CONNECTING HERITAGE AUDIENCES

Designing participation for sustainable engagement

Connecting Heritage Audiences. **Designing participation for sustainable engagement** is a publication developed as a special issue of "Connecting Audiences", a digital magazine on cultural management, marketing, and audience development, spotlighting creative, socially driven innovation.
Co-edited with five sister teams across Europe and Latin America since 2018, the Italian issues of Connecting Audiences are curated by Melting Pro.

This special issue focusing on cultural heritage participatory practices is part of the results from AHEAD - Accessible Heritage Experience for Audience Development, a EU-funded project that aims to give cultural heritage practitioners tools and competences for audience engagement.
Italian, Greek and Spanish versions of the magazine are available on the proejct website: **aheadeurope.eu**

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Co-funded by the European Union

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Changing with the audiences. How Design Thinking can empower heritage professionals

Giulia Fiaccarini

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The future of heritage is audience-centred: close to people, open to possibility. With AHEAD - Accessible Heritage Experience for Audience Development — we set out to make this principle operational: shifting from "bringing people to heritage" to co-creating experiences with people around heritage. This publication gathers what was learned and, more importantly, what can be repeated, adapted, and scaled. It offers stories, methods, and reflections for professionals who want to work with communities.

AHEAD is an EU-funded programme designed to equip heritage professionals with **audience-centred skills and tools**. The special issue you are reading — *Connecting Heritage Audiences* — collects the project's results and situates them within a wider conversation on participation, inclusion, and sustainability. It brings together pilots, interviews, and field notes from Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Denmark, and beyond. The aim is practical: build capacity and enable a shift beyond preservation, opening new opportunities for institutions and professionals to keep heritage alive.

Why design thinking for heritage?

Design thinking adds structure to empathy. It helps teams listen, frame challenges, ideate, prototype, and test — **fast and safely**. AHEAD worked with **ACED - Audience-Centred Experience Design**, a design-thinking blueprint first developed in ADESTE+ and

Credits: Simone Vacca, AHEAD artist

later adapted across different cultural contexts. ACED is not a fixed recipe; it flexes to local needs. What remains constant is the stance: audiences are not "targets"; they are partners and change-makers who help institutions renew their social contract. In the section From Blueprint to Practice, Niels Righolt (CKI) and Ilídio Louro (Mapa das Ideias) describe two very different implementation environments of the ACED in a cross-border dialogue with practitioners who have taken the blueprint into diverse policy and organisational contexts.

Three pilots, one methodology

AHEAD designed a capacity-building programme that revisited and adapted the ACED blueprint for cultural heritage valorisation. It supported the Archaeological Park of Ostia Antica (Italy), the National Museum and Research Centre of Altamira (Spain), and the Archaeological Museum of Messara (Greece) in working with their nearby public. Each site applied design thinking to engage close communities and prototype audience-centred change.

Ostia Antica (Italy). The pilot explored how a major archaeological park can spark a sense of belonging across generations. Two parallel strands unfolded in the same landscape: teenagers, drawn to the site's calm and quiet, prototyped a **wellbeing path** through the Roman baths; older residents reconnected with **personal memories** and favourite places. The learning is simple and transferable: free exploration, light facilitation, and visible shared outcomes—such as collectively designed experiences — legitimise many voices at once.

Altamira (Spain). The Museum safeguards a fragile, world-renowned legacy. Conservation needs are non-negotiable, yet local communities feel a strong sense of ownership. The pilot focused on women in their early sixties from Santillana del Mar and launched a Knowledge Exchange prototype to weave a closer, horizontal relationship between museum and neighbours. Artistic gestures, careful facilitation, and regular gatherings opened a path from tension to **trust**, turning distance into dialogue and continuity.

Messara (Crete, Greece). Two prototypes emerged from the AHEAD series of Design Thinking workshops. First, children became **active narrators**: they linked personal memories to selected artefacts, creating the first layer of a digital, evolving memory archive. Second, the community proposed a **Friends of the Museum and Monuments of Messara Association** to support shared stewardship. Together, the museum and grassroots actors reframed the institution as a platform for **dialogue, creativity, and responsibility**, not only preservation.

Partnerships with grassroots organisations

Resilience today depends on collaboration with actors who work close to lived experience. Grassroots organisations bring trust, agility, and deep knowledge of place; institutions bring continuity and legitimacy. The challenge is to avoid tokenism and move beyond consultation toward co-decision. The AHEAD experimentations shed light to the principles that can guide the shift: listen first; define success together; think long-term; invest in **mutual learning**. These are managerial choices as much as ethical ones.

Artists as bridge-builders

Artists helped us rehearse new relationships between people and places. Their contribution is not decoration; it is **method**. In Altamira, a performance acted as a social invitation, transforming a boardroom into a symbolic space for local women. In Crete, performative documentation reframed museum visits through emotion and memory. The lesson is practical: bring artists in **early**, let them listen first, and protect the **mutuality** of collaboration so that art is not instrumentalised.

What readers will find in this publication:

Design thinking, contextualised. Clear examples of ACED and how institutions

adapted the blueprint to organizational climates, resources, and staff cultures. Expect concrete advice on anchoring processes in leadership, designing with data, and creating safe spaces for unsafe thinking.

Partnership models. Guidance for working with grassroots organisations: how to distribute roles, prevent tokenism, and build structures that survive funding cycles.

Artistic involvement. Formats that connect care, encounter, and belonging; examples of how creative practice can humanise institutions and open doors to new publics.

A call to the profession

The shift we propose is cultural before it is technical. It asks institutions to **change with their audiences** — to reimagine interpretation as dialogue, programming as co-creation, and governance as **shared stewardship**. It also asks professionals to accept that emotions, memories, and everyday uses are part of heritage value. When this happens, an archaeological site or museum becomes a **living relationship**.

The pages that follow acknowledge constraints: limited time, fragile structures, risk aversion, and the pressure to deliver. They also show that small, well-designed prototypes can lower the cost of change, reveal hidden insights, and build internal confidence. Start where you are. Invite an audience group into your process. Re-think what artists can bring. Prototype one activity. Make its outcomes visible. Learn together. Then iterate.

At the heart of AHEAD lies a clear proposition: **design thinking for audience development** enables heritage institutions to open what belongs to everyone — especially to those who live alongside it — yet too often remains an experience for the few. By turning empathy into structured practice, design

methods help teams **listen, share power, prototype safely, and learn with communities**, translating proximity and memory into genuine participation.
Audience is strategy, not a side project.
It is ethics, not only technique.
And it is a path to sustainability, social, cultural, and environmental, because it binds institutions to the communities that keep heritage alive.

Giulia Fiaccarini is a cultural project designer and coordinator, and a co-founder of Melting Pro, where she leads international development and turns collaboration into concrete change for institutions, professionals and communities.
Over the past years she has designed and managed European programmes that connect audience development, human-centred design and training—among them AHEAD (Creative Europe), COME2ART, and Match with Arts and Culture.
She previously coordinated the EU funded project ADESTE and co-edited its book, "Steps towards a good audience practice," helping shape a shared language for public engagement across Europe. Alongside cooperation projects, Giulia mentors organisations on strategy, networking and impact, facilitating partnerships with design-thinking and careful evaluation. Since 2018 she has been an editor for Conectando Audiencias Italia, curating interviews and essays on sustainability, skills and the future of cultural participation.
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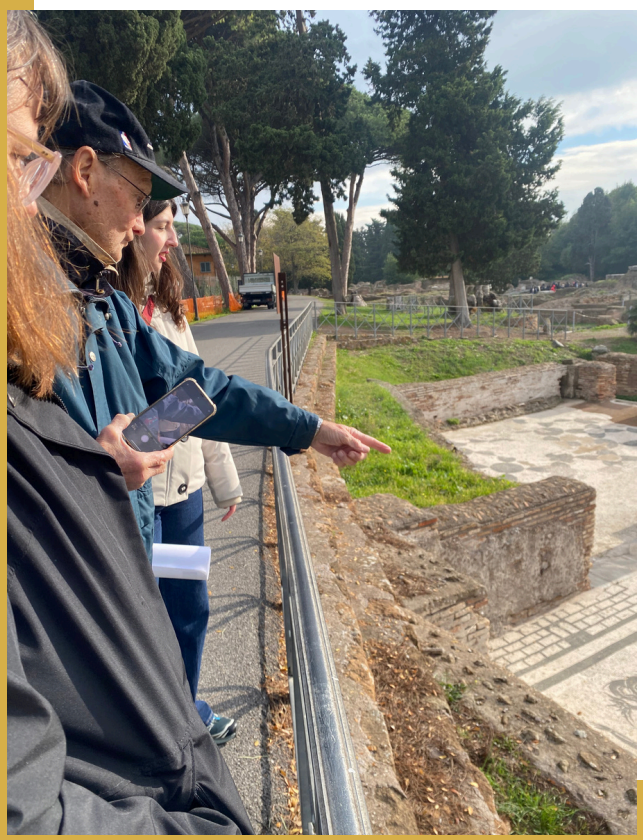
No one interprets alone: participation and meaning-making at Ostia Antica

Carmen Granito
Melting Pro / The Story Behind

Since the Faro Convention, the heritage sector has increasingly recognised the need for communities to play an active role in interpreting their own heritage (Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, 2005). This reflects a broader view of heritage not only as monuments to protect but as a living resource of values, stories, and practices that shape people's sense of belonging. Many institutions now embrace more inclusive approaches, inviting audiences to contribute their voices and perspectives.



Yet, tension remains between aspiration and reality. Participation often appears as an add-on, with communities seldom empowered to define meanings that matter most to them. Interpretation too often stays a one-way act of communication rather than a shared process of meaning-making.
This article presents a pilot initiative – a participatory mapping at the Archaeological Park of Ostia Antica – aimed to bridge this gap. By bringing together two groups with very different relationships to the site – teenagers and elderly members of a community association – the initiative tested how participatory methods could foster dialogue and belonging, reveal unexpected connections, and support personal, inclusive forms of interpretation.

From Transmission to Dialogue

For much of the twentieth century, heritage interpretation followed a linear model: experts uncovered facts and presented them to the public, expected to listen and

appreciate. This raised awareness of heritage values but, as Russell Staiff observed in Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation (2014), it also reinforced hierarchies: professionals as knowledge-holders, communities as passive receivers.

