heritage community," as defined in the Faro Convention, has been cited to remind us that these are primarily groups of people who value elements of heritage and wish to pass them on, regardless of their official status or institutional visibility.
- The visibility of heritage communities varies over time. They are sometimes discreet, as in Riga (Russian heritage), or have disappeared (cemetery in Riga), or are even fragile, as in San Antonio, a sanctuary city that offers hospitality to migrants.

2. **The plurality of narratives (unique, invisible or contradictory):** World Heritage cities have prioritized the identical conservation of their heritage, which is generally based on the choice of a single grand territorial narrative for its appeal (territorial marketing) and the economic value of its tourism benefits. Excessive tourism and the crises that have multiplied in recent years are increasingly undermining these strategies: The pandemic has led to a sudden halt in international mobility, unexpected heat waves are worrying professionals, the influx of refugees is forcing the adaptation of reception policies, and the pressure on land caused by tourism is increasingly revolting residents.

It is difficult, even risky, for municipal authorities to rely solely on a single narrative when considering urban transformation options in response to contemporary challenges. These single narratives, favored for their high economic attractiveness, do not sufficiently reflect contemporary urban reality and its development potential in contexts where legacies are plural, conflicting, or undervalued. As for invisible narratives, they can emerge in a conflictual manner, as when the economic value of heritage seems to be (overly) prioritized over its social value: loss of social spaces in favor of tourism.

- **Example:** In Riga, the plurality of juxtaposed narratives—medieval, Art Nouveau, Soviet—complicates the development of a shared narrative, especially when certain memories (Russian heritage) are little acknowledged or conflictual.
- **Example:** San Antonio has emphasized the importance of letting citizens designate the places that matter to them, as illustrated by their "This Place Matters" initiative.
- **Example:** in Venice, where the narratives of ancient Venice (La Serenissima), modern Venice (industrial) and contemporary Venice (Biennale, Moise) coexist in conflict within the Arsenal.

3. **Collecting and recognizing multiple narratives:** Methodological tools exist to bring narratives to light: mediation tools, participation mechanisms, methods for the heritagization of narratives (participatory maps, walks, archives, sensitive narration). If people (communities), places, and heritage narratives are invisible according to heritage and tourism classification criteria that favor the "remarkable" and "comfortable," cities must develop other ways to make the invisible visible. Memory can even sometimes be "alive" without necessarily maintaining the built environment at all costs or only if the built environment exists. Beyond listed and registered buildings, there is a diversity of other methods that enable narratives to be registered as heritage and that are mobilized by heritage communities, for example through archiving processes (in public or private archives), the publication of works (ISBN number), artistic creation (works of art), street naming, events, or the mobilization of environmental protection measures: identification of endemic plants, creation of protected areas, protection of green and blue infrastructure.

- **Example:** The format of the "heritage walk," as defined by the Faro Convention, provides a sensitive way to discover the diversity of people, places, and narratives, as well as the values and mechanisms mobilized by heritage communities (unanimously recognized as a relevant tool).
- **Example:** The GR2013 in Marseille as a way of narrating the metropolitan city, which is explored by residents, walking artists, and civil servants.
- **Example:** The hospitality narratives of the Hôtel du Nord cooperative in Marseille in the form of books, artistic creations, heritage itineraries, local products (PDO) and rooms in private homes.

4. **Changes in lifestyles:** cities have witnessed tensions between modern comfort, building preservation, and changing uses. Classification systems for tourist accommodation (lodging, transportation, cultural sites) favor modern comfort in terms of private spaces, services, facilities, and contactless technology. The more private, large and well-equipped, the better the tourist rating. Conversely, heritage cities, beyond the remarkable sites that are home to large hotels and heritage sites, have a heritage that favors modest housing, shared common spaces, contribution (participation) and relationships with living beings (inhabitants, animals, plants). Heritage sites are often defined by the way they are inhabited: the ways of living in these places continue to evolve over time, in line with demographic changes and societal phenomena, such as the development of teleworking. These changes affect both the habitability of housing and public space. The dominant role of cars in cities is declining in favor of other, more sustainable forms of mobility. These evolving relationships between housing and inhabitants determine the success of urban projects.

