Cultural Heritage and 'Senses of Place': Issues and Challenges

The paper investigates the relationship between heritage and the concept of 'sense of place'. Focusing attention on the 'sense of place' leads to a shift from the analysis of heritage conservation and valorization based on the object in itself to an approach centred on a place, as an important subject to be considered in cultural policies for sustainable local economic development. In such a perspective the distinction between tangible and intangible heritage becomes blurred, both being important characters of a place. At the same time, several questions come to the fore such as: how the 'sense of place' interacts with society's wellbeing; whose 'sense of place' is relevant; how the public decision-making process is able to deal with the conflicts related to the construction of the 'sense of place'; what a role the Internet and social media play. The paper after analysing the economic dimensions of heritage and its relation with the 'sense of place', addresses the above questions providing examples and suggesting some policy implications.

El documento investiga la relación entre el patrimonio y el concepto «sentido de lugar». Centrar la atención en el «sentido de lugar» lleva a pasar del análisis de la conservación y valorización del patrimonio basado en el objeto en sí a un enfoque centrado en un lugar, como tema importante a tener en cuenta en las políticas culturales para el desarrollo económico local sostenible. Desde esta perspectiva, se difumina la distinción entre patrimonio material e inmaterial, ya que ambos son características importantes de un lugar. Al mismo tiempo, se plantean varias cuestiones: cómo interactúa el «sentido de lugar» con el bienestar de la sociedad; de quién es el «sentido de lugar»; cómo puede el proceso público de toma de decisiones abordar los conflictos relacionados con la construcción del «sentido de lugar»; qué papel desempeñan Internet y los medios sociales. Tras analizar las dimensiones económicas del patrimonio y su relación con el «sentido del lugar», el artículo aborda las cuestiones anteriores ofreciendo ejemplos y sugiriendo algunas implicaciones políticas.

Ondarearen eta «toki zentzua» kontzeptuaren arteko erlazioa ikertzen du artikuluak. «Tokiaren zentzuan» zentratzeak ondarearen kontserbazioaren eta hobekuntzaren azterketa objektutik bertatik tokian zentratutako ikuspegi batera aldatzen du, tokiko garapen ekonomiko iraunkorrerako kultur politiketan kontuan hartu beharreko gai garrantzitsu gisa. Ikuspegi horretatik, ondare materialaren eta ez-materialaren arteko bereizketa lausotu egiten da, biak baitira leku baten ezaugarri garrantzitsuak. Aldi berean, hainbat galdera sortzen dira: nola elkarreragiten duen «tokiaren zentzua» gizartearen ongizatearekin; norena den «leku zentzua»; Nola bideratu ditzake erabaki publikoak hartzeko prozesuak leku zentzuaren eraikuntzarekin lotutako gatazkei? Internetek eta sare sozialek zer eginkizun duten. Ondarearen dimentsio ekonomikoak eta leku zentzuarekin duen erlazioa aztertu ondoren, artikuluak aurreko gaiak jorratzen ditu, adibideak eskainiz eta politikaren ondorio batzuk iradokiz.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage is a multi-faceted complex concept which has been widely investigated by cultural economists (Rizzo and Mignosa, 2013). Indeed, the Economics of cultural heritage, since Alan Peacock's pioneering work (1978) on built heritage, can be considered a well-established sub-field of the wider area of cultural economics. This paper aims at contributing to this stream of literature, investigating a rather specific issue, e.g. the relationship between heritage and the 'sense of place', which so far has received limited attention among the cultural economists (Rizzo, 2023), while being widely studied by architects, geographers, psychologists, sociologists and urban planners, among the others. The concept of heritage is enlarged to include tangible as well as intangible heritage that are closely interconnected.

Investigating heritage through the lenses of the 'sense of place' leads to a shift from the analysis of heritage conservation and valorization based on the single item to an approach centred on a place, where tangible and intangible heritage interact and play a major role as a subject in cultural policies for sustainable economic development.