In recent decades, a different vision has taken root. Interpretation is now seen less as transmitting information and more as facilitating dialogue. Sites and collections hold multiple layers of significance, emerging through the interaction of people, memories, and experiences. This participatory paradigm has been embraced by organisations such as UNESCO's WHIPIC Centre and Interpret Europe, which advocate for people-centred practices that value dialogue and shared ownership.

Heritage places are not defined by stones alone. Their life comes from the meanings people attach to them — whether in memory, identity, or everyday experience. These meanings differ across groups but together shape how a place is understood and why it matters. By weaving such perspectives, interpretation shifts from transmitting facts to cultivating shared understanding. Recognising this plurality does not discard expertise but complements

it with community voices that enrich and sometimes transform narratives.

The move towards participation is more than methodological; it is democratic. Allowing diverse communities to define heritage acknowledges their right to be heard and their role in shaping the cultural landscape. In this sense, participatory interpretation is not only about attracting visitors or diversifying audiences, but about enabling people to see themselves in heritage, fostering belonging, and strengthening the social fabric.

A Participatory Mapping at Ostia Antica

Ostia Antica is one of Italy's most remarkable archaeological parks. Once the bustling harbour city of ancient Rome, today it offers

visitors a vast landscape of ruins and parkland evoking traces of past life. For many, it is a place of historical grandeur; for local communities, it is also a familiar backdrop in daily life.

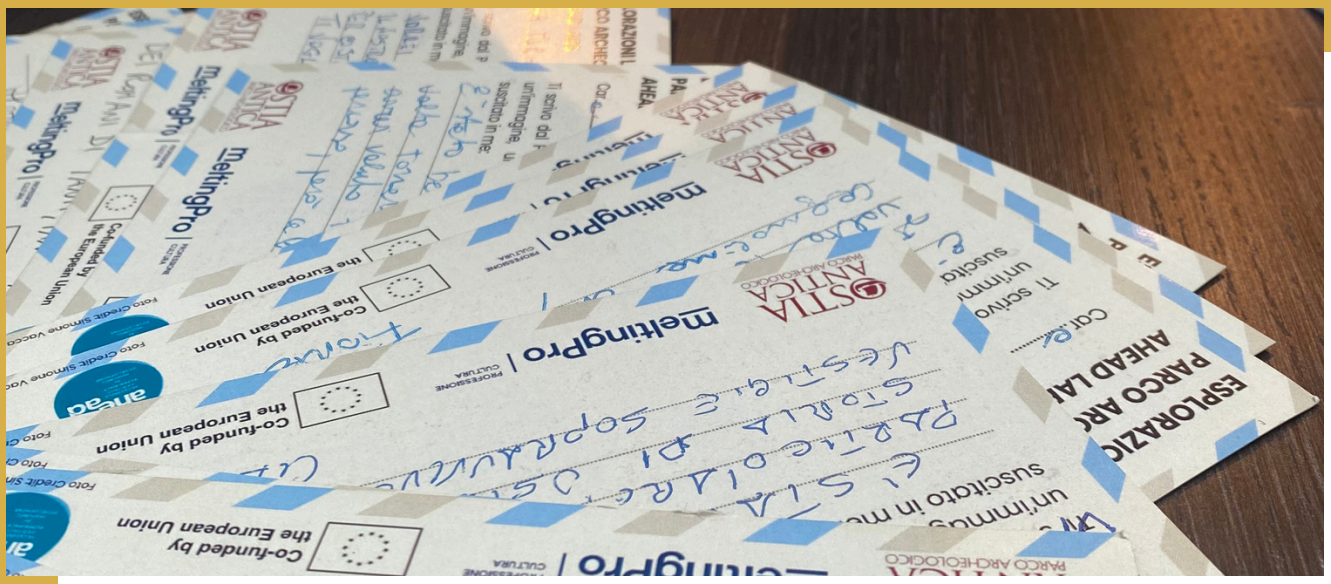
The Participatory Mapping workshop, held during the AHEAD Labs, explored how participatory methods might uncover new connections between people and place. The activity was designed with a simple yet powerful idea: to bring together groups who rarely encounter each other and invite them to interpret the site on their own terms. One was teenage students from a local high school, often familiar with the site from school visits but with little initial interest; the other, elderly members of the "Bonificatori di Isola Sacra" association, whose lives and family histories are tied to nearby reclaimed lands.

After a free exploration of the site, participants were invited to a facilitated activity designed to bring their impressions into dialogue. The two groups had collected different kinds of material during their visit: the teenagers took photographs of details and corners of the park that caught their eye, while the elderly filled in postcards with reflections and memories.

In intergenerational groups, these materials were explained aloud to share why they mattered. They were then placed onto a large map of Ostia Antica: what emerged was not just a visual collage of photos and words, but a conversation that revealed how different generations perceive the same place.

The process quickly revealed both contrasts and convergences in how the groups related to the site. Students were often drawn to fragments of daily life — the baths, animal statues, or parkland reclaiming streets, details that felt relatable, echoing elements of their own lives. Some were amused by 'funny' features, such as the ancient latrines, prompting jokes but also reflection on shared human needs. Their engagement produced fresh meanings tied to their own contemporary interests: places to relax, things that felt playful, or moments that sparked imagination and fun.

Elderly participants, by contrast, gravitated towards broader landscapes and monumental structures. The theatre or vistas of the decumanus recalled family excursions, leisure, and community gatherings. Their reflections also carried a note of loss: many remembered a childhood in which the park felt "free" to use a



nd closely tied to their territory, whereas today they feel it taken away by protection regulations.

Together, these perspectives revealed how the same heritage place can generate very different layers of meaning: on the one hand, new and playful associations rooted in contemporary experience; on the other, memories that speak to belonging but also to a sense of exclusion.

In this way, the map became a meeting ground and an emotional and interpretive landscape, showing heritage values expressed and negotiated by communities. By combining photographs and written reflections, participants articulated what the site meant to them, in their own ways. The process highlighted that interpretation is strongest when it connects diverse voices, turning personal meanings into a shared understanding of heritage.

Outcomes and Insights

The impact of the workshop extended beyond the day itself. For participants, it offered a new way of connecting with a familiar site. Students said the freedom to share their own ideas, without teacher prompts, made them feel more engaged and less constrained. Elderly participants valued sharing personal memories and family heritage, often overlooked in official narratives.

Beyond individual experiences, the process carried broader significance. Several noted that the map gave them recognition — their voices were not only heard but became part of collective interpretation. The activity also created meaningful intergenerational bridges: teenagers and elderly exchanged perspectives rarely shared in daily life, fostering curiosity and respect.

For the park's staff, the participatory map provided fresh insights into how people perceive the site. It highlighted features often underestimated in official interpretation and suggested new opportunities for storytelling that resonates with diverse audiences. It also prompted a shift, encouraging staff to see visitors not as recipients of knowledge but as interpreters in their own right.

Although modest in scale, the activity laid the foundation for continuity. Community groups expressed interest in further involvement, suggesting potential for longer-term relationships between the park and local stakeholders. As a result, the park has begun designing tailored experiences that reflect these plural perspectives, recognising heritage as dynamic and continuously shaped by those who interact with it.

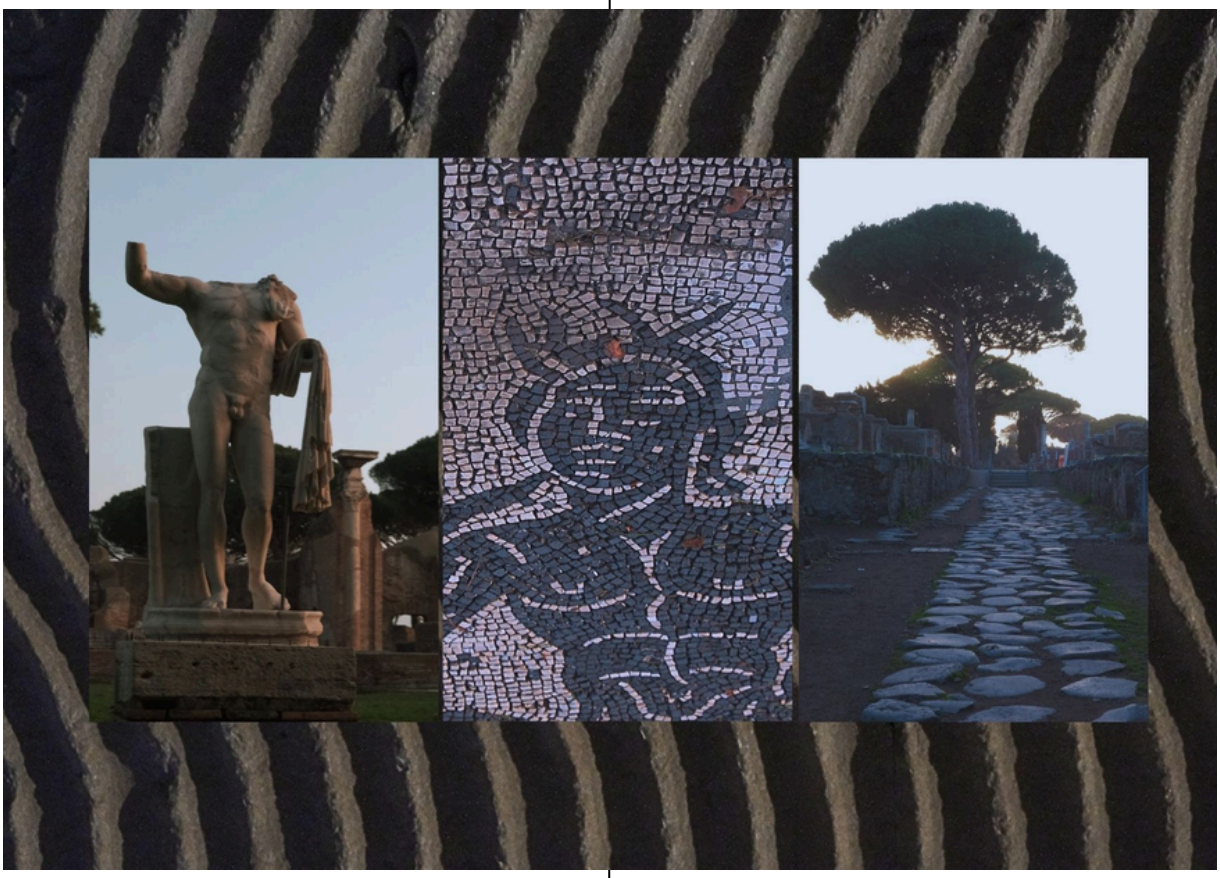
Conclusion: Interpretation as Democracy

The Ostia Antica initiative illustrates a broader truth about participation in heritage interpretation. When communities are invited not only to listen but also to share and co-create, heritage becomes more meaningful and relevant. The future of interpretation lies in facilitating encounters – between people and places, and across generations.