- **Example:** The fondouks in Marrakech were inhabited by artisans with their temporary accommodation, workshops, storage areas and animals. They were then inhabited by families. The workshops, storage areas and accommodation became permanent dwellings.
- **Example:** In Cordoba, where life in the patios requires the shared maintenance of common spaces and gardens to maintain a pleasant living environment (aesthetics, freshness, mobility). The monitoring of 24 patios makes it possible to continuously document the ecological and social impact of the ways in which the patios are used and their architectural features.
- **Example:** In Riga, the conservation of wooden houses is closely linked to the conservation of construction methods and craftsmanship, with the example of renewed wooden facade cladding with ecological insulation materials like wood fibre over the use of synthetic materials to improve the insulation of dwellings (heritage value vs. ecological value).
- **Example:** Rooms in private homes in Marseille that prioritize comfort (relationships with people, living things, and places) over amenities.

5. **Governance and organization of heritage services:** there is considerable diversity between cities. They may also have two approaches to heritage communities:

- **The first involves consulting** heritage communities on public heritage policies (Cordoba, Marrakech): public meetings, working groups, etc. It takes time for the results of these heritage policies to become visible, and requires education and awareness-raising, particularly among young people.
- **The second approach involves** heritage communities in public heritage policies: calls for projects (San Antonio, Riga). This requires the creation of new frameworks for public action that encourage involvement. The heritage department in San Antonio runs projects to collect narratives, such as the "*This place matters*" app, and calls for projects.

However, contrary to the experiences developed within the Faro Network, heritage communities are not fully involved in heritage creation, from its identification to its promotion. "Shared responsibility" (Chapter III of the Faro Convention) does not mean that communities will take the place of heritage institutions, but rather that they will reinforce them "within the framework of public action" by bringing new ways of telling stories, new uses, and new heritage values such as socialization, sobriety, and social inclusion.

- **Example:** In Riga, in the last 10 years civil society has become a key player in heritage policy.
- **Example:** In San Antonio, the heritage department works with all municipal departments.

RESULTS

Shared statements

- **Heritage communities** can be invisible, emerging, mobilized around non-heritage issues (social, ecological) or in disagreement with official policies. The challenge is to recognize their attachment to heritage (tangible or intangible), understand their emotional, symbolic or everyday relationship with the city, and create mechanisms for them to participate in defining urban issues and implementing responses. The narratives of these communities are often multiple, intertwined, even conflicting, and promoting them requires a change in attitude on the part of institutions towards greater listening and co-construction.
- **Public policy frameworks must adapt to the involvement of heritage communities** (it is not a lack of budget but the absence of an integrated strategy that limits the impact of heritage policies). Heritage is often the domain of experts who, given their training, favor certain types of heritage values and disregard (institutional issues) or ignore others (cognitive biases).
- **Heritage is a means of engaging the whole of society** in urban transformation (through communities and their narratives and values) and of diversifying heritage knowledge and skills, whether in relation to identification, study, interpretation, protection, conservation, and promotion of heritage as resources that are already present (prioritizing the robustness of diverse expertise over the performance of a single expertise).
- In order for narratives to create community, their transmission and translation into the urban fabric must be based on specifications and specific programming that is both sensitive and integrated into the context and its contemporary issues.
- It is impossible to conceive of new urban alternatives and approaches with a single narrative and a single way of promoting it as the collective imagination. We must dare to draw on the imagination and human, narrative, symbolic, and material resources to bring forth new inspiring and mobilizing "narratives" that are ly integrated into the given context. The narratives carried by historic cities and liberated by communities must nourish and energize an innovative urban project that is nevertheless rooted in local spaces, communities, and identities, capable of guaranteeing and strengthening habitability and guiding the city toward sustainable development.