The concept of 'sense of place' is not new in the economic literature. The recognition of its relevance for economic development is longstanding, the 'sense of place' being considered a component of regional and local identity and an important form of intangible capital, that has positive externalities (Bolton, 1992). In the same vein, Becattini (2015) uses the expression 'consciousness of places' to outline that the place is an endowment of knowledge, cultures, experiences and traditions that indicates the community (that inhabits it) the direction to follow for its growth. Fusco-Girard and Vecco (2019) re-propose the concept of *genius loci* and suggest a dynamic vision of the tangible and intangible dimensions of a place. Economic scholars have also outlined that globalization has made space and place increasingly important, calling for place-based local development policies, which take into account the geographical context and its social, cultural, and institutional characteristics (Barca *et al.*, 2012; McCann, 2023).

Yet, to the best of my knowledge, while the economic relevance of a place and of its various components to shape economic development policies is widely acknowledged, the relationship between heritage and the 'sense of place' and the implications for cultural policies have not received much attention.

Indeed, most heritage is place-bound and contributes to local place images, identities and economic geographies (Ashworth, 2013), interacting with individuals' wellbeing and affecting their relationship with social and physical environment. There are many possible 'senses of place' depending on the diverse heritage interpretations and divergent interests of the several actors involved in the supply and demand of cultural policies. Conflicting views are likely to arise among the different actors – for instance, residents vs/tourists; experts vs/citizens, different ethnic, political or religious groups - and have to be addressed through the collective decision-making process. To this end, the institutional characteristics and the governance models are crucial for the decisions regarding the identification of heritage to be conserved as well as for the types of intervention to put in practice within cultural policies (Mazza, 2020).

Building on the author's previous research, this paper tries to throw some light on the challenges and opportunities related to the relationship between heritage and the 'sense of place' in the perspective of cultural policies for sustainable development. Coherently with its limitations, this work does not aim at providing solutions for such a complex issue, but rather at contributing to highlight some problems at stake.

The paper is organised as follows. In Section 2 the economic features of heritage will be briefly sketched (2.1.) and the concept of 'sense of place' will be investigated in relation with cultural heritage, to highlight the main economic implications (2.2.). In Section 3, after having outlined that different 'senses of place' emerge within a community, the features of the collective decision-making process will be

analysed to show how the related conflicts can be addressed (3.1); the effects for local development, with a focus on tourism, will be investigated, providing some policy implications (3.2.) and the impact of the Internet and social media on the construction of the 'sense of place' will also be considered (3.3.). Section 4 will offer some preliminary concluding remarks.

2. HERITAGE AND THE 'SENSES OF PLACE'

2.1. About the economics of cultural heritage

Heritage is a complex and multifaceted concept, which is evolving through time and subject to progressive historical and typological extensions to include new items, that were not recognised as such in the past (Benhamou, 2020) as well as intangible cultural resources.

The heterogeneity of the concept of heritage is well expressed by Ashworth *et al.* (2008, p. 40): "heritage is assembled from a wide and varied mixture of past events, personalities, folk memories, mythologies, literary associations, surviving physical relics, together with the places — whether sites, towns, or landscapes — with which they can be symbolically associated".

The recognition of heritage is intrinsically a dynamic process, as represented in the wide array of different documents (conventions, charters, directives, recommendations, resolutions) issued by international organizations (Vecco, 2010). At European level, heritage is increasingly valued not only for its intrinsic historical and artistic quality but also for its cultural and identity values. Its recognition appears to be the result of a continuous process of selection, interpretation and transmission, in which the role of society is considered to be more and more important (Council of Europe, 2005).

The process of heritage recognition offers room for expressing and reflecting cultural diversities[1] in plural societies. The issue is relevant in most countries – at national as well as local level – where ethnic and religious differences are increasing and the composition of population is becoming more and more heterogeneous, as a consequence of the massive international migration flows experienced in recent years[2]. The analysis of the variety of policy models, which can be adopted to address plurality is outside the scope of this paper[3]. Here, it is useful to stress that a negotiation is needed and that how and to what extent such a negotiation takes place de-

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1   At world level, the acknowledgment of cultural diversity has led to overcome the Eurocentric perspective prevailing until a few decades ago (Guerzoni, 1997).