This shift has profound implications. Participatory interpretation does more than enhance visitor experiences; it strengthens democracy by affirming people's right to shape cultural narratives. It builds social cohesion by creating spaces where dialogue replaces hierarchy and multiple voices are valued equally. And it supports sustainability by fostering evolving relationships between communities and heritage, ensuring that sites remain alive in collective memory.

The pilot at Ostia Antica turned the site into a meeting ground where stories converged and new meanings were forged – a heritage place that matters not only through the information shared about it, but through the meanings people contribute.

Interpretation, in this sense, is not a product but a process, not a lecture but a conversation in which "no one interprets alone."
As heritage professionals, educators, and community members, we are called to nurture this process. If heritage is to remain relevant, it must be shaped not only by those who study it, but also by those who live with it.



Credits: Simone Vacca, AHEAD artist

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- *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, 2005*
- *R. Staiff, Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation (2014)*

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Breach the wall: how to engage teenager students in cultural heritage

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A city of everyday Romans

Close to the sea and not far from Rome, the Archaeological Park of Ostia Antica preserves the impressive ruins of the Roman city of Ostia – the Empire's main commercial hub between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD – and also the remains of the imperial harbours, with the huge hexagonal basin built by Emperor Trajan, and many other archaeological areas.

The ancient city of Ostia is a unique place, that tells the story of daily life in Roman times: while in Rome you can admire the remains of the most important monuments of Roman history (the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, etc.), visitors in Ostia can explore the remnants of apartment blocks where ordinary citizens lived, large warehouses, production sites and taverns.

For these reasons, and also because of its proximity to Rome, the Park is a typical destination for school trips, especially for primary and high school students. Yet, many never return after their first visit. For adults living in the modern neighbourhood of Ostia, the site is often remembered only as a distant childhood excursion.
We wanted to understand this lack of engagement, especially among young people aged 12–20, and to explore how their relationship with the site might be renewed.

Listening to teenagers

Through the AHEAD project we applied the ACED method, which emphasises audience-centred dialogue. Students from a nearby tourism and hospitality institute (Istituto Verne in Acilia) were

invited to share their experiences of visiting the Park.

Their feedback was frank: guided tours were “boring.” The site area is very vast; the buildings are usually only preserved on the ground floor, making it difficult to imagine what the city looked like in Roman times; also, guided tours were perceived as really dull , especially due to the use of specialised language: all these factors created a tiring and inaccessible experience. Students said they were expected to be interested in archaeology without being actively engaged.

We therefore asked them: *What kind of visit would you like?*

Free exploration and discovery

Responding to their requests, we designed an activity that gave students complete freedom to explore the site without guides: during this activity, we asked them to take photographs of the places and details that caught their attention. Some images were expected icons of Ostia, such as the Thermopolium (a popular tavern in Roman times), the theatre’s stone tiers, or the statue in the Forum of the Heroic Statue. Others were less predictable: a Judas tree in bloom and some humorous snapshots of signposts and toilets.

All the photographs were printed and pasted onto an “emotional map”, which helped us understand which places in the city were most interesting to students aged 14-16. This activity was particularly appreciated by the students, who, by pasting their photos onto the map, somehow “ took possession” of the archaeological area.

When asked about the feelings they associated with the

experience in the Park, the students mentioned “Silence, peace, nature”, qualities missing from their everyday lives in the suburbs of Rome, with many social and economical problems. This feedback became a key inspiration for developing new activities.

Co-creating activities in the Terme del Foro

To respond meaningfully, we designed an itinerary inside the Terme del Foro, one of Ostia’s largest bath complexes. At each stop, students engaged in an activity inspired by the ancient spa experience:,

- yoga and aerobics sessions to explore movement and wellbeing.
- Aromatherapy and herbal tea tasting
- Readings from classical authors describing life in Roman baths.

The programme was co-facilitated by the Park staff and external professionals.
Students responded with curiosity and enjoyment, and for the first time we saw genuine interest in their eyes. Part of the experience was filmed by a videomaker, producing a short trailer later screened at the school with the approval of both students and teachers.

Breaking down barriers

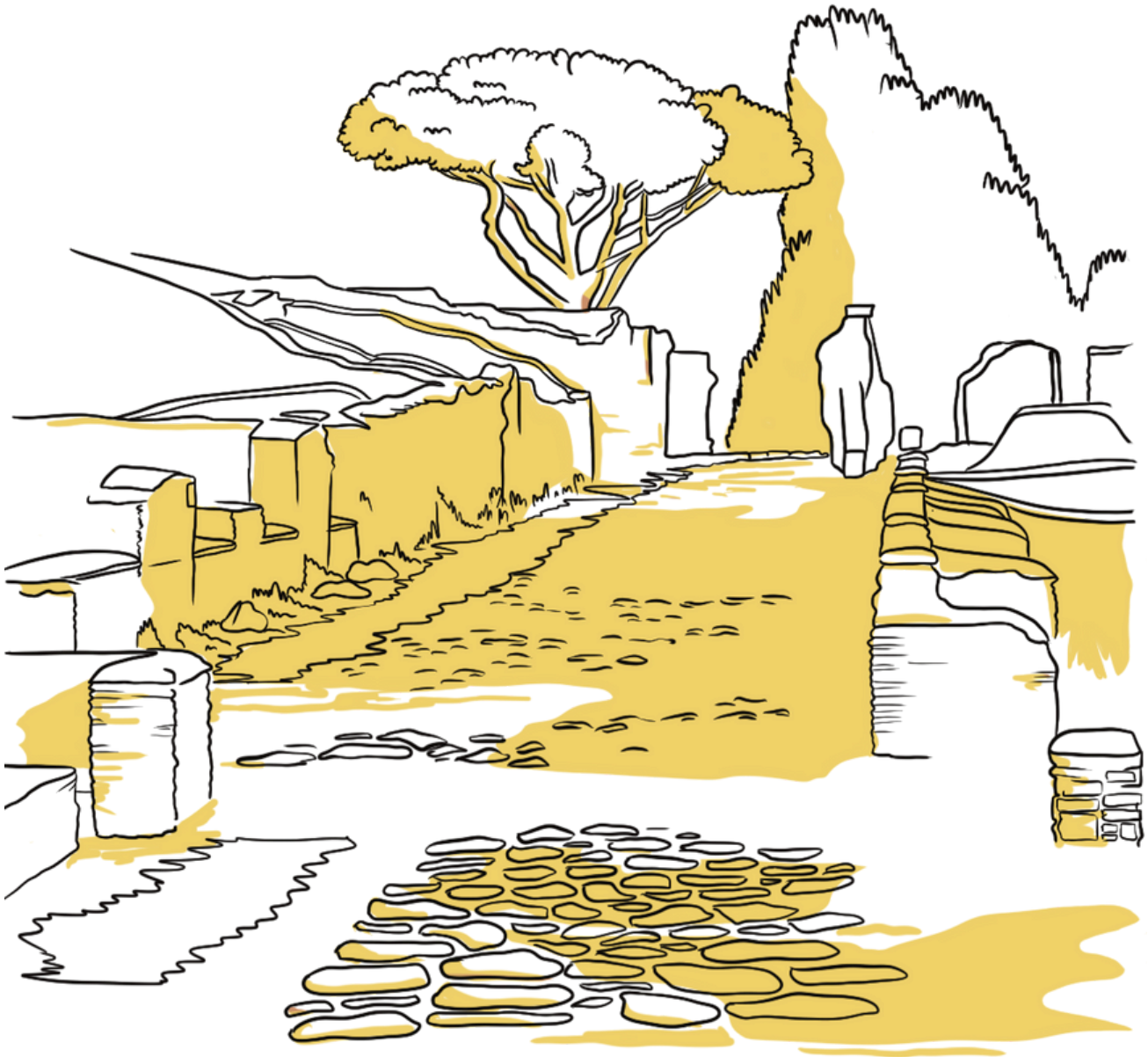
The process showed that involving young people directly in designing their experiences helps “breach the wall” that often separates cultural institutions from teenagers.

The ACED method proved particularly valuable:, it encouraged us to build on students’ suggestions without simply adopting them uncritically. This balance ensured that cultural and educational dimensions were preserved alongside activities that resonated with students’ lives. We aim to build on this experience by continuing in this direction in the coming years.

