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PRESS RELEASE + REPORT

Outcomes of the conference “Increasing Europe’s competitiveness through cultural heritage research”

Preserving Europe’s cultural heritage: Where to start?

Whether from climate change, mass tourism or decay of historical objects, cultural heritage researchers in Europe face many challenges. Common priorities became apparent at a conference about the EU project NET-HERITAGE, on 24 March in Brussels. And among these and other important issues raised by the 170 participants were the economic and social value of cultural heritage for Europe.



Crowded city centres, queues of tourists in front of museums, storms, acid rain, decayed buildings, threatened landscapes: scenarios which are already a reality in many European regions and cities. Conference speakers, however, affirmed that even in times of budget cuts it is worthwhile invest in research on cultural heritage. In Europe today, many medium and small-sized companies are active in the field of cultural heritage. The European market for heritage conservation is estimated to be about EUR 5 billion a year. The field supports around 9 million jobs in the tourism sector, according to a study from LAGroup & Interarts. “But it goes far beyond that: cultural heritage is invaluable”, said Luisa Prista, Head of Unit “Environment” at the Directorate General for Research and Innovation at the European Commission (EC), referring to the social importance of the domain. “The EU claims to be a pioneer in cultural heritage research”, said Ms Prista. At mid-term of the 7th Framework Programme, the EC has already invested EUR 31.5 million in environmental research projects applied to the protection of cultural heritage.

Common needs, strengths and priorities



Currently in many European countries there is a lack of continuous funding for research and for measures to preserve cultural heritage objects. “This is worrying, because there is a continuous need for maintenance”, said Ersébet Kovács, Vice-president of the Hungarian office of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). With the cooperation project NET-HERITAGE, the European Commission, Member States and Associated

Countries aim to increase exchange between 15 funding ministries and national institutions for the financing cultural heritage research. “This project is the first important initiative which gives an overview of what has been achieved at the national level”, project coordinator Antonia Recchia from the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities said.



“Within NET-HERITAGE for the first time common research priorities have been identified”, noted Cristina Sabbioni from the Italian National Research Council (CNR, picture on the left) and professor of physics at the University of Bologna. She coordinated a survey about research priorities. The NET-HERITAGE partners opted for twelve themes. The top two are: non-invasive instruments, and methodologies for diagnosis, monitoring and the development of portable instruments for in

situ measurements. “With this catalogue, we clearly indicate the future funding actions needed”, Sabbioni said. Stakeholders attending the conference appreciated the formulation of these priorities and took the opportunity to offer cooperation: “The UNESCO World Heritage programme, with its 911 world heritage sites – among them 450 in Europe – provides an excellent source for monitoring”, said Mechthild Rössler, Chief of Policy and Statutory Section at the UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

Cultural heritage: a non-renewable resource



Researchers present in Brussels already had figures at hand to show the dangers facing cultural heritage. “Storms, floods and landslides threaten historical buildings”, explained the conservation scientist Johanna Leissner from Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft (picture on the left). She and her colleagues measured the indoor ‘micro climate’ of the famous Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany and in other historical building between 1995 and 2010. They have now conducted

a simulation up to the year 2100 within the EU research project “Climate for Culture”. The predicted rise in temperature may lead to grave repercussions to cultural heritage. “We must take care, because this is a non-renewable resource”, Ms Leissner warned.



Experts also highlighted the threats posed by bushfires and earthquakes to cultural heritage objects such as the medieval walls of the city centre of Rhodes. Mechthild Rössler from UNESCO (picture on the left) announced the publication of a new manual called ‘Managing Disaster Risks for World Heritage’, saying “We want to contribute to disaster preparedness”. However, besides catastrophic events, cultural heritage is also an everyday business: “We have to

draw the interest of decision makers and the public to the economic benefits for European regions”, said Lutz Töpfer from the German Federal Foundation for the Environment, DBU. A case study from Spain revealed this potential. “We have implemented step by step the concept of sustainable use of cultural heritage in our region. This encompasses restricted tourism seasons, signposting, monitoring and a more rational use of energy”, reported Roberto Rodriguez from Avila County Council. Other conference participants commented on the approach of promoting cultural heritage in small communities. “The small regions and the small universities especially need support”, said Ms Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailović, Secretary General of Europa Nostra, Europe’s main umbrella association of organisations involved in the upkeep of cultural heritage.

The need for virtual access



Cristina Gutiérrez-Cortines, MEP from Spain (picture on the left), postulated that a more sustainable use of cultural heritage needs to be applied to big cities: “Some people think that modernising a city means building a huge tower. But I rather prefer the preservation of historical buildings”. She favoured a broader concept of maintenance that focuses on entire city districts rather than single objects. “In times of ageing societies and globalisation, we have to guarantee accessibility to cultural heritage – which includes virtual access to libraries and museums”, Ms Gutiérrez-Cortines said.

Ms Quaedvlieg-Mihailović presented as a case study “The Letters” digitalisation project by the Van Gogh Museum which has received a prize for research from Europa Nostra. It is now possible to have access to the painter’s translated letters. “This represents a very good example of the spreading of immaterial cultural heritage, contributing to the safeguarding of the original autograph material”, said Ms Quaedvlieg-Mihailović.

