



# The Cultural Heritage Sector: current needs, challenges, and opportunities

Rapid societal changes in conjunction with economic, environmental, energy, humanitarian and health crises have deeply impacted the entire cultural ecosystem. The cultural heritage (CH) sector, both at European and global level, has to tackle a complex reality, with multiple challenges and bottlenecks that create specific urgent needs. The COVID-19 pandemic and the energy and cost of living crisis that followed the war in Ukraine are being the most recent examples, which have both compounded the challenges already faced by the sector and created new ones. The first step a museum or a heritage site must take in order to tackle this complex reality is to understand the needs, challenges and bottlenecks of this era. An in-depth understanding of the current situation in the CH sector will facilitate CH professionals to develop a Cultural Heritage Management (CHM) plan that provides a vision, aims and actions designed to address these needs. This crucial step will help museums and heritage sites to understand how to turn challenges into opportunities and act as a major resource for resilience, connection, recovery, and positive change, contributing to the creation of inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable societies in this ever-changing environment.

## *What is the current situation in the CH sector across Europe?*

In the context of the ReInHerit project we mapped the current status quo of the CH sector in Europe in order to provide an overview of the current needs, challenges and opportunities. The current situation in the CH sector can be indicatively summarized as follows:

- **Need for interdisciplinary collaboration so as to avoid fragmentations:** The CH sector is characterized by fragmentation at multiple levels, which creates serious gaps and obstacles to the sustainable management of CH. Dealing with the inclusive and extensive

concept of CH, the entire sector became itself very broad acquiring an interdisciplinary character, since it cuts across many disciplines and fields (social sciences, humanities, architecture, law, management, marketing, finance, restoration, conservation, curatorship, ICT, museology, etc.). This has resulted in difficulties in communication and collaboration between different professional experts (e.g., CH professionals, ICT experts, IPR experts, etc.). As a result of this complex reality there are many adversities in terms of how these experts engage with CH and how they can work together.

- **Sustainable business models resilient to changes and crises:** Budget and funding are decreasing in the CH sector. Yet, financial sustainability is important for museums and CH institutions to pursue their aims and goals. Therefore, the CH sector currently faces the challenge to reassess its underlying business models. Innovative approaches to funding and sustainability are needed for museums and CH institutions to be resilient to change and crises, to promote and diversify the cultural offer, as well as see opportunities where crises lay.
- **Redefining the relationship between museums and their various audiences:** museums and CH institutions are still facing adversities in sustaining and inspiring actual audiences as well as in attracting potential audiences. Engaging with audiences is a complex process given the fact that there are different types of audiences with major diversities in motivation, interests, barriers, experiences, and needs. Furthermore, technological achievements and the recent COVID-19 pandemic changed audience behavior, and this change requires new policies that meet these needs. More specifically, CH professionals are facing difficulties in reaching specific target groups, such as young people, locals, tourists, and making CH relevant to them. It is an extremely challenging task for CH professionals to manage the tangible and intangible CH taking into account the needs of the various audiences, using a management approach.
- **Need to redefine the management of collections based on evolving ethical standards and new trends:** museums and CH institutions need to redefine the way they manage their collections. They have an important duty to collect, preserve and disseminate tangible and intangible CH, taking into account high legal, ethical and professional standards. Despite significant calls for repatriation and decolonization of collections, there are several constraints, differences in attitudes and lack of information that make this task increasingly difficult and as a result create gaps of understanding between artefacts and the communities/countries these artefacts originate from. Lack of resources, the use of institutional gaps and/or political will or difficulties arising from illicit trafficking of cultural objects are some of the obstacles only.
- **Environmentally friendly museums and CH institutions:** climate change and environmental issues play a key role on how museums and CH institutions should be engaged with society as part of the sector's commitment towards it. They are expected to

operate as change makers and leaders in order to better respond to the environmental challenges that the world faces today. This is more relevant than ever, as the current energy and cost of living crisis has forced museums and heritage to find sustainable ways revisit and adapt environmental plans, to reduce energy consumption, to improve sustainability for their buildings, and to find alternative energy sources.

- **The pandemic and the recent energy cost increases, a challenge to crisis management and an opportunity for digital services:** the wide-ranging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it present critical risks for the CH sector due to the intermittent closure of sites (especially in the first stage of the pandemic) and the personal protection measures. Furthermore, the recent energy and cost of living crisis that followed the war in Ukraine tends to be even worse than the COVID-19 pandemic. Museums and CH institutions are extremely vulnerable to unprecedented cost increases following a period of declining revenues during the pandemic. Importantly, this situation has heightened the different challenges faced by the sector, which now strives to find new methods of operating (including going digital, and finding alternative energy sources) and dealing with abnormal situations where normal operation is not possible.

## *What is the next step?*

Over the coming years, museums and heritage sites are called to successfully respond to the rapidly changing reality and act timely and effectively in such a manner and form so as to respond to their social role, responsibilities and the challenges arising. CH professionals should be constantly alert and fully aware of ever-changing global circumstances. This is an absolutely essential step that helps the resilience of museums and heritage sites. The CH sector in Europe should take into account the needs, challenges and opportunities discussed above, build on the best practices of the pre-pandemic situation and the lessons learned over the pandemic, and develop a more sustainable CHM, within the context of technological developments, digital innovation and the Metaverse.

### The Project

This study is part of the research project “Redefining the future of cultural heritage, through a disruptive model of sustainability” (ReInHerit), which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (<https://www.reinherit.eu/>).

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