Useful links:

Discover our activities:
https://ostiaantica.cultura.gov.it/servizi-educativi/servizi-educativi/

See the digital library of Ostia:
https://ostiaantica.cultura.gov.it/biblioteca/digit-osti/



Credits: Coralie Moy, AHEAD artist

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Around the cave. Strengthening local ties to a world heritage site

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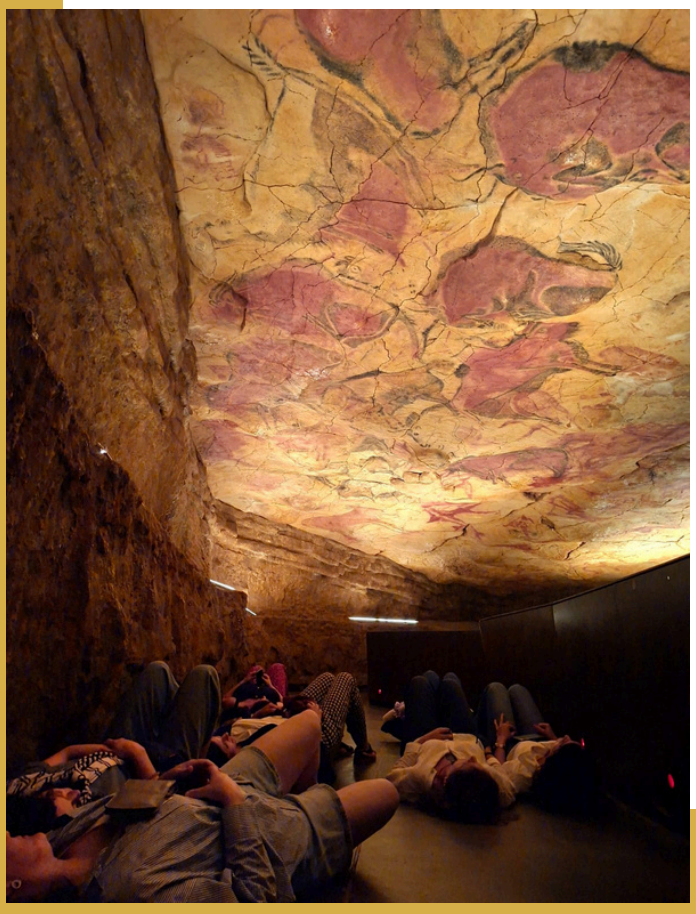
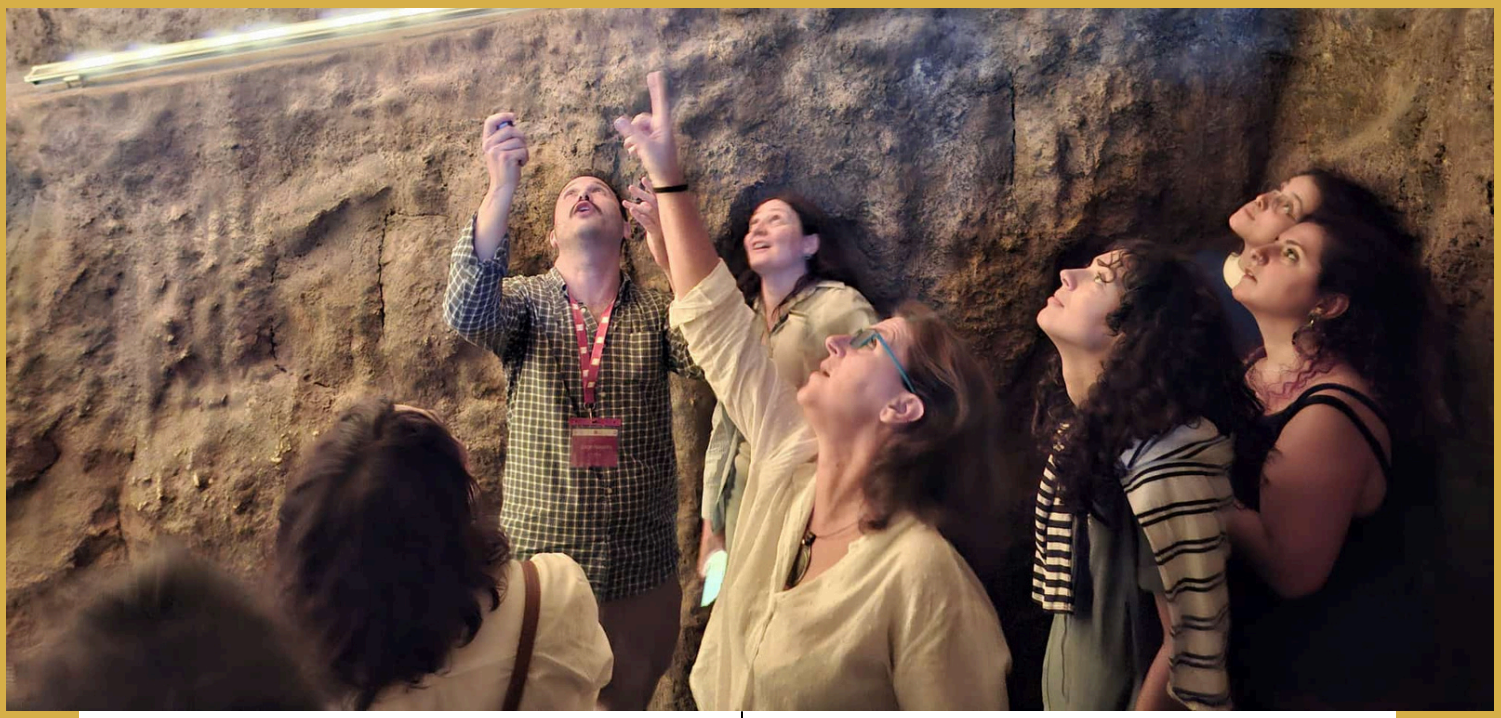
The Museum of Altamira, near the historic town of Santillana del Mar in northern Spain, safeguards one of humanity's most significant artistic achievements: the Paleolithic cave paintings of Altamira, dating back over 20,000 years. To manage this irreplaceable legacy, the museum operates under strict conservation standards. Because the original cave is extremely fragile, the main public interface is the "Neocave," a remarkably accurate replica.



This necessary protective measure introduces a complex challenge: a subtle power dynamic between experts and the local community. While the cave is a global treasure, its physical location anchors it deeply within the local territory and identity. The community, particularly long-term residents, feels a profound sense of cultural ownership. This is sometimes in tension with the institutional management, which reserves the privilege of accessing the original cave almost exclusively for scientific experts. The result is a nuanced relationship where a shared heritage can occasionally feel distant or inaccessible to its closest neighbours.

Addressing this dynamic is central to the goals of the AHEAD project (Accessible Heritage Experience for Audience Development). AHEAD explores how archaeological heritage institutions can cultivate deeper, more reciprocal ties with local populations, particularly those often underrepresented.



A participatory methodology can bridge this gap, transforming potential friction points into opportunities for inclusive cultural participation and shared stewardship of the Altamira legacy.

From tension to trust: defining the challenge through empathy

To address the inherent tension between institutional management and local cultural ownership, a dedicated, co-creative initiative was designed within AHEAD. Around 15-20 local participants joined this process focussed on creating a stronger connection with a key demographic: women around 62 years old from Santillana del Mar and nearby areas , whom we collectively named the “Julianas.” Despite not being a new demographic for the museum, this audience group of older residents often feel detached from the institution, recalling a time when access to the original cave and its surroundings was free and informal.

The initiative aimed to bridge this distance and establish a sense of complicity, positioning the Julianas as potential ambassadors for the museum within their community. The core challenge was defined as: How might we help Juliana nurture her curiosity while feeling part of a close-knit group, so she can enjoy meaningful moments that inspire her?

With this question in mind, we developed a prototype following the ACED methodology (Audience-Centered Experience Design). This approach embedded human-centered, hands-on experimentation, iterative data-guided refinement, and—crucially—local voices from the start .

A series of AHEAD Labs brought together a dynamic team that included 12 museum staff, five local residents, and an artist (Majo García Polanco), with the University of Deusto facilitating.

The initial sessions, starting in January 2025, focused on empathy-building. Participants collaborated to define the geographical and emotional boundaries of the local community, culminating in the creation of a detailed map of potential local audiences. This exercise led directly to the identification of the target audience and the development of the archetypal character, "Juliana." To ground the process in real-life, each participant then interviewed a real-life Juliana to better understand this audience's needs and perceptions.

The following Ideation Lab was notably energetic and creative. Through movement and music-assisted brainstorming, participants refined the challenge and generated creative solutions g, later assessed for impact and feasibility. This collaborative effort led to selecting a leading concept during the Prototyping Lab: a "Knowledge Exchange" programme.

Weaving new relationships: the launch of the knowledge exchange prototype

The participatory process culminated in a crucial, tangible outcome: the successful launch of the "Knowledge Exchange" prototype, designed to establish a lasting and horizontal relationship between the museum and the community. The first gathering on March 2025 was led by museum staff, with the invaluable collaboration of artist Majo García Polanco and the facilitation support of the University of Deusto team.

To foster open dialogue and build trust, the first session hosted a small group: five returning community members and seven newcomers. Guests were welcomed into an informal setting with an artistic performance and were invited to take part in a warm introductory exercise using specially designed postcards. These cards personified the cave itself, bearing the message "Let's be friends," symbolising the museum's genuine desire for deeper connection. The gesture created an atmosphere of complicity and mutual respect, setting the tone for a new kind of institutional-community relationship.

The launch led to a clear

commitment to continuity, with participants agreeing to meet regularly . Since then, the group of "Julianas" has grown and become integral to the museum's operations . They have joined behind-the-scenes site visits to different museum departments, taken part in public events like the Museum Night, and actively participated in a barter market organised during the Sustainability Week.

The project helped shift the local perception of the museum from an exclusive institution to an open and accessible community-centered space. Through the prototype, the museum gained invaluable insights into the lived experiences and sense of ownership felt by its closest neighbours, laying the groundwork for shared stewardship of the Altamira legacy.

Future directions: ensuring the Altamira legacy is truly shared

The collaborative initiative provided valuable insights into effective community engagement for heritage sites. What worked best was the quality of the participatory process itself. From a facilitation perspective, the use of extended opening rounds in each session was crucial. These moments ensured every voice was heard, naturally leading to shared deliberation. The diversity of the working group—which included professionals from various museum departments, local residents, and the supporting artist —enriched the perspectives and encouraged more holistic solutions.

The strong involvement of community representatives, together with the active support from museum leadership, proved essential to success. On a relational level, the project created a genuine feeling of cultural recognition: museum staff learned from the "Julianas'" lived experiences, and the community members felt acknowledged as valid contributors to the heritage narrative.

Credits: Majo G. Polanco, AHEAD artist

The main challenge arose during prototyping and implementation. Transitioning from the creative, conceptual lab work to the launch of a live programme required taking on real responsibilities outside the working group, leading to some uncertainty about roles and institutional ownership. For future projects, these institutional and logistical aspects should be clarified and distributed earlier in the process.

In conclusion, the AHEAD pilot in Altamira demonstrates how a carefully facilitated, co-creative methodology can transform the often-tenuous relationship between a world heritage site and its local community. By embracing inclusive participation, institutions can evolve into truly shared spaces and ensure their legacy endures through the engagement of their closest neighbours.