2   Cultural diversity entails costs and benefits and its economic effects are somehow controversial (Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2014).

3   A thorough analysis of the different models is carried out by Ashworth *et al.* (2008).

pends on the features of the collective decision-making process underlying cultural policies[4].

From an economic perspective, heritage can be considered a capital asset (Peacock, 1997) with two dimensions: a material one, requiring the allocation of resources for its conservation, and another one implying a flow of services to be consumed, or to be used as input for producing other cultural goods and services. However, the benefits stemming from heritage are not necessarily related to its use but may refer even only to its existence, in the present as well as in the future. Heritage also exhibits similarities with natural resources, being subject to the risk of irreversible disappearance (Benhamou, 2020). A peculiarity of cultural heritage, defined as cultural capital (Throsby, 2020) is that it is a multi-dimensional concept that combines economic and cultural values, the latter including aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic and authenticity attributes.

Most heritage benefits are not reflected by the price system[5], inducing market failure and calling for corrective government intervention to avoid an insufficient level of conservation and valorization activities. Public intervention is also motivated because of equity reasons to increase accessibility and reduce social and economic barriers. Even if market failures have been theoretically identified in the cultural field, the extent of government action is a controversial and debated issue because public intervention is also subject to failure (Frey 2020). Moreover, being heritage benefits not reflected by market prices, in the design of heritage policies the challenge of valuing cultural output arises: it is made highly complex by the multidimensionality of heritage (Angelini and Castellani, 2019), while the capacity of non-market valuation techniques to capture the full cultural value is widely questioned and the search for techniques adapted from other fields is advocated (Throsby, 2003).

Being heritage a multi-dimensional concept, its contributions to social well-being are heterogeneous (Rizzo and Herrero-Prieto, 2024), ranging from the transmission of knowledge to the future generation and the improvement of education to the increase of the quality of the urban environment, the enhancement of national prestige, the promotion of social inclusion and the strengthening of national and local identities as well as of social capital.

As it is widely acknowledged (CHCfE, 2015) heritage can play a role in local development as an important factor of local attractiveness: not only the effects on tourism – which are usually considered the most important ones – are worth mentioning but also the capability of attracting talents, providing a favourable environment for cultural and creative industries and creating new and diversified

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4   See below, subsection 3.1.

5   Markets 'failure' occurs because of public goods, externalities, and non-use benefits, such as option, bequest and existence benefits (Benhamou, 2020).

job opportunities. Actually, notwithstanding the importance of tourism for local development, the other potentialities of heritage appear even more fruitful for long-term development, building upon the strengthening of cultural, human and social capital of the place (Cerisola, 2019).

The above widely agreed narrative on the positive effects of heritage on society's well-being and local development requires, however, some remarks. In fact, although the positive effects appear clearly prevalent, it should also be noted that heritage effects may be controversial[6]. For instance, heritage institutions promoting the values of prominent social, economic or political groups endanger social inclusion; heritage that is affected by decay and degradation turns up as a source of local shame rather than of local pride; 'divisive' heritage instead of promoting social cohesion may become the cause of local conflicts on what should be conserved (Murzyn-Kupisz and Dziazek, 2013).

Moreover, also the 'reluctant' relationship between heritage and local development (Ashworth, 2013) is not straightforward and the effects of heritage conservation on development can be considered ambivalent. On the one hand, whenever the regulation on heritage conservation imposes too many restrictions, an high cost opportunity arises and the capacity of places to change is hindered (Rizzo, 2020); on the other hand, heritage conservation can enhance the desirability of surrounding areas, as showed by the increase in property values, and improve the attractiveness of places for visitors. Indeed, the instrumental role of heritage is closely associated to the positive relationship with tourism, though lights and shadows characterise such a relationship[7].

Overall, however, the occurrence of positive effects of heritage on social well-being and local development and their extent, cannot be taken for granted. In fact, heritage is the output of conservation and valorization policies that, in turn, is the outcome of a complex public decision-making process (Mazza, 2020): its institutional features and the governance models put in practice impact on the possibility for heritage of interacting positively with the economic and social resources of the place and being an effective lever for development[8].