Courses of action

- **Putting people at the center:** *"A city without inhabitants is a museum"* and *"People are central": "Without people living there, there is no need to develop transportation, refresh the city, or regenerate housing and the urban environment."* Without inhabitants, the four priorities of the OWHC are meaningless: what is the point of regenerating, refreshing, rehabilitating, and developing mobility if no one lives in the city? Preserving and passing on lifestyles (uses, objects, organization, know-how) is as important as preserving buildings and

adapting them to contemporary issues. *What is the point of preserving a wooden building if we no longer know how to build it? What can be done when owners and lifestyles change?* The functions of buildings and public spaces are bound to evolve in order to keep heritage alive. Just like lifestyles, the functions of a city evolve—public and private services—and the habitability of private and public spaces is not fixed but evolving: increasing the density of public services, local shops, and places for socializing.

- **Develop a culture of heritage cooperation.** We do not necessarily need more budgets and resources, but rather a change in approach. Taking better account of heritage as a resource for society requires the development of a shared "heritage culture" across all municipal services and society as a whole. This facilitates transversality between municipal services, in particular the necessary convergence of urban planning and heritage approaches. Heritage is a way of getting the whole society on board. The lack of time available to heritage managers, who are rarely able to anticipate crises such as societal changes, could be offset by strengthening cooperation with civil society and academia: research (assessment, observations), monitoring (indicators, critical analysis).
- **Promote robust public heritage policies (rather than performance).** Heritage must be able to evolve with society. Municipalities cannot control and imagine everything on their own. They sometimes lack ideas on how to use heritage sites and have their own cognitive biases. Better consideration of the diversity of heritage resources – people, places and narratives – requires strengthening the training of municipal officials in "real participation." Public heritage policies must be flexible enough to adapt continuously to changing lifestyles in both public and private spaces.
- **Implement an integrated public heritage policy.** Historic cities need a curator dedicated to a specific area in order to "put people at the center":
 - **Promote a "public service" approach** for heritage communities (moving away from a top-down public policy approach);
 - **Develop a heritage approach that is integrated** into a specific, defined local area (moving away from an approach based solely on classification categories);
 - **Encourage shared awareness** among the city's various departments of the value of heritage for society (moving away from a sectoral approach);
 - **Develop collective actions** for archiving (documentation), awareness raising (emotional) and animation (festivals, events, accessibility).

This strategy can be supported by heritage walks as a tool. They allow for better consideration of the diversity of stakeholders and seek to balance approaches rather than impose a single point of view and strategy, however good it may be.

Areas for further development

- **Heritagization of narratives in contexts of conflict or sensitive memory** (notably Riga with regard to its Soviet past): This issue was raised but could be explored further. How can a city manage conflicting or painful narratives (colonization, war, forced migration) without freezing an official version? What tools can be used to allow expression without legitimizing discriminatory narratives? How can competing narratives in the same space be arbitrated?
- **Framework for recognizing heritage communities:** The difficulty of identifying and recognizing communities was expressed, but the practical modalities of this recognition remained unclear. Should a status or flexible criteria be created to recognize these communities? What formats for dialogue or consultation should be provided? What tensions arise with institutional representations of heritage?

- **Qualify the interactions between tourism strategy and the specific living environment of historic cities.** Historic cities have prioritized the attractiveness of "cultural tourists," who are considered to be more spendthrift, less seasonal, and consumers of cultural offerings and local crafts. The aim was to prioritize the "quality" of tourists rather than the number of tourists. However, the growth of this "cultural tourism" in historic cities—which are inhabited and have limited space—now poses problems such as overcrowding in public spaces, land speculation on housing and businesses, and the displacement of local businesses in favor of multinational chains.

Annex: List of participants

EXPERTS AND ORGANIZERS

- Prosper Wanner, Lecturer and researcher
- Gaia Redaelli, Co-founder and President of the PAX – Patios de la Axerquia association
- Émilie Gourbin, Urban Heritage Project Manager, General Secretariat of the OWHC

PARTICIPANTS FROM OWHC MEMBER CITIES

- Cordoba (Spain) – host city
 - Carmen Chacon Guerrero, Architect, Head of the Historic Center Office
 - Rosa Lara Jimenez, Architect
- Marrakech (Morocco) – Mohamed Benchakroun, City Councilor, Architect
- Riga (Latvia) – Jānis Bērziņš, Head of the Heritage Protection Office of the Urban Development Department
- San Antonio (USA) – Colleen Swain, Director of the Historic Center Office