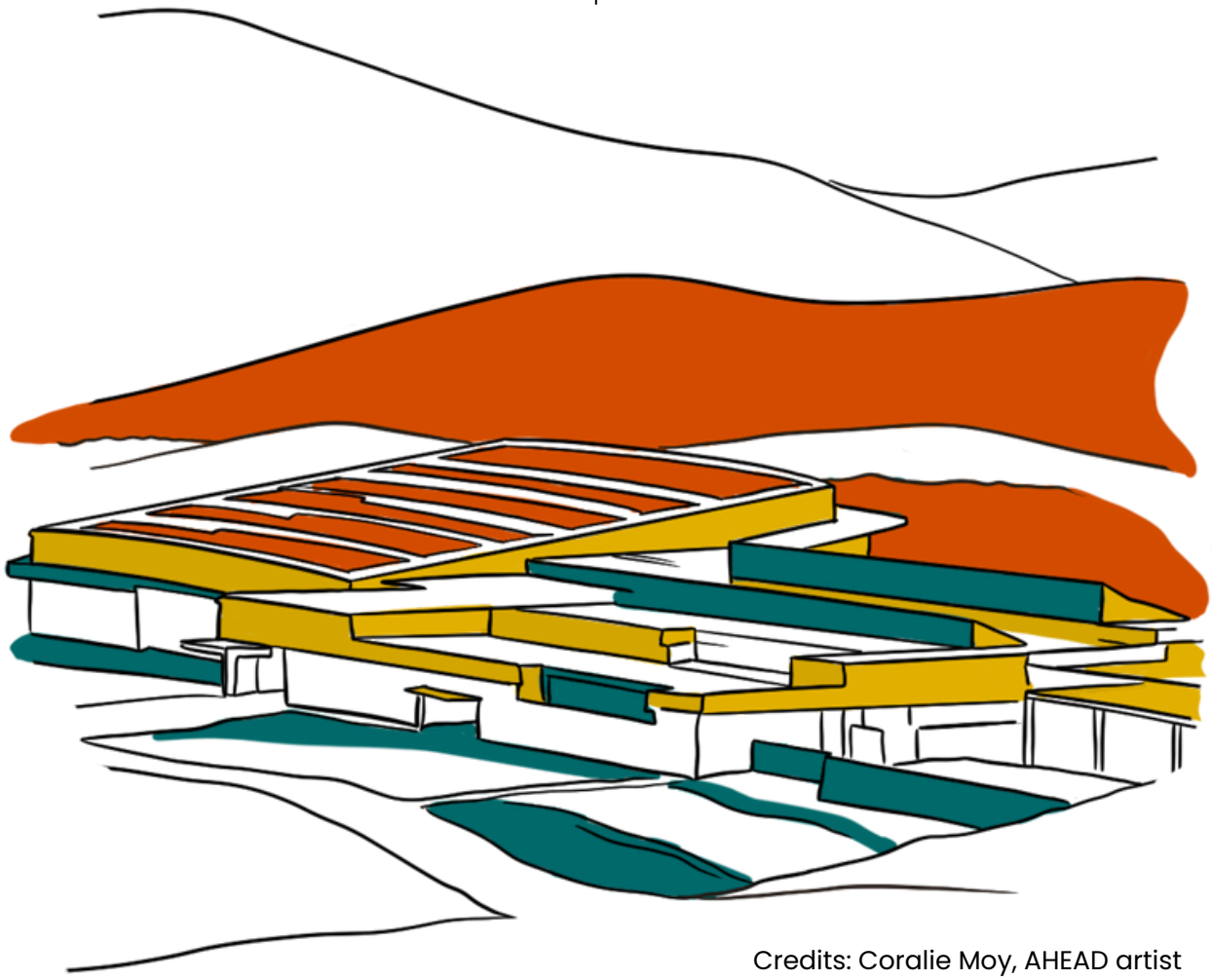
References

Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, 2005

R. Staiff, Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation (2014)

Useful links

Museum of Altamira website: https://www.cultura.gob.es/mnaltamira/home.html



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From Blueprint to Practice: The ACED Methodology Across Borders

A conversation with Ilídio Louro (Architect & Project Coordinator at Mapa das Ideias, Portugal) and Niels Righolt (Director of CKI – Danish Centre for Arts & Interculture, Denmark)

Across Europe, cultural professionals are seeking innovative, sustainable ways to connect with communities and put audiences at the heart of their work. This journey is at the core of the AHEAD project, which champions human-centred methodologies for sector innovation. A foundational tool in this work is the Audience-Centred Experience Design (ACED) methodology. Developed under the previous ADESTE+ project, ACED is a collaborative, design-thinking blueprint designed to help cultural organisations rethink their offer from the audience perspective. ACED is not a rigid formula; it is a flexible approach that adapts to local needs and cultural climates. We explored this adaptability through the experiences of two key figures in the European audience development landscape: Niels Righolt, Director of The Danish Centre for Arts and Interculture, and Ilídio Louro, from Mapa das Ideas in Portugal. Both have been instrumental in applying ACED, though in very different contexts.

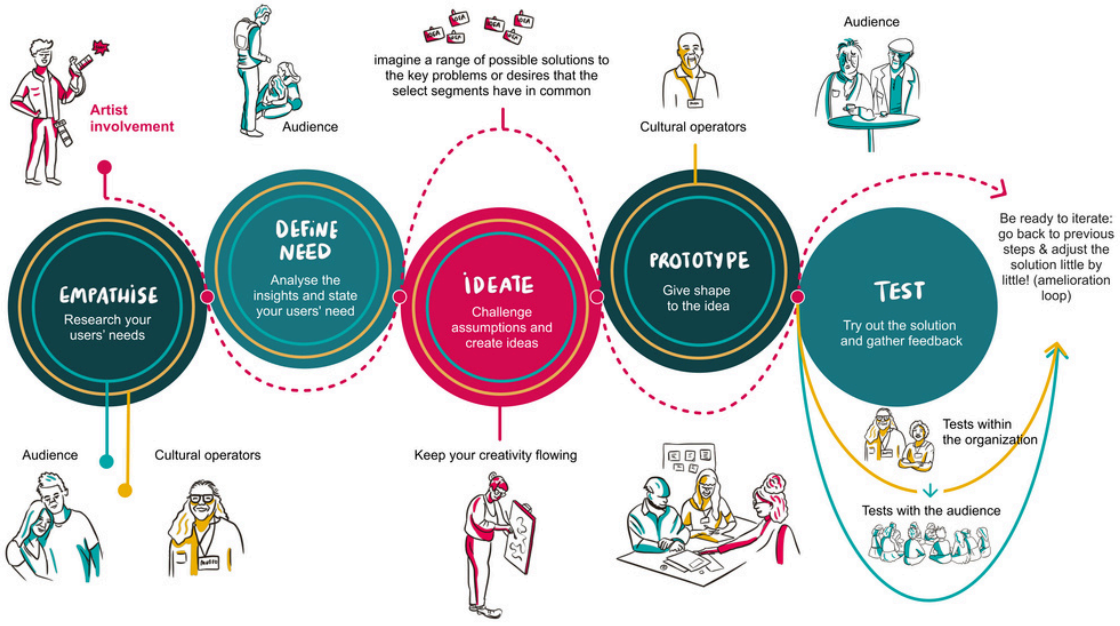
Niels Righolt: We started working with ACED in the Nordics, realising that our contexts are quite similar, allowing us to apply the methodology as a processual way of approaching the dilemmas faced by arts and cultural institutions. We have worked in 20 cities across Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, with over 57 institutions—from museums and art centres to concert halls.

Our starting point is understanding the local context: the political framework, the value of culture, and how people engage with it. We see institutions facing the same issues, particularly around accessibility and their role in a changing society. Instead of talking about audiences merely as visitors, we define them as change-makers who can help redefine the institution's purpose. We begin by asking institutions about their societal contract: Who are you? Who is the community you serve? And how do you add value to that society? In Denmark, participation is high—eight out of

ten Danes visit a cultural institution once a month—which places significant demands on institutions to engage in social design and community development. We see culture policy as something that extends our life values, ensuring citizens' right to access, participate, and co-create.

We treat audience development as organisational development. It is not just smart marketing, it is about sincerely and strategically redefining the institution's core purpose and the relationship between the users and the social contract it offers. This starts with data design, moving from gut feelings to real knowledge—collecting diverse data from ticketing, profile logs, and qualitative interviews to truly understand our audiences, in plural.

Ilídio Louro: At Mapa das Ideas, a cultural consultancy with 25 years of experience, we have dedicated ourselves to exploring the idea of mediation as the construction of bridges between cultural institutions and their publics. Our engagement with the ACED methodology began during the ADESTE+ project, which we were proud to contribute to.
Our core belief is that audience development is not just a marketing or communication challenge; it is a fundamental cultural and collective challenge for organisations. It requires changes in values, visions, policies, and practices, demanding both time and a systemic approach. For us, ADESTE+ emphasised that the goal was not developing audiences, but rather developing cultural organisations that are audience-centred.



Credits: Coralie Moy AHEAD artist

We adapted the basic design thinking paradigm to the specific needs of cultural institutions, regardless of their size or type. This adaptation enables them to focus on achievable goals, take risks through prototyping (doing it fast and cheap), and iterate and refine their projects.

The institutional and cultural reality in Portugal, however, is significantly different from the Nordic countries. Our organisations are often more fragile, with limited resources, and decision makers may have less time and face greater media scrutiny. Implementing ACED in this context is a distinct proposition. We typically facilitate the process in a six-work session format, using the double diamond model to identify a problem, target audience, and a solution—a low-risk, high-reward prototype. While the ACED process in Portugal has often been successful in defining a collective vision, a major challenge lies in institutional follow-up, where political decision-makers may fail to act on the resulting action plans. This highlights the vital need for leadership buy-in.

Niels Righolt: For ACED to be truly strategic, it must be anchored in management. If the process is too distant from the directorial level, it risks becoming just another isolated project. We always include management from the interview phase to signal prioritisation and ensure the dialogue addresses the institution's core strategic ambitions. The greatest challenge, however, is distributing privilege. When curators or directors must share their decision-making power, it creates genuine anxiety about their roles. ACED must address this organisational psychology. It needs to be a safe space for unsafe thinking, allowing staff to feel secure enough to rethink their positions and embrace change. If we do not practice internal empathy toward our staff's anxieties, we risk failure, regardless of how well we understand the audience.