2.2. The 'sense of place': meanings and economic implications

The above considerations highlighted the economic relevance of tangible and intangible cultural heritage for society. The relationship between heritage and individuals does not occur in a vacuum: the place may be an important aspect of heritage and at the same time heritage contributes to place-making (Ashworth, 2013).

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6   In relation with the construction of the 'sense of place', see Section 3.

7   See below, subsection 3.2.

8   See below, subsection 3.1.

The close connection that people have to their local area is well represented by the 'sense of place'. The 'sense of place' recalls the notion of *genius loci* which offers a dynamic view of the tangible and intangible components of a place: it does not exist in itself, being an individual construction motivated by social, cultural and religious needs (Fusco-Girard and Vecco, 2019). The 'sense of place' refers to the experience of continuing interaction between individuals and a specific place, the meanings related to such a connection and its psychological dimensions (Tan Siowkian *et al.*, 2018). Such a concept, which is widely investigated in several disciplines (such as architecture, geography as well as environmental psychology and sociology), offers a fairly flexible and multidimensional way to interpret and analyse the interactions between individuals and places, with strong cultural and natural connotations (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2006). Empirical studies show that the intensity of this bond depends on the characteristics of the places — physical, dimensional, social — and of people — such as socio-economic status, duration of residence, age, social relationships, value systems — (Levicka, 2011). A close investigation of the various definitions of the 'sense of place' in the different disciplines is outside the scope of this paper. In what follows attention will be mainly concentrated on the influence of cultural heritage on the perception and construction of the 'senses of place', on which actors are relevant in this process and on the implications for cultural policies, in the light of local development.

Concepts such as place identity and place dependency are recurrent as constituent parts of the more general concepts of 'sense of place' or place attachment and are used as a measure to investigate how 'sense of place' and the community values for environmental and cultural assets are related. Brown and Raymond (2007), examining the relation between landscape (aesthetic, recreation, economic, spiritual, and therapeutic) values, place identity and place dependence, find that recreation and aesthetic values are the most important predictors, followed by economic and spiritual values. Chung *et al.* (2011) investigate the relation between 'sense of place' and willingness to pay for visiting a national forest and finds that place identity has a significant effect.

Focusing on cultural resources, Morrison and Dowell (2015) point out that since the 'sense of place' reflects people attachment to their community and how well a place provides for the needs of its community, there is a rationale for investigating how cultural resources affect the 'sense of place', and whether, in turn, the 'sense of place' influences community willingness to pay to support them. The results of their empirical analysis are twofold: visits to cultural resources are closely related to place identity and there is a significant relationship between place identity and willingness to pay (as estimated by contingent valuation). The result that people are more willing to pay for cultural resources when their 'sense of place' is higher would suggest that investing in cultural resources might be a good policy

strategy for local government aimed at enhancing place identity and /or at retaining people in a regional area.

In this vein, it is worth noting that the place natural, cultural and historical characteristics and the social interactions within a community affect the 'sense of place' (Bolton, 1992). In places with a strong sense of community, residents are committed in creating and maintaining a 'sense of place' and this can be considered a form of social capital, with important implications for economic development (McCann 2023). Individuals with high human capital typically promote social capital, favouring the creation of social, business and knowledge networks (McCann 2023).

The effects of social capital on the economy are widely acknowledged. At national level, social capital, defined as civic capital – i.e. the set of values and beliefs that help cooperation – (Guiso *et al.*, 2011) or as trust and respect for other people (Tabellini, 2010) is found to exert beneficial effects on countries' economic performance; at local level, it is considered to positively impact on business confidence, attract investors and tend to foster good governance (Bolton, 1992). Thus, the concept of 'sense of place', with its connection to social capital, can be considered at the core of place-based policies for development (McCann, 2023).