A fragmented research community



While the EU 2020 Strategy asks for an increase in cooperation for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the community of cultural heritage researchers in Europe remains small and fragmented, as confirmed by a survey by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland, on behalf of NET-HERITAGE. “Another problem is that university courses in conservation and restoration science often lack practical application”, reported Barbara Świątkowska from the National

Museum in Krakow (picture on the left). She added that information about the availability of PhD programmes is not well advertised.

Isolation is inevitable given the small size of the research community. “Cultural heritage researchers have to come out of their niche. They need to speak a language which is understood also by the mass media and by non-experts”, said Alison Heritage from the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM). One initiative that could help to overcome these shortcomings is the “Net-Heritage Observatory”, a website to which researchers may upload publications and career profiles. The UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council has developed this facility within the NET-HERITAGE project. May Cassar, professor at University College London, suggested additional ways to make contact with researchers: “We have done speed dating with scientists and have had a great response”, said Ms Cassar.

Capacity building – but how?



Professor Cassar leads the UK’s five year “Science and Heritage programme”, one of Europe’s most ambitious national funding programmes which started in 2008 with funding of EUR 9.5 million. “Before the launch of this programme we had a significant lack of capacity – for every sixty museums in Great Britain, there was one conservation scientist”, Ms Cassar said. She hopes the programme will enhance the impact of the cultural heritage sector, increasing its strength and

competitiveness and involving companies in research projects. ICCROM and UNESCO highlighted their efforts in enhancing international and regional capacity building. Many activities have been undertaken since the “World Heritage Convention” in 1972, including

workshops in various regions of the world, mainly in developing countries. “We have strengthened the links between capacity building and research through the establishment of specialized centres under the auspices of UNESCO”, said Mechthild Rössler.



Representatives of European small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) affirmed their interest in collaborative research projects. “We were able to found the Spin-off R.E.D. SrL, specialising in the development of sensors for extreme environments, due to the knowledge built up within the EU-research project VIDRIO”, reported Adriana Bernardi from the Italian National Research Council (CNR) and professor at the University of Ferrara. “We learned how to transfer knowledge

from research to SMEs within the European Construction Technology Platform”, noted Roko Žarnić, Minister for the Environment and Spatial Planning of Slovenia. Noting that national borders still influence the scope of activities by companies, Martin Pracher, founder of the south German company Consolidas Kunst & Kulturgut GmbH (picture on the left), said, “We would like to expand to other European countries. EU research projects could be a door opener”. His SME specialises in the conservation of stones and decontamination of museums objects. “Unfortunately, however, the bureaucracy of EU research projects is still too complex for small companies”, he added.

Paving the way to future funding



A new European cooperation project between ministries and funding partners is the “Joint Programming Initiative (JPI) on Cultural Heritage and Global Change” which begun in 2010. “Partners will put together national funding for research projects”, explained Cristina Sabbioni from CNR. Calls would follow the priority themes already proposed by NET-HERITAGE and other European ERA-NET projects. Currently 17 European countries take part

in the initiative. “NET-HERITAGE and the new JPI demonstrated the common awareness that cultural heritage is one of most important assets for European competitiveness”, Antonia Recchia, coordinator of NET-HERITAGE said. The European Commission (EC) is expected to fund a coordination action to support the launch of the initiative. “With the JPI and a Private Public Partnership on Energy Efficient Buildings, the Commission will continue its efforts for the promotion of research applied to the protection of cultural heritage”, Luisa Prista from the EC confirmed. The Commission is preparing the next EU Research Framework Programme which will start in 2014, and has published a Green Paper to encourage public consultation. Stakeholders are invited to communicate their interests in relation to the importance of innovation for future funding initiatives before May 20th 2011.

Support by a common European platform?



In parallel to the efforts of NET-HERITAGE partners to centralise the European research community, UNESCO and EUROPA NOSTRA have recently opened new offices in Brussels. In the “Declaration of Bruges”, published in December 2010 under the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, cultural heritage experts stated the need of a common European platform.

“Until today the EU obligations on the promotion of cultural heritage are only reflected at a lower policy level”, commented Terje Nypan, Senior Councillor at the Directorate for Cultural Heritage in Norway (picture above). It would be a great success if the ideas, materials gathered and partnerships forged by NET-HERITAGE led to the emergence of such a platform.

Watch the pictures of the conference on:

www.flickr.com/photos/d_b_u/sets/72157626453131134

Presentations of the conference, as well as reports from NET-HERITAGE are available on the three project websites:

www.netheritage.eu | www.heritageportal.eu | www.netheritage.de

Pictures: DBU

More information about...

- the European Commission: http://ec.europa.eu/research/environment/index_en.cfm?pg=cultural
- “The Letters” Project, Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam: <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/>
- the FP 7 research project “Climate for Culture”: www.climateforculture.eu
- the UNESCO report “Managing Disaster Risks for World Heritage”: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/630>
- the Joint Programming Initiative on Cultural Heritage and Global Change: http://ec.europa.eu/research/era/areas/programming/joint_programming_en.htm
- the Science and Heritage programme: <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/ScienceandHeritage.aspx>
- the Green Paper: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2011:0048:FIN:EN:PDF>
- the Declaration of Bruges: <http://heritageconference.rwo.be/Portals/117/Documenten/Declaration%20of%20Bruges.pdf>

Organisers:

German Federal Foundation for the Environment: www.dbu.de

Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities: www.beniculturali.it

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