Ilídio Louro: We must recognize that in contexts with limited resources like Portugal, lengthy implementation is nearly impossible. Teams struggle to commit even to shorter cycles, reinforcing the need for strategic adaptation. ACED's inherent focus on the "now" and small-scale prototypes can make it too small to be strategic.

We need to evolve ACED into a long-term, leadership-focussed methodology. This means designing parallel processes that specifically target decision-makers, giving them tools to anticipate and steer

organisational change over the medium to long term. Design challenges are ever-changing;

“Design challenges are ever-changing; we must leverage design thinking to build resilience and ensure that ACED proactively shapes the future of the institution”

Audience development is not just smart marketing, it is about sincerely and strategically redefining the institution's core purpose and the relationship between the users and the social contract it offers

Ilídio Louro is an Architect and designer who specializes in design, communications, and cultural promotion, drawing on his training in journalism.
He is a key leader at Mapa das Ideias, where he heads the Graphic and Editorial Departments and coordinates multimedia production. His work there focuses on Heritage, Culture, Science, and Health communication, where he is the lead designer for various exhibitions, educational kits, and website management. He has also been involved in international cooperation projects like "Museum Mediators Europe." Furthermore, he serves as the President of the Histórias para Pensar association, which promotes culture, social inclusion, and integration. Throughout his career, he has gained experience as a communications officer and consultant for various organizations, complementing his earlier work in architectural projects.

Niels Righolt is the director of CKI – the Danish Centre for Arts & Interculture in Copenhagen, Denmark, a more than 20 years old competence centre on interculture, audience development and cultural democracy. Niels has worked as Artistic Director, Managing Director, Producer and Curator, Head of Information, Cultural Political Developer and Political Advisor within a variety of cultural institutions and organizations over the years, among others, the Dunkers Arts Centre in Helsingborg, Sweden, the Møstings Hus & Byggeriets Hus, Copenhagen and as co-founder of the intercultural magazine and communication bureau Cultures. At present he is a board member of Culture Action Europe (Brussels, Belgium), the faculty of the humanities at Malmö University (Malmö, Sweden), Voksenåsen (Oslo, Norway), Inkonst Theatre (Malmö, Sweden), Teatergrad (Copenhagen, Denmark) and the Audience Europe Network (Rotterdam, NL).

Rethinking Power and Participation: How Inclusive Collaboration Is Redefining Cultural Heritage Resilience in Times of Change

Roula Gkika
HERITAGE (The Heritage Management Organization

Across Europe, cultural heritage institutions are being reshaped by wider societal transformations. Climate instability, demographic change, and shifting political contexts are challenging the resilience of museums and cultural organisations. Long regarded as custodians of collections, they are now expected to serve as catalysts for social cohesion, creativity, and civic dialogue.

Credits: Coralie Moy, AHEAD artist

Meanwhile, grassroots organisations—though often underfunded and fragile—operate close to the ground. They reflect lived experience, sustain intangible traditions, and foster community trust. Partnerships between these two spheres are not only beneficial but necessary. Yet, collaboration often risks remaining tokenistic unless institutions move beyond outreach and commit to genuine power-sharing.

The AHEAD project offers valuable lessons. Its participatory methodology sought to position heritage as a practice of shared authorship rather than a product to be consumed. By engaging professionals, educators, local groups, and young people, it demonstrated that cultural resilience is strongest when built collaboratively.

Rethinking Participation

Traditional engagement models tended to treat communities as passive audiences. Consultation processes were usually short-term, and heritage narratives remained centrally defined by institutions. This dynamic limited opportunities for meaningful dialogue.
AHEAD proposed a different path: embedding participation from the very start of the engagement planning process. Community voices were recognised not as supplementary but as integral. The aim was not only to increase attendance but to reshape decision-making so that heritage reflected diverse cultural realities.

Such an approach aligns with a broader shift in cultural thinking. Resilience is increasingly understood not as preserving institutions unchanged, but as enabling them to adapt and regenerate through collaboration.

The AHEAD experience stood out for three key aspects

Participation as a process. Engagement unfolded through long-term relationships rather than one-off activities. Dialogue, reflection, and ongoing negotiation replaced static consultation.
The emotional dimension. Heritage is not only about artefacts but also about memory, identity, and sense of belonging. AHEAD acknowledged emotions as vital elements of cultural participation, recognising the symbolic weight of places and practices.
Redistributing power. Through co-design laboratories, grassroots actors and institutional staff worked side by side to shape programmes, interpretive strategies, and governance models. This reciprocity challenged the one-way model of institutional "empowerment."
In this framework, capacity

building flowed both ways: communities gained new tools to sustain their initiatives, while institutions learned to view heritage through the lenses of local knowledge and lived experience.

Prototyping Participation in Crete

The Messara Archaeological Museum was the Greek pilot site for testing the AHEAD participatory methodology. Through our series of Design Thinking workshops, two distinct audience groups co-designed two prototypes for new forms of public engagement for the museum.

The **first prototype** focused on schoolchildren. After being invited to freely explore the permanent collection, each child selected an artefact of personal interest. Sitting together in a circle, they then shared memories and autobiographical experiences that the object evoked. These oral contributions were recorded on their smartphones, creating a first layer of a digital archive of lived memories linked to the museum's collection. In its future development, this archive will not only be accessible to all visitors through interactive digital devices, but will also foster connections among future generations of schoolchildren, creating a bridge with the imagination, interests, and perspectives of their peers. This approach repositioned children from passive learners to active narrators, embedding their voices into the museum's interpretive ecosystem.

The **second prototype** extended participation to the wider community, particularly the families and teachers of those schoolchildren. Through dialogue and collaborative research, participants proposed the establishment of the Friends of the Museum and Monuments of Messara Association. This initiative is envisioned as a mechanism for **shared stewardship and co-management**, fostering sustainable collaboration between the museum and its local stakeholders.

Together, these initiatives reframed the role of the museum – not only as a site of preservation, but as a platform for creativity, dialogue, and shared responsibility. They illustrate how participatory practices can transform institutional functions, redistributing authority and embedding heritage interpretation within community life.

Barriers and Challenges

Despite promising results, obstacles remain. Institutional inertia and bureaucratic

constraints often slow innovation. Risk aversion discourages experimentation, and short-term project funding undermines continuity.

There is also the danger of tokenism. Without genuine power-sharing, communities may be invited into dialogue but excluded from final decisions. Grassroots groups, for their part, often struggle with limited resources and capacity. Supporting their participation requires institutions to act as facilitators rather than directors.

These barriers show that participation is not a technical fix but a cultural transformation. It requires rethinking authority, redistributing responsibility, and embedding trust in everyday practice.

Designing for Resilience

Through its collaboration with the community of Messara, the Museum identified important lessons for shaping resilient cultural heritage partnerships. These can be distilled into a set of guiding principles:

Listen first. Institutions must strive to understand community priorities before shaping programmes. Take time to figure out what matters to them

Define success together. For local people, success may mean continuity, visibility, or a stronger sense of identity—not just higher visitor numbers.

Think long-term.. Real partnerships need to last beyond short project cycles.

Mutual learning. When communities and institutions share knowledge, train together, and practise openness, both sides grow stronger.
In our experience, by embracing these principles, institutions and grassroots organisations can foster partnerships rooted in reciprocity, equity, and care.

Conclusion: Towards Shared Stewardship

Cultural heritage today is less about preserving static monuments than about fostering living relationships. The AHEAD project demonstrates that resilience lies in institutions' ability to share power, open dialogue, and recognise communities as co-creators.

When heritage is treated as a collective endeavour, it becomes a dynamic process of belonging and imagination, capable of sustaining societies through uncertainty and change. The future of cultural heritage will depend not on preserving distance from communities but on its capacity to be lived, felt, and shaped with them.

References & Further Reading

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Roula Gkika is Chief Administrative Officer of HERITΛGE – The Heritage Management Organization, with a background in the conservation of antiquities and works of art and extensive experience in cultural education. Within HERITΛGE, she focuses on administration and financial management, ensuring efficiency and sustainability. Her professional interests lie at the intersection of heritage preservation, cultural education, and organisational development, which she considers essential elements for strengthening the role of culture in society.

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Beyond Consultation: Strengthening Grassroots Partnerships in Cultural Heritage

*A Conversation with **Theodosia Maroutsi**, Coordinator of Living Heritage Network for Greece / Grassroots Collaboration Expert*

This interview with Theodosia Maroutsi explores key lessons and reflections on building meaningful partnerships between heritage institutions and grassroots organisations. She offers her perspectives on participatory practices, the challenges of genuine power-sharing, and strategies for sustainable collaboration. The discussion highlights how platforms like the Living Heritage Networking for Greece can support local cultural actors, foster co-decision making, and strengthen cultural resilience through inclusive approaches.

What inspired you to participate in the Living Heritage Network for Greece, and how does this platform support grassroots organisations in engaging with cultural heritage?

In my work across the heritage management sector, I have increasingly observed a pressing need for structured spaces of communication and exchange among its diverse stakeholders. Internationally, collaborative initiatives have grown rapidly, proving to be both effective and impactful. In parallel, HERITΛGE has made local communities a cornerstone of its mission. This community-centred approach guides much of our work in Greece, especially in projects focused on living heritage — an area that is deeply rooted in Greek culture and is receiving increasing recognition.

Against this background, the Directorate of Modern Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Culture proposed creating an autonomous network for living heritage stakeholders. This gave us the ideal framework to strengthen collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and the sustainable preservation of living heritage.

Launched in 2022, the Network fosters trust and long-term commitment among grassroots organisations and professionals. Its aim is to empower local groups to connect, share experiences, and address common challenges,

while also strengthening their capacity to sustain initiatives and actively participate in heritage preservation.

In your experience, what are the key conditions that allow grassroots organisations to collaborate meaningfully with heritage institutions?

Approaches vary across contexts but meaningful collaboration begins with building internal capacity, especially in project management, resource mobilisation, and sustainability. Institutional recognition of living heritage has helped direct more support and funding to develop these skills.

It is equally important that organisations clarify their cultural values in order to design projects that are truly relevant to their goals; at the same time, they need to involve young generations, to ensure continuity of work and adaptability to change. Groups that do so reduce dependency on government funding and achieve greater impact through collaboration.