'Sense of place', cultural resources and social capital are closely connected. As far as built heritage is concerned, an empirical study conducted in England (Bradley *et al.*, 2009) suggests that its relationship with social capital is indirect and occurs through the 'sense of place', generated by the presence of historic buildings: the historic built environment provides a context which favours social interaction, the exchange of knowledge about the past and the active engagement and volunteering in heritage related activities[9], thus impacting also on social agendas. The process of connecting people and places, however, not only contributes to the local identity and the sense of belonging, but may also generate potential conflicts in specific sociocultural contexts (Erek *et al.*, 2025); strong bonding capital in traditional communities may prevent external contacts and cause even hostility towards outsiders (Murzyn-Kupisz and Dziazek, 2013).

In addition to physical heritage, forms of intangible heritage such as rituals, processions, ceremonies in urban public spaces can contribute to the 'sense of place' and affect social cohesion. The occurrence of negative or positive effects depends much on the way in which these rituals are structured to encourage participation, in relation to the religious, ethnic and social differences that characterize the community (Gamba and Cattacin, 2021).

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9 Volunteering is considered an important dimension of cultural participation with some evidence of positive effects on subjective wellbeing (Ateca-Amestoy *et al.*, 2021).

3. 'SENSES OF PLACE' AND CULTURAL POLICIES

3.1. 'Senses of place' and the collective decision-making process

The relationships that individuals establish with places are different and dynamic, vary in relation to experiences, interests and cultural values and reflect the plurality in society. In fact, there is no single 'sense of place' and, coherently, this concept has to be pluralised. Different individuals or groups in a community grasp the meaning of the place in a different way and create their own 'sense of place'. Whose 'sense of place' will influence cultural policies? As a consequence of diverging views, contrasts are likely to arise, bringing about significant policy implications.

The assignment of values to the cultural components of a place concerns cultural policies, as resulting from a complex collective decision-making process. In such a process several actors are involved on the supply (policymakers, heritage agencies, public officials/experts, public and private providers of cultural services) and the demand side (the general public, organized interest groups, associations and third sector bodies) (Holler and Mazza, 2013). The characteristics of the decision-making process and the methods of interaction between the different actors are important elements that affect the outcome of the process itself. At the same time, cultural policy is also influenced by the mix of policy tools (regulation, direct and indirect expenditure), which is put in practice, depending on the prevailing economic and institutional setting. An in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the collective choice process is beyond the scope of this work but it may be useful to briefly recall some essential features, from a political economy perspective (Mazza, 2020).

As it is common in public sector decision-making processes, cultural heritage policy decisions occur in a complex system of principal–agent relationships with the related information asymmetries. However, these information problems are even more relevant for cultural heritage where the low salience of the government support makes the public little aware of heritage policies and the highly specific knowledge and expertise required to evaluate heritage may hinder public scrutiny (Holler and Mazza, 2013). In fact, a prominent role is plaid by experts. In absence of objective criteria to identify what priorities have to be established, experts will tend to privilege their own values and disciplinary skills; in many cases, art historians, archaeologists, architects, operating within the administration responsible for the conservation and enhancement of heritage, can influence the size and the composition of the stock of cultural heritage, the balance between conserving the past or promoting contemporary heritage, the type of conservation and the uses which are allowed and the related services and economic effects (Peacock and Rizzo, 2008). Depending on the legal and administrative framework, a "custodianship" model, limiting the access to heritage and its use, may prevail (OECD, 2018). As a consequence, the residents 'sense of place' as well as the place image for external perception will be quite affected. In this regard, it is significant the example of the city of

Syracuse (Sicily), in which the attention of the heritage authority, with marked archaeological skills, was focused until the 90s exclusively on archaeological resources, neglecting the medieval and modern testimonies, which subsequently became an important element of the image of the city, also in the recovered awareness of its citizens (Montemagno, 2002).

The information advantage enjoyed by experts and the presence of decision makers with objectives that often do not coincide can give rise to decisions regarding the conservation and enhancement of heritage that are not consistent with the preferences of the public. In top-down decisions, the values of elite or dominant groups tend to prevail, and the role of heritage as a tool to promote cultural participation and social inclusion is undermined (Mignosa, 2016).