How do you see AHEAD's approach to participation compared to other initiatives you have observed or supported?

Its capacity-building programme strengthens crucial skills for audience development, sustainability, and systemic change. It also distinguishes itself through co-design labs where communities, artists, and heritage staff create side by side. People are given real agency in shaping heritage experiences, building a sense of ownership.

The AHEAD Manifesto reflects this spirit of openness, accessibility, and empowerment, promoting heritage spaces that are inclusive and welcoming. In contrast to top-down, content-centred strategies, AHEAD champions human-centred practice.

What common barriers prevent grassroots voices from influencing heritage policies and practices, and how might institutions work to overcome them?

Grassroots participation in heritage management is widely endorsed in theory, but in practice it often faces many obstacles — from bureaucracy and rigid institutions to cultural and social barriers. Decision-making is frequently top-down, giving more weight to expert or technical knowledge and leaving little room for local expertise and grassroots entities. This "epistemic hierarchy"

frames academic or professional knowledge as more legitimate than community-based knowledge, perpetuating exclusion.

Many communities also struggle with limited resources, weak networks, or a lack of access to decision-making spaces. Barriers such as language, digital gaps, and physical inaccessibility can make participation even harder, especially for underrepresented groups. In some cases, national politics and economic interests dominate, turning participation into a formality rather than a real opportunity — and eroding trust as a result.

To change this, institutions need to make grassroots participation part of their everyday governance, not an afterthought. This means creating real spaces for grassroots voices, valuing different kinds of knowledge — from oral traditions to local experience — and making sure communities have the tools and skills to take part. Building trust through long-term collaboration can help shape heritage priorities that truly reflect shared values.

How can we move beyond symbolic consultation to genuine co-decision making?

True co-design and co-decision require strategies that generate mutual benefit. Achieving this balance involves focusing on the needs of others while setting aside individual or organisational agendas. Any genuine participatory process should include three key practices: Inclusivity, ensuring diverse voices are equitably represented; active listening and adaptive creativity, keeping institutions responsive to evolving dynamics; and long-term trust-building, sustaining collaboration and shared ownership over time.

These show that co-decision is not only about formal authority but also about relational ethics — embedding respect, reciprocity, and accountability throughout the process.

How can initiatives like Living Heritage Network contribute to sustaining partnerships between local communities and formal cultural bodies beyond individual projects?

The long-term success of such networks depends on their ability to adapt to emerging contexts and remain relevant to diverse audiences, in order to avoid stagnation.

One challenge is the project-based nature of funding, which often drives short-term

partnerships with limited community impact. In this context, the Living Heritage Network acts not only as a facilitator of individual projects but as a framework that sustains and amplifies outcomes. By disseminating results and treating projects as catalysts, the Network embeds successful practices into ongoing collaborations. In this way, it shifts focus from isolated interventions to durable partnerships, where communities act as co-creators of cultural strategies.

What advice would you offer to both grassroots actors and heritage professionals seeking to build equitable, trust-based collaborations?

The key to equitable collaborations is recognising that grassroots actors and institutions play complementary roles. The former brings community knowledge and agility, while the latter provide continuity and legitimacy. The challenge is to balance these strengths without creating hierarchies.

For grassroots actors, developing competencies in project management, documentation, and evaluation strengthens their voice and credibility in dialogue with institutions — while staying rooted in local contexts keeps their work relevant.

For professionals, trust grows when they move beyond compliance-driven, top-down models, open spaces for dialogue, embrace co-creation, and allow experimentation – even if the outcomes may challenge traditional frameworks. Investing in joint training helps build mutual understanding.

In the end, sustainable collaboration depends on shared responsibility and long-term commitment. This requires transparent governance, fair resource distribution, and mechanisms to ensure continuity beyond projects. By embedding reciprocity and inclusivity, grassroots actors and institutions can build a resilient, socially engaged, and future-oriented cultural landscape.

"Equitable partnerships arise when grassroots knowledge and institutional expertise meet on equal ground"

“Moving beyond consultation to genuine co-decision is the only way to build trust and lasting collaboration”

Theodosia Maroutsi. National Programmes Manager at HERITAGE, Theodosia Maroutsi has been active in the cultural and creative sector since 1994, beginning her career as a creative art director for magazines, newspapers, and marketing projects. With a background in graphic design, she later specialised in cultural heritage, earning a BA (with Distinction) in European Civilisation from the Hellenic Open University and an MA (with Distinction) in Heritage Management from the Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB) in collaboration with the University of Kent. She is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of West Attica, focusing on strategic planning for remote areas with significant cultural heritage and methods for protecting and promoting heritage on innovative approaches grounded in historical knowledge. In recent years, she has played a leading role in the design and organisation of the international HerMa Conference.

Artists as Bridge-Builders: Participation and Cultural Heritage

An artists' conversation on participation and meaningful collaborations between communities, institutions, and cultural heritage.

This conversation explores the role of artists in the AHEAD project, who contributed to develop accessible heritage experiences through design thinking. Artists collaborated with local communities during the AHEAD labs held in Spain (Altamira Museum, with local women), Greece (Archaeological Museum of Messara, with families), and Italy (Ostia Antica Archaeological Park, with youth and elders).

Their creative involvement helped redefine relationships between heritage places and communities. The discussion also includes artists Coralie Moy and Costanza Kapsali, who, though not part of AHEAD, also work on participatory art linking cultural heritage, memory, and local identity.

Could you describe your experience collaborating with museums and local communities? How did their input influence your artistic process?

Majo García Polanco:
At first, I was both excited and nervous. I joined the AHEAD labs as a participant, observing and listening before having an active role. This helped me balance the women's voices and the institution's expectations: a challenging but rewarding task. The result was "Variations on a Welcoming Carpet," a performance in a 1924 house using a carpet that belonged to my mother. It had never left our home until that day, when I moved it from

Majo Garcia Polanco, *Variations on a carpet to give a welcome*, performance, 2025

the domestic sphere to the public space. During the performance, I unrolled the carpet with slow, minimal movements inspired by Nō Theatre. At the end, I invited visitors to walk across it and enter the house with me, symbolically welcoming them. The work explored bringing the inside outside, turning the carpet into a symbol of inclusion connecting community and museum.

The performance also challenged institutional hierarchies. In many museums, decisions are made by male-dominated patronage boards. For one day, that boardroom became a "Matronato", a symbolic space of power for local women. One participant told me, "If someone doesn't invite you to their house, you cannot enter". That idea stayed with me. My goal was to make that invitation real—to let women become part of the institution itself.

Elektra Angelopoulou:
I'm a performer interested in the intersection of performance and archaeology. Before AHEAD, I had never worked in a museum, only in archaeological sites, so it was a challenge for me. When I joined the AHEAD labs in Crete, I wasn't sure if I should observe or participate. Soon it became clear that I could play an active role. My archaeological background helped me act as a bridge between the AHEAD team and the locals.

One participant said, "Museums are for other kinds of people". That became a turning point. I thought, "No, museums should be for everyone". The locals' stories inspired much of my work. My documentation of the labs evolved into a performative piece inviting visitors to rediscover exhibits through emotion and memory. I also plan to use interviews from

children, asking imaginative questions such as, “If you were your favorite artifact, what would you be like?”.

This project showed me how artistic and managerial approaches can meet. It also made collaboration with institutions and locals much easier — something not always simple for artists in Greece.

Two other artists, not directly part of AHEAD, were involved in this conversation. Could you tell us about your work and how it is linked to AHEAD’s themes?

Coralie Moy:
I’m an illustrator from Paris, now based in Rome. My work explores collective memory and emotional connections to places through illustrative maps. Last year, I did two projects with local communities in Rome.

The first was a map of Pigneto, a roman neighborhood known for its strong identity. I initially drew a personal map, but later a local association invited me to co-create one from residents’ perspectives. Together, we redesigned it to include local landmarks, turning it into a genuine community map. Later, two more artists joined, organising a workshop where children imagined their neighborhood’s future through collage—mixing daily life with symbols of politics and history. It was a creative way to discuss change.

The second project was part of the Rome Architecture Festival. I collaborated with architecture students to create a “pocket map” for the Porta Portese district. We studied how people use public spaces, met community leaders, and transformed our findings into an illustrated map combining workshops and stories. It was challenging but rewarding to see how much a map can reflect the soul of a place.

Coralie Moy, *Pigneto del futuro*, Rome, 2024

Kostanza Kapsali:
I'm a filmmaker working mainly with documentary and hybrid films, with a background in archaeology and heritage studies. I explore how art and archaeology shape our sense of belonging.

One project in Athens focused on the statue of Hippodamia, a mythological figure linked to violence and femicide. It was difficult to engage the community there because of social challenges and weak institutional ties.
However, another project in Chania, Crete, was more successful. I made a film about a neighborhood undergoing gentrification, focusing on two elderly women who swam daily in the same spot by the sea.

One said that through these swims, she experienced friendship for the first time. The film became a story about female friendship, resilience, and reclaiming public space. It was screened in schools and sparked meaningful discussions with young audiences.

In another residency on a small Greek island, I worked with students in a former boarding school. We did a creative exercise called "Bibliomancy": students picked random books from an old library to find "answers" to personal questions. It was a poetic way to talk about knowledge and storytelling.
Through these experiences, I learned that artists are often

Konstanza Kapsali, Elsa & Olga, still from video, 2023

invited to “represent” communities, but art should never be instrumentalised for institutional goals. True collaboration must be mutual and based on care.

How did your artistic process adapt to the AHEAD methodology, the design thinking approach and the collaboration with institutions?

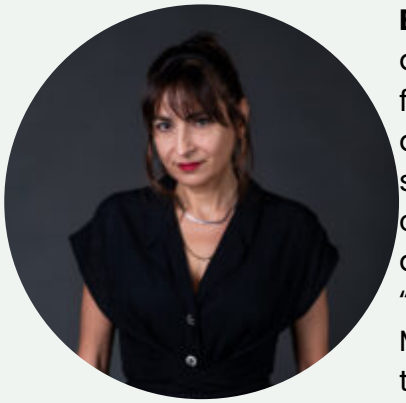
Majo García Polanco:
For me, it was all about adapting —half my method, half the lab’s. I tried to stay present, listen deeply to people and places, and
transform that energy through my art. It was a process of mutual transformation for both me and the participants.

Elektra Angelopoulou:
For me, the methodology and my work went hand in hand. The key wasn’t the method itself but the people involved. My participants shaped my way of working, and my artistic outcome was created with and for them.

“Art should never be instrumentalised for institutional goals. True collaboration must be mutual and based on care”

One participant said, "Museums are for other kinds of people". That became a turning point. I thought, "No, museums should be for everyone"

Majo Garcia Polanco's work explores themes of memory, identity, and the intersection of human nature with the environment. With a background in audiovisual languages, she uses photography, installation, and performance to create site-specific artistic experiences that challenge viewers' perceptions of time and space. Her approach reflects a deep engagement with both personal and collective histories, often blending contemporary concerns with ancient traditions.



Elektra Angelopoulou is a performer, director, dramaturg, and producer for various major cultural institutions and festivals. Her core focus is the intersection of performance and archaeology, having participated in research and site-specific productions at archaeological sites. She has conducted on-site ethnographic research, co-dramaturgy, directing, and in situ performance in the productions "Woman" (Koutroulou Magoula, Fthiotida) and "Routes" (Neo Monastiri, Fthiotida), under the aegis of Brown University and the Ephorate of Antiquities of Fthiotida and Evrytania.

Coralie Moy is an illustrator specializing in inhabited spaces from the intimacy of a home to large territories, through an experiential and research-driven approach to drawing. Her work explores collective memory and emotional connection to places.

Konstanza Kapsali is an Athens-based filmmaker whose work blends Visual Anthropology and Documentary Film with a background in Archaeology and Heritage studies. Her practice utilizes observational cinema and sensory ethnography, frequently exploring themes of memory, femininity, belonging, and history.

Design Thinking and the Arts. Learning from other fields to rethink participation and co-creation

*A conversation with **Clémentine Le Guerec** (product designer, founder of TRY AGAIN?) and **Géraldine Bueken** (founder of XR4Heritage)*

AHEAD explores how design thinking and artistic involvement can assist cultural institutions with audience development, participation, and co-creation. However, the cultural sector is not the only one interested. Associations, private companies and public services have also found value in the methodology.

At Impact Valley, we support organisations across the various stages of Design Thinking.

In this conversation, we showcase the perspectives and practical examples from two of our partners: Géraldine Bueken, founder of XR4Heritage, an association that bridges new technologies with cultural organisations through various formats and content; and Clémentine Le Guerec, a product designer involved in the upcycling initiative TRY AGAIN?, which engages creatives in addressing industrial waste. Both have used design thinking processes and involved creatives to co-design their concepts and build supportive communities.

Design Thinking is a human-centered methodology rooted in empathy, iteration, and collaboration. Its five phases, empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test provide structure for solving complex challenges.

If design thinking is interesting for all sectors it's because it is based on forming valuable relationships, building on true insights, and working with creativity outside of traditional collaborative structures.

In both guest projects, design thinking became a bridge between disciplines, between professionals and communities, and between today's needs and future possibilities.

Géraldine, why did you decide to follow a design thinking journey while shaping XR4Heritage?

Géraldine Bueken:
When we launched XR4Heritage, there were no established practices for digital transformation in museums. Many professionals felt technology was a luxury or even a threat. Design thinking provided a framework to bring together stakeholders, including museum managers, archivists, and tourism operators, and to ask: What common problems do we face? One example of a common problem is: the access to previously inaccessible or disappeared sites. Using VR or AR, visitors could imagine spaces that no longer exist. By co-creating solutions with professionals, they became ambassadors inside their institutions. They could defend and promote these innovations because they had shaped them themselves.

Clémentine, your initiative's mission is rooted in the necessity of collaboration and creativity. What were your first steps and key learnings?

Clémentine Le Guerec:
With "TRY AGAIN?", we aim to find reuse solutions for more than 15 million syringes. From the start, it was clear that we couldn't accomplish this alone. We identified key stakeholders like designers, architects, researchers, and entrepreneurs who share our values and creativity, and started building with them.
We followed a design thinking process moving from identifying needs to developing a prototype. Initially structured as a competition, we quickly realised that this approach was intimidating and counterproductive, prompting us to shift to open calls and collaborative workshops for greater inclusivity. This was our first major learning.
We also had smaller ones, for example, we learnt the importance of tailoring communication to the audience, as different people respond better to varied approaches.

Design thinking often requires balancing very different perspectives. How did you both manage that?

Géraldine Bueken:
We operate at the intersection of three sectors: cultural institutions seeking relevance, digital creators building their portfolios, and tourism actors aiming to reach new audiences. Indeed, these stakeholders can have very different needs and priorities.
We have discovered that focusing

on themes such as decolonisation or women's empowerment helps facilitate collaboration and acts as a bridge based on shared values and a greater purpose. This creates a common ground where diverse stakeholders can all contribute meaningfully.

Clémentine Le Guerec:
For TRY AGAIN?, failure and resilience are part of the process. We describe ourselves as "queens of failure and test." Diverging feedback sometimes reshapes the project in unexpected ways but that's not a setback, it's a step forward.
Observation is also crucial. Craftspeople, for example, often work intuitively and don't explain their methods. By watching carefully, we can capture insights they may not verbalise.

What qualities are vital when working in co-creation processes with artists, institutions, and communities?

Clémentine Le Guerec:
Patience, humility, and active listening. Without humility, it's impossible to challenge assumptions or integrate other voices.

Géraldine Bueken:
I would add clarity. In projects, practical limits like security rules or insurance can block initiatives. Setting clear boundaries early allows creatives to have freedom within a safe framework.
Define your line clearly, then give people freedom to enrich it. We can't please everyone, and that's fine.

What guidance would you offer to others applying design thinking and collaborating with artists?

Clémentine Le Guerec:
Keep it simple. "Simple" doesn't mean "superficial", it's the result of digesting complex processes so that everyone can understand and join in.

And be ready to be challenged and go above your limits. You can't really anticipate how people will react and interact with your project. You have to be able to let them do just that.

Géraldine Bueken:
Give a lot of freedom to the artists because they really enrich your vision. They will have their own background, their own storytelling. And trust is essential. People must feel their expertise is respected, even if their perspective is only one piece of the puzzle.

Conclusions

Innovation can involve creating new solutions, but it can also mean approaching the same context in a new way.
True ownership occurs when people embark on the journey together.
So, it's important to include not only those who will agree and be prepared to embrace transformation.

Further information:

IDEO: Design Thinking Overview
XR4Heritage: **Website**
TRY AGAIN?: Presentation

"Failure and resilience are part of the process. We describe ourselves as queens of failure and test. Diverging feedback is not a setback, it's a step forward"

“By co-creating solutions with professionals, they became ambassadors inside their institutions. They could defend and promote these innovations because they had shaped them themselves.”

Clémentine Le Guerec is a designer specializing in material innovation, product design, and craftsmanship. Trained at ECAL and La Cambre, she explores the intersection of design, industry, and artisanal excellence, creating objects and materials that challenge traditional boundaries. Balancing conceptual research and hands-on experimentation, Clémentine transforms raw materials into innovative, narrative-driven designs.

Géraldine Bueken is an experience strategist, producer, and scriptwriter who also curates the World Immersive Forum, STEREOPSIA.
She is the founder of XR4HERITAGE, a European label dedicated to designing large-format immersive social experiences for the preservation and enhancement of cultural heritage. Her consulting work, carried out through TROIS PLUMES, includes developing pedagogic programs in Africa with support from organizations like Unesco.

Letter to those who will work with cultural heritage and audiences in the future

Clio Basco
Melting Pro, Italy

I am writing at twenty-seven, with the experience of AHEAD (Accessible Heritage Experience for Audience Development) still very present, to share my reflections. In this project I learned that heritage is not an altar but a threshold: we cross it together. When we do, museums breathe, archaeological parks turn into public squares, and ruins become promises. Care is not a side gesture; it is the method.

What proved useful in carrying AHEAD forward? The practice of active listening—leaving time for questions without already having the answers. Workshops with local communities, artists, and facilitators opened unexpected paths. The method worked when it held rigor and kindness together: data and stories, metrics and perspectives. It is a design-thinking stance that begins by asking "how might we…" and proceeds through iteration, unafraid of mistakes.

One truth must be stated: it is impossible to be accessible to

A truth must be stated: "universal accessibility" does not exist in any absolute sense. We can only move step by step: we need to make choices, beginning to get to know and listen to one specific audience at a time—the one with whom we want to build a meaningful relationship with cultural heritage.

For me, "accessibility" is an active commitment, stronger than "inclusion," because it says: I'm here, I'm listening, and I want to dismantle barriers that are not only physical but also cultural and social. It requires courage: stepping off the rails of the everyday, changing method, suspending judgment, accepting that another person's perspective is as valid as mine.
This is where empathy comes into play as a true competence that, I learned, must be trained and with which it becomes possible to design with people, not for people. The challenge is to start practicing it—first with one audience—and

then make it a systemic approach in every process.

To achieve this, time and continuity are needed; processes and results must be shared; above all, we need to think of ourselves as an ecosystem: archaeologists, communities, artists, trainers, schools, public administrations, social enterprises, partners. An interdependent system that exchanges knowledge, shares information, coordinates decisions, practices reciprocity, and aims at regeneration: what we learn returns to nourish the context and helps us feel part of it. In this landscape, public archaeology is not a label but a daily practice.

As Nina Simon reminds us, relevance arises from relating meanings, not just objects: when people recognize a part of themselves in what we propose, experiences unlock meaningThat is why opening up is not a threat, but a lever for quality.

I carry with me a note I took during one of the project's first meetings, a thought by Christopher McCandless: "Happiness is only real when shared." If happiness is true only when it is shared, then let us also share doubts and works-in-progress: make the whys visible alongside the whats, and keep the doors ajar for those who arrive with new needs and desires.

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Credits: Simone Vacca, AHEAD artist

Clio Biasco is a junior project manager and facilitator at Melting Pro. With an master degree with honours in Innovation and Organisation of Culture and the Arts from the University of Bologna - including study periods at Copenhagen Business School - she works on EU cooperation, organisational development and audience engagement. She centres accessibility and postcolonial perspectives in her practice.

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Co-funded by the European Union

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