To this respect, it is worth noting, however, that, also in other disciplinary fields, the role of heritage professionals, defined as 'outsider elite', and their auto-referential approach in heritage recognition has been questioned as being unable to understand the ways in which the local community finds adequate expression to its own cultural values and, therefore, to the 'sense of place' (Hawke, 2011). The evolution in the definition of heritage – from physical testimony of the past to social construction, with an increasing relevance of its intangible components – and the growing diffusion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) applications call for other disciplinary skills, such as sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and computer scientists without prejudice to the priority role of those traditionally considered as heritage experts.

To reduce information asymmetries and improve the level of public participation in the decision-making several strategies can be outlined. A common wisdom is that devolution can favour the representation of preferences, being the link between heritage and local community very strong. In addition, possible solutions might imply the use of tools of direct democracy such as referenda, the presence of representatives of citizens and associations in decision-making committee or creation of arm-length bodies, bearing in mind, however, the role of different cultures in determining different institutions and the behaviour of public actors (Holler and Mazza, 2013).

In addition to the above instruments impacting on the institutional framework, another form of participation to enhance the role of the community in decision-making may be provided by Policy Labs, that are platforms to produce and to share new knowledge, improve trust and cooperation, exchange skills and experiences to favour co-creation and co-planning, with an important role assigned to the systematic adoption of valuation techniques capable to gather the multidimensionality of heritage (Fusco-Girard and Vecco, 2019). It is also outlined that political activity, volunteering, or civil society engagement is facilitated by a strong local 'sense of place' (McCann, 2023).

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Indeed, a challenge for the decision-making process is how to deal with the increasing diversity characterising contemporary societies and its impact on cultural policies: the crucial role of heritage in creating representations of place as a core attribute of identity, implies both constraints and opportunities in plural and diverse societies (Ashworth *et al.*, 2008).

Identification with heritage can give rise to conflicts also in relation to significant changes in common feelings, which influence the perception of the symbolic values of place*s,* and have an impact on the 'sense of place'. An example of addressing the link between contentious memories and places is given by the case of transformation of symbolic places of the Argentine dictatorship – a park, a detention centre and a square – into a museum and places of memory, through the involvement of institutions, human rights movements and bottom-up initiatives (Cremaschi, 2021).

A further example, in a different direction, reflecting the imposition of the changing 'weight' of memories is provided by the renewal project implemented in Hacı Bayram District, in Ankara, which caused the loss of the former mix of social and cultural values of heritage place to enhance religious values (Özçakır et al., 2018[10]. It is through the collective decision-making process that the links between heritage, place and identity, and the conflicts which eventually arise can be addressed, implying continuous renegotiation (Ashworth et al., 2008).

Conflicts also characterise urban regeneration processes, focused on heritage rehabilitation, which are increasingly common in many countries[11]. Conflicts of interest may arise between residents and private investors as well as gentrification, with redistributive effects and profound economic, social and cultural changes. The overall assessment of the positive and negative externalities generated by these processes, the scope of which is conditioned by the context and the public policies put in place, is an open question and cannot be addressed in the limited space of this work. What is important to underline here is that this process affects the construction of the 'sense of place', since the meaning of places change as a result of the modifications in the composition of residents and in the type of economic and cultural activities carried out. The results depend very much on the characteristics of the decision-making process and the forms of participation put in place.

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10 Before the renewal project, the co-existence of Augustus Temple and Hacı Bayram Mosque, made the area surrounding Hacı Bayram Square a center of communities with different religious beliefs through history. With the renewal project the local authority intended to create new religious centre in Ankara by emphasizing the religious values resulting from Hacı Bayram Mosque instead of conserving the co-existence of Augustus Temple (Ozcakır *et al.*, 2018).

11 A vast review of experiences is provided by De Cesari and Dimova, (2019) and the contributions contained in the special issue of the same name

3.2. Senses of place', local development and policy implications

A different perspective refers to the construction of the 'sense of place' oriented towards the outside, aimed at proposing the image of a place for attracting visitors, investors, or residents and enhancing a place's identity and reputation. This activity can concern both the national and local levels. International marketing studies investigate the role of heritage in the definition of a country's image, to develop strategies, which select the components of the country's culture to enhance its attractiveness for foreign customers. As for the national level, Mainolfi *et al.* (2015), identify five dimensions that characterize the construction of a country cultural heritage image – national gastronomy; museums and libraries; local population and traditions; arts; and cultural heritage – suggesting how tangible and intangible heritage dimensions are closely interconnected.

Public authorities are also increasingly becoming aware that film and television productions can advantage place attractiveness and place branding and through different dedicated organizations (Film Commissions, Film Offices) allocate resources to use films and tv series to have an impact on their own place's image (Châtel, 2024). It is also recognized the interest of film and television productions for minor places with strong local identities and a high historical-environmental value, with a related positive effect of cine-tourism (Bencivenga *et al.*, 2015). Notwithstanding the expectations of national and local governments, however, a cause-effect relationship between the vision of a film and the decision to visit a place cannot be taken for granted.

The representations of a place are subjective and different images reflect the values of the different groups connected to the territory, and can be translated into stereotypes and selective narratives of the economic, social and historical characteristics of places. For instance, in this vein, Bellini *et al.* (2010) with reference to Tuscany underline how the emphasis on the past, linked to tourist stereotypes, tends to penalize the image of a region rich in hi-tech industries and interested in attracting foreign investors.

In the perspective of cultural policies, the use of the heritage as a lever for local development and urban regeneration deserves attention. Location and quality of heritage influence the geographical scope and the range of effects deriving from heritage conservation and use, giving rise to different economic implications. As for the former, accessibility and attractiveness vary depending on the heritage location, whether it is in isolated position or inside a city, whether as single building or as part of an historic centre. As for the latter, a distinction has to be drawn between heritage of different quality, for instance, outstanding and worldwide known heritage, such as UNESCO sites, vs. 'minor' regional or local heritage. The more important the cultural heritage is the greater will be its beneficial impact on tourism and, as a consequence, on the local economy. If the objective of the local public decision-

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maker is to promote the economic development of the territory through tourism, there is a risk that the political decision-making process gives rise to strategies for the conservation and enhancement of the heritage which may be biased in favour of superstar heritage because of its touristic attractiveness with respect to minor heritage, even if the latter is intrinsically linked to the identity of the place and its residents (Martorana *et al.*, 2019). Since the likely consequence of such a strategy is the increase of mass tourism, the effects on local communities and on the 'sense of place' deserve attention.

In fact, despite the positive impact of tourism in monetary terms, top-down policies oriented to promote tourism without involving local communities give rise to sustainability problems when the flows of visitors are beyond control,[12] with the consequence of generating social, cultural, environmental, and economic costs. Congestion that threatens heritage conservation, negative environmental externalities and increased crime may discourage investors and are likely to reduce the returns from tourism (Cerisola and Panzera, 2024). Moreover, the negative impact on residents' well-being, the risk of erosion and commodification of local culture and the likely negative social effects, in terms of gentrification, should not be overlooked and in the absence of adequate policies, are destined to affect negatively the 'sense of place'. An appropriate balance between the advantages and opportunities offered by heritage tourism and the respect of the authenticity and integrity of the place requires governance models for public action suitable to give centrality to culture as a factor of sustainability, so that tourism can stimulate local socio-economic development together with the strengthening of the sense of local identity and pride.

To this end, the participation of local communities is called for to enhance the long-term sustainability of cultural policy. Indeed, a strong 'sense of place' might be a comparative advantage even for tourism. In fact, in a time when experiential tourism is gaining consensus and increasing value (Richard, 2018), territories with a strong 'sense of place' are able to offer a distinctive experience, alimented by the community awareness of its tangible and intangible heritage and by participation to the overall cultural supply of the place. This may be especially important for the sustainable development of 'minor' sites, providing incentives to art and crafts production, creating new products, helping communities in appreciating their own culture, with a positive impact on the authenticity of the place. The involvement of local communities enhancing cultural experiences may also prevent the above-mentioned risk that UNESCO sites might generate displacement or substitution effects with respect to 'minor' heritage (Cuccia and Rizzo, 2013).

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12 For the effects of over-tourism on the sites included in the World Heritage List, see World Tourism Organization (2018). An in-depth analysis of the implications of over-tourism and possible solutions is provided by Frey and Briviba (2021).

In this perspective, cultural policies need to rely on an intersectoral approach (Throsby, 2010), that relates heritage protection and valorization with environmental, economic and social resources, as a necessary condition for a truly place-based policy. Moreover, the complexity of the decision-making process requires governance models suitable to ensure coordination methods for overcoming the consequent phenomena of vertical (between different layers of government) and horizontal (derived from the coexistence of several public and private actors) fragmentation (Cuccia and Rizzo, 2013).

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3.3. The role of the Internet and social media

The fact that the value of heritage is influenced by its interaction with individuals or groups and that this contributes to the process of building the 'sense of place' suggests that the Internet and social media, which reinforce this interaction, can play an important role in such a respect.

It is widely recognized that the use of ICT technologies has changed the role of cultural consumers, transforming them from passive consumers in active public, this evolution being described by neologisms, such as produser, produsage and prosumption (Bruns, 2013)[13]. Facebook or other social media, as well as the recommendations issued by users of the platforms, are increasingly becoming very influential – in some cases even more than experts – and are likely to play a significant role in heritage promotion and, therefore, may significantly contribute to building the 'sense of place'. What at first sight may seem to be an enlargement of participation in the decision-making process and a tool for the active and democratic involvement of communities need, however, to be evaluated with caution. In fact, the phenomenon of the digital divide can lead to the systematic under-representation of individuals, depending on their socio-economic characteristics (such as age, gender, income, geographical origin, ethnicity) (Mihelj *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, with respect to cultural participation, digital participation appears to reproduce similar divides and inequalities as physical participation (Ateca-Amestoy and Prieto Rodriguez, 2024).

This phenomenon can be quite important in introducing biases in the construction of the 'sense of place' in heterogeneous contexts, characterized by the presence of diversities and conflicts. At the same time, it is worth noting that the various applications of digital technologies to cultural heritage are increasingly used by decision-makers as a tool to influence the construction of the 'sense of place' of a territory, in the perspective of tourism development (Howell and Chilcott, 2013). However, the digital divide also occurs across regions and/or cultural institutions and may enhance territorial disparities, penalizing disadvantaged marginal areas, richly

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13 These expressions refer to the fact that technological interactivity allows customers to become active as content creators and contributors, making blurred the distinction between producers and consumers.

endowed with cultural resources but less visible on the Internet than wealthier though less culturally relevant ones. As a consequence, their capability of attracting visitors is hindered, with negative implications for local development.

Social media are also recognized as having an important role to shape tourists' expectations, acting as a catalyst in the creation of a strong 'sense of place' on the occasion of the visits to cultural heritage. While there is a wide literature on the several digital applications aimed at proposing images of places to promote cultural tourism (Beck *et al.*, 2019; Polimeris and Calfoglou, 2016), scarce attention has been paid to the influences of social media on communities' behaviour and the related effects on the ownership of the 'sense of place' (Dameria *et al.*, 2018).

4. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has investigated the challenges and opportunities related to the relationship between heritage and the 'senses of place', in the perspective of cultural policies for sustainable development.

Heritage being a place-bound asset, closely linked to local identities, contributes to place-making and is a resource for social well-being and local development. The decisions regarding the recognition and valorization of heritage as well as the types of intervention to put in practice impact on the sense of identity and belonging of the community and affect the construction of the 'sense of place'. Cultural policies, as resulting from the collective decision-making process, have the difficult task of governing the related conflicts, deriving by the coexistence of diverging interests and diversities in plural societies. In this perspective, the tools and methods of intervention appear relevant as they have a significant influence on the construction of the 'sense of place' and the sense of identity and belonging, shaping the active participation of the communities and the ability to generate social capital.

To this end, cultural policies need to be transversal and based on an intersectoral approach so that heritage protection and valorization can be related with environmental, economic and social resources, as a necessary condition for a truly place-based policy. To address the complexity of the public decision-making process, where different layers of government co-exist and several actors are involved at any level, coordination models are needed to overcome the consequent phenomena of vertical and horizontal fragmentation.

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